“As I transition into this next phase of my life, I want everyone to know the real me. I am Chelsea Manning. I am a female” (Manning, August 22, 2013, para. 1). These words began a media frenzy when Private Manning, convicted for violations of the Espionage Act and other offenses related to the release of classified information to WikiLeaks, announced to the world on August 22, 2013 that she was a transgender woman. The news industry’s response to this announcement, her request to be called Chelsea instead of Bradley and to be referenced using feminine pronouns, ran the gamut from honoring her request immediately, to honoring her request eventually, to ridiculing her for making the request at all. Subsequently, certain news media were admonished for transphobic coverage by transgender advocacy organizations, transgender citizens, media watchdog groups, and media outlets themselves. By year’s end, Manning was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize and The Huffington Post ranked Manning’s coming out as the “biggest transgender moment of 2013” (Nichols, 2013).

The following spring, Manning reappeared in the headlines when she petitioned for a legal name change, applied for clemency, and when the Army considered transferring her to a civilian prison to receive hormone therapy (civilian prisons are obligated legally to meet transgender healthcare needs whereas military prisons are not because Pentagon policy forbids transgender soldiers from serving openly). The extensive news coverage of Manning’s announcement, her transition, and the heated response to that coverage prompted a much larger public debate about how journalists should best cover stories about transgender lives. This debate invites scholarly attention on the part of media critics interested in transgender communication.
The Manning case is well chosen because it illustrates many of the claims made by researchers and trans advocates regarding the role media play in regulating transgender identity. Specifically this chapter examines how this narrative functioned in three ways: to support an assimilationist definition of transgender, to contest Manning’s transgender identity, and to divert public attention from other important matters.

In addition to illustrating the mediation of transgender identity and providing additional support for existing research, this chapter will extend this body of work by identifying and exploring another technique used to regulate transgender identity and expression, metareporting. How we talk about gender matters, and metareporting about how journalists write about transgender people such as Manning provides a prime opportunity to examine how public discourses construct, reconstruct, and potentially deconstruct gender. Because metareporting scholarship explores the symbiotic relationship between both press and publicity sources, this chapter also will add to transgender communication research by exploring messages produced directly by transgender advocates.

Scholarship about News Coverage of Transgender Lives

Early media scholarship primarily examined representations of transgender people in entertainment media, and to a lesser extent news, with a focus on identity politics. Current research focuses on the politics of difference, specifically the roles media, including social and alternative media, play in producing and reproducing sex and gender normativity. Most research has taken the form of qualitative studies, both those that address questions of materiality and critical studies, informed by theories used in trans studies such as social constructivism, feminism, intersectionality, performativity and queer theory.

The majority of this scholarship is message-centered rather than audience-centered. Little
research in the form of traditional social scientific media effects studies or critical and audience reception studies exists. Ringo (2002) found that media facilitated the transgender self-identification process and this form of internalization often led to negative self-perception among transgender people in terms of both identity and agency. Trans Media Watch (n.d.) measured British transgender people’s attitudes toward media depictions of their community. Questionnaires revealed that the majority of respondents perceived these images to be inaccurate, negative, and at times, precipitating negative reactions and abuse.

When studying messages, researchers documented how media underrepresent this population and construct and reconstruct a standard definition of “transgender.” According to this body of work, transgender lives historically were underrepresented by media much the same as other minority groups. However, more recently, an era of increased visibility has begun (GLAAD, 2013; Roe, Blakar & Nafstad, 2011; Arune, 2006; Gamson, 1998). Transgender people such as Chaz Bono on Dancing With the Stars, Isis King on America’s Next Top Model, and Laverne Cox in Orange is the New Black or characters such as Bree in TransAmerica, Zoe in All My Children, or Unique in Glee are taking their place in U.S. entertainment media.

In studies of news media, communication researchers have tracked and critiqued increased media attention producing primarily case studies about celebrities and sports figures such as Christine Jorgensen (Skidmore, 2011; Meyerowitz, 1998), Renee Richards (Birrell & Cole, 1990), Jenna Talackova (Tady, 2012), Steve Stanton (Kenney, 2008), and Christine Daniels (Pieper, 2013) or case studies about hate crime victims such as Brandon Teena (Sloop, 2000; Wilcox, 2003; Squires & Brouwer, 2002), Gwen Araujo (Parker-Blummer, 2012), Victoria Arellano (Chavez, 2010), F.C. Martinez, Channelle Picket, and Rita Hester (Marcel, 2008).

While this research supported the claim that transgender lives are now more visible in the
news, this quantitative increase in media attention did not equate with challenges to
cisnormativity. Once media depicted transgender lives with more regularity, researchers found
this coverage to be narrow and stereotypical on several levels. First, transgender people often
were depicted as deceivers. Such coverage functioned as a means of disciplining marginalized
populations. For example, crime news often sanctioned violence against transgender people by
blaming them for hate crimes committed against them, a phenomenon known as “transpanic”
defenses (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Eckhardt, 2010; Marcel, 2008; Wilcox, 2003; Sloop, 2000).
Another example is Cloud’s (2014) study which argued that Manning was disciplined both for
her crimes related to espionage and because of her gender identity. Such news coverage also
functioned to disparage trans identity by limiting depictions to either the “deceptive” or “pathetic”
transsexual (Serano, 2007).

Second, increased news coverage medicalized the transgender body. For example, news
media often focused on sex reassignment surgery (Meyerowitz, 1998; Oberacker, 2007; Buscar
& Enke, 2011; Seibler, 2012). The fixation with genitals and reliance on “wrong body discourse”
reduced gender identity and expression to reproductive systems, often in an exploitive manner
(Barker-Plummer, 2012; Hollar, 2007; Squires & Brouwer, 2002; Kalter, 2008). As Woods
summarized, transgender people in the media are “frozen in a permanent pathology” (Chuang,
2010).

Third, researchers found news coverage often conflated sex and gender, potentially
undermining news consumers’ understanding of the two. Furthermore, journalists typically over-
emphasized transgender people’s sexuality thus sensationalizing the news narrative (Birrell &

Fourth, researchers investigated problematic language use by journalists including the
failure to use chosen names and pronouns as well as phrases such as “he wants to be called” or “she calls herself.” This phrasing undermines a transgender person’s ability to self-identify (Barker-Plummer, 2007; Williams, 2010; Pieper, 2013).

Researchers also found that once transgender people do gain media attention, these representations typically were assimilative. For example, several studies investigated “passing” and determined that media seldom depict genderqueer identities (Squires & Brouwer, 2002; Wilcox, 2003; Mackie, 2008; Seibler, 2010; Skidmore, 2011). Hladky (2012) argued that the documentary miniseries TransGeneration constructed a standardized narrative around transgender identity “characterized by a progression from gender identity struggles, to therapy, to hormones, and finally to potential surgery, all in a specific timeframe” (p. 107).

News narratives seldom challenge gender norms. Westbrook and Schilt (2014) found that news stories validated self-determinism for transgender people, yet maintained the gender binary. Capuzza’s (forthcoming) examination of journalists’ sourcing patterns found that while transgender individuals were cited in news stories about gender diversity, their voices were limited to personal narratives, typically in soft news, rather than hard news or political commentary that questioned gender norms or the silencing of genderqueer voices. Rarely did journalists use these stories as an opportunity to explain or to interrogate social assumptions about gender.

In sum, researchers have documented increased representations of transgender lives, but news stories often contributed to narrow views of transgender identity. Because gaining media visibility is an important first step to obtaining political power for minority populations, transgender people may feel compelled to court media attention, but in order to do so, often the price paid is assimilation, whether that is a desired outcome or not (Butler, 1990; Fejes & Petrich,
In this regard, the media contribute to a narrow definition of transgender; this practice puts transgender people in the position of “proving” their identities using a standard that many find problematic.

**Metareporting**

Newer forms of media criticism focus not only on how media cover events, but also the mediation of those events. Journalists are becoming increasingly self-reflective about their own role in political processes (Haas, 2006; deVreese & Elenbaas, 2008; Esser, 2009). This self-reflection is a type of metacommunication sometimes called “metareporting.” Specifically, metareporting is a trend in journalism that features both the news outlets themselves and publicity sources as important elements of the news narrative. Media scholars have used various terms to refer to this phenomenon such as “self-referential,” “process news,” “press self-coverage,” “media self-criticism,” “metacoverage,” “media stories,” and “media process frames,” (Wise, 2010; Esser, 2009; de Vreese & Elenbaas, 2008; Haas, 2006; Esser & D’Angelo, 2003; Esser, Reinemann & Fan, 2001; D’Angelo, 1999; Kerbel, 1998, 1999; Gitlin, 1991).

The goals of this body of research are to document the frequency and tone of metareporting as well as the possible ways it shapes public opinion. Most often this research is quantitative and social scientific. Scholarship about metareporting typically focuses upon three features. First, there are two dimensions of metareporting including “press” and “publicity.” Press metareporting spotlights the roles of the media in political affairs whereas publicity metareporting draws attention to the efforts of political actors courting the media’s attention (de Vreese & Elenbaas, 2008). This research recognizes the fact that the media are not monolithic nor are they alone in creating public discourses. To this end, to be considered an example of metareporting, a story must make references to the press using terms such as “media” or
“journalists” or proper nouns referring to specific news outlets as well as references to publicity sources (Esser, Reinemann & Fan, 2001; Esser & D’Angelo, 2003; Esser, 2009[LS1]). Publicity sources include actors from across the political spectrum vying for media attention. This chapter focuses specifically on publicity sources that sought media attention in support of transgender citizenship.

Second, press and publicity dimensions always appear within specific frames. When journalists include the publicity dimension in their stories, the choice about how to frame this coverage is influenced by self-perceptions, industry standards, professional ideologies, and in this case, knowledge and attitudes about gender diversity. Similarly, when publicity sources frame their relationship to the press, they are influenced by similar factors and forward their own strategic communicative goals. Framing of metareporting is constructed in one of four ways: 1) as conduit; 2) as strategy; 3) as accountability, or 4) as personalization. According to Esser (2009), conduit frames present news organizations and advocates as pure brokers of information; strategy frames portray the news media and advocates as autonomous protagonists whose activities are consequential for the political process; accountability frames present the media and advocates as capable of self-criticism and concerned about journalistic standards and social responsibility; and personalization frames encompass stories about media personalities who make their subjective experiences the center of attention.

Third, metareporting appears within specific topic contexts. As news events are mediated, certain topics are revealed and others concealed. For example, in news coverage of political campaigns, candidate personality may appear more often than substantial discussions of policy issues. Previous scholarship focused initially on topic contexts related to election campaigns, war correspondence, and more recently, political policy initiatives. In this study, research on
metareporting will be extended to news stories published about biased coverage of transgender lives.

Designing a Case Study of Manning’s News Coverage

It is important to understand Manning’s identity within a sociohistorical context. Manning leaked the largest number of classified documents in U.S. history at a time the country was involved in two controversial wars. Her identity was complicated first by the fact she was condemned by some as a traitor and honored by others as a whistleblower. Conservatives used her narrative as support for arguments about keeping gay and transgender people from serving in the military at the same time as liberals used her narrative as support for human rights, ending the wars, and prison reform.

Her identity was yet further complicated by the fact that the public was first introduced to Manning by the media as a gay man during her trial. As the trial progressed, however, the media reported that the Army knew Manning had a gender identity disorder and that she had created a female alter ego named Breanna Manning (Radia & Martinez, 2011). The Army knew about Manning’s transgender identity because she gave her supervising officer a picture of herself dressed in a wig and lipstick attached to an email that stated, “This is my problem ... I thought a career in the military would get rid of it.” (Lewis, August 13, 2013, para. 2). Manning testified that she joined the Army hoping that living in a hyper-masculine environment would help her overcome her gender identity confusion. Although all of this information was readily available to the press during the trial, her August 22, 2013 statement regarding her transgender identity curiously surprised reporters and created confusion regarding how to write about her.

This textual analysis relied on three data sets. The first set of news articles, the announcement sample, dated from August 22, 2013, the day of Manning’s coming out via her
lawyer’s televised statement, through the subsequent week. The second set of articles, the name change sample, was published March 19-21, 2014. The third set of articles, the clemency request and prison transfer sample, was published April 14-24, 2014. This method of sampling provided an opportunity to identify trends in news coverage over time.

After defining the time frame, the population to be studied was limited to print news stories, editorials, and blogs. Press articles included those written by professional journalists working for traditional outlets such as newspapers and news magazines as well as Internet-based news providers (such as The Huffington Post, Salon, and Slate), and Web sites and Weblogs produced by corporate news organizations based in the US and aimed at a national audience. The resulting press sample represented a wide variety of outlets.

Press outlets do not work alone in the construction of transgender identity. Publicity outlets also participate in these regulatory discourses and, therefore, they should be included in the samples. Articles provided by national LBGTQ media watchdog groups, trans advocacy organizations, on-line support groups set up specifically for Manning and Weblogs maintained by transgender individuals were included in the data collection process. The publicity sample included online articles from organizations such as The Chelsea Manning Support Network, the National Center for Transgender Equality, GLAAD, and the ACLU, as well as from individuals such as Janet Mock and Lauren McNamara, and articles posted to Web sites such as LBGTQ Nation. Articles were obtained from Lexis/Nexis and by searching each outlet’s own online archives for additional articles. The coding unit was the written text including headlines and articles, but not captions.

Stories then were coded using content categories based on the three features identified in scholarship about metareporting. The first content category identified patterns in press and
publicity dimensions and revealed whose voices are centered in the public debate about news coverage of transgender lives. The second content category classified news frames as conduit, strategy, accountability or personalization for both press and publicity sources and revealed patterns in the framing of news coverage of transgender lives. The third content category identified topic contexts and revealed important information about what aspects of transgender identity and expression are most deeply embedded in press coverage and publicity efforts. The present study examined the following topic contexts: chosen names/pronouns, the role of transgender people in the military, incarceration of transgender inmates, and violence directed toward transgender victims. These topic contexts arose inductively from the samples.

The Amount of News Coverage About Manning

A total of 136 stories were identified and coded (See Figure 6.1). The press provided 79% of the articles about Manning and publicity sources provided 21% of the articles. A total of 39 different news outlets contributed to the samples, 25 press outlets and 14 publicity outlets. Newspapers, including The Washington Post, The New York Times, and USA Today, provided the most press articles about Manning and GLAAD and the ACLU provided the most publicity articles.

News coverage of Manning decreased over time by both press and publicity outlets. Sixty-one percent of the articles focused on Manning’s coming out. This finding is consistent with previous claims that media forward a standardized coming out narrative. Once press and publicity outlets capitalized on the sensationalism of Manning’s announcement, coverage of her name change, clemency application and possible prison transfer dissipated.

<FIGURE 6.1 ABOUT HERE>

The limited number of articles available from publicity outlets may reflect the
controversial status Manning had at the time. News outlets already established the fact that Manning was convicted for espionage before her coming out, so her identity as a deceiver already was in place. What is interesting in this case study, however, is how a transgender person’s damaged reputation resulted in the distancing of trans advocates. As transgender author Jennifer Finney Boylan published in *The Washington Post*, “any trans woman in the public eye has to behave in a manner above reproach. Lots of people wouldn’t call Manning ‘above reproach,’ though; as a spokesperson she sets a very complicated example” (2013, para. 3).

Additionally, Manning did not use the term “transgender” or a similar term in her coming out announcement to identify directly with this community; some people felt this omission was disrespectful. While publicity sources came to the public defense of Manning, their stated motivation came from a sense of mutual obligation to the transgender community rather than respect for her as an individual. Moreover, some transgender military personnel felt dishonored by Manning. As Gosztola (2014) summarized, “Numerous military veterans whether they were part of the LGBT community or not, reacted to the news of what Manning had done with profound disgust” (p. 40).

**Metareporting: Press and Publicity Dimensions in News Coverage of Manning**

To be considered a metareporting article, there must be references to press outlets and publicity outlets, a media frame that incorporates the press or publicity outlets into the news story, and this frame must appear in conjunction with another topic. Across all three samples, 30% were coded as examples of metareporting (See Figure 6.2). Specifically, 23% of press articles and 38% of publicity articles were coded as metareporting. Sixty-four percent of the press outlets and 43% of the publicity outlets participated in metareporting. These data illustrated the substantial level of metacommunication that occurred during the Manning narratives and how
the mediation of Manning became newsworthy in and of itself.

References to the press far outnumbered references to publicity sources in both press and publicity metareporting articles (for the purposes of this case study, a term counted as a reference only the first time it was used in each article). Of the references to media in press metareporting articles, *The Today Show*, the Associated Press, NPR, CNN, and *The New York Times* were referenced most often, even more than generic terms such as “reporters” or “the media.” Of the references to publicity sources in press metareporting articles, GLAAD was referenced most often. Journalists referenced national non-profit organizations that do not focus solely on transgender issues seldom mentioning grassroots organizations devoted specifically to transgender rights or individuals. Publicity metareporting articles similarly referenced CNN, *The New York Times*, the Associated Press, and GLAAD most often. The majority of publicity articles self-referenced rather than identify other organizations or transgender individuals.

Finally, the rate of metareporting in these samples decreased over time in both press and publicity articles. All but one metareporting article came from the announcement sample, indicating the debate over how transgender lives are discussed in news discourse was short-lived during the Manning narrative. Once the issue of how to refer to Manning was settled, the motivation to self-reflect about how the story of transgender lives is told in the news waned. In keeping with previous scholarship, again, the focus primarily was coming out narratives.

In this case study, metareporting took on a variety of forms. Press metareporting articles largely included those that simply inventoried which media organizations used which name and pronoun and far fewer articles critical of media coverage. Press articles with headlines such as *USA Today*’s “Media torn in Manning ‘he’ or ‘she’ pronoun debate” (DiBlasio, 2013)
illustrated the former category while *Salon’s* “Media willfully misgender Chelsea Manning” (McDonough, 2013) illustrated the latter.

Publicity metareporting articles also ranged from a simple inventory of media organizations’ use of name and pronoun and articles that merely encouraged the press to follow stylebook guidelines to articles that were critical of media coverage. An example of the former included GLAAD’s “Private Manning will be called Chelsea, at least by some media outlets” (Murray, 2013). An example of the latter was Maza’s (2013) editorial posted on *LBGTQ Nation* entitled, “CNN guest jokes Chelsea Manning will get ‘good practice’ being a woman in prison.”

Metareporting: Framing in News Coverage of Manning

In metareporting, journalists highlight news and publicity outlets in their stories using specific frames (See Figure 6.3). In this case study, 49% of metareporting articles exemplified the strategy frame. The strategy frame illustrates the tension between press and publicity outlets for control over the message. An example of a press article that contained a strategy frame, posted on *Politico*, was entitled, “Bradley Manning explains gender change.” This article detailed how Manning had hoped to come out after the publicity of the trial dissipated. The plan changed the day before her sentencing when she found out Courthouse News Service was going to publish an article that stated she would not be provided hormone therapy while in prison (2013, para. 6). Manning and her lawyer strategized that it would be better for her to get ahead of the story and to take control of her coming out narrative.

Naturally publicity outlets also provided their own interpretation of events and sought to control messaging about Manning. The Transgender Law Center described the problematic relationship between the press and the transgender community they represent as follows, “The media has a long and poor track record of reporting on transgender people, and the coverage
surrounding Private Chelsea Manning has brought that lack of fair and accurate coverage into sharp focus. The coverage that we have seen thus far has relied on stereotypical images, contrived confusion over names and pronouns, and an obsession with surgery” (2013, para. 3). In this regard, the Transgender Law Center clearly established an oppositional stance to the news media.

Typically strategy frames depict an antagonistic relationship between the press and publicity outlets. However, in this case study, the strategy frame transmuted into a new form in which the tension also arose among press outlets themselves. In the Manning narrative, metareporting primarily took the form of cross-media finger pointing depicting an antagonistic relationship between some media outlets on one hand, and trans advocates and other media outlets on the other hand. Some press outlets were put on the defensive, publishing various rationalizations for their coverage while publicity sources and other media outlets pushed these press outlets to change that coverage. In their efforts to control the message, publicity outlets benefited from a highly competitive media landscape. While the media seldom self-critique, they occasionally criticize their rivals when it is to their strategic benefit. As Esser (2009) explained, media do not criticize each other “unless they are motivated by ideological animosity or business rivalry” (p. 713). This form of metareporting allowed press and publicity sources to capitalize on the sensationalism of the Manning narrative.

Twenty-eight percent of the metareporting articles typified the conduit frame. The conduit frame depicts media organizations in the neutral role of information brokers emphasizing a dissemination function. A press article that contained a conduit frame was *The New York Times*’s “He? She? News media are encouraged to change” (Haughney, 2013) which described
language used to refer to Manning by the Associated Press, National Public Radio, *The Huffington Post*, and *The New York Times* itself. The journalist quoted editors and stylebook guidelines throughout the article as well as GLAAD’s style guidelines. In this manner, the newspaper became a simple conduit of information sharing with its readers a recap of style guidelines. The underlying message, a defensive one, is that the news industry has rules for discussing transgender lives already in place and many outlets are following them; the possibility that these guidelines have significant shortcomings is never broached. A publicity article that exemplified the conduit frame was the Transgender Law Center’s “Journalists: Commit to fair and accurate coverage of transgender people, including Pvt. Chelsea Manning” (2013) which explained that the media have a poor track record of reporting on transgender people and provided a short list of problematic examples. The Web page’s tone is neutral documenting the simple fact the news media do not always get it right when reporting about transgender people.

The marked difference in the number of press conduit frames and publicity conduit frames illustrated the function each plays in society. Professional standards of journalism include objectivity which coincides with the definition of the conduit frame as a neutral dissemination of information. Publicity outlets, on the other hand, actively make a persuasive case for their cause rather than simply distribute information. In this regard, news consumers would expect to see more conduit frames in press articles than in publicity articles.

Twenty-three percent of metareporting articles contained accountability frames. Accountability frames present the press and publicity outlets as self-reflective and adaptive public advocates working to meet their responsibilities to create an informed citizenry. The article “NPR issues new guidance on Manning’s gender identity” illustrated the press accountability frame as follows, “a healthy newsroom is open to debate and reflection. In the
past day, we have been challenged by listeners and readers and by colleagues . . . raising a chorus of views, including requests to rethink, backed up by arguments that make good sense. We have been persuaded” (Perlata, 2013, para. 9). NPR held itself accountable for its news coverage and shared with news consumers a detailed explanation of how their thinking evolved and of the decision to change the nature of its coverage of Manning. An article indicative of the publicity accountability frame was “NLGJA encourages journalists to be fair and accurate about Manning’s plans to live as a woman” (2013). The author of this Web page used the Manning case as an opportunity to educate readers about important research about LBGTQ youth regarding high rates of depression and drug use.

Considering the fact that most news consumers are painfully uninformed about transgender lives, the limited number of accountability articles on the part of both the press and publicity outlets is problematic. Of all the metareporting frames, accountability is the most empowering because it illustrates growth on the part of media and those who court them and provides opportunities for public education. Most media organizations are prone to focus their stories about conflicts that naturally suits the strategy frame more than the accountability frame. Yet, because many citizens do not have regular opportunities to interact with transgender people directly due to the size of this population, people rely on mediated images to learn about transgender lives. Thus, it is all the more imperative that media fulfill an education function. Additionally, while working to improve media representations of transgender people is critical, advocacy organizations need to use their time in the media spotlight to educate the public about key issues facing this community as much as to criticize media coverage if public understanding, acceptance, and respect is to increase.

Metareporting: Topic Contexts in News Coverage of Chelsea Manning
The next step in metareporting research is to examine the most frequent or typical connections between frames and topic contexts. The majority of press frames occurred in conjunction with stories about the use of Manning’s preferred name and pronouns. Nineteen of the 24 press metareporting articles discussed this topic and did so across all three frames equally. The majority of publicity frames also occurred in conjunction with articles about the Manning’s preferred name and pronoun. Ten of the 15 publicity metareporting articles discussed this topic and did so mostly within the strategy frame.

Taking into consideration all of the press articles and thus putting the metareporting articles into a larger context, the majority used the name “Chelsea” and feminine pronouns to refer to Manning in all three samples. Of the 107 press articles, 70% used Manning’s preferred name and pronoun. This number increased over time indicating that the press learned its lesson from the “pronoun debate” that defined the announcement sample. Every publicity article used Manning’s preferred name and pronoun across all three samples.

All in all, one outcome of the Manning narrative is proof that the media can improve their coverage of transgender lives if there is a sufficient level of internal and external pressure to do so. However, it is important to recognize that metareporting also functioned as a means of regulating transgender identity. As Barker-Plummer (2013) argued, public debates are “both accommodating and containing gender challenges by allowing for, even capitalizing on the (empirically obvious and in some cases dramatic) gender nonconformity we see emerging around us, but then quickly moving to contain that nonconformity” (p. 720). While the increased use of preferred names and pronouns illustrated an accommodation of transgenderism and Manning’s request, metareporting articles focused on language use, seldom mentioning other shortcomings of Manning’s new coverage. For example, Manning’s diagnosis of gender dysphoria and denial
of hormone therapy by the military appeared regularly throughout all the articles, even those focusing on unrelated topics such as her applications for clemency and a name change.

Putting the metareporting articles in a larger context, across the sample of 136 articles, a variety of topics of concern to the transgender community were discussed including military service, violence, access to trans health care, and treatment of transgender inmates. However, in the 39 metareporting articles, these issues seldom were addressed and did not emerge as topic contexts. When the mediation of Manning was discussed in news articles, how journalists wrote about her was prioritized over what journalists wrote or, perhaps more importantly, failed to write about her and the very serious challenges she and other transgender people face. To be sure, this examination of metareporting revealed that the press’s attention span for self-reflection is short.

Dynamics of Manning’s News Coverage

Much the same as previous research on news coverage of transgender lives illustrated, the Manning case revealed how news narratives function in three ways: constructing an assimilationist definition of transgender, contesting transgender identity, and diverting public attention from other key concerns. First, the military’s denial of Manning’s hormone therapy certainly was newsworthy because it violated the World Professional Association for Transgender Health guidelines. But it also disrupted the existing assimilationist definition of transgender, and taking this position fueled the media frenzy. Hormone therapy became a major issue in the story line not only because denying therapy constituted cruel and unusual punishment, but also because it violated public expectations of what constituted a transgender life.

This case also illustrated that the press struggles with how to tell anything other than a
standardized narrative about transgender people. Much the same as was found in previous research, journalists tried to fit Manning into a prescribed narrative. Stories of transgender people such as Manning who have not begun the transition process or who cannot transition push the established boundaries of news reporting conventions, and those who do not desire body modification or who are genderqueer are quite outside those boundaries.

Second, assimilationist definitions have consequences in that transgender people are put in the position of “proving” they meet a standard of transgender acceptability. The Manning narrative illustrated this form of gender policing. Because news consumers were accustomed to seeing Manning presenting as a man, her identity was contested even more vigorously. For example, in the first sample, almost every press article began with Manning’s coming out statement, but press outlets never considered her word sufficient enough to establish her transgender identity. The press consistently followed the statement with discussions of her psychiatric diagnosis and her medical need for hormone therapy. As the author of The Huffington Post’s “Mainstream media’s issue with Chelsea Manning’s gender identity” explained, “news sources were unwilling to accept the veracity of Manning’s claim to her gender identity” (DiLalla, 2014, para. 5). Additionally, the press regularly included “before and after” photographs of Manning, one photograph of Manning in uniform presenting as a man and one photograph of her presenting as a woman (a photograph that was submitted as evidence during her trial and used by media outlets repeatedly over many months of news coverage). In this regard, the media reconstructed a narrow definition of what constitutes an acceptable transgender body and debated whether Manning met this standard of acceptability.

While media reconstructed a standard definition of transgender and determined who is “trans enough” to meet that standard, they failed news consumers by not providing a deeper
understanding of gender that would enable them to comprehend, and potentially accept and respect, transgender identities. Neither press nor publicity outlets explored gender assumptions meaningfully though an accountability frame. Across the three samples, only ten press articles indirectly explained or challenged gender assumptions: one article referenced the gender binary, five articles referenced sex and gender congruency and four articles referenced gender stability. Remarkably not a single publicity outlet questioned gender assumptions in articles about Manning, thus indirectly reaffirming, rather than challenging, gender stereotypes. Consistent with other studies, the Manning case illustrated a discourse of rights and representations, not a challenge to the gender order or how journalists play a role in regulating transgender identity (Barker-Plummer, 2013; Sloop, 2004).

Third, in addition to concealing deeply embedded cultural assumptions about gender diversity, news articles about Manning’s gender identity distracted public attention from the political truths she sought to expose. Both the leak itself and its contents undermined the public image of the U.S. military as in control of the wars and its own secrets. The military wanted the news consumers to view Manning as a threat to the state and then to the social gender order. This message dominated headlines rather than the controversies she revealed. In this regard, Manning’s public identity constructed firstly as a traitor to her country and reconstructed secondly as a traitor to her gender certainly benefitted the military. As Cloud (2014) concluded, “Manning’s coming out was allowed to negate the impact of her revelations of the atrocity of war” (p. 97).

Dynamics of Metareporting

This chapter demonstrated that metareporting is another technique for regulating gender identities and explored the role publicity sources play in this dynamic. In this case, metareporting
as a journalistic practice created the appearance of accommodating transgender identity and expression when, in actuality, it did not challenge assimilationist definitions of transgenderism. Metareporting constituted a significant portion of the first sample but decreased over time in both press and publicity sources, indicating that a consistent commitment to reflecting about news coverage of Manning was not sustained. Press and publicity sources both capitalized on the Manning narratives to forward their agendas during the coming out narrative and did so primarily using the strategy frame rather than the accountability frame which would have indicated a deeper commitment to public education about gender justice. Some press outlets used the narrative to appeal to their conservative base of readers while others positioned themselves as ideological rivals who were progressively trans friendly. Both press and publicity metareporting articles focused primarily on the topic context of language use with far fewer and less developed discussions of other shortcomings typically found in news coverage of transgender lives.

Additionally, this chapter demonstrated the limited and moderate role of publicity sources in news coverage about Manning. When the press did reference publicity sources, typically they were not advocacy groups focused solely on the transgender justice nor were most grassroots organizations. Radical transgender activists who question the role of organizations with million dollar budgets such as the HRC and the National Lesbian and Gay Taskforce largely were silent during the Manning narrative. Bassichis, Lee, and Spade (2011) recognized this dynamic in their research about trans and queer social movements, “the most visible and well-funded arms of the ‘LBGT movement’ look much more like a corporate strategizing session than a grassroots social justice movement” (p. 654). The Manning narratives were ones of reform, not resistance. For example, publicity sources called from more humane treatment of transgender prisoners rather than calling into question the role of incarceration in the US itself. Moreover, even though
publicity sources openly supported Manning’s right to be called by her chosen name and her access to hormone therapy, they still distanced themselves from the political truths she shared. Publicity outlets walked a fine line between supporting Manning and creating a positive image of the transgender movement. These organizations also found themselves in the difficult position of striking a balance between courting media visibility and criticizing media coverage.

Conclusion

While the body of research about news coverage is more developed than that of many other topics related to transgender communication, scholars in media and journalism studies have the potential to advance the field further. Textual analyses have identified and critiqued a variety of mechanisms used by news industries to ridicule and regulate transgender identities, such as metareporting, but other mechanisms remain unidentified and unexplored. For example, textual analysis of photojournalism, bridging visual communication research and journalism scholarship, would provide additional insight into how gender expression is framed in news coverage. Furthermore, most textual analyses have concluded that standard definitions of transgender render genderqueer identities almost invisible in news coverage. If and when this invisibility ebbs, scholars should critically analyze the role news industries play in the production of genderqueer identities.

This study focused on trans advocates as publicity sources. Media scholars and rhetorical critics alike could contribute significantly to a more in-depth exploration of the role communication plays in transgender rights activism. Additionally, anti-trans voices also vying for media attention as publicity sources warrant careful scrutiny, and this work would result in a more complete picture of trans mediation and metareporting.

Thus far, the majority of textual analyses have investigated messages produced by
Western media industries. Cross-cultural analysis of news coverage would reflect current interests in trans studies related to the nation state’s role in gender expression, trans-feminisms, and post-colonialism. Similarly, textual analysis of news coverage generated by independent news producers, including transgender individuals and trans advocacy organizations, would be another fruitful research agenda. Alternative and social media play an increasingly important role in transgender communities; researchers would do well to investigate their use as modes of resistance. Such work also would provide deeper insight into the tension between press and publicity news sources in metareporting research. Moreover, researchers should not overlook nuanced though important differences among transgender advocates. Transgender veterans’ organizations, Wiki communities, anti-incarceration groups, among others, may employ alternative and social media differently.

Thus far the focus on textual analysis has been at the expense of audience and industry studies. Studies of transgender populations as news consumers are sorely lacking. The impact of news media, both corporate and those produced by the transgender community, on gender identity and politics would be an important complement to text-based research. Similarly, an investigation of the roles transgender professionals play in the news industry or the role of media watchdog groups also would generate meaningful data. Undoubtedly, media scholarship will continue to make a significant contribution to the future of transgender communication research.