A Grounded Theory Analysis: Hillary Clinton Represented as Innovator and Voiceless in TV News

Mary Tucker-McLaughlin¹ and Kenneth Campbell²

Abstract
Grounded theory methodology is a qualitative approach that allows researchers to set aside previous research and focus only on the project at hand. The previous research is then used to help give context to the findings. It is gaining use, but is still rare, in journalism and mass communications research. Using grounded theory methodology, the authors seek to contribute to theory that addresses the representation of Hillary Clinton during her public life and trailblazing political career. News stories about Clinton broadcast on the three major TV networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC—from 1993 to 2008 are examined. The authors find that two primary representations emerge: Clinton as an innovator and Clinton as voiceless. Voiceless is an inherently negative representation, and although innovator is a positive theme, the news media tended to focus on representations of Clinton in negative stories.

Keywords
Hillary, Clinton, grounded theory, television, news, representations

¹ School of Communication, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC, USA
² University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC, USA

Corresponding Author:
Mary Tucker-McLaughlin, School of Communication, East Carolina University, 122 Joyner East, Greenville, NC 27858, USA
Email: tuckermclaughlinm@ecu.edu
Introduction

In her concession speech to campaign supporters on June 8, 2008, Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton emphasized the inroads she made as a female politician in American politics at the highest levels, which is a realm still dominated by men:

Although we weren’t able to shatter that highest, hardest glass ceiling this time, thanks to you, it’s got about 18 million cracks in it. . . . And the light is shining through like never before, filling us all with the hope and the sure knowledge that the path will be a little easier next time. (Milbank, 2008, p. A01)

No female politician has been covered more closely in the news media in the past 20 years than Hillary Clinton (Beasley, 2006; Burrell, 1997; Gardetto, 1997; Lawless, 2009; Lawrence & Rose, 2010). As Hillary Clinton became increasingly involved in policy making as a First Lady, the media struggled with how to represent a woman seeking high political office who was both family- and career-oriented; at the same time, society grappled with how to accept such a woman (Jamieson, 1995). Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1995) labels this continual tension a double-bind, as news media tended to portray female politicians through the lens of traditional female roles by focusing on personal aspects of their lives. Stories that focus on personal aspects of these women’s lives deny them the opportunity to voice views on substantive policy issues, views that are important in educating voters and possibly garnering political support (Kaid & Bystrom, 1999).

Clinton’s trailblazing political career as a woman—in roles as a First Lady with policy-making responsibility, a U.S. Senator, a leading presidential candidate, and now the U.S. Secretary of State—continues to place her in the forefront of American politics. For Clinton and her political peers, the news media play an important role in the campaign process (Lawless, 2009). Although more and more Americans are following news online, a study by the Pew Research Center in 2010 showed that network evening news remains a viable source of news for a large number of Americans. Even with a decline in viewership in network news, four times as many people watched the three network evening newscasts on American Broadcasting Company (ABC), National Broadcasting Company (NBC), and Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) in 2010 during the dinner hour than watched the three cable news channels (CNN, Fox

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Lady</th>
<th>Healthcare Reform</th>
<th>Lewinsky Whitewater</th>
<th>Senate</th>
<th>2008 Pres. Primaries</th>
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Figure 1. Timeline of Hillary Clinton’s public life 1993–2008.
News, and MSNBC) in prime time (Guskin, Rosenthal & Moore, 2010). Network news programs, thus, are still vitally important for politicians seeking national office and for viewers who depend on the programs. As women launch campaigns for high political office in the United States, the news media play a critical role in introducing them to voters. Historically, news media representations of female politicians have been gender biased (Falk, 2008; Jamieson, 1995; Lawless, 2009; Rhode, 1995; Tuchman, 1979), although these representations are improving and coverage is increasing (Carroll & Fox, 2006; Carroll & Schreiber, 1997; Lawless, 2009). We focus on Hillary Clinton because of her path-breaking role at the highest levels of American politics and the challenge journalists still face in their representation of female politicians (Jamieson, 1995; Lawless, 2009; Lawrence & Rose, 2010). To avoid influence from previous studies that might already suggest news media bias in the representation of Clinton because of her gender, we use the grounded theory approach as a methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory is considered a bottom-up approach, which allows researchers to simply address broad questions like “What are the representations?” rather than use previous literature to hypothesize that certain representations are present and then examine the news stories to see if the hypothesis is supported. The important distinction here is that media bias is not assumed when using the grounded theory approach.

Research Question and Methodology

We sought to answer the specific question: What themes are represented in major network television news stories about Hillary Clinton during the most public times in her life between 1993 and 2008? Our goal is to contribute to the development of theory addressing the representation of female politicians seeking high political office. Using grounded theory methodology, we analyzed 30 television news stories or segments (approximately 3 hours of news stories) collected around important dates in Hillary Clinton’s public life between the years of 1993 and 2008, which included her tenure as a First Lady, U.S. Senator, and presidential primary candidate.

The news segments, 10 from each of the 3 major networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC, were selected using the progressive sampling method (Altheide, 1996). According to Altheide (1996), progressive sampling is more suitable to qualitative analysis than random and other more rigid forms of sampling.

Rather than “trap” our analysis with too many pre-set categories and cases derived from a rigid sampling strategy, it is better to use “progressive theoretical sampling.” This refers to the selection of materials based on emerging understanding of the topic under investigation. The idea is to select materials for “conceptual” or “theoretically relevant” reasons. For example, a researcher might want to include materials that are “caucuses” or “different” on a particular dimension. (Altheide, 1996, p. 33)

The progressive theoretical sampling process began with a search through news abstracts in the Vanderbilt Television News Archive which contained nearly 3,000
references to Mrs. Clinton. Many of these abstracts simply mentioned Clinton’s name in passing or focused on her husband. Rather than conducting a random sample of all of these stories, we identified stories that clustered around particular events in Clinton’s life. This method is consistent with Altheide’s approach of selecting stories based on conceptual or “theoretically relevant” reasons (Altheide, 1996, p. 33). We defined a cluster as existing when each of the three networks produced a story or stories about a newsworthy event within a 2-day period preceding, during, or following a “defining moment.” Using Lawrence and Rose’s guidance, a defining moment is a “highly publicized” incident that is interpreted by the media as one “that reveal(s) the underlying character of the candidate” (Lawrence & Rose, 2010, p. 52).

Many of the stories and news packages were embedded in team coverage and included live commentary from the assigned reporters. It became evident in the initial analysis of the stories that reporters from each network were assigned to follow the progress of particular candidates throughout their campaigns. These assignments exhibit daily journalistic routines and practices (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996) notable in election coverage historically.

For the historical portion of the study, we identified five distinct events from 1993 to 2000. An equal number of defining moments were identified in the 2008 presidential primary that defined the majority of the coverage. These stories showed the relevant routines for covering politics and elections and reflected defining moments in Clinton’s life both as a First Lady and on the campaign trail in 2008.

A story from each of the three major networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC—was collected surrounding each of the 10 defining moments. The sample was determined using a keyword search of “Hillary” and “Clinton” from January 20, 1993, which was the date of Bill Clinton’s inauguration as President, through June 4, 2008, which was the date of Barack Obama’s announced victory in the Democratic presidential primary. The first significant time period was Hillary Clinton’s debut as First Lady. Her role as First Lady led to four more notable moments that preceded her presidential primary campaign and can be considered defining moments in her career. These included her debut as chairwoman for the task force on national health care reform; the Whitewater investigation; the Monica Lewinsky investigation; and her campaign for New York’s open U.S. Senate seat in 2000. We further narrowed the results by identifying appropriate dates during these time periods that served as a catalyst or pivotal point for the events.2

Five notable clusters of news segments were identified in the 2008 presidential primary to achieve balance in the sample. These defining moments represent the media’s “game-framing” of the presidential primary campaign (Lawrence & Rose, 2010). The first cluster of news was around the Iowa caucuses on January 3, 2008. The Iowa caucuses are an important benchmark for candidates. Since 1972, no candidate chosen to represent his political party for the presidential election has lost the Iowa caucuses (Services, 2007). The second cluster of stories occurred 4 days later on January 7 when the candidates travelled to the New Hampshire primary. New Hampshire is considered critical early in the primary race because unlike in the Iowa caucuses, voters go to the
polls and vote for a candidate (Ridout & Rottinghaus, 2008). The third cluster of news segments revolved around February 5, when the media gave extensive coverage to voting on what is referred to as Super Tuesday. On this primary day, 41% of Republican delegates and 52% of Democratic delegates were chosen across 22 states (Nagourney, 2008). The fourth cluster occurred around March 4, 2008, when the states of Ohio, Texas, Vermont, and Rhode Island conducted their primaries (Bumiller, 2008). Ohio and Texas are thought to be states that presidential candidates must win in order to be elected (Hirsch, 2008). The final collection of stories clustered around June 4, 2008, when Barack Obama announced victory in the Democratic presidential primary; Clinton was runner-up (Nagourney, 2008).

**Why Grounded Theory?**

Grounded theory methodology was chosen for the analysis because it allows researchers to go beyond previously established categories and images. The results of grounded theory analysis can contribute to new theory. Sociologists Glaser and Strauss (1967) argued against traditional methodologies and introduced grounded theory as a methodology for gathering qualitative data to develop theory. They contend that “theory could not be divorced from the process by which it was generated” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 5). The methodology is used in a variety of disciplines including mass communications where it has been recognized as a unique way to unearth media discourse (Altheide, 1996; Curkan-Flanagan, 2000; Dutta-Burgman, 2005; Figueroa, 2008; Schnopp-Wyatt, 2005). Grounded theory, when used to develop media theory, requires researchers to immerse themselves in the media content. Thus, it is the depth of the examination of the media content that gives the study its importance rather than the number of media texts.

In the present research, immersion into the media content involved viewing the video news stories multiple times and likewise reading the transcripts multiple times until certain images and words commanded attention more than others. We refer to attention-commanding images and words as visual and verbal *concepts* (See Table 1). Grounded theory emphasizes the identification of patterns or consistency in use of concepts across data. When patterns appeared among the concepts, we labeled them *categories*. Glaser refers to this process as *fracturing* the data into categories, which allows the data to then be compared and contrasted for the next level of abstraction, which is the identification of conceptual themes (Glaser, 1992). Whereas a quantitative study at this point would apply a statistical approach for comparisons, the qualitative approach of grounded theory allows us to apply conceptual meaning to the categories by connecting the elements within and between categories. When meanings were found in multiple categories, they were labeled *conceptual themes*. The goal of the process was to allow themes to emerge that are not present in current literature on media representation of female politicians. In brief, the process allows for multiple concepts in the representations to be identified, then the concepts to be collapsed into a few broad categories based on commonalities they share, and finally the categories
to be further combined into fewer conceptual themes based on similarities in the categories. This creates manageable and meaningful qualitative data.

Secondary literature in a grounded theory study is interwoven with the findings to give context. Thus, we do not have a separate literature review in the present study.

### Findings: Two Representations of Hillary Clinton

Twelve visual and verbal concepts, or attention-commanding representations of Clinton, were identified in the analysis. When a pattern could be identified across concepts, the pattern was designated as a category. A pattern could be similarities in how the representations were created—by Clinton’s attempt at image-making for example, or a pattern could be similarities in the news media’s treatment of Clinton as a newsmaker. The concepts yielded seven categories: (1) Voiceless, (2) Invisible, (3) Horse Race, (4) 1st First Lady, (5) Victim versus Perpetrator, (6) Planned Events, and (7) Performing Roles. As with concepts, these categories were then analyzed for patterns and a way to express the essence of the representation in the pattern. In the process, two conceptual themes addressing the representation of Clinton emerged: (1) Innovator and (2) Voiceless (See Table 1).

The categories of Performing Role, Planned Event, 1st First Lady, and Victim versus Perpetrator yielded the conceptual theme of Innovator. We initially considered Performing Roles and Planned Event as a conceptual theme called Image-Making, but image-making is not a function of journalists. Upon further analysis, we concluded that Performing Roles and Planned Event were indeed image-making on the part of Clinton in an effort to create an image of her as an Innovator. The categories of 1st First Lady and Victim versus Perpetrator (whether Clinton was presented as a victim of circumstances or if she created them) were also about Clinton pushing to be

### Table 1. Concepts to Categories to Conceptual Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visual and Verbal Concepts</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Conceptual Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional First Lady (5)</td>
<td>Performing role</td>
<td>Innovator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporter (5)</td>
<td>Performing role</td>
<td>Innovator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photo-Ops (visual) (20)</td>
<td>Planned event</td>
<td>Innovator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Lady as policy advisor (9)</td>
<td>1st First Lady</td>
<td>Innovator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman as President (5)</td>
<td>1st First Lady</td>
<td>Innovator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman as VP (3)</td>
<td>1st First Lady</td>
<td>Innovator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fighting back (3)</td>
<td>Victim versus Perpetrator</td>
<td>Innovator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal (3)</td>
<td>Victim versus Perpetrator</td>
<td>Innovator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invisible (6)</td>
<td>Invisible</td>
<td>Voiceless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voiceless (10)</td>
<td>Voiceless</td>
<td>Voiceless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positioned behind in primary (8)</td>
<td>Horse race</td>
<td>Voiceless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign strategy (7)</td>
<td>Horse race</td>
<td>Voiceless</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*The number in parentheses shows the number of stories containing the concept.*
portrayed by the media as an Innovator. This occurred either because of positions she held that a woman had not previously held, or because of her willingness to speak out in controversial situations unlike previous First Ladies. These were natural news stories for the media, but not with the media necessarily accepting Clinton’s representation of herself. This created the conceptual theme of Innovator with the dynamic of Clinton negotiating her image, and the media negotiating the representation of that image in the context of maintaining journalistic integrity. The second conceptual theme, Voiceless, emerged from the categories of Invisible, Voiceless, and Horse Race reporting. We initially considered Voiceless and Invisible as separate conceptual themes, but continued analysis suggested they were aspects of the same representation. In both, Clinton does not have the opportunity to speak for herself. Readers are only given the journalist’s interpretation. Likewise, Horse Race reporting was all about journalists’ interpretation, not Clinton addressing her political views and policies. We now discuss the two conceptual themes in the news stories.

**Innovator**

Clinton as innovator emerged as a dominant conceptual theme, showing up in 66% of the 30 stories analyzed, beginning with her first term as First Lady and continuing through her career as a political candidate. It was a theme actively created by Clinton, driven by her political activities and ambitions. Yet, although innovator was a positive theme, what is noticeable is how much of the theme as reported grew out of negative news events or included a negative perspective toward Clinton. While Clinton sought to create an image of a nontraditional female politician knocking down barriers, the news media—in the stories examined—presented an image much different. The media representations showed her as innovative, but also as pushy and aggressive, two qualities often associated with negative portrayals of successful women (Falk, 2008; Rosaldo, 1977). Additionally, the news media continually presented Clinton in gendered contexts often in terms of relationships and family, again consistent with limited earlier portrayals of successful women.

All three networks reported that Clinton was the 1st First Lady in the history of the presidency to establish an office in the West Wing of the White House, where government business is typically conducted (Chung, 1995; Plante, 1993; Wooten, 1993b). CBS’s Bill Plante (1993) reported,

> Traditionally First Ladies preside over an office in the East Wing of the White House which oversees social events and they identify themselves with charitable causes, but Hillary Clinton has an office in the West Wing where the President and the power are, and that’s a first.

Plante acknowledged that Clinton was breaking a major barrier, but did so in backhanded fashion. Another barrier fell days after Bill Clinton’s inauguration as President in 1993, when Hillary Clinton became the only First Lady ever to be appointed to chair a task force on a national issue, health care reform. Bill Plante’s story (1993) on
January 25 emphasized the precedent-setting nature of the appointment, but at the same time questioned Americans’ receptiveness to a First Lady in this role. He reported,

In one hundred days, the President will deliver something many Americans want . . . a healthcare reform package, in charge, his wife Hillary Rodham Clinton, a choice many Americans may question . . . . Hillary Clinton began generating heat early in the campaign—vote for him and you get both of us . . . When that didn’t go over well, her role as an advisor was played down.

Plante’s effort to give political context to the story overshadows the trailblazing nature of the appointment.

In her years as First Lady, Clinton was also presented by the news media as an innovator in the way she handled scandal—her own and her husband’s (Bloom, 1998; Douglas, 1998; Jones, 1998; Judd, 1998; Palmer, 1998; Rather, 1998; Wooten, 1993a). It was a first for a First Lady to be so visible in such unseemly affairs, associated with scandals involving both her own business dealings and accusations involving the President (Beasley, 2006). In the Lewinsky investigation, in which the President was accused of having an affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky, the First Lady was packaged by the media as a victim, someone consumed by the circumstances. But the stories also presented her in an innovator role, as the President’s wife who took on the awkward position of staunchly defending her husband and their marriage in the public eye, a first for a First Lady. These stories show Clinton as a nontraditional supporter even in the most difficult of situations.

In another negative news story that depicted her as an innovator, Clinton was subpoenaed by a grand jury to testify about the questionable land development deal known as Whitewater, in which she and the president had invested. She was also implicated in overbilling of clients at the Arkansas law firm where she had been employed (Jones, 1998; Judd, 1998; Palmer, 1998). As the Whitewater land deal story developed, the news media presented First Lady Hillary Clinton as a perpetrator knowingly involved in the questionable activity, not as a victim of it.

The innovator representation, both positive and negative, shows Clinton’s struggle to negotiate her image through the journalists who covered her, and the journalists’ challenge to find the right approach to the stories. The Clinton White House was known for its strict regulation of the press; White House staffers have admitted that often the White House press corps were prevented from covering events involving the First Lady (Winfield, 1997). Hillary Clinton admitted in her autobiography that her relationship with the press was tricky and delicate, adding “I didn’t fully understand it” (Clinton, 2003, p. 105). As she transitioned from First Lady to U.S. Senator to presidential candidate, the innovator image took on a new dynamic as she began her quest to increase her visibility and further control her image. Clinton used planned events such as photo opportunities as a strategic part of image-making. The nature of these photo opportunities varied and included press conferences, family moments, and
campaign trail footage, but the goal was always to push her innovativeness as a theme. For political candidates, planned events are a large part of image-making and are very much a norm (Winfield, 1997). As Clinton campaigned for the U.S. Senate, the stories contained a great deal of this supportive staged imagery.

As Senator Hillary Clinton launched her presidential primary campaign, the news media continued to buy into the innovativeness theme but this time by focusing on gender as a significant factor in the 2008 presidential primaries. Four of the 15 stories in the study about the campaign focused on gender as a factor. But again, the news media tended to turn gender, and thus Clinton’s innovativeness, into a negative. When she was questioned by a voter in a town meeting in New Hampshire about her ability “to do it all”—a question not posed to men—the networks reported her as having “an emotional moment” (Axelrod, 2008a; Mitchell, 2008a; Snow, 2008a). In ABC’s story, a sound bite from fellow Democratic presidential candidate John Edwards on Clinton’s “emotional moment” questioned Clinton’s ability to be “tough enough” to be president (Snow, 2008a). CBS used a small graphic with the text “moved to tears” in its story. The graphic and text appeared at the beginning of the story and were actually pulled from a sound bite of a voter who was describing how Barack Obama had moved her to joyful tears the previous day (Axelrod, 2008a). In both stories, the innovator that Clinton was in her excellent showing in the primary was gendered to a weakness.

In the 2008 presidential primaries, dozens of video photo ops showed her waving, smiling, and shaking hands with supporters or with her family at various venues around the country. Two stories showed Clinton in a downpour of confetti, in a throng of supporters, visually positioning her as a winner. The context of these visuals was sometimes mitigated, however, when the reporter and/or anchor commentary was added in. Although she was presented visually with many supporters in the video, the journalists often questioned Clinton’s voter base. A story by Jim Axelrod, although visually positive for Clinton, questioned her ability to win over Iowa’s voters. Axelrod stated that Iowa voters saw Obama as more of an agent of change (Axelrod, 2008b). In an early primary story on January 7 about Clinton’s supposedly “emotional moment,” Andrea Mitchell (Mitchell, 2008a) reported that Clinton was “clearly showing the strain.” The implication by Mitchell was that she was showing the strain because she was a woman. The end of this story contained a sound bite from an interview with an entertainment reporter where Clinton states that in her spare time she enjoyed cleaning closets (Mitchell, 2008a). By adding this additional sound bite from an unrelated interview, Mitchell emphasized Clinton’s femininity which in turn emphasized that Clinton’s softness was a trait viewed as unsuitable to withstand the strain of public office (Mitchell, 2008a).

This mitigation of the positive visual by the negative verbal was present in presidential primary stories on each network beginning in January 2008 and continuing through June when Clinton conceded the nomination (Axelrod, 2008c, 2008d; Couric, 2008; Mitchell, 2008c, 2008d; Muir, 2008; Snow, 2008b, 2008c). Innovativeness as a positive representation was offset by traditional perceptions of women.
How the news media could have covered Clinton without raising negative stereotypes associated with gender was explained in a story by Kate Snow (Snow, 2008a) at the end of the primary campaign. Clinton had been criticized for not conceding the Democratic primary election to Barack Obama as soon as it was clear she could not secure enough votes to win. ABC colleague Diane Sawyer had asked Clinton during an interview on “Good Morning America,” “Do different standards apply to women,” suggesting that a male candidate would not have received the same criticism for not immediately conceding. Snow used the sound bite in an interview with Hilary Rosen, Political Director of The Huffington Post, who emphasized that Clinton’s accomplishments in the race—that she won a number of states—should have been the focus at that point and should have been a cause for celebration. Instead, Rosen commented, the media questioned Clinton’s unwillingness to concede the race immediately. Rosen said, “We should be applauding the woman who came in such a close second and instead we’re talking about, ‘what is she doing and why is she doing this?’” (Snow & Gibson, 2008).

**Voiceless**

The second theme to emerge was voiceless—representations when Clinton was seen but not heard in sound bites, and when she was significant in a story but was not seen or heard. At times, it was not the video or script that told the Clinton story, but the lack of them. Fifty percent of the stories analyzed contained the theme of voiceless. As Hillary Clinton assumed the role of First Lady, all of the major networks broadcast a story about her. None of these stories, however, contained actual interviews with the First Lady. After Clinton was appointed to head the health care policy task force, in a 2-min interview on NBC with Clinton’s former Arkansas Chief of Staff, Betsy Wright, the story focused on Clinton’s role, but the First Lady herself was not interviewed. The only visual of Clinton in the story is a small graphic that is seen at the beginning of the interview and is placed far in the background (Utley, 1993). Although the story is ultimately positive in nature, Clinton is voiceless.

As the health care debate continued during the Clinton administration, Hillary Clinton became less and less visible in the debate and in the stories as well. NBC news anchor Connie Chung (1995) reported in 1995 that Clinton was stepping back from the health care issue in an effort to maintain a more traditional image as a First Lady. Chung alluded to Clinton’s attempts to control her image as a factor in her diminishing role in the health care issue. The sound bites from Clinton in the story were from file footage. Chung interviewed several people and discussed Clinton, but Clinton was not given an immediate voice (Chung, 1995). In August of 1996, when President Clinton signed a health care bill into law (Miklaszewski, 1996), she was shown in NBC’s story for less than 3 seconds and with no interview.

As with her depiction as an innovator, when Clinton was given voice it seemed to be in negative stories and gendered roles. When Clinton was allowed to speak in the stories, she addressed the stability of her marriage or relationship issues, which might
be seen as two women fighting over a man. She was allowed to speak about her relationship but not national policy. During the Lewinsky investigation, NBC reporter David Bloom showed Clinton supporting her husband when he reported, “Hillary Clinton has taken a lead role in a damage control effort, allowing no access to the President” (Bloom, 1998). ABC’s Linda Douglas, reporting on the Lewinsky investigation, noted that “Mrs. Clinton is battling fiercely” (Douglas, 1998). File footage containing a sound bite from Hillary Clinton at a campaign rally in Arkansas years earlier stated, “we have a strong marriage, we love each other” (Douglas, 1998). None of the Lewinsky and Whitewater stories analyzed contain photo ops or sound bites from Hillary Clinton concerning the respective investigation at hand. As stated earlier, Clinton can be considered an innovator for speaking up as a First Lady in such a scandalous situation, but it is also worth considering why she is given greater voice in such matters rather than on policy issues.

It is worth noting that giving Clinton voice in such scandalous stories continued from a trend prior to the research period. Two sound bites that aired in 1992 represent the struggle the media had in negotiating Hillary Clinton’s nontraditional First Lady role and in giving her voice. The first sound bite occurred during an interview with the television news magazine show, 60 Minutes, in which she was questioned about her husband’s alleged 12-year affair with a nightclub singer. Clinton responded, “I’m not sitting here, some little woman standing by my man like Tammy Wynette,” referring to a popular Country and Western song, which encourages women to “stand by your man” under all circumstances (Burns, 2008; Clinton, 2003; Jamieson, 1995, p. 24). This statement has followed Clinton during her political career, including when she announced her bid for president 15 years later (Chung, 1995; The Seattle Times, 2007).

The second sound bite occurred in a press conference with Hillary Clinton that addressed statements made by California Governor and presidential candidate Jerry Brown in 1992. During a televised debate with Bill Clinton, Gov. Brown accused Hillary Clinton of capitalizing on her husband’s position as Governor of Arkansas by funneling funds to the Rose law firm where she was a partner (Clinton, 2003; Jamieson, 1995). Rejecting the charges during a press conference, she said, “You know I suppose I could have stayed home and baked cookies and had teas. But what I decided to do was fulfill my profession which I entered before my husband was in public life” (Jamieson, 1995, p. 27). The press conference ended quickly and her sound bite became the quote of the day. An article about Hillary Clinton in New York Newsday 3 months later in July mentioned cookies no less than five times (Benz, 1992), and in 1995, the sound bite was referenced in a story titled “The State of the First Lady” (Chung, 1995). Even in June of 2010, a blog called Chicago Now referenced the 18-year-old quote in a discussion about the demise of the old-fashioned American bake sale (Tithofsteere, 2010). The repeated reference by the media to these quotes and sound bites shows a propensity by the media to portray the “double-bind” (Jamieson, 1995; Lawrence & Rose, 2010) of traditional versus nontraditional when it comes to Hillary Clinton.
Clinton’s visibility in news stories during her presidential primary campaign was evident; however, her voice, particularly addressing policies, was not. Some of her voicelessness may be due to journalistic practice, and other political candidates may have suffered likewise. Over time, election coverage by broadcast journalists has changed from a philosophy of allowing candidates to speak on important issues, to quick updates of where candidates stand in a race (Kaid & Bystrom, 1999). Clinton’s speaking opportunities in news stories may have suffered during the presidential primary as a result of this news revolution. Her voice on policies, issues, and her own experiences are at times silenced through horse race reporting. One hundred percent of the stories analyzed during the 2008 presidential primary had evidence of horse race reporting. With time being such a scarce commodity in broadcast news (Kaid & Bystrom, 1999; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996), journalists generally used this valuable time to give the “who’s ahead, who’s behind” updates, leaving little or no on-air time for interviews or sound bites on policy and issues. Commentary like “(Clinton) comes with the frontrunner title, will she leave with it” (Mitchell, 2008b), “I wouldn’t say Clinton’s campaign is brimming with confidence” (Axelrod, 2008b), “will this one moment help or hurt (Clinton)” (Snow, 2008a), and “recognition she may come in 2nd or 3rd” (Snow, 2008b) put journalists in the position of being the voice in the news stories. Horse-race coverage promoted voicelessness at the expense of policy coverage.

Also, some of Clinton’s voicelessness may have been due to her aggressive attempts to control her image, as discussed previously, by making herself inaccessible to the news media at times, including during significant newsworthy events (Clinton, 2003; Winfield, 1997). As also noted earlier, Clinton admitted in her autobiography that she did not fully understand her relationship with the media while in the White House (Clinton, 2003).

Discussion

We have used grounded theory analysis because we are interested in developing theory that can help explain portrayals of a nontraditional candidate, rather than relying on previous depictions and explanations. Our research produced two new conceptual themes, innovator and voiceless, one positive and one negative, respectively. However, the intersection of the two themes suggests a negative representation. The two conceptual themes suggest an innovator candidate will find himself/herself questioned rather than celebrated and voiceless when the expectation might be otherwise. Although it is not the job of journalists to celebrate, even pioneering efforts, this finding is important because it raises questions about how much journalism is guided by perhaps worn notions of cynicism rather than fair representations and accurately recording history.

We, both of whom are former journalists—one print and one broadcast—do not intend to suggest intentional bias on the part of journalists who cover groundbreaking innovative newsmakers like Clinton. But the study shows that despite a solid body of
literature regarding viewer feedback on the inadequacies of presidential election coverage in both network and local television news (Falk, 2008; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2004, 2011a; Kaid & Bystrom, 1999; Kohut, 2008; Lawrence & Rose, 2010; Winfield, 1997), network coverage of elections continues the practice of “horse race” reporting and soft style election coverage that focuses more on the commentator than the candidate and issues (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2004, 2011b). Perhaps, this is an old lesson in journalism practices, but it is a lesson which continues to be ignored. As broadcast journalists and news management seek to maintain and increase viewership in an environment of news consumption decline (Guskin et al., 2010), ignoring this lesson serves only to increase voter cynicism and push viewers to cable, print, and online media for election information (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2004, 2011a; Kohut, 2008).

With the goal of grounded theory being to contribute to new theory, our finding makes such a contribution, even if modest. It is no small matter to find that an inherently positive story—a woman breaking barriers at the highest levels of American politics—is essentially treated as a negative story in two significant ways: a negative twist on many of the individual stories, and not giving the innovator a consistent voice. Even in this case, where admittedly the innovator had plenty of negative baggage when the stories were reported, journalists have an obligation to history. News stories are a result of a complex process of journalistic routines and practices (Gitlin, 2001; Griffin, 1992; Lawrence & Rose, 2010; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Journalists and all newsroom gatekeepers should always remember their practices have implications for the stories that are produced, and the stories have implications for the present and the future (McQuail, 2005; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). For example, the stories reporting Clinton cried in New Hampshire—inaccurate stories because she did not cry—perpetuate harmful stereotypes of females that may be impossible to counteract. This defining moment in the campaign served as a news hook and a means of generating controversy concerning a nontraditional candidate.

As network news journalists continue to provide presidential election coverage in the coming years, they will need to provide candidates with a voice, allowing their views on policies and issues to supersede traditional horse race reporting and the role of reporter as celebrity commentator. This study contributes to a body of existing literature that consistently has advised the network news media of its shortfalls in election coverage over past decades (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2004, 2011a, 2011b; Guskin, et al., 2010; Lawrence & Rose, 2010). The average network news presidential sound bite has dropped from 48 s in the 1968 elections, to 10 s in the 1992 elections, to a record low of 7.8 s in the 2000 elections (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2004; Kaid & Bystrom, 1999).

Continually tuning out the cries of viewers and scholars who urge networks to provide more literate and accurate coverage of candidates has resulted in a continuous decline of trust and viewership. As more and more nontraditional candidates are able to enter presidential elections, the media have a duty and an obligation to viewers to allow all candidates to have a voice that educates the polity on their policy positions and character.
Future research would benefit from a response from network producers who have been and will be in charge of election coverage. The literature does not include any type of research either quantitative or qualitative that can give us a deeper understanding of why this philosophy of network coverage continues despite evidence that it has failed the viewing public and the candidates.

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Notes
1. Several of the stories in the analysis far exceeded the traditional news package length of 2 min and involved team coverage and comments from the other candidates about Hillary Clinton, which lasted up to 15 min for some stories.
2. The television news segment is the unit of analysis for this study. A news segment, for the purposes of this study, may contain one or more news packages voice-overs, readers, or sound bites referred to as stories which are at times accompanied by live reporter commentary. A package as referred to in the broadcast news industry, is a preproduced story most often containing sound bites and the reporter’s voice track.

References


**Bios**

**Mary Tucker-McLaughlin** (PhD, University of South Carolina) is an assistant professor in the School of Communication at East Carolina University. She researches gender representation in mass communication, collective memory and social media communication.

**Kenneth Campbell** (PhD, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) is an associate professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of South Carolina. His research interests include media history, representation of minorities, and collective memory.