

Media and the Framing of Hillary Clinton

Ghislaine L Lewis

Introduction

The media play an influential role in framing and ordering our social and economic world. Their influence shapes the way we interpret and engage with our global community. In the wake of Hillary Clinton's electoral college loss in the 2016 United States election, there has been much discussion on who or what is to blame. Recently, much of the blame has been placed at the doorstep of the media and the rise in fake news not only on traditional news platforms but also on social media.

An Ivy League educated lawyer, Clinton has served as Secretary of State under President Barack Obama's first administration, as the first female Senator for New York in the United States Senate and as First Lady during her husband Bill Clinton's presidency. On 12 April 2015, Clinton announced her 2016 candidacy for president of the United States via social media platform YouTube. In the 238-year history of the United States, she was deemed the most qualified person to ever run for president. The broad global assumption in the wake of Obama's election in 2008 was that the United States as a nation in transition was ready for its first female president. However, the exit polls and post 8 November 2016 discussion reveal a rise in populism and anti-immigrant sentiment that has created a space for a Donald Trump presidency (Taub, 2016).

Clinton touted her 30 years of experience and her qualifications indicated that she was the best candidate to ensure the continued progression of American domestic and foreign policy targets. Clinton's campaign revolved around her vow to be a champion for children and families, job creation, affordable higher education and equal pay for women. Yet, despite her detailed list of policy ideas, Clinton faced an uphill battle as the media, the Republican House and Senate and even her own party openly questioned her ability to govern. The media focused on her private email server, the Benghazi hearings, her ties to Wall Street, her husband's policies and even her moment of exhaustion at the 2016 September 11 memorial service, all while still predicting she would win the election in a landslide victory.

Media Framing

The public relies on mass media platforms for the dissemination of political information. The way the media distributes this information and their shaping of individuals or events is known as "framing". Through framing the media is able to "select some aspects of a perceived reality and makes them more salient in a communicating text, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 1993: 52). "News frames are constructed from and embodied in the keywords, metaphors, concepts, symbols and visual images influenced in a news narrative" (Entman, 1991: 7). Media frames offer subtle cues using visual, verbal and textual strategies that enable specific interpretations over others (Entman, 1993). Journalists, like the public they serve, also shape their media coverage using specific frames (Tuchman, 1978). How these frames are chosen directly correlate to the nature of public opinion, the political and economic climate. Journalists and pundits also must take the commercial interests of their parent companies into consideration when framing their argument (McMenamin, et al, 2013).



Ghislaine L. Lewis is a lecturer in journalism at Monash University. She completed her Ph.D. in Media and Communication at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand (2014). The title of her dissertation was "Evolving Newspapers & the Shaping of an Extradition-Jamaica on the Cusp of Change".

Her academic path has straddled several continents and a wide range of social and academic disciplines, including journalism, health communication, gender and sexuality and media policy. Her current research interests are focused on the role of the media in fostering an active and engaged public sphere.

Framing of Female Politicians

Although politicians create complex communication strategies to get their message to a wider community, most of what the public knows about them is mediated through national and local media organisations (Gitlin, 2003). Journalistic and editorial norms may distort political messages. Even though media organisations are committed to the principle of objectivity, many lean toward dramatic and over-simplified versions of complex ideologies which often results in the creation of slanted news (Entman, 2010). Studies have shown that the news media is one of the major factors that works against women politicians. Fogiel-Bijaoui (2010) contends that the media depicts women as exhibiting qualities and behaviours that run counter to those expected of politicians. Many of these women experience Raymond Cattell's (1950) notion of "coercion to the biosocial mean" whereby they are punished for deviating from the culturally prescribed norms set out for them by their communities. This is very evident in the media framing of Clinton in the 2016 election cycle.

Framing of Hillary Clinton

Studies conducted on the framing of Clinton, prior to her most recent presidential run reveal an uneasy relationship with the press, which began in 1992 when she became first lady and strived to find a place in her husband's administration (Stiehm, 2016). This love-hate relationship has continued into the 2016 election cycle. In the mediated age where voters are more drawn to sound bites than to facts the discourse surrounding Clinton's candidacy was detrimental to her success. The news media, without concrete evidence, framed her as dishonest in her public life while being cold in her private life. The focus on her private email server, Benghazi, The Clinton Foundation and her earnings from her Wall Street speeches appeared disproportionate when compared to the scrutiny of Trump and his global business empire.

Analysis of the news coverage in the 2016 primary cycle by the Harvard Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public indicated that media organisations engaged in journalistic bias that led to the disproportionate over-coverage of the Trump campaign and under-coverage of Democratic candidates like Clinton (Patterson, 2016a). Another report from the Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center analysed the news coverage during the 2016 general election which indicated that the coverage of Clinton "was overwhelmingly negative in tone and extremely light on policy" (Patterson: 2016b). The overall tone of Clinton's coverage was 62 percent negative with 38 percent positive as compared to 56 percent negative and 44 percent positive for Trump (ibid).

A 2015 Quinnipiac University poll showed the top words voters used to describe Clinton were "liar", "dishonest", "untrustworthy", "experienced" and "strong". These words continued to trend throughout the entire election cycle, even though there was little evidence to substantiate the claims. "For conservatives, loathing Hillary Clinton has long been a cottage industry. Pundits and journalists alike continually refer to her as corrupt and untrustworthy, even though the things people point to for support either are false or they can't say why they use those words because, well, it's just a feeling they have. Even though many fans call her loyal and fearless, the negative too often overshadows the positive" (Bamberger, 2016).

To add to the negative framing of Clinton, the whistleblower website WikiLeaks, created a Hillary Clinton Email Archive based on emails collected during the time she was Secretary of State. By the end of the election cycle they had released thousands of emails on a daily basis. These emails would then provide fodder for news discussions. While the emails failed to implicate Clinton in any wrongdoings, the release implied she was hiding pertinent facts from the American public. In addition to the probing gaze of WikiLeaks, she continued to face obstruction from FBI Director, James Comey and interference from the Russian Government. Through the media, the public was "being taught that it's not only acceptable to criticize each other with outright lies, but also that people will believe those lies if the media parrot them back to us enough times" (Bamberger, 2016).

The framing of Clinton moved beyond her political policies and ideologies to focus on her sense of fashion. The continued emphasis on Clinton's penchant for pantsuits shows a friction between her femininity and her role as a politician. Journalist Vanessa Friedman (2016) of the New York Times noted that Clinton had bored her clothing critics into silence by choosing muted colors for her campaign suits. However, other critics also noted that Clinton's attempt at choosing a gender-blind wardrobe helped to solidify her framing as a cold and calculating woman. These comments add to the overt sexism of coverage women like Clinton experience when they run for public office.

Conclusion

In the 96 years since the 19th Amendment was ratified in the United States Constitution and guaranteed women the right to vote, there have been 83 other women who have served as head of state around the globe. The media coverage of Clinton and the post-election exit polls have indicated that the heavily slanted discourse surrounding her candidacy was integral to her electoral loss. It also indicates that while progressive in some areas of governance, many Americans are still not really prepared to elect a woman as president. The framing of Hillary Clinton conveys broader ramifications for the way the media treat not only for women in politics but all women in positions of power.

Bamberger, J C (2016). *The Problem with Hillary-Hate*. US News. Retrieved from <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2016-07-28/the-ugly-sexist-politics-of-hating-on-hillary-clinton>

Cattell, R B (1950). *Personality: A systematic theoretical and factual*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill

Entman, R M (1991). *Framing U.S. coverage of international news: Contrasts in narratives of the KAL and Iran air incidents*. *Journal of Communication*, 41(4), 6–28.

Entman, R M (1993). *Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm*. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58.

Entman, R M (2010). *Media framing biases and political power: Explaining slant in news of Campaign 2008*. *Journalism*, 11(4), 389–408.

Fogiel-Bijaoui, S (2010). *Democracy and Feminism: Citizenship, Gender and Civil-rights*, Open University: Raanana.

Friedman, V (2016, January 1). *How Hillary Clinton Ended the Clothing Conversation*. *New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/21/fashion/hillary-clinton-pantsuit-style-2016-campaign.html?_r=0

Gitlin, T (2003). *The Whole World is Watching, Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left, With a New Preface*. University of California Press.

McMenamin, I, Flynn, R, O'Malley, E & Rafter, K (2013). *Commercialism and Election Framing*. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, Vol 18, Issue 2, pp. 167–187.

Patterson, T E (2016a). *Pre-Primary News Coverage of the 2016 Presidential Race: Trump's Rise, Sanders' Emergence, Clinton's Struggle*. Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy. Retrieved from <http://shorensteincenter.org/pre-primary-news-coverage-2016-trump-clinton-sanders/>

Patterson, T E (2016b). *News Coverage of the 2016 General Election: How the Press Failed the Voters*. Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy. Retrieved from <http://shorensteincenter.org/news-coverage-2016-general-election/>

Quinnipiac University Poll (2015). *Biden Runs Better Than Clinton Against Top Republicans, Quinnipiac University National Poll Finds; Trump GOP Lead Grows as Clinton Dem Lead Shrinks*. Retrieved from <https://poll.qu.edu/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=2274>

Stiehm, J (2016). *Clinton is No Media Darling*. US News. Retrieved from <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2016-05-23/hillary-clinton-is-subject-to-disproportionately-negative-media-coverage>

Stoehr, J (2016). *The Sexist Press*. US News. Retrieved from <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2016-09-06/medias-sexist-coverage-of-hillary-clinton>

Taub, A (2016, 9 November). *Trump's Victory and the Rise of White Populism*. *New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/world/americas/trump-white-populism-europe-united-states.html?_r=0

Tuchman, G (1978). *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality*. The Free Press, New York.