

News coverage of Hillary Clinton often emphasizes gender over competency, study shows

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Though much progress has been made toward gender equality, news coverage of female politicians typically follows gendered lines that often disregards women's competence in political affairs, a University of Texas at Arlington assistant communication professor has found.

Dustin Harp, an expert in gender and media studies, examines the issue in "Hillary Clinton's Benghazi Hearing Coverage: Political Competence, Authenticity, and the Persistence of the Double Bind," which appears online in the June issue of *Women's Studies in Communication*.

News coverage of the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee is well studied concerning women in U.S. politics. In her timely paper, Harp investigated the ways in which gender played a role in the more recent discourse.

The findings suggest that though this news media coverage shows some improvement in how Clinton was covered compared with previous research regarding representations of female politicians, the conversations still employ stereotypical feminine frames, including questioning Clinton's proficiency as a leader.

"Because of gender stereotypes, women are expected to act in particular ways that often place them in a double bind," Harp said. "The double bind is an either/or situation where a person has one or the other option

but where both options penalize the person.

"One of these binds, femininity/competency is particularly tough for women politicians because to be feminine is seen as less powerful, which is clearly not good for a leader. At the same time to be a competent woman is problematic for many people who see that as unfeminine. So in this case the woman is criticized either way."

On January 23, 2013, Clinton executed one of her last significant duties as secretary of state when she testified at the congressional committee hearings regarding the 2012 attack on the American consulate in Benghazi, Libya. Four Americans died in the attack. Both of the committees before which Clinton testified were made up primarily of men. News coverage hinted at a new double bind pitting competence against authenticity, whereas Clinton's emotional displays during the hearing were regarded as either a lack of control that undermined her capability or an insincere show of emotion to escape blame for the situation.

"Media coverage of the hearings is a particularly interesting site for analysis," said Harp. "Not only was this an event in which a female politician participated in a heavily male-dominated setting, but also Clinton's performance was at the core of the political event. The juxtaposition of gender and politics, televised for all to see, is especially noteworthy."

Harp undertook the new study with Ingrid Bachmann, assistant professor of communications at Pontificia Universidad Catolica de Chile, and Jaime Loke, assistant professor of journalism at the University of Oklahoma. The three researchers also co-authored "Where are the Women? The Presence of Female Columnists in U.S. Opinion Pages," in the June 2014 issue of *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*.

For their new study, the team examined 93 articles and commentary from the eight most heavily visited U.S. news websites from Jan. 22 to Feb. 4, 2013. The news sites included CNN, MSNBC, The New York Times, the Huffington Post, Fox News, the Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, and USA Today. News aggregators, such as Google News, and non-U.S. outlets, such as BBC News were excluded. News websites were examined as there has been a significant readership decline in traditional daily newspapers and the overall news market has grown as a result of the availability of online coverage.

Harp's study found that Clinton often is presented as a competent political figure, but also that her emotions are referenced in gendered ways. A Los Angeles Times story, for example, explained that at one point "Clinton's voice broke." USA Today highlighted both that she "was near tears as she talked" and that "she erupted in anger." A Washington Post commentary described Clinton as "blowing her lid."

These descriptions are in line with past research findings that show how women's emotions are the focus of much attention, whereas men's emotional displays are scrutinized or mocked only when the reaction is deemed exaggerated or in violation of traditional masculinity, the paper found.

One example of a man showing emotion that was later documented by the media includes former Speaker of the House John Boehner's tearful episodes during important interviews and political events.

However, for women, the study found that being emotional was described as a part of who they are. For men, it is a trait that is demonstrated only sporadically, a peculiarity that is not a part of being male. The two emotions most prominent in [news](#) websites' coverage of Clinton during the Benghazi hearing were anger and sadness.

The findings are in line with analysis of previous studies that have shown [news coverage](#) of [female politicians](#) is often sex stereotypical to the extent that the media function to undermine or even dismiss women politicians.

"We found that when Clinton did show her humanity with an emotional display, either her capability was compromised by a show of weakness or her display was considered part of a calculated ploy," Harp said.

One of the senators at the Benghazi hearings complained to CNN that Clinton "used an emotional trump card" to avoid his questions, and a column on Fox News argued that the display had been strategically timed. Because she has often been considered hard and lacking warmth, in ways hindering her likeability, had Clinton not choked up when talking about the victims of the Benghazi attacks she would have arguably been criticized for being too cold and unsympathetic. This scenario perfectly illustrates the double bind's no-win situation, Harp noted in the study.

Elisabeth Cawthon, interim dean of the UTA College of Liberal Arts, said Harp's study is an example of excellence in research into the human condition, a core theme of the University's Strategic Plan 2020: Bold Solutions | Global Impact.

"Dr. Harp's work adds greatly to the ongoing, greater discussion about women in leadership, language used to define them, how these women are perceived in society, and the media's role in perpetuating or dispelling stereotypes about them," Cawthon said. "As more women enter higher-profile arenas, including the political sphere, studies such as this one can serve as a guide for those who have an impact on deciding what it means to be feminine or masculine, and regarding issues of gender equality."

Cawthon added that the research is especially timely considering Clinton's historic bid to become the first woman president of the United States.

Harp joined UTA in 2011 and has focused her research on issues of power and voice in the public sphere. She has published work on women and marginalized groups, journalism, and digital and social media.

Harp also recently examined media coverage of the 2013 filibuster by former state Sen. Wendy Davis to block an abortion-restricting bill in the Texas Legislature. The move became a political exhibition and symbolized dominant gender values and norms. "The Spectacle of Politics: Wendy Davis, Abortion, and Pink Shoes in the Texas 'Fillybuster,'" is published online in the April 2016 issue of *Journal of Gender Studies*.

More information: Dustin Harp et al, Hillary Clinton's Benghazi Hearing Coverage: Political Competence, Authenticity, and the Persistence of the Double Bind, *Women's Studies in Communication* (2016). [DOI: 10.1080/07491409.2016.1171267](https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2016.1171267)

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