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Sexual and Political Affairs: Representation of Women in American News Media

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This research is a product of the graduate program in Communication Studies with Community College Pedagogy Option at Eastern Illinois University. Find out more about the program.

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Sexual and Political Affairs:

Representations of Women in American News Media

(TITLE)

BY
Melissa Beal

THESIS
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I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE.
Sexual and Political Affairs
Representations of Women in American News Media

Melissa Beal
Abstract

Explores representations in American news media of women who have been involved sexually with male politicians and women who are politicians through a critical rhetorical lens. Through the use of poststructural feminism, the term “mistress” is problematized. Attention is given to the news media’s focus on women’s bodies as sites of dangerous sexual temptations as well as the media’s constant attention to women’s physical features, which reduces women to objects. It is shown that similar coverage regarding bodies is not given to men. Also discusses the news media’s frequent interrogation of women’s minds. Explores aspects of confession and apology through a Foucauldian lens and also investigate why the news media covers sexual affairs continuously and in great detail despite America’s often prudish attitude towards sex through the same lens. Also examines the infrequency with which women politicians are involved in sexual affairs or scandals, particularly when compared with men. Describes various ways that women who become successful in the male-dominated field of American politics are often unsexed by their success and scrutinized in ways that men are not, only because of their gender. Offers solutions to the continued belittling of women and reification of gender stereotypes in American news media.
Dedication

This project is dedicated to Leslie Knope.

“\textit{I guess some people object to powerful depictions of awesome ladies.}”
- Leslie Knope
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I would like to thank Dr. Marita Gronnvoll without whom this project would not have been conceived nor completed. Before graduate school at EIU, particularly the two classes I was fortunate to take with Dr. Gronnvoll, I was not aware that I was interested in feminism or rhetoric. Although this project has taken longer than I had anticipated, Dr. Gronnvoll's extreme patience with my progress was most appreciated. I consider her level of intellect and sense of humor great bonuses. Thank you also to Dr. T. M. Linda Scholz and Dr. Rich Jones for their participation in this project.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

"I did not have sexual relations with that woman." – President Bill Clinton

In January 1998 rumors began to emerge about a possible sex scandal in the White House. President Bill Clinton had been accused of carrying on an extramarital affair with a young White House intern named Monica Lewinsky. For the next year a media frenzy ensued. The story was confirmed and covered from every angle, and Lewinsky achieved epic notoriety. Clinton was brought to trial for possible perjury and obstruction of justice, but was acquitted on all charges. Thousands of newspaper column inches were dedicated to the nine sexual encounters between Clinton and Lewinsky. The nation was captivated as this American soap opera unfolded for over a year. What is interesting, though, is that this story that produced an ongoing media circus surrounding its every detail, involved real people, not fictional characters whose sexual liaisons were written and filmed for entertainment purposes. However, that did not stop reporters from covering the story as if they had been.

In late 2007, a similar circus developed when the National Enquirer, a notoriously shady supermarket tabloid reported that Senator John Edwards a democratic party presidential candidate was not only carrying on an affair with Rielle Hunter, a filmmaker who had been hired to produce video of his campaign, but was also the father of her child. Almost six months later, mainstream media outlets were able to verify the story and the media frenzy began. Edwards continued
to deny allegations of the affair until August of 2008. Over a year later, in the first month of 2010, Edwards finally admitted to fathering Hunter’s child. Complicating the affair, and adding to the hub-bub surrounding it were the discovery of a sex tape between Edwards and Hunter, the fact that his wife was suffering from terminal cancer throughout the ongoing affair, as well as Edwards indictment in North Carolina on six felony charges relating to whether or not he used campaign funds to help conceal the affair.

In early November 2012 four-star General David Patraeus, acting director of the American Central Intelligence Agency, resigned after admitting to an extra-marital sexual affair with his biographer, Paula Broadwell, a writer and Army intelligence officer who specialized in anti-terrorism. This story, which is still unfolding, involves the ongoing affair and secret email accounts and was uncovered after the FBI began an investigation into a cyber stalking complaint, which eventually led to Broadwell, and the revelation of the affair. The title of Broadwell’s book All In: The Education of David Patraeus was subject to every sexual pun imaginable.

All of this speaks to a larger issue regarding news as entertainment, but for my purposes, I will focus on the ways in which the media, specifically print news media, portray these women, real women, whose lives have been fractured first by a sexual affair and then by the media coverage surrounding it. These women thusly include Monica Lewinsky, Rielle Hunter and Paula Broadwell.

In my research, I will examine the ways in which these women are represented in American print news media after engaging in consensual extra-
marital affairs with well known/powerful American male politicians; how the media covers the affairs; and how sexist media coverage prevents women in politics from receiving the same kind of coverage as men in politics. In my initial research, I discovered that although both a man and a woman were involved together in an affair, women are written about, described and represented differently than their male counterparts, despite the fact that both engaged in a similar act. Furthermore, and perhaps as a result of news media providing a more negative representation of the women involved in high-profile affairs with American politicians, women are disciplined in society differently, and more harshly than are men. In order to research and explore this phenomenon in American news media I will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. How are these women represented in American print news media?
2. In what ways does the American news media hold women to higher standards than men?
3. How does discourse on sex exist as a taboo in American print news media while simultaneously a hot topic of discussion?
4. How are sex scandals involving American politicians gendered?

In order to answer these questions I engaged in a critical rhetorical analysis of the print news media discourses surrounding these affairs. According to McKerrow, in his seminal article “Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis,” “The aim [of critical rhetoric] is to understand the integration of power/knowledge in society—what possibilities for change the integration invites or inhibits and what intervention strategies might be considered appropriate to effect social change” (91). In my
analysis, then, I “unmask and "reveal" the ways in which American print news media helps create/perpetuate the subjugation of women through discourse. To do this, McKerrow suggests focusing on the discourses of power that create and maintain social and political practices that control a disadvantaged group, in this case, women, particularly Lewinsky, Hunter, and Broadwell as well as women who hold elected or appointed offices of the American government. Specifically, this is a “critique of ideologies,” which are rhetorical creations. Since most discourses of power—which include sexist representations of women in the media—are “institutionalized rules accepted and used by the dominant class to control the discursive actions of the dominated” (93), a critical rhetorical lens is crucial to apply to American print news media to evaluate the way the discourses included within it are “taken-for-granted.” These kinds of discourses endanger our freedoms by reducing our chances of considering or realizing new possibilities or courses for action when we accept them, their boundaries, and the authority granted to certain individuals to speak about them (97).

In addition to an overarching critical rhetorical approach, I intend to include the following communication theories in my analysis: poststructural criticism, feminism, discourse formation, and discipline. I will begin here with poststructuralism. According to Adams St. Pierre poststructural critique “can be employed to examine any commonplace situation, any ordinary event or process, in order to think differently about that occurrence—to open up what seems ‘natural’ to other possibilities (479). Poststructural feminism can be used to interrogate “natural” binaries that privilege men and disadvantage women. I will argue that the
term "mistress," especially when used possessively, does just this. Describing a woman as a man's mistress, for example Monica Lewinsky as "Bill Clinton's mistress," as hundreds of media reports have done, provides a binary of the relationship between the two, wherein he is the subject and she is his object. Through a poststructural critique, it is possible to interrogate many other aspects of high-profile affairs and work to denaturalize the aspects and features of news media coverage that continue to privilege men and denigrate women. For example, the term "mistress" is used so commonly in news media, that it seems natural. However, nary is a related term used to describe men. In fact, an equivalent term for men does not exist. Philanderer, lover, adulterer all might come close, but none carry as negative a connotation as mistress. Additionally, hundreds of other words used to describe a promiscuous woman exist—slut, whore, tramp—while much fewer words exist to describe licentious men, and those that do, like stud or pimp, carry more socially acceptable more positive connotations that suggest masculinity and virility. It is also important to note that mistress and madam, which were at one time used as courteous titles to address women, both now carry a sexual implication. Mistress describes a woman who engages in a sexual relationship with a married man who is not her husband, and madam describes the owner or manager of a brothel or group of sexual escorts. Mister and master remain courteous titles for men. Other sexist terms used in print media will also be critiqued.

Through various facets of feminism I will be able to more adeptly problematize and interrogate the news media’s use of the term "mistress" as well as many other aspects of the ways in which the news media provide unfair representations of
women. bell hooks describes feminism as “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression” (viii). Part of dispensing a feminist agenda then, must be to interrogate sexism in common places, such as the news media, where reporters continue to present information in a sexist fashion. One way in which they do this, particularly when covering heterosexual extra-marital affairs is by emphasizing and more thoroughly interrogating women’s bodies than men’s, which contributes to sexism, and thus the belittlement of women. Building on Butler’s notion that “only the feminine gender is marked,” I will apply a critical feminist lens to news media discourses that highlight the women’s bodies and ignore men’s (Butler 13). These include inane and frequent descriptions of women’s physical appearance that hone in on Lewinsky’s weight and “love handles” or Broadwell’s “toned arms” and fitness achievements and are discussed in reference to the women’s level of attractiveness. Oddly, in “objective” journalistic discourses, women are subject to harsh judgment and criticism based on their appearance. However, interrogation of the female body does not stop there. At some point during her affair with Clinton (keep in mind that the two never engaged in sexual intercourse) Lewinksy underwent an abortion. Numerous news reports publicized this private matter regarding her reproductive rights and control of her own body to further the notion that Lewinsky was promiscuous. Additionally, this matter was investigated in Clinton’s impeachment trial, and despite the issue at hand being whether or not the American president lied under oath, this aspect of Lewinsky’s body was widely reported. In the case of Edwards and Hunter, who conceived a child during their affair, news reports revealed details about Hunter’s menstrual cycle as well as
details about appointments with her gynecologist. Although these details were revealed in a trial to determine whether or not Edwards misappropriated campaign funds, some media outlets determined that the gynecological details were important enough to report to the American public. Many news reports also delve into the sexual histories of politicians' “mistresses” while ignoring the pasts of the politicians themselves, except in the case of Clinton, whose sexual past was well known because of sexual harassment charges filed by Paula Jones. These examples will provide rich fodder for analysis in my thesis project. According to Butler, “The association of the body with the female works along magical relations of reciprocity whereby the female sex becomes restricted to its body, and the male body, fully disavowed, becomes, paradoxically, the incorporeal instrument of an ostensibly radical freedom” (16). This helps explain the media’s constant reference to these women’s bodies, and ignorance of men’s. According to Hammers:

The gendered nature of the bias against the body places an uneven burden on women who seek to participate in, and shape the social order, particularly through participation in the public fora. This draws attention to the ways in which the mind/body split influences one of its parallel binaries, the dichotomy between the “public” and the “private.” (224)

The relationship between mind/body and public/private is important to critique in this context. Traditionally, the “distinction between ‘public’ and ‘private” has operated to keep certain issues, particularly those associated with women and other minorities out of public discourse” (Hammers 225). But in the case of coverage surrounding Lewinsky’s and Hunter’s bodies, the private became public in a way that perpetuated the sexist privileging of the mind over body binary by denigrating these women who were unable to “transcend” their bodies like their male
counterparts. Here, the "private" was made "public" in a way that continued to
disadvantage women. Attention was not drawn to abortion, reproductive rights, or
women's health for the purpose of empowering women, but rather to illustrate their
perceived weaknesses.

In addition to the emphasis on their bodies, women involved in these affairs are
also subject to judgment of their mental status. As mentioned, the binary of
body/mind privileges men and disadvantages women (Adams St. Pierre 481).
Various news reports perpetuate this binary by emphasizing deficiencies in
women's mental statuses, while never even exploring men's. According to Hurt,
"When men have problems, society tends to look outward for explanations; when
women have problems, society looks inward" (306). For example, Hunter was
consistently described in news reports as a "loose cannon" whose personality and
outbursts needed to be kept in check. Coverage of Lewinsky's mental status was far
worse. Numerous reports credited her penchant for having sex with married men to
low self-esteem, a result of her "weight problem." Reports of her use of prescription
anti-depressant drugs became public knowledge, as well as the notion that she at
one time "contemplated suicide." Many news reports assumed that Lewinsky's
mental status/depression led to her engaging in high-risk sexual affairs. However, I
submit that it is possible that the opposite is true, and that perhaps getting caught
caused her some anguish. As Hurt argues:

The bad feelings women uniquely experience as the result of economic
discrimination, emotional and sexual abuse, and being treated as second-class
citizens in a society in which men continue to control most of the resources may
contribute to a more encompassing depiction of women's depression (307).
Though I cannot say with any certainty what did or did not lead to Lewinsky's alleged depression, it is important to consider, as Hurt suggests, external societal forces instead of an inherent feminine weakness when evaluating a woman's mental status. Hurt's scholarship will aid in the analysis of the media's coverage of these women's mental "instabilities." She writes "Critical rhetoric discourages rhetorical scholars from solely focusing on what is true or certain in a particular discourse, and instead encourages scholars to look at what is concealed and revealed in that discourse" (290). For this project, I am interested in what is "concealed and revealed" in the discourses that evoke mental deficiency in women.

Another problematic aspect of American news media coverage of extramarital affairs involving high-level politicians is the tendency for reporters to conceive a plot that pits women against one another, allowing for the coverage of potential (real or perceived) "catfights." In Sexual Politics Kate Millett wrote, "One of the chief effects of class within patriarchy is to set one woman against another, in the past creating a lively antagonism between whore and matron." Men then, through their patriarchal advantage, as well as an established double standard, are able to "play the estranged women against each other as rivals" (38). Oddly, the women media reports pit "mistresses" against, are rarely the male adulterers' wives with whom a mutual dislike of one of another might make sense. Linda Tripp became a household name when she became the whistleblower of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair. As such, she became an easy nemesis for reporters to position Lewinsky against. The more obvious rival would have been Hillary Clinton, but it appears that the news media is ironically opposed to belittling women whose
husbands are involved in high-profile affairs. This is especially true in the case of the Hunter-Edwards affair, since Edwards’ wife, who has since died, was suffering from terminal breast cancer when the affair was revealed—this however, did not stop the news media from reporting on Elizabeth Edwards’ mental stability particular to an isolated outburst after discovering her husband’s infidelity. As for Broadwell and Patraeus, news reports put Broadwell in opposition with a set of “Kardashian-like” twins who threw extravagant parties for military personal and were acquaintances of Patraeus. Pitting women against one another prevents women from acting in solidarity. According to hooks, women are “socialized as females by patriarchal thinking to see ourselves as inferior to men, to see ourselves as always and only in competition with one another for patriarchal approval, to look upon each other with jealousy, fear, and hatred” (Feminism 14). When the news media positions women in opposition with each other, in real or imagined ways, patriarchy is perpetuated because women are represented as constantly seeking male approval, even fighting with each other in order to achieve it. Furthermore, it prevents women from establishing a positive sisterhood. bell hooks describes sisterhood as the ability of females to “bond together in constructive ways even in the midst of sexism” (Foss, Foss & Griffin 70). As long as the media pits women against one another, sexism will continue to prevail and sisterhood will fail.

As briefly mentioned, discourse surrounding wives of cheating politicians could also be critiqued. What kind of statements do they make about their husbands? About the women who they cheated with? And about their families? Many women, like Hillary Clinton remain married to their cheating husbands. Why?
Is it because men cheat and that’s just the way it is? “Comfort of imagined absolutes and deep structures allows us, women and men, to avoid responsibility for the state of the world. When we say ‘that’s just the way it is,’ when we place responsibility on some centered presence, some absolute, foundational principle outside the realm of human activity, we may, in fact, be acting irresponsibly,” Adams St. Pierre argued (484). In this sense, I would argue that the media’s discourse surrounding affairs is irresponsible. It sensationalizes the sordid private lives of politicians, and creates victims and villains out of women, while forgiving men for behaving “like men.”

On the other hand, some of the discourse presents women in a positive way. Most news reports can’t mention Broadwell without tagging on a “West Point graduate” descriptor. Many other reports also emphasize her successful military career, her Harvard doctoral degree and her success in journalism and as a writer (of the Petraeus biography). However, coverage of her high-profile affair completely overshadows her success in multiple fields. Furthermore, it appears that part of the reason her success in the military is mentioned, is to highlight at least one way in which Broadwell is atypically feminine. Print news media has had a field day with the “unusual” juxtaposition of an attractive woman who has met with a great deal of success in a masculine field, while still maintaining a strong enough level of femininity to attract General Patraeus. So far, in analyzing various media discourses, it is obvious and apparent that the American news media is completely preoccupied with the female body, particularly those involved in high-profile affairs. They are also completely preoccupied with sex.
In the *History of Sexuality* Foucault writes, "Despite society's best efforts to keep sex silent, a kind of phenomenal proliferation of sexual discourse occurred" (18). Although he was writing about the past, I would argue that in 20th and 21st century America, sex remains a relatively taboo subject that proper people do not discuss in terms that are not medical or related to reproduction. However, when it comes to high-profile affairs, the American news media have a virtual field day with the intimate and private details regarding the sexual acts perpetrated by politicians with their "mistresses." I find it rather curious that the sexual habits of husband and wife are off-limits in news reports, but every sordid detail of the sexual encounters between a husband and the woman with whom he is having an affair is fair game. This is why we all know about Lewinsky's blue Gap dress that was stained with semen or that she was intimate with a cigar, but nothing about Hillary's sexual predilections. That said, I'm not proposing that the news media publicize those details, but rather that a critical lens be applied to the American news media's choice to investigate and publicize some sexual details and not others. In the case of each affair I have analyzed, media coverage seemingly reports only on sexual relations that it deems "wrong" or "inappropriate." As such, reporters have turned "sex into that which, above all else, had to be confessed" (Foucault, 35). When it comes to reporting sexual affairs carried out by high profile politicians, the media have, as Foucault described, "dedicated themselves to speaking of it ad infinitum, while exploiting it as the secret" (35). In this way, the media, specifically when describing sexual affairs carried out by high profile American politicians, are gaining "pleasure in the truth of pleasure." Foucault describes this "pleasure," which is
evidently experienced by reporters and readers of news stories surrounding the
tawdry details of sex as “the pleasure of knowing that truth, of discovering and
exposing it, the fascination of seeing it and telling it, of captivating and capturing
others by it, of confiding it in secret, of luring it out in the open—the specific
pleasure of the true discourse on pleasure” (71). My analysis of news media
discourse surrounding extra-marital sexual affairs will interrogate the ways in
which the news media positions sex as both taboo and necessary to discuss. In other
words, how the topic of sex is both and neither private or public. This portion of
analysis will rely heavily on Foucault’s notions of discourse formation in the History
of Sexuality, which states:

Indeed, it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together. And
for this very reason, we must conceive discourse as a series of discontinuous
segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable. To be more
precise, we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted
discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and
the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come
into play in various strategies. . . Discourse transmits and produces power; it
reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and
makes it possible to thwart it. (100-101)

This passage is very useful when analyzing American print news discourses. The
knowledge that news reporters provided the American public that included the
sexual details of each affair may have seemed taboo, but at the time of printing it
was considered acceptable discourse. I am not only interested in why this is so, and
what the implications of that are, but I am also very interested in the excluded
discourses in these situations. Excluded discourses include not only the “mistress”
side of the story (which seems to emerge in a prime-time confessional format), but
more importantly, national issues that went unnoticed because of the media
madness surrounding the affairs, and the trials that followed. For example, the day that General Patreaus resigned from the CIA, most of the major news outlets’ top stories were about his affair with Broadwell becoming public. Hearings on Benghazi, for which Patreaus was supposed to testify, were only days away, and his resignation meant at the time that he would not testify. However, this aspect of the story, which is arguably more important to American lives or national security, was completely overshadowed by news of his extramarital affair with the “biographer with toned arms” (Parker). I think it speaks volumes about the American public and the American news media, that news reporters assume that we would rather read the sleazy details surrounding the sex lives of major political players than about an attack on an American consulate that resulted in the deaths of several Americans, and as such, dedicate much more time and energy in reporting every detail of the sexual affairs that effect very few Americans’ lives directly.

Also curiously absent from print news media discourse are stories on women in politics who have engaged in affairs with men to whom they are not married. I feel like this aspect is especially important to consider critically because of how it silently perpetuates gender roles. Powerful men are attractive and manly, while powerful women are unattractive and not feminine. Campbell discusses a palpable public hatred of Hillary Clinton and puts partial blame on her failure to perform traditional femininity. According to Campbell:

[Hillary Clinton] symbolizes the problems of public women writ large, the continuing demand that women who play public roles or function in the public sphere discursively enact their femininity, and that women who do not or who do so to only a limited degree, women whose training and personal history fit them for the roles of rhetor, lawyer, expert, and advocate,
roles that are gender-coded masculine, will arouse the intensely hostile responses that seem so baffling” (Hating Hillary, 15).

In other words, as Campbell has stated elsewhere, “Education and socialization cause women to be ‘unsexed’ by success whereas men are ‘unsexed’ by failure” (Oxymoron 77). Hillary’s success, and other women like her (such as Janet Reno, about whom John Sloop has written) mark them as masculine and therefore unfeminine and unattractive. Still, the fact that there are few, if any, examples of powerful, political women getting caught cheating on their spouse is very intriguing and begs a number of questions about the differences between the behaviors of powerful men and women, and society’s response to that behavior. How would news coverage have been different if Hillary had cheated on Bill? Although that is a question that cannot be answered, its implications are important. If women in powerful positions aren’t cheating on their husbands, there must be a reason. Does society hold women to higher standards than men? And do women who reach a high level of power in American have to walk the straight and narrow in order to maintain that power? It seems that it is possible that some women are more capable of disciplining themselves than are their male counterparts, or they’ve just never been caught.

It is apparent that women are disciplined in ways that men aren’t for the exact same actions, specifically extra-marital sexual affairs. For example, Former President Clinton is a renowned humanitarian and respected, active leader of the Democratic Party, while Monica Lewinsky will forever be the White House intern who had sexual relations with the president. According to Macdonald, women are often the victims of the process wherein the distinction between public and private
spheres are convoluted. Mistresses then, become particularly “reviled by a tabloid press content to reproduce the dishonest cliché that male adulterers are ‘virile,’ while females ones are ‘sluts’ or ‘whores’” who deserve to be punished for their actions in some fashion (50). I find this problematic for a number of reasons. First, Lewinsky and Hunter were both single women who were sexually involved with married men. All were consenting adults. However, it was only the men who violated the “sanctity of marriage” by engaging in these affairs. Therefore, in order to spread the blame, various news reports placed “blame” on these women for starting the affair in the first place. Lewinsky allegedly “flashed her thong” at the president, and Hunter told Edwards he was “hot.” Although the reasons for initiating an affair are unknown for all parties involved, the news media appears to blame the woman, despite the fact that her sexual act is slightly less egregious by virtue of the fact that neither woman was married to another man at the time of the affair. The women involved are also punished by society, and relegated to its fringes. Opinion polls during the “Lewinsky scandal” revealed that Clinton’s approval ratings had increased, while other polls revealed that most Americans disliked Lewinsky. This is troubling for multiple reasons. First, I find it unsettling that professional pollsters would even bother to conduct survey research to determine whether or not the American public approved of, or liked, Monica Lewinsky and second that polling revealed that Americans’ opinion of a man involved in an affair was overwhelmingly more positive than their opinion of the woman involved in the same affair.

Once the Petraeus/Broadwell affair became public, General Petraeus resigned from the CIA. President Obama accepted his resignation and offered the following
statement, “Going forward, my thoughts and prayers are with Dave and Holly Petraeus, who has done so much to help military families through her own work. I wish them the very best at this difficult time.” Though it may have been inappropriate for the president to mention Paula Broadwell while accepting Petraeus’ resignation, the fact that the president is offering prayers to Petraeus and his wife, but not to Broadwell illustrates another way that men and women involved in affairs are treated differently and as such needs to be critically analyzed especially since these women’s “approval ratings” have the potential to punish them throughout their lives in personal and professional matters. After all, Broadwell lost her promotion to lieutenant colonel, while some people are calling for Petraeus to run for president in 2016.

I believe this research project has potential scholarly and practical value. Within communication scholarship, representations of women in the media are heavily researched. However, much scholarship focuses on fictional representations of women. According to Macdonald:

Real-life role models, the exposure in childhood to forms of activity and play that naturalize gender divisions, and the influence of the media and other cultural forms, encourage men and women in adult life to adopt behaviour that reinforces gender-specific roles, and to internalize the appropriateness of this as part of their own sense of identity (13).

Because both real-life women and fictional female characters play a role in creating and stabilizing facets of gender identification, it is important to give both representations attention in communication scholarship.

bell hooks has said that cultural criticism is a powerful tool that focuses on representations in various forms of mass media. She believes that television and
film are exemplary texts for such analysis because they, more than any other media, establish how oppressed peoples, such as women, are perceived and how other groups can respond to them “based on their relation to these constructed and consumed images. As such, hooks suggest that we “interrogate these messages coming to us” and “analyze the complexity of what is taking place” (Foss, Foss & Griffin 89). Although she is suggesting this be done to popular television and film, I intend to expand the interrogation to include American media, especially newspapers, and how they help establish how women are perceived and how women and other people respond to them. In doing this, I hope to reveal the “complexity of what is taking place” when reporters write “real stories” about “real women.” Even true stories can only provide representations of women, not the truth, or the complete picture, but rather fragments of these women’s lives that satisfy the need for public knowledge dissemination, while at the same time offering less than optimal perceptions of women. This is not only damaging to the women involved in the reporters’ stories, but also to the women whose maltreatment is upheld by sexist representations of women, not only in fictionalized popular culture, but in nonfiction, factual news coverage.

Many scholars, such as Bonnie Dow (Prime Time Feminism), and Susan J. Douglas (Where the Girls Are), have provided compelling evidence of the various ways in which American popular culture has stunted the growth of feminism by continuing to offer sexist representations of women. Fewer scholars have interrogated the ways in which the American news media perpetuates patriarchy and sexism through negative representations of real women and include Marita
Gronnvoll and John Sloop whose research focuses on representations of gender normativity in American news media. I believe that my research can build upon these scholars' research, as well as bridge the gap between them, while offering a testament to the ways in which representations of real women, even those who subscribe to normative, heterosexual gender roles are subject to sexist representations in the American popular media.

This research also has potential practical value. Because my background is in journalism, it is particularly important to me to promote accurate, fair, objective, and balanced news coverage. It is obvious that, despite its insistence to the contrary, American news reporters continue to produce news stories that are unfair, especially to women. It has been said, by Foucault and repeated by Macdonald that, “Discourse, like ideology, has most powerful effect when we are unconscious of its workings” (44). Through my research, I intend to reveal the unconscious workings of the American news media that perpetuates sexism through negative representations of women, so that news reporters are aware of it and, in doing so, offer an alternative, feminist approach to newsgathering and reporting that depicts all genders equally.

In order critically evaluate American news media discourse I must first set the parameters for my data collection. To do this, I first identified high-profile extra-marital affairs involving American male politicians (more on this later). There is no shortage of philandering politicians in America, as any number of presidents from Franklin Roosevelt to John F. Kennedy had mistresses, so I had to narrow the field. Since my primary object of study is representations of real women in the American
news media, I decided to include only affairs that involved an ongoing sexual relationship with a single woman that was revealed to the public while it still in progress (as opposed to a confessional style after the fact, as is the case with any number of Kennedy’s “mistresses”). Within these parameters I came up with three affairs to use to analyze news media coverage, including Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, John Edwards and Rielle Hunter, and General David Petraeus and Paula Broadwell. Additionally, I think the news coverage surrounding these affairs is of particular interest because each of these events took place relatively recently—after the onset of third wave feminism America and during an era where the field of journalism had been praised for being less dominated by men than ever before.

After determining which affairs’ coverage to interrogate, I began my data collection on EBSCOhost through the Booth Library using various keywords and combinations of keywords including, “mistress” combined with each last name, each first and last name, and the last names of both the male and female involved; “affair” combined with each last name, each first and last name, and the last names of both the male and female involved. I also performed searches using various combinations of last names in order to find articles that discussed these affairs in reference to each other. My various searches resulted in hundreds of newspaper articles from The New York Times, The Washington Post, The San Jose Mercury, New York Daily Post, Philadelphia Inquirer, USA Today and magazine articles from Newsweek, Time, Entertainment Weekly, and People. Each search was framed to include the month before the affair story broke to present (with a particular focus on the year following the breaking news) to include as much current information as possible.
Since the Patraeus/Broadwell affair occurred fairly recently, I have set up a Google Alert, so that any article including “Paula Broadwell,” is sent directly to my inbox.

I have elected to focus on print news media for several reasons, but primarily because print news media provides much more coverage of these events than does cable or other visual news outlets. Since cable news and other visual media outlets rely more on sound bites than in-depth coverage, print news media provides much more fodder for analysis that is both richer and more accessible. Additionally, ease of accessibility to the print material I have chosen for analysis suggests that these articles are much less ephemeral than are visual media coverage, especially those visual news packages that only air once. Print news is therefore not only more accessible, but also more permanent.

My data revealed various themes, which I have discussed at greater length above, but that include a focus on women’s bodies and not men’s; investigation into women’s mental status; speculation into reasons for women’s behavior and not men’s; frequent use of the term mistress as a possession (i.e. Clinton’s mistress); real and perceived rivalries among women; speculation into the men’s wives reactions; reactions from the men’s wives; and the mental status of men’s wives. Each theme has been critically evaluated in order to further and develop a sensibility as to why these sexist themes continue to pervade American print news media.

My thesis is comprised of five parts: Chapter 1: Introduction; Chapter 2: Problematizing “Mistress” and the Focus on Bodies and Minds; Chapter 3: Confessions and Apologies: Media Coverage of Scandal; Chapter 4: Women in Power:
Overcoming Gender Gaps in American Politics; and Chapter 5: Conclusion. Chapter 2 employs the use of a critical, poststructural feminist lens to analyze the various ways in which American print news media perpetuates (or doesn't) sexism when covering high-profile sexual affairs involving male politicians and a woman who is not their wife. This chapter includes analysis problematizing the term "mistress" as well as many others that denigrate women but continue to be used unquestioningly in print news media. It also analyzes media focus on women's bodies and minds while ignoring men's. It explores the ways in which the media holds women to higher standards than men when it comes to sexual behavior. This chapter will also critique the "postfeminist" sensibilities of American print news media, and offer potential solutions to sexist news reporting. The third chapter focuses on coverage of sex scandals, confessions, apologies in the media, specifically how American print news media shies away from sexual discourse until someone, specifically a politician and a "mistress," deviates from the normative sexual behavior, at which point discourse proliferates. This chapter critically explores the sheer, staggering amount of discourse incited by menial sexual exchanges between two consenting adults. In this chapter, I also apply a critical lens to the discourses that are excluded by the infinite coverage of these sexual affairs. Chapter four focuses on the various reasons why women in politics do not engage in sex scandals in ways that their male counterparts do. It explores the gender gap in American politics as well as the sexual double standard that holds women to higher standards than men, particularly in male-dominated fields. The final chapter concludes my analysis and findings and
offers suggestions for intervention that will promote feminist ideals, especially in the media.
Chapter 2
Problematizing “Mistress” and the Focus on Bodies and Minds

“Mistresses”

In January of 1998 rumors began to surface about an alleged sexual affair involving the sitting President of the United States of America, Bill Clinton, and a young, female, White House intern. On January 19, the name Monica Lewinsky surfaced as the intern in question on the Drudge Report, an Internet gossip column on the fringes of legitimate news coverage. At this time her name immediately became synonymous with “mistress.” Similar fates met Rielle Hunter, whose affair with presidential hopeful, Senator John Edwards became public in 2007, and Paula Broadwell, whose affair with General David Petraeus, then director of the CIA, became public. In each instance a woman became instantly infamous as the “mistress” of a powerful, white, male, political figure. By interrogating the way language, specifically the term “mistress,” is used in the media to create representations of women, I intend to highlight the ways in which women are held to a different societal standard than men, disciplined more harshly by the public, and subordinated by the perpetuation of sexist language that reifies patriarchy in our culture.

“Mistressdom is inextricably linked with marriage, human society’s most fundamental institution, and almost automatically implies marital infidelity... Indeed, marriage is a key element in determining who is a mistress and who is not” (Abbott, 5). Lewinsky, Hunter, and Broadwell, can only be defined as “mistresses” because the men with whom they were involved were married. Their marital
statuses are not implicated in the word, and the man they had a sexual relationship with is not described with a particular term that conveys whether or not the woman with whom he became involved was married. For example, of the three women, only Broadwell was married during the time of her affair with a prominent political figure. However, Petraeus was not described using a different term than Clinton or Edwards in order to convey the fact that Broadwell was married during the time of their affair. Through the use of this particular language, which identifies only the woman involved in consensual, heterosexual, extra-marital sexual affairs as having broken a social or moral code, women must necessarily hold themselves to a higher standard of behavior or decorum, to prevent being labeled by society, specifically the media, as a woman who has broken the sanctity of (someone else’s) marriage. According to Beauvoir, “Marriage is the reference by which the single woman is defined, whether she is frustrated by, disgusted at, or even indifferent to the institution. Adultery is a breach of contract for both parties” (439). Still, although each of the people mentioned here committed adultery in one form or another, only the woman is discursively marked as such. Calling a man an “adulterer” does not carry the same implications in society as “mistress” and “mistresses” are rarely referred to as adulterers in the press. The fact that there is no word that specifically connotes a man that is philandering or a man that has had sexual relations with a married woman is even more troubling considering “mistress” is not the only female-exclusive term that describes an adulterer. Terms like “home-wrecker,” “the other woman,” “kept woman,” “slut,” and “whore” are all used at various times in everyday vernacular as well as in the American media to describe women.
The term “mistress” is exclusive to women, and generally refers to a woman, who has had a sexual relationship with a married man. An equivalent term does not exist for men. Philanderer provides an example. It is a term exclusive to men and describes a man who frequently engages in sexual relationships with women, but is by no means as derogatory as “mistress.” First, because philanderer does not carry the negative connotation that “mistress” does, but rather implies a virility or positive sexual prowess. Also, “philanderer” gives a man agency. He is not the possession of a woman; he is himself a philanderer. In other words, a woman cannot “have a philanderer” in the same way a man can “have a mistress” or “mistresses.” As such, the term mistress carries with it sexist implications that not only mark the woman in ways that men cannot be marked, but also naturalizes a sexist depiction of women through the perpetuation of its use, among other sexist discourse, in American media.

Throughout history, powerful and political male figures have kept “mistresses.” One famous example lies in ancient Greece, where Pericles, a prominent statesman and influential orator took up with Aspasia, a less sophisticated woman, and despite the fact that he had been divorced, the public still considered her his mistress. As such, his closest advisors suggested he keep his sexual relationship with her a secret. He disregarded their advice, and:

A groundswell of opposition to Aspasia mounted, and she, rather than Pericles, bore the brunt of it. She was slandered mercilessly in public forums and political broadsides. Comic poets outdid themselves with bawdy ripostes, likening Aspasia to Thargelia, the powerful Ionian courtesan and wife—of fourteen husbands!—who had used her immense influence to aid the enemy during the Persian Wars. (Abbott, 16)
This incident occurred in the mid-5th century B.C. in Athens at a time when gender equality didn’t even exist as a kernel of notion. However, American print media has been comparably harsh to modern day “mistresses” Lewinsky, Hunter, and Broadwell, as men in public and political forums and comics in Ancient Greece were when reporting information regarding the extra-marital affairs these women engaged in with powerful political figures. According to Beauvoir, “Since ancient times, satirists and moralist have delighted in depicting women’s weaknesses” (11). In contemporary times however, the delight is not relegated to satirists and moralists, but is rather prevalent in the mainstream and popular press. Even well respected news organizations contribute to the disadvantaging of women by highlighting their weaknesses, particularly when they become involved with a married, male political figure.

As briefly mentioned above, these women were (and continue to be) referred to as “mistress,” while the man they were involved with continue to be referred to by their names (Bill Clinton, John Edwards or David Petraeus) or their reputable titles (president, senator, General/director). Examples include, a *Washington Post* article (Miller & Nakashima) from November 2012, which reported on the FBI probe into potential mishandling of classified files whose first mention of Paula Broadwell qualifies her immediately as “the retired general’s biographer and mistress.” Or a *New York Times* article which calls Broadwell “Petraeus’s mistress” for the first five paragraphs of the article, before finally calling her by name in the sixth paragraph, while still qualifying her as his mistress, “Paula Broadwell, Petreaus’s former mistress” (Nocera). In another article, after describing Broadwell as “the co-author
of his biography,” a writer for *The Daily News of Los Angeles* puts Petraeus on “the naughty list for being head of the CIA and choosing a mistress who clearly cannot keep a secret” (Dupuy). This phrase is problematic not only because the writer refers to Broadwell in a sexist fashion by calling her a “mistress,” it also subjects that she had no autonomy regarding the affair, and that Petraeus “chose” her, like an object. Furthermore, it emphasizes her perceived inability to “keep a secret,” as if the revelation of the affair was her fault, and her fault alone, rather than the result of an FBI investigation. In yet another article, reported and written by three reporters and published in the *Daily News*, Broadwell is first introduced in the article by the term, “mistress,” rather than her name. Discussing the emails that lead to the revelation of Broadwell and Petraeus’ extramarital affair, writers reported, “The menacing emails were traced to Petraeus’ mistress and biographer, Paula Broadwell, 40” (Cunningham, Lysiak, Hutchinson). *The Washington Post* is also guilty of referring to Broadwell by her relationship to Petraeus before first calling her by name. In a front-page article discussing the private lives of various four-star generals, the *Post* published, “a fact discovered in the FBI investigation into harassing messages sent by Petraeus’s former mistress and biographer, Paula Broadwell” (Chandrasekaran, Jaffe). Here again, we have an example of how the American news media considers Broadwell a “mistress” first and foremost.

Although Lewinsky was consistently referred to as “White House intern,” (possibly because she was not necessarily President Bill Clinton’s only “mistress” but also because the moniker marks her as young and powerless) news articles frequently referred to her as “mistress” rather than her name. In a *Daily News* (New
York) article from January of 1999 described Mr. and Mrs. Clinton’s meeting with the Pope in St. Louis, “while White House lawyer David Kendall did his best to stop the President’s mistress from testifying against him” (Bell 7). The Daily News ran another article later that year about a car accident in which Lewinsky was involved, “The president’s former mistress was rushed to Community Memorial Hospital in Ventura in a neck brace and strapped to a backboard in case she had suffered spinal injuries” (Egbert). Even in a life-threatening situation, Lewinksy was marked by a sexual relationship of her past and reduced to a sexual possession, rather than a human being, years after carrying on a very brief dalliance with Bill Clinton. An article in the Washington Post refers to Lewinsky as “a White House strumpet” and later said that “Lewinsky was not the first presidential mistress to cash in on her sins” (Carlson). “Strumpet,” which means “a promiscuous woman” or “prostitute” represents yet another sexist term that denigrates women because of its gendered and negative connotation. It is especially offensive in this context because it is published in what is arguably one of the most respected news sources in the United States. Additionally, this article refers to Lewinsky, yet again, as “mistress,” and this time accuses her of “sinful” behavior. In another article from The Washington Post, which was commenting on Vanity Fair’s feature on Lewinsky, Richard Cohen wrote that Lewinsky was put, “preposterously, in the same company as Cleopatra, lady Macbeth and Camilla Parker Bowles. Alas, she was no queen, never and wife and not quite a mistress. She was more like a temp” (Cohen). This distinction is interesting and suggests that the term “mistress” is a desirable label for women, and that women wish to be defined in terms of their relationship to men.
Because the story of Hunter’s affair with presidential hopeful, Senator John Edwards was broken by the *National Enquirer*, a notoriously shady tabloid, she fell victim to sensational headlines such as 2009’s “John Edwards is Dad of Mistress’ Baby!” However, when more legitimate publications began to cover the story, Hunter began being designated as Edwards’ mistress, like she was in a 2011 *The Washington Times* article, which stated, “A federal grand jury on Friday returned a six-count indictment against John Edward [sic] for using campaign funds to cover up his mistress and out-of-wedlock child” (“John Edwards Gets His Due”). Two paragraphs later, she was finally mentioned by name, but even then only as “Miss Hunter.” A less conservative publication, the *Washington Post* described Hunter as Edwards’ “then-mistress Rielle Hunter” in an April, 2012 article (Henneberger). A *New York Times* article qualifies Hunter after the first use of her name in an article discussing campaign donations from heiress Rachel Mellon, whose contributions to Edwards were largely suspected to be used to conceal Edwards affair with Hunter. The article described Hunter, “Rielle Hunter, the campaign videographer who became Mr. Edwards’s mistress” (Severson). During Edwards’ trial, *The Washington Post* reported that, “Edwards’s mistress has been described as a loose canon during the case, and her possible appearance as a government witness has been among the most intensely awaited developments in the trial” (Roig-Franzia). In another an article featured in *USA Today*, Rielle Hunter is not called by name until after she is twice referred to “mistress” (Schouten). These articles in *USA Today* and the *New York Times* called Hunter simply “his mistress” when covering the allegations against Edwards about possible campaign finance violations. For example, used
money to “hide his mistress” (Schouten) who is eventually, but not initially called by name in both articles.

Interestingly, mistress has become a possessive term in many of these cases. A man has a mistress or mistresses, like they are objects, able to be possessed. According to Beauvoir, “Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous human being” (5). Although this sentiment should be outmoded, the use of mistress as a possession in popular media absolutely perpetuates it. As long as a man can have a mistress, or as long as publications use a possessive apostrophe following a man’s name followed by the word mistress, women lack autonomy in our culture.

The several instances above provide only a miniscule sampling of the print media discourse surrounding these women and their affiliation with the term “mistress.” To put it simply, hundreds of articles from dozens of reputable publications have referred to these women as mistresses in articles that rarely, if ever, qualify men in the same way. As such, a post-structural feminist perspective is useful in critiquing print media’s frequent use of the term “mistress” to describe Lewinsky, Hunter and Broadwell. Such critique, according to St. Pierre, “can be employed to examine any commonplace situation, any ordinary event or process, in order to think differently about that occurrence—to open up what seems ‘natural’ to other possibilities” (479). What “seems natural” here, is for people in general, and print news media specifically, to refer to women who are or have been involved in sexual relationships with married men as “mistress(es)” while offering no similar term to describe men, despite their involvement in these sexual relationships.
outside of marriage. However, there is nothing natural about ascribing the shame or infamy arguably inherent in the term “mistress” exclusively to women. Throughout history, powerful American men have had “mistresses”—from Thomas Jefferson (his slave, Sally Hemmings), to Franklin Delano Roosevelt (his secretary Lucy Mercer) to John F. Kennedy (actress Marilyn Monroe). For these women, and countless others, sexual dalliances have therefore been ingrained in their identity in ways that extra-marital sexual affairs do not define men, simply because an equally negative term does not exist for them. That is not to say, that history will not remember Bill Clinton, John Edwards or David Petreaus as cheaters or philanderers, only that those words do not carry the same weight or negative sexual connotation than does the word “mistress,” which exclusively describes women.

According to Mills, “It has been argued that in pairs of words for women and men, the word to denote the female tends to pick up a sexual overtone which is not present in the word used for male” (58). Such is the case with “mistress” and its one-time masculine equivalent “master.” Despite the fact that mistress and master are rarely used as titles in modern parlance to describe heads of households or owners of slaves, it is obvious that mistress has taken on a sexual overtone while master has not. Furthermore, the term “mistress” when used to describe a woman involved in an affair with a married man signifies a possession that creates a subject/object binary between men and women. Interestingly, the term “paramour,” which is a gender neutral term could be used to describe the male lover of a female adulterer. A paramour is defined as “the illicit partner of a married person.” This then might be one of the only terms that can be used to describe a man as the possession of a
woman, at least discursively. However, it still does so in a way that is not necessarily sexist. Clinton, Edwards and Petraeus could be accurately described as Lewinsky's paramour, Hunter's paramour and Broadwell's paramour, accordingly, thereby challenging the traditional subject/object binary that privileges men, but this language is simply not used in American media. Furthermore, I am not suggesting that the solution to sexist language that benefits men merely be reversed to privilege women, only that language exists that privileges women and is rarely, if ever used. For example, General Petraeus could easily be described as Broadwell's paramour. He was her illicit lover. However, several recent articles have begun referring to Broadwell as his paramour. An October 2013 article from the *Charlotte Business Journal* reported a $100 donation that Broadwell made to a local mayoral campaign. In the first paragraph Broadwell is described as "the biographer and one-time paramour of former CIA director David Petraeus" (Spanberg). In a September 2013 release from the Associated Press, Broadwell is described—in the caption of a photo featuring Jill Kelly—as "Gen. David Petraeus' paramour, Paula Broadwell" (AP). So while it refreshing to see the media avoiding the term "mistress," it is troubling that they have replaced it with a gender-neutral term that still objectifies women, treating them discursively as the possessions of men.

"Feminists believe that the first term in binaries such as... subject/object is male and privileged and the second term is female and disadvantaged. In order to preserve their distinctions, binaries are more flexible than one might think and operate in subtle ways" (Adams St. Pierre, 481). In the above examples, American newspapers contribute to the construction of men as subjects and women as
objects, through continued use of the term “mistress,” which cannot, when describing Lewinsky, Hunter and Broadwell, be used in the absence of the man’s name. These women are thusly defined through their relationship to a man, in a way that cannot be reversed or altered to describe the man involved in the sexual relationship. This is a problematic way of describing women in modern print news media, and can easily be resolved by avoiding sexist terminology. For example, “Bill Clinton’s mistress,” or “mistress of Bill Clinton” can be altered by describing Monica Lewinsky as “the person with whom Bill Clinton engaged in an extra-marital affair” or Bill Clinton as “the person with whom Monica Lewinsky engaged in a sexual relationship.” Although, “mistress” is much simpler, to excuse sexist language in the interest of brevity is unacceptable. It is important then, to not only acknowledge that the term “mistress” is sexist, or can at least contribute to sexism, but to deconstruct its usage in American print news media to see how it “has been constructed, what holds it together, and what it produces” (St. Pierre, 482). This is particularly necessary, because the term “mistress” is only a part of the sexist discourse that exists in American newspapers, and, “Discourse, like ideology, has most powerful effect when we are unconscious of its workings” (Macdonald, 44).

According to Macdonald:

Language refers most appropriately to the self-contained linguistic system of vocabulary and grammar. Discourse, on the other hand, connects the pattern of words that we use to systematic ways of thinking about the world, and sees language as embedded in ideology. Language is not, on this model, a neutral or transparent tool. It already carries the imprint of our culture and its values, although we are often unaware of this. (44)

This helps explain why the term mistress continues to be used in American media.
In a patriarchal society, men are privileged and women are not. Patriarchy is in part maintained in our society through the continued use of language structures that disadvantage women and privilege men. According to Butler, language has the power to subordinate and exclude women, “Language ranks among the concrete and contingent practices and institutions maintained by the choices of individuals and, hence, weakened by the collective actions of choosing individuals” (36). The term “mistress” is only one of many sexist words used in print news media to perpetuate unequal gender binaries in our society, and as such should be problematized and interrogated for its continued use by choosing individuals who create news, and, therefore, “truths” in our culture that contributes to negative depictions of women. However, to merely call for a change “at the level of the phrase or word” only draws attention to sexism “at the level of conceptualization, at the discourse level, and at the level of social practices.” Therefore, it should be a primary task of feminists to “draw attention to ways of thinking and behaving which are anachronistic” and to “call for change at the level of material practice” (Mills, 161) In other words, we must engage in feminist practices when writing about women, even those who have reached a level of infamy for their sexual indiscretions.

However, sexist descriptors are not the only way in which reporters present information in a sexist fashion. Another method, by which women are further oppressed discursively, is through the news media’s constant emphasis and interrogation of women’s bodies and not men’s.
Women's Bodies

Mind/body is a common binary by which men and women are differentiated from one another. The mind is associated with masculinity and is therefore privileged while the body is associated with femininity and is therefore disadvantaged. Butler suggests that this binary is well documented in philosophy and feminism (17). According to Macdonald:

The body has historically been much more integral to the formation of identity for women than for men. If women had defined for themselves the ideals of their bodily shape or decoration, this would not be problematic. It is the denial of this right in the history of western cultural representation, in medical practice, and in the multi-billion dollar pornography, fashion and cosmetic industries, that has granted women only squatters’ rights to their own bodies. (193)

This is extremely apparent in media coverage of high profile heterosexual affairs, wherein women’s bodies are described, ridiculed and interrogated in ways that men’s are not.

In a San Jose Mercury News column from November 28, 2012 writer Kathleen Parker attempted to make sense of what was becoming a more complicated web of events that eventually led to the Broadwell-Petraeus affair’s public reveal. While describing people involved she wrote, “And there’s the biographer with toned arms, Paula Broadwell, who wore tight jeans and allegedly seduced America’s most darling general, David Petreaus.” Here, Broadwell has not only been reduced to her figure, through the description of her “toned arms,” and her “tight jeans,” but she is also being blamed here for seducing “America’s most darling general.” Although these descriptions may seem complimentary, they are actually marking Broadwell as a dangerous and irresistible sexual temptation. Also, her descriptors are exclusive
to the body, while his speak to his military accomplishments and charm, which are associated with the mind. In a Los Angeles Times article from November 17, 2012 Broadwell was not the only woman involved with Petraeus who fell victim to the media’s focus on the female body. Here writer Sandy Banks first suggests that, “it’s the women’s fault [Petraeus] fell” before explaining that “We blame the wife, because she’s so homely. Or his mistress, because she’s so hot.” Further down the article, Banks asks the audience, “What man married to [Holly Petraeus] wouldn’t jump at the chance to get it on with a vixen like Petraeus’ mistress, Paula Broadwell, a pretty West Point-bred fitness buff brimming with self-confidence and blessed with a 13% body fat?” At no point did Banks make mention of Petraeus’ level of attractiveness or physique, suggesting that reporters reserve the sexist emphasis on the body for women. Numerous other articles also made mention of Broadwell’s toned arms, which some reporters said were “only rivaled by Michelle Obama’s.” In this way reporters were able not only to focus on the physique of two women whose professional accomplishments should by far overshadow their physical appearance, but also to subtly pit these two women against each other, a common theme which will be discussed at length later.

Gill describes the media’s “obsessive preoccupation with the body” as postfeminist and contends that:

Surveillance of women’s bodies constitutes perhaps the largest type of media content across all genres and media forms. Women’s bodies are evaluated, scrutinized and dissected by women as well as men, and are always at risk of “failing” . . . So excessive and punitive is the regulation of women’s bodies through this medium that conventionally attractive women can be indicted, for having “fat ankles” or “laughter lines.” No transgression is too small to be picked over and picked apart by paparazzi photographers and writers. (137)
Media coverage of Monica Lewinsky exemplifies this trend. In March of 1999, the *Daily News* (New York) published a small “news” piece focused entirely on Lewinsky’s weight. The article begins with, “It’s the love handles, stupid,” a reference to Clinton’s previous campaign motto, “It’s the economy, stupid,” which was created by political strategist James Carville in order to emphasize the extreme importance and simple notion of focusing on the economy when trying to win a presidential election. Here it is used to explain to Lewinsky why her relationship did not work out with Clinton, to say nothing of his wife or status. Because the *Daily News* can be considered to be tawdry, another example from the *USA Today* is useful. In a March 3, 1999 article Maria Puente refers to Lewinsky as a “portly pepperpot” and says that “waiters count the number of ravioli she eats and then tell reporters.” Here Puente attributes the term “portly pepperpot” to tabloids and keeps it in quotation marks. In this way, Puente is able to use the term, while simultaneously avoiding responsibility for its creation, thereby contributing to sexist discourse by promulgating such terminologies.

In another *USA Today* news piece published just before Lewinsky was to appear in a televised interview with Barbara Walters, Diane McWhorter writes, “The fat-bashing of Monica Lewinsky has practically become a national sport during the year of our intern.” Momentarily it seems as if McWhorter is criticizing media coverage of Lewinsky’s appearance, but the article quickly becomes a sort of “best of” Lewinsky put-downs, a collection of derogatory statements about her weight, under the guise of reporting “the role of the fat girl in modern society,” to say nothing of the use of the term “girl” to describe a grown woman. Other put-downs
include, “Notwithstanding her Beverly Hills background, Lewinsky’s weight (and perhaps her big hair and teeth) landed her in the same category as other ‘socially inappropriate’ objects of Clinton’s desire” and dismisses Lewinsky as “an oddity or nuisance, not even rating the title mistress.” She is called “pleasingly plump,” and the “Susan B. Anthony of fat liberation,” and in an article from *The Washington Post*, Lewinsky is referred to as “a zaftig woman” (Cohen). Zaftig is an obscure Yiddish word for “plump.”

By focusing on Lewinsky’s body the reporters/columnists above have perpetuated the sexist binary that associates men with the mind and women with the body. According to Hammers:

It is vital to understand that this binary does not merely devalue the ‘human’ body in relation to the ‘human’ mind; this binary also imposes a gendered hierarchy that associates women with ‘body’ and man with ‘mind.’ This gendered hierarchy projects onto women the burden of being, first and foremost, ‘body,’ with all the negative associations that go along with it (224).

In this way, Lewinsky is reduced to her figure and physique, while Clinton remains the disembodied masculine, the capable leader of the free world. However, the media’s preoccupation with the female body does not end with mere commentary surrounding physical features.

[T]he distinction between “public” and “private” has operated to keep certain issues, particularly those associated with women and other minorities out of public discourse. Associating issues such as domestic violence, sexual assault, and reproductive rights with the particularities of individual lives, rather than the commonality of shared interest, long rendered them unfit for public consideration. (Hammers, 225)

Feminists have long argued that, “the personal is political.” However, “the public/private dichotomy remains susceptible to manipulation against women and their interests” (Hammers, 225). This is exemplified by Lewinsky’s widely reported
abortion. At some point during her relationship with President Clinton, Lewinsky became pregnant by another man, and terminated the pregnancy. When this was reported in the media, it was rarely a starting point for a discussion about women’s reproductive rights, abortion, or single motherhood, rather this information was used as evidence that Lewinsky was promiscuous and that she failed to appropriately perform femininity. One article from the Philadelphia Inquirer opens with “She got pregnant, but not by handsome” before explaining that “she became pregnant as a result of an affair with a coworker at the Pentagon in the summer of 1996, during the time she was also sexually involved with President Clinton. Lewinsky had an abortion that fall, she says, but never told the President” (Goldstein). Here, the line between public and private is very blurred, but not to the benefit of women, Lewinsky in particular. Had a feminist stance been taken to report this information, perhaps it could have opened up a dialogue about reproductive rights or access to abortion. Instead, Lewinsky’s status as a promiscuous “mistress” is shored up, because there is solid proof that she did have sex with another (married) man and again, the female body is devalued, this time because of its apparently inherent weakness to “get pregnant,” as if the man involved had nothing to do with it. Furthermore, the line “but she never told the President” is interesting. As if women are required to be forthcoming about their sexual pasts. Just because the private and public have blurred, and personal is political, it should not give the news media the right to put women’s bodies on trial, regardless of who they have had sexual relations with.
Rielle Hunter's body, because her relationship with John Edwards resulted in a pregnancy, was literally put on trial, and the facts surrounding both her menstrual cycle, gynecological appointments and various other aspects of her pregnancy became a matter of public record. One *New York Times* article stated:

The couple [Edwards and Hunter] conceived the baby around May 28, 2007, about the time Mr. Edwards announced new proposals for veterans as part of his campaign. The date, along with evidence about her menstrual cycle and gynecological appointments, were evidence in the trial (Sverson).

Although it is unclear exactly what evidence was included in the trial, it provides a good example of one of the ways in which women's bodies are disciplined because "their bodies are objects than need to be tamed or controlled through the medical community" (Hurt, 289).

According to Butler, "Only the feminine gender is marked... the universal person and the masculine gender are conflated, thereby defining women in terms of their sex and extolling men as the bearers of a body-transcendent universal personhood" (13). The above examples provide ample evidence of this occurring in American news media. Broadwell, Lewinsky, and Hunter each are women, restricted to their feminine bodies while Petraeus, Clinton, and Edwards are able to transcend their bodies and simply be people. Although I am not suggesting that a solution to this is to further interrogate men's bodies, it is interesting, but problematic, that the media almost completely ignores men's corporeality. Much attention was given to Broadwell's toned physique and high fitness levels. It is well known, that because Broadwell was Petraeus's biographer, the two went on many runs together, wherein they would discuss his life (certainly among other things). This would suggest that like Broadwell, Petraeus too was in good physical shape. However, the media failed
to mention his physique or level of fitness like they did Broadwell’s. Conversely, Clinton was not in great shape. Although late night talk shows and some news outlets mocked his penchant for eating Big Macs and other fast food staples, Clinton’s physical appearance, albeit borderline unhealthy, was never derided to the degree that Lewinsky’s was. Finally, as mentioned, Hunter’s body became a matter of public interest when she “became pregnant.” Obviously, it takes both an egg and sperm to create a child, yet Edwards’ bodily contribution to conception was mysteriously left out of the public discourse. This is not to suggest that a solution to the emphasis on women’s bodies in the media would be to emphasize men’s equally, only to enumerate the fact that men’s bodies go unnoticed, while women’s become the focus of innumerable articles.

Women’s Minds

Although it is apparent that the mind/body binary privileges men, by associating them with the mind while restricting women to the body, women’s minds are not excluded from sexist interrogations. According to Hurt, “In addition to possessing these deficient and defective bodies, women are also said to have weak and non-resistant minds” (295). This notion appears consistently in news media to explain the behaviors of Broadwell, Hunter, and Lewinsky, regarding their relationships with powerful American political figures.

While some of the information regarding Lewinsky’s mental status was garnered from her book Monica’s Story, written by Andrew Morton, much information was taken out of context and out of her own words when reported in
the media. A Philadelphia Inquirer article from March, 1999 states that "a terrified Lewinsky contemplated suicide" when she was confronted by prosecutors and told that there was a possibility she might spend time in jail. The article also states that Lewinsky is the "product of a privileged, but broken, home who struggled throughout her life with weight and self-esteem problems and went looking for love in all the wrong places—ultimately the Oval Office itself" (Goldstein). It also mentions Lewinsky's abortion and says she "underwent therapy for anxiety and depression" and also that she "takes antidepressant medication." According to Hurt, "the dominant discourse concludes that women are more susceptible to depression than men" (293). This was certainly true for Lewinsky, following the revelation of her affair with Clinton. His mental status went unchecked, while hers became fodder for the media, who often blamed her abortion for her depression, anxiety, and need for therapy and anti-depressants, to say nothing of her private life becoming public, catapulting her into notoriety before the age of 25. Hurt states:

When men have problems, society tends to look outward for explanations; when women have problems, society looks inward... By focusing on the 'natural' causes of women's depression, the cultural and social causes are left out of the discussion (306).

In the case of Lewinsky, perhaps her newfound infamy or public shaming contributed to her depression and anxiety, but that possibility went unreported. Still, the media did not hesitate to attribute her mental status to an inherent weakness based on her gender.

However, the media is not restricted to attributing only anxious and depressive behavior to women's "weak minds." These women are also subject to accusations of being mentally unbalanced. Numerous articles referred to Hunter as
a “loose-cannon” and one article from the New York Times stated, “Ms. Hunter caused so much havoc on the road that a staff member called the campaign a ‘traveling freak show’” (byline). Again, by using direct quotations, the newspaper can provide negative descriptions of a woman’s behavior without necessarily being held responsible for their accuracy or credibility (Mills, 138). In this example, a single staffer’s opinion helped define Hunter’s character, negatively. Furthermore, because the term (loose-cannon) is taken entirely out of context, the audience who reads this accusation/description is unable to discern whether or not the situation she was in warranted such behavior. “Loose-cannon” generally refers to an unpredictable or uncontrollable person, but in certain situations justify this kind of outrageous behavior. Although it is unknown what particular conduct resulted in this descriptor, I would suggest that hiding an ongoing affair with Senator Edwards, who was running for the office of the president of the United States of America and lying about who was the father of her unborn child, could easily contribute to Hunter’s behavior complying with traditional and patriarchal notions of femininity.

Another New York Times’ article was particularly harsh in its judgment of Lewinsky, calling her an “emotional mess,” “a mixed-up young woman who, despite her brazen behavior, was fragile when she met Bill Clinton,” “insecure,” and “emotionally frail.” Oddly, in the same article, Lewinsky was described as “bold and savvy enough to credibly play chicken with the President” and “worldly, plenty smart and even cunning, a manipulator who, after Mr. Clinton broke off the affair, threatened to expose it unless he helped her get a job” and that she was well known as “a stalker.” The author, Melinda Henneberger, then says that, “This is not to say
that Ms. Lewinsky used any double-secret feminine voodoo to seduce the president.”

This passage, though extreme, exemplifies a common disparity in the dominant discourse’s characterization of women. According to Macdonald:

The view that women are naturally co-operative and mutually supportive sits oddly with the stereotype of the woman as a bitch. Yet woman in her role as cultural symbol typically gyrates between extremes: virgin or whore; saint or sinner; supportive ally or destructive fiend. Myth defies logic in allowing polar opposites to co-exist without discomfort. The myths of women’s discourse parallel closely the diverse myths of femininity as simultaneously other-centered, gentle and kind, but also prone to jealousy and pettiness. 61)

Lewinsky was certainly portrayed in the media as possessing the mental instability to be depressed, anxious and desperate while simultaneously being stable enough to manipulate the president. Although the term “double secret feminine voodoo” is sexist, it aptly describes the incongruous manner in which women, particularly those who have been sexually involved with powerful men, are portrayed in print media.

These women’s mental status and stability also come into question, when the media pits them against other women. There appears to be a tendency for reporters to conceive plots that pit women against one another, allowing for the coverage of potential (real or perceived) “catfights.” In Sexual Politics Kate Millett wrote, “One of the chief effects of class within patriarchy is to set one woman against another, in the past creating a lively antagonism between whore and matron.” Men then, through their patriarchal advantage, as well as an established double standard, are able to “play the estranged women against each other as rivals” (38). In all three affairs, the women involved were significantly younger than the men. Clinton was 51 when his affair with Lewinsky, then 24 was revealed. Clinton’s wife, Hillary
Rodham Clinton was 50. Eleven years separate Edwards and Hunter, while Edwards' wife was four years his senior. Broadwell had just turned 40 when her affair with Petraeus, 20 years her senior, was revealed. His wife is one year younger than him. Oddly, the women media reports pit “mistresses” against, are rarely the male adulterers’ wives with whom a mutual dislike of one of another might make sense.

Linda Tripp became a household name when she became the whistleblower of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair. As such, she became an easy nemesis for reporters to position Lewinsky against. The more obvious rival would have been Hillary Clinton, but it appears that the news media is ironically opposed to belittling women whose husbands are involved in high-profile affairs, so long as they are attractive, and maintain the news media’s standard of “feminine” throughout the course of coverage. This is especially true in the case of the Hunter-Edwards affair, since Edwards’ wife, who has since died, was suffering from terminal breast cancer when the affair was revealed—this however, did not stop the news media from reporting on Elizabeth Edwards’ mental instability particular to an isolated outburst after discovering her husband’s infidelity. During Edwards’ trial to determine if he violated campaign finance laws, it was reported that one witness described Elizabeth Edwards as “volcanic” and a woman “who once got so distraught she ripped off her shirt and bra in front of staff members and screamed, ‘You don’t see me anymore!’ at Mr. Edwards,” (Severson, Schwartz). In this article, this behavior justified John Edwards’ efforts to hide his affair, as well as the money he was using to cover it up. Elizabeth Edwards was simply written off as an unstable woman,
whose irrational outbursts must be kept at bay through lies and delusions. However, what this article and another from the *New York Times*, which described Elizabeth Edwards as “beside herself with rage when she discovered that two close friends and campaign contributors... were secretly taking Ms. Hunter on shopping trips to Los Angeles” did not consider, is that Elizabeth Edwards behavior was a direct result of the fact that her husband was having an affair, behind her back, while she was suffering from cancer, rather than a unwarranted vendetta against another woman. As has been mentioned, but bears repeating, society looked inward to explain Elizabeth Edwards’ mentality, because traditionally, only men’s mental status can be impacted by outside forces. All of this speaks to women’s “collective vulnerability to depression” that Hurt describes. This vulnerability “results simply from living in a culture in which sexism, discrimination, and violence against women are allowed and sometimes even encouraged” (306).

Sometimes the violence is described as woman on woman, and is essentially made-up, usually as entertainment, disguised as news (infotainment). Following the revelation in the media of the affair between General David Petraeus and Paula Broadwell a slew of characters involved in the unfolding drama began to appear in the news. Reports pitted Broadwell against a set of “Kardashian-like” twins who threw extravagant parties for military personal and were acquaintances of Patraeus. An article in *The New York Post* reported that Jill, one of the “Kardashian-like sisters, “skyrocketed to fame after being allegedly stalked and threatened by Petraeus’ unglued mistress, Paula Broadwell” (Peyser). Here again, a woman is accused of stalking and mental instability. This time, however, the unstable behavior is directed
towards another woman, who the media has determined was a threat to Broadwell’s relationship with Petreaus. In another article, in *The Philadelphia Daily News* writer Ronnie Polaneczky compared Broadwell to a well-known movie villain. “If [Petreaus and Broadwell] thought more about their families, they might still occupy a world in which his reputation was honorable and no one was comparing her to the unhinged paramour in *Fatal Attraction.*” The “unhinged paramour” Polaneczky is referring to here, is character Alex, played by Glenn Close in 1987’s *Fatal Attraction.* In the film, Alex slits her wrists when the man with whom she had a weekend-long affair tries to leave her apartment, destroys his vehicle, kidnaps his daughter, boils his daughter’s pet rabbit, and finally attacks him and his wife before being held under water until unconscious, and eventually shot and killed. This hardly compares to Broadwell’s behavior, which included harshly worded emails to the Kelley sisters, and hardly qualifies as criminally psychotic behavior, warranting a comparison to one of the most notoriously terrifying women in film.

Pitting women against one another prevents women from acting in solidarity. According to hooks, women are “socialized as females by patriarchal thinking to see ourselves as inferior to men, to see ourselves as always and only in competition with one another for patriarchal approval, to look upon each other with jealousy, fear, and hatred” (14). When the news media positions women in opposition with each other, in real or imagined ways, patriarchy is perpetuated because women are represented as constantly seeking male approval, even fighting with each other in order to achieve it. This contributes in part to women’s inability to “organize themselves into a unit that could posit itself in opposition [to
patriarchy],” Beauvoir suggested. According to her, “[Women] live dispersed among men, tied by homes, work, economic interests, and social conditions to certain men—fathers or husbands—more closely than to other women” (8). This inability to organize combined with the perceived notion of mutual dislike for one another has real implications for the material reality of women’s lives. Discourses that pit women against each other subtly discourage women from acting in solidarity. These often artificial plotlines that make women enemies of other women (particularly over men) invite and encourage competition among women, rather than solidarity. This competitive activity has implications that negatively affect the goals of feminism. If women are put in position of opposition with each other, then it is nearly impossible for them to challenge the patriarchal discourse that pitted them against one another in the first place, thusly reifying their subordinate position in our culture. Furthermore, the above examples provide evidence that sexism, particular to the mental status of women, is prevalent in the media. Each of the women, whose minds were unjustly interrogated, are very different people with vastly different personality traits. Lewinsky worked in the White House Office of Legislative Affairs after a brief stint as an unpaid intern after completing college in Oregon. Broadwell was both homecoming queen and valedictorian of her high school before graduating from West Point, attended graduate school at Harvard, and became a best-selling author. However, these women are pitted against other women and written off as “crazy” or mentally weak, despite having professional achievements that would boldly suggest otherwise.
Continued use of sexist language in media discourse, the relegation of women to their corporeality and the accusations of mental instability all contribute the the idea that women are held to a higher standard than men in American society, and thusly disciplined—sometimes harshly—for failing to behave in ways that are “appropriately feminine.” The consequences are not just rhetorical, limited to representations in the media. Some consequences are material. Although it cannot be said that the media caused any of the fallout that occurred in the lives of Lewinsky, Hunter and Broadwell, it can certainly be said that the media impacted the way in which these women were disciplined by society in ways that the men were not. For example, while Clinton became the darling of the Democratic Party and is well respected in Washington and other political circles the world over, Lewinsky’s reputation precedes her. She eventually moved to London to study economics and attempt to stay out of the media spotlight. Additionally, during Clinton’s impeachment trial, his approval ratings rose, while approval ratings for Lewinsky were extremely low. The idea that people were even polled regarding their opinion of Lewinsky is absurd on its face, but they do serve as evidence that Lewinsky became a social pariah, while Clinton became more likable. The difference between the material repercussions for Petraeus and Broadwell following the revelation of their affair are astounding. Although Petraeus stepped down from his position as Director of the CIA (without President Obama’s blessing) he has since—in just over one year—become an advocate for veterans, been named a visiting professor at the City University of New York, and a Judge Widney Professor, which recognizes leadership by the University of Southern California, been hired as a
chairman for an investment firm and become a senior fellow at Harvard. Broadwell, on the other hand, retroactively lost her promotion to lieutenant colonial in the United States Army. These provide examples of how sexist representations in the media can contribute to the reification of women's subordinate statuses in America.

“It is often argued that the journalist's deployment of [female] stereotypes, far from being harmless, is instead likely to result in negative and undesirable social consequences for women” (Carter, Branston, Allen, 6). In the coverage of high-profile extra-marital sexual affairs, women have been reduced to stereotypes through blatantly sexist attitudes rampant in American print news media. These attitudes are prevalent in the everyday media discourses available to American audiences, and represent women in ways that are counter-intuitive to feminism. Each of these women have been held to higher societal standards than their male counterparts, and thusly disciplined more harshly by the public. In this way women are subordinated by the media’s continued and active use of sexist language that reifies both patriarchy as well as sexist notions of femininity and masculinity in our culture.
Chapter 3  
Confessions and Apologies: Media Coverage of Scandal

On January 26, 1998 Bill Clinton denied having had a sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky. As he famously said in a televised statement, “I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky.” Following an intense investigation into his political and private life, which is thoroughly outlined in the Starr Report, as well as an impeachment trial, President Clinton changed his story. Just seven months after telling the entire nation that he had not had sexual relations with Lewinsky, Clinton addressed the nation in a four-minute prepared speech that aired on ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC, CNN, Fox News Channel, Headline News, MSNBC and CNBC. In the same room and the same chair in which he testified before the Office of Independent Counsel and the grand jury earlier that day, Clinton confessed to an inappropriate relationship with White House intern, Monica Lewinsky. Seriously but confidently, he began his confession by taking responsibility for his actions “public and private” and asserting that the answers he gave in his deposition in January were “legally accurate.” He continued: “Indeed, I did have a relationship with Miss Lewinsky that was not appropriate. In fact, it was wrong. It constituted a critical lapse in judgment and personal failure on my part for which I am solely and completely responsible.” 

Following Clinton’s “heartfelt” confession, CNN reported that Democrats in Congress believed that the tone of Clinton’s message was “serious and apologetic” while republicans in Congress accused Clinton of being defiant and lacking contrition (Orban, 66). USA Today also produced data concerning reactions to
Clinton’s revelation of a sexual relationship with a White House intern. As could be predicted, Republicans provided primarily negative reactions, while Democrats’ reactions were varied (Orban, 66). Members of both parties used his disclosure of sexual indiscretion to gain leverage in political campaigns across the United States, whether they supported him or called for his resignation, while accusing their opponents of wrongfully doing the opposite (Foerstel).

According to Orban, “Speech critics assessed the speech as deceptive, defensive, self-protective, and without good faith.” They accused him of using language that was “excruciatingly precise,” which adversely affected the effectiveness of his argument; of “confessing legal responsibility ‘while maintaining his legal innocence’”; of acting primarily on the advice of his legal team; and finally of attempting to refute any action that could be considered perjury” (64). However, because the American media was the primary force behind delivering this communication event to the American public, and subsequently deliberating and reflecting on, debating about and discussing ad nauseam, reports remained largely positive about Clinton’s relationship with the American public, despite what lawmakers and speech critics communicated about the incident. In other words, the media turned the incident—the affair and the confession—into entertainment fodder for the American public that featured high-profile players, sex and intrigue while simultaneously burying issues that more directly affected both the American public and its position in the world. The media then, has exchanged its role as a crucial component of maintaining a democracy by providing an unfettered check on the American government for the role of providing salacious “infotainment.”
In continuing with Shakespearean comparisons, as is prevalent in American media coverage of extra-marital affairs involving high-power politicians, Rob Elder from the *San Jose Mercury News* wrote:

Like a king in a Shakespeare tragedy, Clinton is on stage with larger-than-life flaws for all to see. But he has strengths as well. And one of these is the ability to position himself as a defender of the very values his own acts have violated—including our beliefs that sex ought to be private, families ought to be sacrosanct, and government ought to be about the public’s business. Clinton would likely agree with this sentiment. In his confession to America he stated, “Even presidents have private lives. It is time to stop the pursuit of personal destruction and the prying into private lives and get on with our national life” (Clinton).

But if the American public or the American media agreed with Clinton and legitimately believed that “sex ought to be private,” why were so many column inches and so much airtime dedicated to the inane details of the sexual relationship between Clinton and Lewinsky—especially when the two only engaged sexually a few times? And why, after the media was ridiculed for turning the Clinton-Lewinsky affair into a circus, did the media choose to focus on the sexual indiscretions of countless other American officials like General Petraeus and Senator Edwards?

According to Foucault, Christian values—upon which America was established—turned sex “into that which, above all else, had to be confessed” (*History Volume I*, 35). It was clearly not enough for American media audiences to read the sordid details—from the cigar story to the blue Gap dress—of the Clinton-
Lewinsky affair, they also needed to hear, to watch both parties confess to engaging in sexual acts that social modes of decorum dictated as forbidden.

On March 3, 1999, more than one year after Lewinsky’s name emerged on Drudge Report, Lewinsky appeared on ABC’s 20/20 with Barbara Walters. Up until that interview, the public had only heard Lewinsky on the tapes that Linda Tripp had secretly recorded and subsequently released to the media and in her video recorded Senate deposition in Clinton’s impeachment trial. According to the *Washington Post*, “The ABC interview is her first public attempt to describe her feelings about the failed romance, betrayal and investigation that plunged her into a political hurricane and made her one of the world’s most famous women” (Kurtz). More than 70 million viewers tuned in for the Lewinsky-Walters interview on 20/20, which ABC reported as a record-setting audience for a news program. 20/20 provided an introduction to the interview, “Monica Lewinsky, guaranteed a place in history, finally free to tell her own story of the affair that nearly toppled the president. . . Plus the secret she has never revealed and questions that have not been answered, until now!”

During their three hour session (only two aired) Walters grilled, albeit politely, Lewinsky on all facets of her relationship with Clinton. The only questions Lewinsky tried not to answer involved Ken Starr, and the ongoing trial. The *Washington Post* described Lewinsky as “candid, direct, and at times emotional and teary-eyed,” which persuaded ABC executives to expand the 20/20 broadcast, which is normally one hour, to two hours (Kurtz). Before the interview, Walters introduced Lewinsky and the situation. She said, “Tonight, for the first time she has chosen to
tell her story from her private flirtation with President Clinton to the public nightmare of the aftermath... She has done this interview with no payment of any kind and we could ask her whatever we wanted” (Walters ABC Interview).

The day after Lewinsky’s interview aired, her authorized biography Monica’s Story was released. She received a reported $500,000 for its advance. The author, Andrew Morton also wrote the “definitive” Princess Dianna biography. Soon after its release, Monica’s Story shot to the top of the New York Times best-seller list. Two weeks later, Monica appeared on the cover of Time magazine in an “exclusive interview” dubbed: “Monica Lewinsky Up Close.”

But why? Why did Clinton confess to a national audience? And why did Lewinsky, who likely had more autonomy in her decision to confess to a televised audience because of her status as a “private” citizen, go on national television with Barbara Walters, agree to a Time magazine cover and release a tell-all book? Foucault suggests that, “next to the testimony of witnesses, and the learned methods of observation and demonstration, the confession became one of the West’s most highly valued techniques for producing truth” (History Volume I, 59). Despite the fact that the Lewinsky scandal had been reported in the mainstream news media for more than a year, some Americans still weren’t sure what to believe. Just before Clinton’s four-minute, nationally televised confession, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press revealed that “most Americans believe President Clinton probably lied about the affair with Lewinsky, but that 60 percent would be satisfied to end the matter if he confessed he didn’t tell the truth because he wanted to protect his family” (Boccella). But what difference could it possibly make in the lives...
of the 60% of Americans who “would be satisfied to end the matter” if Clinton would only admit that he was dishonest, thereby confessing to having a sexual relationship with Lewinsky. The public’s overwhelming desire to hear the president confess is what Foucault calls “pleasure in the truth of pleasure.” Certainly some Americans were concerned by the integrity of the American president, but it is reasonable to assume that some, if not many Americans were primarily interested in knowing, definitively, whether or not the American president was receiving oral sex in the Oval Office. According to Foucault:

The confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one’s crimes, one’s sins, one’s thoughts and desires, one’s illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell. (History Volume I, 59)

Although Clinton was relatively vague in his televised confession to the public, his confession played a part in almost all of the areas of life that Foucault listed. He confessed to lying to the American public—about a private matter—and to carrying on a sexual relationship with a 22-year-old White House Intern. His admission must certainly have affected his family relationships, his love relations, and because he was ever involved in the affair, his everyday life—in as much as the American president has an everyday life—which was turned upside down by the media circus and impeachment trial that resulted from his sexual dalliances. Certainly, and despite being well spoken and possessing a profound political savvy, Clinton’s
confession was difficult. Furthermore, it should be noted that this was not last of Clinton’s confessions concerning the Lewinsky scandal—in the month following this televised confession, Clinton addressed the issue five additional times in public events—it was likely at least his third, for he certainly confessed to his wife and child before confessing under oath and later to the American public, which refers to another of Foucault’s points regarding confessions: “One confesses—or is forced to confess. When it is not spontaneous or dictated by some internal imperative, the confession is wrung from a person by a violence or threat” (History Volume I, 59).

Although physical violence was not looming, certainly the threat of impeachment was enough for Clinton to want to confess. As for Lewinsky, the threat of serving time in prison for perjury was threatening enough to get her to confess during Clinton’s impeachment trial, as for her televised confessional on 20/20, “some internal imperative” could be responsible, as could be the possibility of selling more copies of her book, for which she was receiving royalties, by appearing on national television and promoting it the day before its release.

Still, it seems that “some internal imperative” is overwhelmingly the force behind adulterers’ confessions, or at least those of John Edwards and Rielle Hunter and David Petraeus and Paula Broadwell.

On August 8, 2008—more than nine months after the National Enquirer first reported that Edwards was having an affair with Hunter—Edwards released a statement wherein he confessed to having an affair with Hunter. The statement was sent to major news outlets, the same day Edwards was to appear, in a televised confessional-style interview, on ABC’s Nightline with Bob Woodruff. Woodruff
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opened the *Nightline* interview by stating, “Senator, before we start this I just want to make it clear to our audience that you asked me to come here, and asked me to come here to talk about the reports about your personal life” (Edwards, ABC Transcript). He then immediately follows the disclaimer by asking Edwards if he had an affair with “Ms. Hunter.” Edwards answered in the positive, with an obviously prepared statement that bore blatant resemblance to the one he released to news agencies earlier that day. He said:

In 2006, two years ago, I made a very serious mistake. A mistake that I am responsible for and no one else. In 2006 I told Elizabeth about the mistake, asked her for her forgiveness, asked God for his forgiveness. And we have kept this within our family since that time. All of my family knows about this and just to be absolutely clear, none of them are responsible for it. I am responsible for it. I alone am responsible for it. And it led to this most recent incident at the Beverly Hilton. I was at the Beverly Hilton. I was there for a very simple reason, because I was trying to keep this mistake that I had made from becoming public. (Edwards, ABC Transcript)

Curiously absent from his confession is the word “affair,” which has here been replaced with the word “mistake,” as well as the fact that Edwards fathered a child with Hunter. Actually, during the interview, he outright denied fathering a child, and even suggested taking a paternity test in order to provide proof. During his interview he claimed that he was only in love with one woman, his wife, and that his affair with Hunter occurred during a period of time when Elizabeth Edwards’ cancer was in remission. He described his wife’s reaction to learning of his affair as “angry”
and “furious” and he claimed that he publicly denied the affair for so long because he did not want the public to know what he had done.

Fortunately for Edwards’ reputation, the National Enquirer had long been considered a disreputable supermarket tabloid. As such he was able to dismiss its allegations as preposterous lies and tabloid fodder for almost six months before more legitimate publications began reporting the affair as truth. This addresses one of Foucault’s central issues regarding sex. He posits that:

[The central issue] is not to determine whether one says yes or no to sex, whether one formulates prohibitions or permissions, whether one asserts its importance or denies its effects, or whether one refines the words one uses to designate it” but rather, the point is “to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it” (History Volume I, 11).

In the example of John Edwards, the institution that was doing the speaking was a down-market tabloid that was notorious for publishing salacious gossip. As such, Edwards reputation could remain intact, and he could continue to deny having had an extra-marital affair because the only publication reporting on his affair was at that time considered an untrustworthy source. Until the mainstream press gathered enough evidence or proof of the affair, Edwards’ sex life remained a private matter outside the pages of tawdry gossip rags. In other words, coverage of Edwards’ affair was initially mere gossip promulgated by a shady institution whose obvious goal was to sell copies. They were speaking from a very particular viewpoint, that of a supermarket tabloid, which allowed for the discussion of sex in a way that did not disrupt modes of decorum that more respectable, mainstream or legitimate
publications uphold, that is, until those institutions began their own coverage of the affair.

At some point, according to his interview, Edwards confessed to his wife, who was obviously invested in knowing the truth, but why did he feel compelled to share his story, to confess the truth of his affair to the American public? He was no longer a viable democratic presidential candidate and the affair would only tarnish his reputation and thusly his political aspirations, since some of his appeal resulted from his image as an all-American family man. According to Foucault:

The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, "demands" only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power weighs it down, and it can finally be articulated only at the price of a kind of liberation (History Volume I, 60).

Therefore it can be argued, that Edwards confessed, on national television no less, to his affair with Hunter because, simply put: the truth is liberating. In order to repair the damage done to his family or his relationships, he need only confess and apologize to them. However, his role as a public figure and an elected official, in a governmental body that few people have the privilege on which to serve does require a certain amount of trust from the public, who arguably deserve an explanation since his integrity was called into question because of marital infidelities. As such, it makes sense that Edwards would feel compelled to confess
and apologize to his constituents. In doing so, a burden could be lifted, and he could be free to carry on with his life knowing that by confessing to his misdeeds, he could find a sense of peace in liberation. His sense of peace was short lived.

A year and a half after Edwards “tell-all” confession on Nightline, he once again released a statement. On January 21, 2010 John Edwards confessed to fathering a child with Rielle Hunter. His confession came just one week before Andrew Young, a former Edwards campaign staffer who had claimed paternity, was to appear in an exclusive interview with 20/20. By confirming what most people already assumed, that Frances Quinn was indeed Edwards’ “love child,” Edwards finally completed his confession, but only because he was threatened by the release of such information in a format that was out of his control. This explains why he finally confessed to fathering the child, but what kept him from doing it in his pre-planned, primetime confessional on Nightline?

Foucault suggests that silence, or the things one does not or cannot say, functions right alongside that which is said. “There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things” (History Volume I, 27). In the case of Frances Quinn, her mere existence suggests, but does not explicitly say sex. It is curious then, how Edwards thought he could deny paternity after admitting to having an ongoing affair with a woman who became impregnated during the time he admitted to having an affair with her. Though it is entirely possible that someone else could have been the father, it is interesting that Edwards would choose to deny it—despite all of the obvious signs suggesting he was the father, from the timeline,
to the published photographs of him holding baby Frances Quinn during a "secret" meeting with Hunter at the Beverly Hilton—up until the point that he was threatened by the revelation of the truth, especially since he appeared on primetime television with the sole purpose of confessing his indiscretions to the public. Perhaps he believed that if he confessed to one misdeed, people would believe him when he said he did not do another. Instead, the child born by his affair provided a device—to reduce her life crudely—that caused sex, specifically between Edwards and Hunter, to be talked about even more. So much more so, that ABC aired the confession of a man who did not have sex with Hunter, and who did not father her child, but who pretended (and was compensated) to be the father in order to prevent Edwards from being caught having an extra-marital affair. His scenario exemplifies one of Foucault's main points, that the more you try to hide sex, or to keep it quiet, the more desirable it becomes for the media to discuss, especially when it involves high-profile politicians. As such, the media clamors not just for one confession, but two.

In the event that a high profile American politician is involved in an extra marital affair, it is not necessarily sufficient for the media to report the confession and subsequent details regarding the affair from the politician involved. They also jockey for the exclusive rights to the interview with the woman involved. *GQ* secured that interview with the woman with whom Edwards had an affair in April 2010. "Hello, America, My Name is Rielle Hunter," served as the headline for the article, which featured the subhead, "Now, after years of silence, the other woman speaks," (Depaulo). The article mentioned that Hunter was not benefiting financially
by appearing in magazine’s “exclusive.” In the interview, Hunter is asked why after keeping silent about the affair publically, she has chosen to finally confess. She replied, “I feel comfortable talking now, because Johnny went public and made a statement admitting paternity. I didn’t feel like I could ever speak until he did that” (Depaulo). Here Hunter is contributing to the ever-circular logic of talking about sex in public. Because Edwards finally spoke out about their affair and claimed paternity of their child, she felt like she could finally speak out about their affair and their child. When asked how hard it was to remain quiet she explained it as “very difficult... It’s hard to know that people are out there speaking over and over and over again untruths. Lies. Consciously going out there and spinning the truth” (Depaulo). It is evident then, that Hunter is using the confession to produce the truth about what really happened. As mentioned, Foucault regards the confession as “one of the West’s most highly valued techniques for producing truth” (History Volume I, 59).

The media then, provided Hunter with the power to establish and create truth. Without the power of the media, Hunter would scarcely have had the opportunity to reach as many people as she did with her confession, with her version of the events. After her GQ interview, she was given, or took, three more opportunities to establish the truth. On April 29, 2010 Hunter appeared in her first televised interview, another “exclusive,” with Oprah. Two years later, on June 22, 2012 Hunter released an unapologetic memoir chronicling her relationship with presidential hopeful John Edwards called What Really Happened: John Edwards, Our Daughter, and Me. Sales of her book were relatively low. The following year, in October, Hunter re-released her memoir under the title, In Hindsight, What Really Happened, which was annotated
with Hunter’s mistakes and regrets (Coffey). This version was widely touted as being much more apologetic. The day her second attempt at telling the truth was released, Hunter contributed a blog to Huffington Post. In her blog she stated:

I behaved badly. That may seem obvious to you but it’s taken me a long time to admit that, even to myself. For years I was so viciously attacked by the media and the world that I felt like a victim. I now realize that the attacks are actually beside the point. The point is: I behaved badly. . . I am very sorry for my wrong, selfish behavior.

This blog post represents (at minimum) Hunter’s fifth confessional outlet. Although the affair itself, because it involved a high profile politician, who at the time of the affair was running for the highest office in the United States of America, was newsworthy, the media still continued to cover Hunter’s actions more than four years later. By then, Edwards had fully confessed to his role in the affair and subsequent attempts to hide it, and had nearly disappeared from public life and his wife, Elizabeth, succumbed to cancer in late 2010, so Hunter’s final confession and apology was relatively moot. The damage was done and the person who was most affected by it, Elizabeth, had since died. Why then, did the media continue to cover the Edwards-Hunter affair? How did Hunter possibly sell any copies of her second memoir, when the public knew most, if not all, of the salacious details surrounding the affair, due to constant media coverage?

Furthermore, why did the media continue to report the tawdry details of a years-old affair that involved two consenting adults, who attempted—at least initially—to keep their sexual relationship private? And why was the American
public devouring such media coverage? Certainly more important, less trivial events were happening both domestically and internationally during each the Clinton-Lewinsky affair, the Edwards-Hunter affair, and the Petraeus-Broadwell affair. I think Michiko Kakutani summed it up perfectly in her New York Times book review, “‘Monica’s Story’: Tawdry and Tiresome,” where she wrote:

  If months of television talk show debates haven’t already made the reader weary of this whole tawdry affair and its surreal effect on our public discourse, this book should certainly do it. Its obsessive account of teen-age shenanigans, its tiresome prattling about sex and self-esteem, its therapeutic jargon and Judith Krantz prose sadly sum up the sorry state of affairs our culture has reached, a state in which news and voyeurism, politics and soap opera have inextricably blurred, where the personal is paramount and D-Day no longer refers to World War II but to “Dump Day” in the saga of Monica and Bill.

Although she was speaking specifically about Clinton and Lewinsky, this sentiment can be applied to each of the affairs, which were widely (if not over-widely) covered for much longer than was necessary for the American public to function. This has certainly been a problem since the advent of 24-hour news channels, the (d)evolution of news into “infotainment,” but there is more to it than that. As Richard E. Miller asked in “Rhetoric’s Inescapable Grasp”:

  Why are confessions so much more compelling than ideas? Is it the pleasure of sitting in judgment, while the temperature and the sea level rise in concert,
the North Pole melts, the global economy wobbles, war without end shifts
from a form of damnation to national policy? (142)

Certainly it can be argued that many of the good ideas and policies that Clinton
created or supported while he was in office have been completely overshadowed by
his brief sexual affair with Lewinsky. It is somewhat of a travesty that something
like Americorps—a program that allows young people who wish to serve their
country but do not wish to join the military or the Peace Corps to volunteer
domestically—remains relatively unknown to the American public, while The
Lewinsky Affair is nearly synonymous with The Clinton Presidency.

The confessions of the women involved in high profile extra marital affairs
with American politicians also have feminist implications. At the heart of feminism
is the notion that “the personal is political.” Scarcely is this more literal than in the
cases of Monica Lewinsky, Rielle Hunter and Paula Broadwell. Although the
traditional idea that the personal is political most nearly means that women’s
individual identities and experiences need not be relegated to the world of private
and personal, but instead are political, because they are important aspects of
people’s lives that should be addressed instead of disregarded simply because they
are feminine. The personal as political includes all the issues of women’s liberation
(Campbell, 84) including, but not limited to, sexual issues of health as well as desire,
domestic issues, workplace issues, education, equality, and anything and everything
else that affects the lives of women in a personal, and thusly political way. According
to Macdonald:
Although women are now shown in controlling sexual positions, they are rarely enabled in mainstream representations to speak of their own sexual desires and feelings. This lessens the media’s ability to explore the possibilities of moving away from the traditional masculine paradigm of a predatory and goal-directed sexuality towards more open forms of sexual pleasure. (190)

Each of these women were given the opportunity to make the personal political by using the mainstream media prime-time confessional as a vehicle for advancing feminist ideals. Whether or not any of them actually advanced feminist ideals in any way is certainly up for debate. According to Cixous:

> It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence. Women should break out of the snare of silence. They shouldn’t be conned into accepting a domain, which is the margin or the harem. (1528)

In this way then, it can be argued that each of the women, through their spoken confessions as well as their tell-all books (Lewinsky and Hunter) if nothing else entered themselves into history in a way that was more autonomous than if they had remained silent regarding their sexual dalliances and allowed the patriarchal media to be the primary voice discussing the matter. Interestingly though, when given the opportunity to speak for themselves, each of the women accepted
(through confession) her “identity” as a “mistress.” None resisted the media’s representation of “mistress.”

Although it is unknown in what ways, if any, these women’s confessions extended feminist ideals, they certainly exemplify various ways in which the personal is political. As discussed in Chapter 2, much media attention was focused on both women’s bodies and minds, generally in very negative ways. Although the interview-style confessions still perpetuated much of the sexist language discussed earlier, they did provide an outlet for the discussion of certain personal issues, such as Lewinsky’s depression or Hunter’s pregnancy. As such, these issues, described by the woman who experienced them, may have opened a dialogue for other women who were experiencing similar issues. Bonnie J. Dow describes feminism as “a set of political ideas and practices—developed through feminist movements, dedicated to the progress of women and the transformation of patriarchy” (xxiii). Whether or not the confessions of Lewinsky and Hunter in any way advanced feminism, they certainly gave new meaning to “the personal is political.” For each of these women, Lewinsky, Hunter, and Broadwell, a personal affair was political on a national scale. These women’s personal lives quickly devolved into political scandals when their affairs were revealed to the public via the media.

Current research provides four different ways to read political scandal in American society. According to Schudson scandals can first be considered rituals of collective absolution that reaffirm the social order (1236). If politicians are caught engaging in bad behavior, then the American public can believe that the system is working and that their leaders are not regularly disregarding rules, because if they
do, they will be caught and they will be punished. For example, President Clinton certainly broke the sanctity of marriage when he engaged in oral sex with a White House intern. However, his real mistake was being less than honest about his affair when testifying under oath. When his mistruth was construed as a lie [under oath], Clinton was impeached. Although he was acquitted and remained in office, the social order was reaffirmed very publicly when the president was taken to task for his misdeeds.

Political scandals can also be considered notable “primarily as events that trivialize public discourse and focus popular attention on incidental matters rather than the meat and potatoes of the economic and social matters that touch people’s daily lives” (Schudson 1236). This reading of scandals posits them as mere “distractions” perpetuated by the media, which draw Americans’ attention away from real issues and focus them on the tawdry details of politicians’ personal lives. This is most obvious in the case of the Petraeus and Broadwell affair. Just days before Petraeus was supposed to testify before the United States Senate regarding an attack on the American consulate in Benghazi, Libya, he resigned from his post as the commander of the Central Intelligence Agency, and credited his affair with Broadwell as his primary reason for his resignation. The Senate was investigating an attack that had taken place at the American consulate more than a year prior. Initially, the attack had been reported as a demonstration that had gotten out of hand, it was later reported as a well-executed attack on American, wherein two American diplomats were killed. The intent of the investigation was to determine whether or not the State Department, the CIA, the military, the White House and
other government agencies acted appropriately and in a timely manner, after the attack was reported. Although it still remains unclear which agencies and/or persons were primarily responsible for what was later alleged to be an inappropriate or slow response to the crisis in Benghazi, the interesting aspect regarding my research, is the fact that very little media coverage was dedicated to how Petraeus’ departure from the CIA would affect the investigation into the attack and was instead focused primarily on the fact that he engaged in an extra-marital affair with a much younger woman, who was his biographer. This reading of sex scandals provides an explanation as to why we know names like Paula Broadwell, with whom General Petraeus had an affair, or Jill Kelly, the Florida woman whose FBI report eventually led to the investigation that revealed Petraeus and Broadwell’s affair and why we don’t know names like J. Christopher Stevens, Glen Doherty, and Sean Smith, who were all killed during the attack. Stevens was the first U.S. ambassador to be killed in the line of duty since 1979 (“Assault on U.S. consulate”). Furthermore, Clinton approved/initiated the bombing of terrorist sites in Afghanistan and the Sudan only three days after his confession. Although some critics questioned Clinton’s timing on the bombings, because the affair was at the forefront of media reports, the bombings, although reported at the time, certainly are less memorable to media audiences than his affair with Lewinsky, in part because the affair completely overshadowed what was obviously less trivial. Congressional Quarterly quoted Senator Daniel Coats after the bombings as saying, “The timing is so extraordinary that both friends and foes are going to conclude that it was done for the wrong motives. But even if it isn’t, I believe people will use that
as an excuse now to further put the United States’ credibility and foreign leadership in question” (Foerstel). In this case, not only do the bombings—which are more likely to impact peoples lives than a presidential affair—get upstaged by coverage of the affair, but in various reports regarded as a failed attempt by Clinton to change the news cycle, thereby directing people’s attention away from the affair and towards the bombings. The idea that an American president would be willing to drop bombs on foreign sites, terrorist or not, in order to deflect attention away from his sexual dalliances is both appalling and absurd.

The third method of reading political scandals, applies most directly to sex scandals. According to Schudson political scandal “is the activity of popular media and down-market media audience that reject dominant conventions of serious journalism and acts out the inversions, travesties, and transgressions of carnival” (1237). He points out, however, as is the case with each of the sex scandals analyzed here, that sex scandals “are promoted as much by respectable media institutions as by marginal and saucy ones” (1237). This concept is most interesting in regard to the Edwards-Hunter affair. Initially, and for almost six months, the only news outlet covering the alleged affair between Edwards and Hunter was the National Enquirer—a notorious supermarket tabloid that is published weekly. Its popularity has declined somewhat in recent years, due to competition with glossier, weekly tabloids like as Us Weekly. According to their editorial mission statement, they report “unvarnished stories about celebrities: their antics, celebrations, loves, mishaps. Also in the mix are high profile stories regarding current criminal investigations, human interest and health” (American Media, Inc.). As is apparent
then, they rarely rely on hard news for content, and instead feature tawdry, tabloid-fare almost exclusively. As such, it was easy for Edwards to continue to deny his extra-marital affair with Hunter for so long, because the *National Enquirer* has long been notorious for publishing less than truthful, sensationalized content. However, the believability of the Edwards-Hunter affair grew when respectable media institutions like *ABC News*, *CNN*, and the *Washington Post* began reporting it. At this point, the idea that sex scandals are merely fodder for down-market media outlets is challenged. Although it makes sense that major (respectable) media outlets would wish to cover breaking news about a senator and presidential hopeful, it is interesting and unfortunate that there is no longer much distinction between disreputable supermarket tabloid and respectable media institution coverage of sex scandals, particularly when they involve high profile American politicians. Simply put, in the American media, there appears to be a very blurred line between hard news and gossip, wherein even respectable media institutions are reliant upon tawdry affairs for readership and ratings.

The fourth and preferred way to read a scandal, according to Schudson, implies that scandals represent a symbolic power contest wherein the stakes are trust and reputation. He suggests that the media has just as much to lose when they focus their attention on political scandal. “The media can profit from scandal, but they can lose too when relevant publics find their scandalizing unpersuasive, as happened in the end with both White water and Monicagate” (Schudson 1237). In other words, when the media focuses too much attention on a particular scandal—and as a result sully the reputation of the actors involved—they risk their reputation
as well. The media certainly should be criticized for its over coverage of “Monicagate.” By seeking out and publishing every possible detail, they turned a brief affair into a full-blown year-long media circus. But, if the media’s reputation was also at stake, why would they cover these affairs at all, let alone in an ongoing fashion, and why did the public continue to consume such “disreputable” coverage?

Foucault provides an appropriate explanation that begins with immoderation. Simply put, the American president possessed a “lack of self-restraint with regard to pleasure” (History Volume II, 45). This lack of restraint manifested itself in extra-marital affairs, and marked Clinton sexually deviant. And, according to Hall, the news is produced according to certain significant framing and interpretive functions. “The media are often presenting information about events which occur outside the direct experience of the majority of the society” (648). If labeled a sexual “deviant” (defined as “departed from usual or accepted standards”) then Clinton’s behavior certainly qualifies as news, as he is acting outside the “direct experience of the majority of society.” However, [heterosexual] sex is obviously conventional in America and extra-marital affairs are relatively commonplace. So why are people so interested in it? According to Foucault:

From the singular imperialism that compels everyone to transform their sexuality into a perpetual discourse, to the manifold mechanisms which, in the areas of economy, pedagogy, medicine, and justice, incite, extract, distribute, and institutionalize the sexual discourse, an immense verbosity is what our civilization has required and organized. (History Volume I, 33)
This would explain why the media dedicated more than a year to the coverage of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair. They turned a few sexual escapades into a perpetual discourse. They approached every angle, reported every vulgar detail, and violated privacy. Their efforts to obtain information regarding sexual behavior became a virtual circus—a media storm that followed Lewinsky wherever she went. It explains why their confessions attracted mass audiences and why Lewinsky’s tell-all book became a \textit{New York Times} Best-Seller. Because, as Foucault wrote, “What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it \textit{ad infinitum}, while exploiting it as the secret” (History Volume I, 35).

It is sex’s status as a secret, as well as the notion that married women are often considered sexless, that prevents the media from interrogating and/or reporting on the sexual predilections of the First Lady, while simultaneously reporting every sleazy detail of the sexual escapades carried about by President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky. According to Foucault, “People often say that modern society has attempted to reduce sexuality to the couple—the heterosexual and, insofar as possible, legitimate couple” (History Volume I, 45). Therefore, any sex that occurs \textit{outside} of the heterosexual couple is illegitimate and thusly must be closely supervised or at least kept in check by various modes of power. In the case of political sex scandals, the media created an archive of confessed “illegitimate” sexual acts, at once condemning sexual acts deemed deviant by a prudish society, normalizing them through the frequency by which they are reported, and excusing them as a kind of “boys will be boys” behavior.
According to Foucault, "the pleasure in the truth of pleasure" includes "the pleasure of knowing that truth, of discovering and exposing it, the fascination of seeing it and telling it, of captivating and capturing others by it, of confiding it in secret, of luring it out in the open—the specific pleasure of the true discourse on pleasure" (History Volume I, 71). This passage most appropriately explains the media’s constant attention to sex scandals involving American politicians as well as the American public’s appetite for such fodder. If there is pleasure in every step of reporting salacious stories, such as the Clinton-Lewinsky affair, the Petraeus-Broadwell affair, and the Edwards-Hunter affair, then it makes sense that the media would investigate, report, and reveal these politicians’ biggest secrets and that the American public would be completely captivated by every sordid detail. What remains a mystery, is how and why sex continues to be so newsworthy when it is nothing if not ordinary, common, and banal. However, as long as the media chooses to cover it in a way that makes it feel taboo, illicit, and sensational as well as important to people’s lives, then it will continue to interest media audiences more so than the serious domestic and international issues upon which we should be focusing.
Chapter 4
Women in Power: Overcoming Gender Gaps in American Politics

In the American political sphere, extra-marital affairs are not uncommon. Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy allegedly carried on affairs for years with little notice from the press or the public. By the 1980’s though, a politician engaging in a sexual affair outside of their marriage was considered major news and was covered in the mainstream press as such. As discussed in chapter three, the reasons for this over coverage are complex and varied.

In 1987, Senator Gary Hart began a second presidential campaign. A month after announcing his bid for president, the Miami Herald published a photo of a woman—who was not Hart’s wife—exiting his home. After receiving information that Hart had visited the Bahamas with the woman, the Herald published the infamous “Monkey Business” photo of 29-year-old Donna Rice, a model, sitting on Hart’s lap. A week after the photo was published Hart dropped out of the race, and although he later re-entered, the evidence of his affair was enough to derail his campaign and contributed to an unsuccessful presidential run, as well as a permanent place in the annals of political cheaters (Gray, Snyder).
In the early 1990's Republican Congressman Newt Gingrich began an affair with Callista Bisek, an aide in the office of Congressman Steve Gunderson. According to Tim Dickinson of *Rolling Stone* magazine, Gingrich's affair with Bisek was considered common knowledge on the Hill, even as Gingrich was climbing the political ladder on his way to becoming Speaker of the House in 1994. Gingrich's arrangement with Bisek was particularly interesting because of his role in the Republican Revolution, which involved legislation regarding "family values," such as the Defensive of Marriage Act, and a prominent role in the Clinton impeachment, in which he was very outspoken about the wrongfulness of President Clinton's sexual dalliances. In 2000, four months after his divorce from second-wife Marianne Ginther, and seven years after their affair began, Gingrich married Bisek, who is 23 years his junior. Interestingly, Gingrich's relationship with Ginther began as an affair as well. He left his first wife—Jackie Battley, his high school geometry teacher—in 1980 and married Ginther six months later.

In September 1998 Indiana Republican Congressman and outspoken Clinton critic Dan Burton acknowledged that he was the father of a child who was born as the result of an extra-marital affair. Burton fathered the child in the early 1980's when he was a member of the Indiana Senate. The woman with whom he carried on the affair was an Indiana Senate staffer. Burton claimed to disclose his prior affair and child in order to end harassment by both the mother of his teenage son, as well as the media, which he felt had been out to get him since his role in the investigation of President Clinton and the DNC's alleged fundraising abuses in 1996 (Walsh).
In May 2000, during his re-election campaign, Democratic New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani announced his separation from Donna Hanover, his wife of 16 years. News of the separation coincided with tabloid rumors that Giuliani had a long-term girlfriend Judith Nathan that Giuliani confirmed during a press conference in which a reporter asked about Nathan. Hours later, Hanover told the press that he was having another affair, with his former communications director, Cristyne Lategano (Drucker). Giuliani’s political career was hardly affected by his confession. He went on to become a viable candidate for the Democratic presidential nominee in 2004.

In January 2002, Jim McGreevey became governor of New Jersey and soon appointed Golan Cipel, who was not an American citizen and therefore could not obtain security clearance, as New Jersey's anti-terrorism advisor. Two and a half years later in August 2004, McGreevey held a press conference in which he announced, “I am a gay American.” He confessed to an affair with a man, asked for the forgiveness of his family and announced his resignation. It was soon revealed that Cipel was the man with whom McGreevey had an affair. He officially left the New Jersey Governor’s office in November (CNN Library).

In March 2008, Democratic New York Governor Eliot Spitzer resigned 48 hours after the media revealed that he had hired a high-priced prostitute from a call service in Washington D.C. It was subsequently reported that he was a regular customer of the Emperors Club VIP prostitution ring and a criminal investigation followed. During his resignation speech, his wife Silda Wall Spitzer somberly stood by his side (Kocieniewski, Hakim). Less than a week later Lt. Governor David
Paterson, a state legislator for over 20 years, was sworn in as governor of New York. Hours later, Paterson was fielding questions from the press and admitted to having his own extra-marital affair from 1999 to 2001 during what he called a “rough patch” in his marriage. He opted to speak publicly about his indiscretions in response to media rumors about his personal life. His wife also admitted to having an affair (Bauman).

In June 2009 Republican South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford disappeared. His wife claimed he was busy focusing on a writing project and his spokesman claimed that he was “hiking the Appalachian Trail,” a lie that would get much coverage in the mainstream press, quickly becoming a euphemism for infidelity in marriage (Severson). In reality, Sanford was in Buenos Aires, Argentina visiting Maria Belen Chapur, a journalist with whom he had been having an affair since 2008 (Gray, Snyder). He claimed to have ended the affair while in Argentina and resigned as Chairman of the Republican Governors Association, but refused to step down as governor even amidst legal issues and impeachment charges. After leaving his post as governor with a tarnished reputation both for his sexual dalliances and for misappropriating state funds to travel to Argentina, Sanford’s political career had little momentum. His wife divorced him in 2011. However, in 2013 Sanford was elected to Congress in South Carolina. In his victory speech, he introduced Chapur as his fiancé (Severson).

In 2009, the sex scandal that eventually lead to Republican Nevada Senator John Ensign’s resignation in 2011 was revealed to the public through the media. Ensign, who had publically called for the resignation of both President Bill Clinton
and Senator Larry Craig—who was charged with lewd conduct after soliciting sex in a public bathroom at the Minneapolis airport—following revelations of their sexual misconduct were revealed was involved in an extra-marital affair with a former staffer, Cynthia Hampton, whose husband Doug also worked for Ensign, from 2007 to 2008. The Senate Ethics panel conducted an investigation and released a report on the Ensign scandal after it became evident that Ensign had violated federal law offered the Hamptons lobbying jobs on Capitol Hill. The affair apparently began when Ensign suggested the Hamptons move in with his family following a break-in/robbery of their family's home. The report also revealed that Ensign and Cynthia Hampton had used both text messaging and email accounts with fake names to cover up their affair. Ensign's parents paid the Hamptons nearly $100,000 to keep quiet about the affair. However, Doug Hampton went public with the affair in 2009 with letters to Senator Rick Santorum and Fox News. When the affair went public, Ensign confessed to his misdeeds and he and his wife said that their marriage was stronger than ever (Graham).

In addition to those listed above, numerous other politicians have gained notoriety through various types of sex scandals. Democratic U.S. Representative Anthony Weiner sent lewd texts and tweets to numerous women. Conservative Louisiana Senator David Vitter hired prostitutes and paid them to make him wear diapers. Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick had an affair with his chief of staff that resulted in perjury charges (that seem minor compared to his other political misdeeds). Republican Idaho Senator Larry Craig attempted to solicit sex from a man in a Minneapolis airport bathroom stall. And U.S. Representative Gary Condit
had an affair with intern Chandra Levy that was made public when she was found murdered in Rock Creek Park.

This list of politicians who cheated, had extra-marital affairs, or were otherwise involved in various sexual infidelities within their marriage includes senators, representatives, governors, mayors, and presidential candidates and hopefuls with varying degrees of political influence in the public sphere is far from exhaustive. In contains only politicians who were caught, and whose dalliances were subsequently reported in the mainstream media in the last 25 years. Philandering politicians have held offices as high as the President of the United States, and certainly at state and local levels as well. These politicians come from various political parties, religions, ethnicities, races, classes, and sexual orientations. However, one thing they all have in common, apart from being elected or appointed officials wielding political power, is that they are all men.

As mentioned, the above list of philandering men involved in the American political sphere is hardly comprehensive. Such a list would be too burdensome to compile. However, to compile an exhaustive list of American women politicians who have been involved in a sexual affair that was subsequently reported by the media in the last 25 years is simple and includes: Idaho Congresswoman Helen Chenoweth, Charlotte, North Carolina Mayor Sue Myrick, and Utah State Representative Katherine Bryson. However, their sexual affairs were less brazen, less public, and less "newsworthy" than those of their male counterparts mentioned above.

In 1998 Republican Idaho Representative Helen Chenoweth became an outspoken advocate against Clinton following his affair with Monica Lewinsky.
When the two-term Congresswoman began airing commercials that urged President Clinton to resign, she opened her own personal life up to media scrutiny. At that time she was compelled to admit to an affair in which she was once involved. Unlike the men listed above though, Chenoweth was, first of all, not married when she engaged in the affair. She was single and became involved with a married man. Also, the affair took place before Chenoweth was in public office. Chenoweth became involved with her business partner, Vern Ravenscroft in the early 1980’s, and their affair lasted for six years. Ravenscroft’s wife, Harriett, has blamed Chenoweth for the affair. Interestingly, Ravenscroft was at once a state legislator in Idaho, as well as a serious gubernatorial candidate. Also, Chenoweth won her 1994 Congressional seat from the incumbent candidate, one week after he acknowledged that he had been involved in an extra marital affair, and subsequently lied to the public by denying it (Kurtz).

In 2004, Utah State Representative Katherine Bryson was caught on a surveillance camera with her lover, after her estranged husband set up the camera to catch a burglar at the condominium Bryson lived in with their son (Baird). Bryson’s husband threatened to release the tape because she had recently testified in the House that she had been a victim of domestic abuse. The local newspaper described their divorce as “bitter” (Hyde).

In an even smaller blip on the American political sex scandal radar, Charlotte, North Carolina Mayor Sue Myrick admitted to a past affair during her 1989 re-election campaign. The affair had occurred in 1973, before Myrick was in political
office. She was single and had a relationship with the man to whom she was married, while he was still married to someone else.

In many ways, these women’s sexual affairs pale in comparison to their male political counterparts. Of the three women holding public office whose sexual exploits have been reported in the American media, two of them engaged in an affair with a married man, as opposed to being married and carrying on an extra-marital affair. The other was separated from her spouse before engaging in a sexual relationship with another man. Of the three women, only one held national public office while another held state office, and the other local. Only one of the women engaged in her affair while holding public office. None of the women gained infamy or notoriety from her affair. These women merely provide examples, proof that women in politics have been involved in affairs, regardless of how tame. However, because these three examples constitute most, if not all, instances of American women politicians caught having affairs, it must be asked: Why then, does the media cover women in politics in a sexist fashion and sexualize them in ways that they do not sexualize men because of their gender, when men are the ones involving themselves in sexual affairs that warrant (some) media coverage?

History provides us with (at least) two examples of women who famously used their power to attract men: Cleopatra and Catherine the great. Cleopatra married both of her brothers, killed one, and had the other killed to maintain her power. Thereafter, she chose lovers not only to please her, but also to enhance her own power. This included Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, both of whom had children with the last queen of Egypt. Catherine the Great ruled Russia in the late
1700's in what was known as Russia’s Golden Age. She famously had a great number of lovers, who were generally given high-ranking positions within her empire. She had several husbands and multiple affairs. She had children with several men, some of whom were considered “illegitimate.” Despite history’s favorable depiction of these powerful women leaders, no such modern day equivalent exists, especially in America. This is not to say that women in political positions of power should use their power to attract lovers or to conduct extra-marital affairs, only to highlight the rarity of women who do so, particularly when compared to men in similar positions. The reasons for this disparity are numerous.

The simplest explanation as to why fewer women engage (or are caught engaging) in extra-marital sexual affairs while in office is because fewer women than men hold public office in America. As of 2014, the United States remains one of few world democracies that has never elected a woman to the highest office in government. In fact, neither of the major parties in America (democratic, republican) have ever even advanced a woman to presidential nominee and only two women from major parties, Geraldine Ferraro and Sarah Palin, have ever run for Vice President of the United States. Currently, women hold less than 20% of seats in Congress, even though women comprise more than 50% of the American population. Compared to the rest of the world, the United States ranks 95th in percentage of women in national legislative positions according to FairVote. For comparison, Rwanda ranks 1st, Iraq 53rd, China 65th, North Korea 113th, and the United Kingdom 69th. Out of 50 state governors, only five are women. Only 26 states in the union, barely more than half, have ever had a woman governor. At the state
level, women hold less than 25% of public offices, a number that has scarcely increased since 1993. Of the 100 largest cities in the United States, 12 have female mayors (Hill). In addition to fewer women holding public office in the United States, fewer women cheat in general, at least according to current statistics that suggest about 19% of married women cheat, while 23% of married men cheat (Carollo).

Still, although important, numbers don’t even begin to explain the vast disparity between men and women in politics who become involved in extra-marital affairs. However, a feminist lens offers an interesting and multifaceted explanation: Women are “unsexed” by success. In America, the qualities necessary for success are generally considered masculine and therefore more often attributed to men. Women who possess the same traits that can lead them to successful careers in politics (or otherwise) tend to be viewed as less feminine when their “masculine traits” betray their femininity. According to Kimmel, using the phrase attributed to Margaret Mead:

Men, as the saying goes, are “unsexed by failure” they cease to be seen as real men. Women, on the other hand are “unsexed by success.” To be competent, aggressive, and ambitious in the workplace may be both gender confirming and gender conforming for men, but they are gender nonconforming, and thus gender disconfirming for women, undermining her sense of herself as feminine. (177)

In other words, when women successfully reach the level of elected office, their femininity becomes suspect. Surely, according to sexist notions, they cannot be both a successful politician and a true woman, because one must necessarily negate the
other. Therefore, because her success has negated her femininity, she is no longer
seen as having feminine sexuality and is therefore undesirable to men, who are not
interested in having sexual relations with “masculine” women. Although this
sentiment in American society helps explain why fewer women cheat, the
implications of this notion are extensive, far-reaching, and damaging to women.

Nancy Pelosi, who became (and historically remains) the highest-ranking woman in
American government when she served as the Speaker of the House from 2007 to
2011, serves as an example of how sexist media coverage is when it comes to
women in politics. During her tenure as a member of the House of Representatives,
Pelosi has been subject to gendered media criticism regarding her personality and
appearance. In 2006, Pelosi was dubbed “Nancy Shrew,” a play on the moniker
Nancy Drew, but hardly as flattering. The New York Post described her as “a
caricature of the shrill, petty woman boss” just after the 2006 election that
propelled her to the position of Speaker of the House (Orin-Eilbeck). The article also
claims that if “Nancy Shrew becomes the image of the highest-ranking woman ever
in American politics... it'll be a problem for all women politicos” (Orin-Eilbeck). An
explanation as to how or why her position will affect all women in politics
negatively is not explicitly given. In 2014, Fox News strategic analyst Ralph Peters
said Pelosi was, “dumb as a rock” and “makes no effort to educate herself” (“Foreign
Policy Expert”). In 2011, there was much speculation in the media as to whether or
not Pelosi underwent “cosmetic procedures.” In one article from the Washington
Examiner, reporters consulted a certified plastic surgeon (who did not work on
Pelosi) to confirm their suspicions (“Nancy Pelosi doing some House-keeping?”).
The *Washington Times* also weighed in on the “issue” in a fashion that perfectly exemplifies the sexual double standard that exists for women in politics. The *Times* article purports that it is “obvious” that Pelosi had plastic surgery and cites a Detroit-based plastic surgeon, Anthony Youn, as proof. He said, “A woman her age shouldn’t look that good” (Dingfelder). Here, Pelosi is being criticized for looking “too good” for her age. However, one year later in 2012, Pelosi was included in the *Washington Times* “Top-ten ugliest women in politics” list. Although, the list was qualified by the phrase “beauty is only skin deep,” and included only liberal women, it certainly described each of the women’s perceived “ugliness” figuratively and literally. The description of Pelosi, which was wholly negative, included, “She went to Syria to sip tea with murderer Bashar Assad. She even put on a burka. Unfortunately, she removed it when she came home” (Golub). This is interesting on at least two levels. First, Pelosi’s appearance should have no bearing on her ability to perform her job. Second, men in politics are scarcely interrogated in this way.

Politics has long been viewed as masculine territory. Much like other male-dominated industries like law enforcement, technology, finance, and journalism, politics is a job in which women who occupy a position within it, are seen as an aberration. “[S]ince gender, as we have seen, is a system of classification and identity as well as a structure of power relations, it shouldn’t surprise us that virtually every society has a gendered division of labor” (Kimmel, 172). America is no exception. It is not difficult to determine in our society, which jobs are considered masculine and which are considered feminine. Terms like “pink collar jobs” make it very explicit that some occupations are reserved for women.
Secretaries, nurses, and teachers provide several examples of what are known as “pink collar jobs,” and each of them, while requiring highly qualified individuals, also tend to be associated with feminine attributes like empathy, patience, emotion, gentleness, and the ability to nurture. Masculine industries, which include blue and white-collar positions, are generally associated with a different set of attributes that would lead to an individual's success within that field. Jobs in fields listed above might be associated with strength, aggression, and restriction of emotion. Therefore, when women enter a male-dominated industry or field, the lines between feminine and masculine become blurred. If the woman is masculine enough to perform a “man's job,” then her ability to perform appropriate femininity is questioned.

According to Witt, gender stereotypes in politics “have always contained built-in limits to how much a woman should follow the advice to be 'like male.' Voters want women to be tough and aggressive as evidence that they can handle political life, but if they are too tough or aggressive, voters become wary” (13). In order to be successful politicians then, women have had to find ways not only to accomplish their jobs, but to simultaneously navigate a fine line between being too masculine or too feminine in a way that men in politics have never had to do.

Witt has said that the caveats that come with women running for office, or being successful in office contains an extensive "list of do's and don'ts" (13). From particular habits of dress and hairstyle, to emphasis on women's issues, to avoiding sexual dalliances while in office (or otherwise), women have found ways to be successful in the field of politics and government in America despite (or in spite of) obvious gender inequality as well as a sexual double standard within the field.
However, these methods are not necessarily progressive or feminist. Although women in politics have broken certain gender barriers and made great strides towards gender equality in various ways (both personally and legislatively) others, along with the media, are reifying and perpetuating gender inequality in various ways.

Clothing is one interesting aspect of politics women have had to contend with in ways that men have not. Although it seems like a minor detail in the grand scheme of things that politicians must deal with—abortion, gun control, war, natural disasters, poverty—clothing has been an issue for women since they entered American politics. According to Witt:

The way political women have dressed is a visual clue to what they believed was expected of them and what they had to do to accomplish the task at hand... The sad reality is, of course, this survival strategy reflected the compromises with femaleness and her own sense of self that the individual women felt necessary to achieve the political goals she set for herself (57).

Although men rarely, if ever, had to contend with fashion choices in politics, women have had to make very careful choices about what they wear because their dress could be neither too masculine nor too feminine. Women’s attire must avoid conveying any sexual message (Witt 60). As such, women in politics have tended to dress in an asexual fashion or an “almost masculine version of women’s attire” in order to avoid sexual innuendo. “Skirts that were too short and necklines that were too plunging suggested sexual intent, not political seriousness” (Witt 13), so most women opted for tailored suits in dark colors. Men, on the other hand, have always
worn suits with little regard as to how their attire influenced public perceptions of competence or efficacy in their jobs. Although we know that women’s competence is not based on attire, it has long been tradition in the media to comment and criticize the way that women in politics are dressed. This overemphasis on appearance, not only belittles women by reducing them to a body with decorations or adornments that have been deemed inappropriate for the political realm, but it eclipses the contributions (both positive and negative) that women in politics make. A focus on clothing, to say nothing of hairstyle, also overshadows real actions and issues that affect people’s lives.

In 1984, Geraldine Ferraro became the first woman vice presidential candidate for a major American political party. During her campaign her appearance and attire was constantly analyzed in ways that men’s were not. One article from the *Gainesville Sun* written by John Molloy was particularly harsh. It stated, Ferraro “is dressing like a presidential mate, not a presidential running mate” and accused “popular women’s magazines” of convincing her that “dressing for power is unfashionable and unfeminine,” which is what he describes as the “Doris Day message”:

The first part is still acceptable today. I am a nice, upper-middle-class woman and I am married or going to marry, live in suburbia and raise my children.

The second part of the message causes all the trouble. If you remember those Doris Day movies, it ran something like this. I do silly things, I am a bit flighty, I can’t take care of myself and I need a big strong man to lean on. That message was designed to capture Rock Hudson, not the Blair House and
certainly not the White House. Unfortunately, that is the message being sent by Geraldine Ferraro's clothing.

Malloy’s analysis is problematic in a number of ways. First of all, it suggests that women have only two options when it comes to conveying an image through clothing or attire. One option is dressing for marriage, children and life in suburbia, and the other is dressing in a way that suggests total incompetence and need for a man’s help. Ferraro was a competent school teacher, lawyer, member of Congress who, although married to a real estate developer, did not rely on a man for her station in life. It is unclear what makes Malloy a woman in politics fashion aficionado, but according to his article reporters from “all over the country” asked him what he thought of Ferraro’s campaign clothing choices. He said that it needed a “major overhaul. . . A woman wearing the feminine, soft, frilly clothing that Ferraro wears will not be taken seriously by many women and most of the men in America.” When faced with the task of suggesting what she should be wearing Malloy wrote, “I couldn’t give them an answer because I never packaged a woman running for national office.” This quote is rather telling. Malloy, although having strong opinions about the fashion choices of women in politics, he doesn’t earnestly believe that women should even be in politics. Oddly, the Gainesville Sun still felt that his opinion, albeit extremely sexist, was valid and worth publishing. As such, it was able to perpetuate particular notions that suggest that women are not competent to hold elected office. However, this article is 30 years old and certainly represents antiquated, sexist values in American media that shouldn't and couldn't possibly still be in use today. But they are.
Hillary Rodham Clinton has long been scrutinized for her fashion choices. A *Huffington Post* article from 2012 begins, “Hillary Clinton has always struck us as a low-key unflashy dresser” before it praises her for wearing “chic” and “ladylike” Chanel jackets. One paragraph later, however, the online publication is back to criticizing. “Over the past three days, the Secretary of State has re-worn both the turquoise jacket and the high collared white jacket just two days apart and with nearly the exact same hairstyles as in January” (Krupnick). Imagine a similar article describing a man acting as the United States’ Secretary of State. To discuss whether or not he had already worn a suit, tie, or other article of clothing is unheard of. For a legitimate publication to criticize a man for wearing the same suit with the same hairstyle he wore two months prior seems absurd. However, when it comes to women in politics, fashion choices and appearance of attire are not only accepted in mainstream media, but rather common. This provides just one example of how the media contribute to gender inequality when it comes to the roles of women in politics.

Attorney General Janet Reno received much criticism in the media for frequently wearing dresses and suits that were a similar color of blue. According to an article in the *Washington Post*, which was criticizing *Saturday Night Live*’s representations of Reno, “For a male, such behavior would be less remarkable, expected. For Reno, the dress and the brush ‘n’ go short haircut receive more attention that probably any law enforcement initiative she’s ever proposed” (Mundy). In other words, women are expected to dress a certain way and wear their hair a certain way in order to appear appropriately feminine, despite what bearing
their appearance has on their job. Similar standards do not exist for men, who are only expected to be well kempt. Reno also received much negative attention in the media for her performance of what Halberstam refers to as “female masculinity” (Sloop 105). According to Sloop, news reports frequently referenced Reno’s height as if it were her most important attribute. “Reno’s height and size... are more than simply observed; rather, there has been a minor cultural obsession with Reno’s height and size, evident in the fact that so many articles not only mention her size but also utilize it as an opening comment” (109). Reno provides yet another example of a woman whose physical attributes, whose body, receives unwarranted, sexist attention in the news media. Sloop also suggests that “Reno is reified as outside the norm of acceptable femininity—at times monstrously so” (110). She was reported to be interested in “tough” extra-curricular activities that have generally been associated with men, and she was unmarried without children. As such, “Reno must be defended as a heterosexual or she must be represented as a lesbian” (Sloop 116). In other words, despite Reno’s position as the Attorney General (the first woman to serve in this position), the media focused more on her appearance and her ability to perform “appropriate femininity,” rather than her qualifications or her ability to perform her job.

When Sarah Palin ran for vice president in 2008, the relatively unknown Alaska Governor immediately became a media sensation. According to Anderson:

In less than a week, Palin went from being a rising star in the Republican party and the first Republican woman to be nominated for the vice-presidential ticket, to being the national MILF. This transformation has
the potential to undercut women’s agency by reducing their power to sex
appeal and rewarding their attractiveness with heterosexual male approval
rather than respect. Framing women’s political agency in terms of sexual
influence is a familiar strategy, one that has shaped both ancient and
contemporary narratives (339).

Rather than focusing on Palin’s credentials or qualifications, media coverage focused
on her ability to appear attractive. Much attention was given to the $150,000
clothing budget given to her by the Republican National Committee, but the scrutiny
did not stop there. A Washington Post article, from less than two months before the
election, stated, “Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin’s style is
exceptionally ordinary. Nothing about it connotes authority. No detail announces
that she is in charge” (Givhan). The article goes on to call her glasses “banal” and
her clothes “unpretentious” but “unremarkable” and compares her style, which is
not “boss lady, “Iron Lady” or “devil who wore Prada,” before providing a set of rules
for political fashion: “In the narrow confines of political style, the accepted rule is to
dress in a manner that implies empathy for one’s constituency—so don’t wear
anything too expensive—but also conveys authority” (Givhan). The article also
compares Palin’s wardrobe directly with other women’s. Saying her clothing lacks
“the aura of sophistication” of “Michelle Obama’s sheaths and pearls,” and the
“patina of glamour like Cindy McCain’s heiress wardrobe,” and finally “the
confidence, assertiveness and listen-to-me-ness of Senator Hillary Clinton’s bold
pantsuits” (Givhan). As should be obvious, a similar article describing opponent and
man Joe Biden does not exist, because, as has been stated, men are not subject to the
same scrutiny as women when it comes to clothing. Rather, the media's attention to such petty details about clothing choices highlights the notion that politicians are men, and women in politics are exceptions, and therefore must be described differently in the news. According to Anderson, even though Palin touted her status as a former beauty pageant contestant, and (like many other candidates, male and female) conformed to traditional beauty standards, “the framing of her candidacy in blogs, political cartoons, journalistic sources, and political paraphernalia went well beyond noting her attractiveness” (340). In other words, Palin’s attractive appearance was not merely mentioned, but soon became very sexualized. “Sarah Palin was dubbed the national ‘MILF,’ a term that not only trades on the stereotype of an attractive older woman’s sexual allure, but also features the four-letter word for sexual intercourse” (Anderson 340).

Another way gender inequality presents itself in American politics, is the tendency for women politicians to be relegated to the handling of “women’s issues.” According to Niven and Zilber candidates and legislators that are women tend not to be taken as seriously as men who are political candidates and legislators and often receive less news coverage than men, and when they do receive attention in the media it tends to be about “women’s issues” like abortion or family leave (396). Other issues, that should be important to all Americans, but are generally relegated to “women’s issues” include birth control, family planning, and other reproductive rights, education, domestic abuse, rape, and gender wage gaps, just to name a few. According to Hillary Clinton’s famous 1995 speech to the United Nations World Conference on Women, “women’s rights are human rights.” Unfortunately, in
American politics and American media, these issues are generally regarded as less important than things like the economy or military defense, regardless of the fact that each of the topics is important to almost every American. By belittling "women's issues" or marking certain human rights as only affecting women, politicians and the media have stunted the potential for women to become powerful figures in American politics. By gendering issues, and then regarding the issues considered "women's issues" as less important, politicians and the media are stunting the ability of women in politics to reach their full potential. Furthermore, it highlights the notion that women in politics are an aberration by assuming that women can only handle a particular set of issues, specifically those that have been deemed relevant only to their gender. In this way, women's gender is highlighted in ways that men's gender is not and the gender gap in politics is widened.

This gap is further widened, by the media's continued emphasis on the family status of women in politics. Again, although family life—particularly children and marital status—may or may not affect job performance for both men and women in politics, this realm is almost exclusively consigned to women. According to Witt, "Children... immediately evoke the image of woman as mother, which can swamp other aspects of her background or career" (9). However, children and family are often considered an asset for men running for office—proving that he is both virile as well as a good provider for a family, not to mention straight—children are often a liability for women. According to Braden, "References to husbands and children have cropped up repeatedly in news stories about women politicians in contexts where family would not be mentioned if the politicians were a man" (7). What this
suggests, is that families and children are the woman's responsibility, and women who challenge this role are considered suspect. Although, men's role as father and husband goes unquestioned when he chooses to work outside the home, women's roles do not. Women who choose to run for office are often chided for putting their career before their children. During the 2008 presidential campaign, Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin received much attention for her role as a mother of five children, one of whom was only a few months old and had down syndrome, and another who was about to become a teenage mother. According to an article in the New York Times:

No one has ever tried to combine presidential politics and motherhood in quite the way Ms. Palin is doing, and it is no simple task. In the last week, the criticism she feared in Alaska has exploded into a national debate. On blogs and PTA meetings, voters alternately cheer and fault her balancing act, and although many are thrilled to see a child with special needs in the spotlight, some accuse her of exploiting Trig for political gain. (Kantor)

This passage essentially sums up the media coverage Palin received regarding her children during the 2008 presidential election, in which she ran for vice president on the Republican ticket. It should probably go without saying, that Democratic nominee, Joe Biden’s, parental status was not interrogated to any similar degree. As mentioned in the passage, some pundits believed that Palin was “exploiting” her son for “political gain.” Whether she was or was not, her decision not to terminate her pregnancy upon learning of his condition, in addition to her teenage daughter’s decision to keep her own baby, certainly shored up her status as an anti-abortion
conservative Republican, whether or not either of those decisions were politically motivated. Although not every article discussing Palin’s role as mother and governor/candidate/vice president was negative, the fact remains that much attention was given to whether or not she could perform the duties of the vice president and raise children, regardless of having a very capable husband. In this way, Palin’s candidacy had the ability to open the dialogue about working mothers, but even that conversation wasn’t necessarily positive. According to an article from MSNBC, “[Some] worry that Palin’s candidacy could spark a backlash against working mothers, either because Palin has faced such strong criticism for pursuing a high-powered job while raising young kids or because more mothers could face pressure to return to work as quickly as Palin did” (Linn). Sarah Palin provides a perfect example of how women candidates must face particular criticisms that men do not. In her case, her role as a mother contradicted her political aspirations and resulted in much media criticism. It seems then, that not having children might make a woman candidate less susceptible to media criticism, but that is not the case either.

According to Witt, “Just being strong, powerful, and female subjects a woman politician to speculation about her sexuality or ‘true womanhood,’ regardless of her marital or maternal status, or even her age” (62). In other words, women lose either way. If they have children, then the children are considered a liability—a distraction that would prevent the candidate/politician from performing her duties to her full ability, but if they don’t have children, then they are seen as failing at femininity. Additionally, marital status presents opportunities for scrutiny. Janet Reno
represents one example. Reno who served as Attorney General of the United States under President Clinton, was the first woman to occupy the position. She received much attention in the media and on late night shows—particularly *Saturday Night Live*—because she possessed what widely considered an unfeminine appearance. As Mundy wrote in *Washington Post*, “In short, even in Washington—in a city where married people are normal, where divorced people are normal, where people having affairs are normal—a single woman with a magnificent career and a host of abiding friendships and a set of rugged hobbies is suspected of being odd.” Reno’s “unusual” status as a single, successful woman in a high-ranking legal position led to much gossip about her sexuality. Mundy wrote, “While single men may evoke some passing interest, and while it still may be difficult for a spouseless man to attain the presidency, unmarried men don’t arouse nearly the suspicion that unmarried women do.” In this way, women in politics must face yet another challenge—overcoming their family and marital statuses, regardless of what they might be—in order to be taken seriously in politics. Witt describes the list of 1992’s early presidential contenders to show how family and marital status don’t necessarily discredit men, in the way that they potentially discredit women. Men seeking nomination included Jerry Brown, a bachelor without children, Tom Harkin, Paul Tsongas, Bill Clinton, and George Bush, married men with children; Bill Clinton and George Bush, married men who had probably cheated on their wives, and Bob Kerrey, a divorcee who had had a very public affair with actress Debra Winger (61). Each of these men was taken seriously as a viable presidential candidate, despite
their various marital statuses. Neither their sexuality nor their masculinity was in any way challenged by the particular lifestyle they chose to lead.

Gender inequality also manifests itself in the media, which uses particular words and phrases to describe women, that when used and repeated perpetuate and reify the denigration of women in American politics. Although words like spunky, feisty, and plucky are not used as frequently as they once were to describe women in politics—in part due to the fact that they are blatantly sexist and were never used to describe men with similar qualities—words like “bossy,” and “bitch” are currently, commonly used to describe powerful women in America. These words, which are rarely if ever applied to men in politics, carry a very negative connotation that at once insults women who have achieved a particular status of power and condemns them for possessing the characteristics that were necessary to achieve their station. These attributes, commonly necessary in leadership positions include being aggressive, assertive, confident, bold, decisive, poised, and self-assured. Each of these words has been used positively to describe men in politics, but are rarely used to describe women, who are more commonly referred to in negative terms like “bossy” and “bitch.” Madeline Albright, Secretary of State under President Clinton, said she remembered being called “very bright” and “very bossy” as a child. In her memoir she said, “As I began to climb the ladder, I had to cope with different vocabulary used to describe similar qualities in men (confident, take-charge, committed) and women (bossy, aggressive, emotional)” (Alter). Albright, who holds a PhD, was the first woman to hold the position of Secretary of State. In other words, it could not merely have been her “bossy” nature that allowed her to
achieve her success in politics. She was also intelligent, hardworking, and dedicated.

Other women who had to overcome sexist descriptions or monikers include: Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the second woman ever to serve as a Supreme Court Justice, whose (male) law school classmates referred to as “bitch.” Ginsberg has been quoted as saying “better bitch than mouse;” and Hillary Clinton, who has been called almost every awful sexist term that exists. In 2007 Glenn Beck called her a “bitch” on his nationally syndicated radio show. He said, “She is like the stereotypical—excuse the expression, but this is the way to—she’s the stereotypical bitch, you know what I mean?” (Media Matters). Beck, a staunch conservative is known for outrageous comments, but the fact remains that by calling Clinton a “bitch” on national airwaves, he was contributing to a particular discourse that disparages women who seek leadership roles in our country. Men on the campaign trail were never referred to in similar terms by Beck. In November 2007, Senator McCain and presidential hopeful received much media attention after a female supporter asked him, referring to Clinton, “How do we beat the bitch?” After some awkward laughter, McCain said, “That’s an excellent question” before discussing recent poll results. He eventually said that he respects Clinton, but his behavior, to say nothing of the woman who asked the question, was inexcusable. He was running for President of the United States and when a female candidate, a strong opponent, was called a “bitch,” he essentially ignored it (Condren). In this way, sexism, particularly sexist language used to shame or belittle strong confident women, becomes naturalized, because men in the position to problematize it, tend to ignore it and thusly perpetuate its negative implications. Still, “bossy” and “bitch” seem relatively tame
compared to other terms Hilary Clinton has endured. According to Anderson, during the 2008 election (Hillary was stumping for Obama) “one online respondent to a story about Clinton posted on the Washington Post’s website charged that ‘Hillary is a conniving. . . well, never mind. . . it rhymes with blunt’” (341). Anderson explains that although it seems like this comment could be dismissed as an isolated incident or ignored because it was merely a “rant from the digital fringe,” in reality, the rhyme, or more specifically the term for which it was a euphemism, “was hurled explicitly at Clinton during the Democratic primary” (341). Salon.com reported on a political action committee called Citizens United Not Timid who opposed Clinton and whose acronym was none to subtle. Jon Stewart presented a satirical monologue regarding the term, as did Bill Maher, less successfully. Eventually discussion of the term found its way into the mainstream media. While the word “cunt,” has long been regarded as too vulgar for utterance, but its emergence of the term “into public, political discourse seems to have been triggered by the Clinton candidacy” (Anderson 341). This is (obviously) problematic for a number of reasons. Much like the term “mistress,” and “bitch,” a similarly negative term that can be applied to men does not exist. Furthermore, there are few more vulgar or offensive terms in the English language, and this term was applied, and brought into public discourse describing one of the most powerful, intelligent and politically competent women in America, specifically one whose achievements and aspirations elevated her to the status of Democratic presidential nominee. This characterization of Clinton as a “rhymes with blunt” is not only sexist, but a very blatant example of how women in positions of power are subject to intense scrutiny and extreme
disparagement because of their gender. Many other powerful women have been reduced to sexist terminology that is unfairly associated with women in power. These include Janet Yellen, the first woman Chair of the Federal Reserve, who was dubbed in the blogosphere as “the bitch of the Fed”; Democratic Vice Presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro, who was called “rhymes with rich” by Barbara Bush in 1984; to U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice who was frequently referred to by other diplomats as “bossy” (Alter). Bossy is defined as “fond of giving people orders; domineering” and comes with synonyms like “pushy,” “overbearing,” “dictatorial,” and “controlling.” Because of the use of words like this in popular and mainstream media, women—who possess the same leadership traits as their male counterparts—are denigrated because their qualities put them on equal footing with men. Using sexist terms like “bossy,” and “bitch,” help perpetuate certain gendered stereotypes that suggest that men are leaders, and women who wish to be leaders or become leaders despite gender barriers are merely bossy bitches. In American culture it seems that “men are bosses but women are bossy” (Alter).

Each of these unique challenges that women in politics must face, from the idea that their success in a masculine field “unsexes” them, to the intense scrutiny they face regarding their gender, sexuality, style of dress and hair to their family and marital status, as well as a constant use of sexist language in the media and by colleagues, contribute to the widespread notion that politics is a place for men, and women don’t belong. As such, it is likely that women who reach political positions of power, despite the intensified scrutiny, make every attempt to behave appropriately, so as not draw any more negative attention to themselves. This helps
explain why so few women in power engage in sexual affairs or are caught in sex scandals. Their position as outsiders in the realm of politics, forces them to behave appropriately in ways that men are not necessarily expected to. According to Witt:

Opportunities for sex were counted among the spoils of power, one of the unquestioned privileges that came with male territory. Male politicians preferred—and undoubtedly, still would prefer—to describe themselves as public men, their behavior toward women above reproach and all for the public good, or at the very least beyond the purview of the press and the people. But among themselves, there has been a very different attitude. Women were booty. (52)

The men listed in the first section of this chapter prove this sentiment to be true. The common belief in the sentiment, proven by the fact that many of the men discussed above remained in politics, with few, if any, repercussions to their political careers has contributed to a political environment where women are held to higher standards than men. This environment is commonly known as “the sexual double standard” and it is very prevalent in American politics. According to Kimmel:

The sexual double standard is itself a product of gender inequality, of sexism—the unequal distribution of power in our society based on gender. Gender inequality is reinforced by the ways we have come to assume that men are more sexual than women, that men will always try to escalate sexual encounters to prove their manhood, and that women—or rather, “ladies”—either do not have strong sexual feelings, or that those they do must be constantly controlled lest they fall into disrepute. With such a view, sex
becomes a contest, not a means of connection; when sexual pleasure happens, it’s often seen as his victory over her resistance. Sexuality becomes, in the words of feminist lawyer Catharine MacKinnon, “the linchpin of gender inequality.” (223)

Therefore, if women in politics do not want to fall “into disrepute” they must maintain much higher standards of sexual decency than do men. This helps explain why so few women in American politics have been associated with sexual affairs or scandals. Still, Belkin, a columnist for the Huffington Post, suggests that reasons why men in politics cheat and women (for the most part) do not cannot necessarily be explained. She wrote:

Is sex so fundamentally different for each gender that men see it as exerting their influence, while women somehow succumb to it? Have we simply not reached the point where there are enough women in positions of power, a critical mass that will make cheating an equal opportunity perk of office -- men do this because they can, and women don’t because they can’t...yet? Or are women just more moral than men? The answer is probably all of the above, none of the above, and it is much more complicated than that. If—when—the scales balance (the last election was a good start) we will likely learn that it isn’t just sex that means different things to men and women, but also power.

This is not to say that the end goal for gender equality in American politics includes more women politicians, candidates, or appointed office holders becoming involved in sex scandals or extra-marital affairs while in office. Rather, the above discussion
should highlight the extreme gap in gender equality that still exists in America, particularly politics. It is interesting, albeit disgusting, that men in politics, in varying positions of power, from local levels like mayors to the highest office in America, the president of the United States, can be forgiven for cheating on their wives, hiring escorts, fathering children with women who are not their wives, or involving themselves in various other sex related scandals, as well as using campaign funds and American tax dollars to support or hide these affairs and scandals while women continue to be condemned by virtue of their gender. Women are judged harshly for their hairstyles, outfits, success, children, marital status, and strong leadership qualities, so it is no wonder that women in politics opt not to involve themselves in extra-marital affairs or sex scandals of any kind. It is difficult, if not impossible to imagine the media storm, judgment and name calling that would result if a woman in American politics ever dared to really be “just one of the guys.”
Chapter 5
Conclusion

It is evident that sexism is rampant in American news media. By writing and reporting about women in ways that denigrate and belittle women, the news media is contributing to, perpetuating, and reifying a culture in which women are subordinate to men. However, it is difficult to notice the ways in which the media contributes to, perpetuates, and reifies sexism, because they do it in a way that is subtle, consistent, and incessant so that it seems natural. Herein lies the biggest problem with sexism in the American media.

As has been discussed, women are constantly written about in ways that men are not. Women who find themselves involved in sexual affairs with powerful, political men are subject to name-calling and public scrutiny. This includes sexist terms like “mistress,” “homewrecker,” as well as terms like “slut” and “whore.” Similarly negative terms do not exist for men, and the media does not even acknowledge this discrepancy and continues to use sexist and disparaging terms for women without question. Women who have achieved success in politics are not immune from sexist terminology. Although it is sexist, and unfair, it makes some sense that women who have behaved in ways considered inappropriate might be subject to harsher criticism in the media. However, even women who have worked hard and become political power players themselves are also subject to name-calling. Words like “bitch” or “bossy” continued to be used in ways that criticize women for possessing strong leadership qualities. Men, on the other hand, are seen as natural leaders, which contributes to the sexist environment in American politics. This naturalization of men as strong, powerful leaders tends to exclude women, and
therefore makes powerful women seem like aberrations in the “natural” order of things.

Women are also subject to much scrutiny regarding their bodies. As has been discussed, the women involved in affairs with politicians all received negative attention for various aspects of their bodies or builds. No body type is safe from deprecation. Whether women are “portly pepperpots” (whatever that means) or thin, toned, and fit, the media does not ignore their shapes. Men, however—unless extreme in their build—are not discussed in such ways that trivialize all other aspects of the person. The media’s focus on women’s fashion, clothing, and hairstyle choices further diminishes them. By reducing women to adorned bodies, the media shores up the idea that men should be taken seriously as people or political leaders, while women are merely playing dress-up, and sometimes even failing at that. The media also calls women’s mental abilities into question, whether they are private citizens who become entangled in public affairs, or seeking public office. Women are considered to be more emotional than men and this assumption manifests itself in various, generally negative, ways that make women seem unstable.

Through the use of sexist language and by focusing on bodies, clothing, and a perceived mental instability, the news media contributes to, perpetuates, and reifies sexism in America. Although the media is not necessarily the cause of these particular problems, its vast power to inform and persuade certainly creates a circuitous problem regarding sexism in America. Not only must women exist and participate in a sexist environment and culture, but they must do so in one that is reflected and sustained by the media, thereby making it seem natural and normal.
Although the media is not the sole contributor to sexism in America, it certainly possesses the power to curb sexism and the continued devaluing of women. Various strategies could be employed that would help eliminate sexism in the news media and therefore, possibly, in our culture.

As was discussed in chapter four, certain fields and industries are considered masculine “boys’ clubs.” The news media is one of these fields. Historically, journalism has been a masculine field at every level from reporters, to editors, and broadcasters, and everyone in between. Terms like “newspapermen” and “paper boys” exemplify this trend. In recent years, however, women have not only been welcomed into the field, but many have become household names, and powerful conveyers of truth. Unfortunately, not all women are feminists and as such, the hiring of women has done little to eliminate sexism in the news media. It was most unfortunate in my research and data collection to see that some of the harshest critics of the women discussed in my study were other women, particularly women who had no shame in putting their names in the bylines of stories that blatantly and unapologetically diminished women. Although discouraging, this trend might suggest that although women have been welcomed into the world of news and journalism, the field still remains a place for men rife with patriarchal ideologies that are, unfortunately, supported by both men and women. Perhaps women who achieve success in journalism, have done so at the cost of continuing to perpetuate sexism without question. One solution then, might be to include feminist coursework in journalism school.
Ideally, American students would begin their education in an environment free of sexism, but since that is hardly realistic (at this juncture), intervention at the college level is necessary. As a print journalism major, I can attest to the lack of education by universities regarding offensive language. Use of blatantly offensive language is obviously not condoned or taught, but it is hardly portrayed as the problem. Perhaps colleges and universities could integrate a gender studies class into their journalism curricula or, at the very least, require a unit on the use of neutral language. Obviously, not every journalist attends journalism school or majors in journalism, but perhaps if the most well-trained, highly educated journalists in the field were educated on the use of gender-neutral language as well as the avoidance of sexist coverage then the entire field of journalism, and therefore our culture, could benefit from a less sexist news media. The effectiveness of this solution will not be immediate or widespread, but some intervention in education is certainly necessary and this strategy is extremely practical.

A second strategy that might help reduce sexism in the news media is for people to call the news media out and to take them to task for using sexist language or perpetuating sexism in various ways. One major reason that sexism continues to pervade the news media is because it is permitted to do so. When people ignore sexist commentary in the media, it becomes more and more naturalized, leading people, even those with feminist ideals, to believe that that’s just the way it is, even though it does not have to be that way. By holding the news media responsible for its use of sexism, we come one step closer to eliminating it. Furthermore, the media should use its power to declare certain sentiments as sexist. For example, when
politicians or pundits use sexist language or promote sexism in various ways, it should be the media’s job not only to report what happened, but to label the behavior or language as sexist. By merely reporting it, the media takes no responsibility in the perpetuation of sexism. They have the power to thwart sexism, by calling it what it is, and thusly preventing the dissemination of sexism as an acceptable discourse.

In addition to calling news outlets out for being sexist, consumers should encourage and support feminist news outlets. Let it be clear here that there is a stark difference between feminist media and women’s media. Magazines like Cosmopolitan, Redbook, or Marie Claire are purportedly for women, but do little to proliferate a feminist agenda, and in many ways retard it. However, there are several media outlets that do a great job promoting feminist ideals. Websites like “Jezabel” and “Huffpost Women” appeal to a feminist sensibility. They cover various aspects of news from politics and celebrities, to fashion and advice. However, despite their generally feminist tone, they certainly appeal to a niche audience, an audience of women seeking feminist texts. Although these sites, and many others like them, create a much more positive environment and contribute to a feminist culture than do many “women’s magazines” or various other media outlets, they are not nearly as effective at undermining sexism as are mainstream, popular outlets that are feminist. For example, the website “Buzzfeed” frequently features stories with feminist overtones. They cover women and gender in a way that is both free of sexism, and supportive of equality, while preserving their status as a mainstream outlet for news and entertainment. If more mainstream news outlets operated in
this way, promoting gender equality and feminism, then perhaps these notions would become “naturalized” in our culture.

Another positive strategy includes encouraging more women to run for public office, which hopefully leads to more women holding public office. If more women run and more women hold office, then eventually politics will not be viewed as strictly masculine territory. Women are not only capable leaders, but when working together towards similar goals they would have the potential to positively influence the lives of women in our culture, in turn improving everyone’s life. Furthermore, if more women hold office in our country words like “bitch” or “bossy” can be reclaimed as positive attributes. While both carry negative connotations currently, there is potential for these words to become desired traits in young girls, rather than discouraging them from seeking leadership positions. If words like “bitch” and “bossy” operate to condemn particular qualities of aggression, leadership, and passion in girls now, maybe they can work conversely when they are used to describe women in powerful political positions, if and when women equal or outnumber men in elected office.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we must begin to consider sexism a problem for everyone, not just women. Unfortunately, not even all women are on board with feminism. At its very base, feminism is the antithesis to sexism. Sexism merely describes the inequality between genders that benefits men and disadvantages women. We live in a patriarchal society wherein many people do not believe in, or at least do not promote equal rights for women. As such, women continue to be devalued in our culture. In this project I have researched and
discussed only one of the infinite ways in which women are denigrated in our culture. This trend will continue forever without intervention. As such, it is up to us, to feminists, to intervene in any way we can, to promote the equality of women, who are, first and foremost, humans.
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