

## **Political Scandals in the Modern Media Environment: Applying a New Analytical Framework to Hillary Clinton’s Whitewater and E-Mail Scandals**

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Scholars have long been interested in political scandals. Yet many analyses focus on a single scandal to better understand the rhetorical features, responses, or effects. This study takes a different approach by studying how different media environments affect the nature of news reporting during political scandals. To do so, I specify three measurable parameters that detail the shifts from traditional to digital media: interactivity, personalization, and liveness. I use this framework to analyze two Hillary Clinton scandals that occurred in different media environments: Whitewater and the e-mail use scandal. The results indicate somewhat greater interactivity in the modern media era. Journalists are also increasingly personalizing their political scandal interpretations and having less contextualized and in-depth discussions. The implications of these shifts are discussed.

*Keywords: political scandals, Hillary Clinton, news reporting, journalism, content analysis*

Political scandals are a critical component of liberal democracies and are defined as the “individual misconduct by presidents or candidates that the media publicize as an urgent problem for the polity, one that must be investigated and somehow remedied” (Entman, 2012, p. 4). Research indicates the importance of political scandals on candidate evaluations, political success, citizen political behavior, the establishment of political norms, and satisfaction with democracy (Adut, 2008; Dewberry, 2015; Kumlin & Esaiasson, 2012; Thompson, 2000; Tumber & Waisbord, 2019; von Sikorski, Knoll, & Matthes, 2017). Importantly, political scandals are centrally communicative events. As Ekström and Johansson (2008) explained, “A scandal is not merely something that is revealed but also something that is shown, reported, staged and kept alive day after day” (p.18). From this perspective, scandals are constructed through sustained attention to and discussion about political transgressions.

John Thompson’s (2000) theorization of mediated scandals provides a central reference for understanding the importance of mediated communication in the construction of political scandals. Scandals only become such insofar as they are revealed and framed as scandals to the public. Accordingly, scholars have offered important insights specific to the construction of mediated political scandals. The norm in this

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body of research is to take a topical approach. Using a single scandal as a case study, scholars have examined different types of scandals (e.g., sex, financial; Mandell, 2017; Thompson, 2000), the rhetorical dimensions of scandals (Conners, 2016; Cos, 2016; Denton & Hollaway, 2003; King, 1985), the electoral consequences of scandals (Banducci & Karp, 1994), and how specific scandals blur the lines between the public and private sphere (Almond, 2016; Masullo Chen, Pain, & Fadnis, 2016). Scholars have also paid considerable attention to the news coverage of political scandals (Entman & Stonbely, 2018; Fogarty, 2013; Puglisi & Snyder, 2011; Richardson & Smith Fullerton, 2016). Although the media are discussed in this research, the specific scandal(s) becomes the main focus of scholarly inquiry. Such nuanced accounts have value for our understanding of political scandals, but they do not entirely account for how the changing media environment shapes news norms and, consequently, the nature of scandal discussions.

This study thus attempts to isolate how the changing media environment affects news reporting of political scandals. I begin by deriving from extant literature an analytical framework that specifies three shifts in the modern media environment: interactivity, personalization, and liveness. I then assess this framework in relation to news discussions of two Hillary Clinton scandals that occurred in different media environments: Whitewater and Clinton's use of a private e-mail server. This framework works from the perspective that as the media environment evolves, so too does the nature of political scandal narratives. Because scholars continue to indicate the importance of political scandals in democratic societies (e.g., Adut, 2008; Dewberry, 2015; Tumber & Waisbord, 2019), changes in political scandal discussions can have significant consequences (e.g., electability, impeachment, trust in government). By examining the news discourse produced in response to Clinton's Whitewater and e-mail scandals, this study speaks to patterns of reporting and the ways that scandal discussions have evolved alongside the media. In doing so, this study contributes to a growing body of research focused on political scandals (e.g., Entman & Stonbely, 2018; Mandell, 2017; Tumber & Waisbord, 2019; von Sikorski, 2018) and has practical implications for journalists who manage scandal narratives and alleged transgressors who are implicated in them.

### **Political Scandals in the Modern Media Environment: An Analytical Framework**

Political scandals are not inherent to specific transgressions, but rather result from sustained attention in mediated discourse (Entman, 2012; Thompson, 2000). Arguably, then, as the media environment evolves, so too will the nature of political scandal construction (see Mandell & Masullo Chen, 2016; Sullivan, 2013). The analytical framework in this study is thus derived from previous research that has examined digital technology and its incorporation into American political life. In particular, this framework recognizes that the digital context provides a unique opportunity for participatory journalism, public deliberation, and political discussions (see Hermida, 2010; Howard & Hussain, 2011; Lewis, Kaufhold, & Lasora, 2010; Lotan et al., 2011; McGregor & Molyneux, 2020). Through the development of social media sites and interactive technology, audience participation has been rendered more visible, accessible, and personal (Loosen & Schmidt, 2012). The public is now "empowered by these new technologies, occupying a space at the intersection between old and new media," demanding "the right to participate within the culture" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 24), or in this case, political scandal discussions. Many news organizations and journalists have incorporated digital technology and social media discourse into their production practices, which situates the construction of news as ongoing and collaborative (McGregor & Molyneux, 2020). The result is a fragmented but constitutive news process, "influencing journalism practices and, furthermore,

changing how journalism itself is defined" (Hermida, 2010, p. 300). Three shifts in the media environment likely affect the nature of political scandal discussions: interactivity, personalization, and liveness.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Interactivity***

Interactivity is considered an inherent feature of digital technology and includes "how people interact through media, the nature of interactive content, and how individuals interface with the computers and telecommunications tools that host interactive communication" (McMillan, 2002, p. 163). Digital technology facilitates user engagement with systems (e.g., hyperlinks, social media), users (e.g., comment sections, discursive interactions), and documents (e.g., contributing content; McMillan, 2002; Warnick, Xenos, Endres, & Gastil, 2005). These features are made available by mainstream news organizations with links to additional content, calls to action by journalists, polls, social media solicitations, and more (Stroud, Scacco, & Curry, 2016). Beyond the engagement that is built into the technological infrastructure of the news, scholars argue that digital technology promotes a "spirit" of interactivity (Endres & Warnick, 2004; Trammell, Williams, Postelnicu, & Landreville, 2006, p. 27). The rhetorical features of social media, news texts, and news websites can encourage interactivity through conversational style, signaling additional content for the audience, and presenting choice (e.g., references to other information, asking questions, providing multiple perspectives; Endres & Warnick, 2004; Trammell et al., 2006; Warnick et al., 2005).

Interactivity as a feature and spirit of digital technology suggests that more voices can potentially contribute to the construction of political scandal discussions, demonstrating a more collaborative process. In a traditional media environment, mainstream media were primarily responsible for generating the climate of disapproval with little audience interaction (Dewberry, 2015; Thompson, 2000). What digital technology makes more visible is how various actors (e.g., average individuals, political elites, multiple media organizations) understand and construct political morality and behavior. In particular, interactivity better enables average individuals to construct the scandal narrative as they see fit (see Warner, Turner McGowen, & Hawthorne, 2012). Thus, including interactive features in news discourse might suggest a recognition that political scandal construction is more collaborative in the modern media era. The interactivity of political scandal discussions becomes significant when considering that both vernacular and elite discourse can construct and affect political realities (Druckman & Holmes, 2004; Hauser, 2007), thus potentially influencing how a scandal is perceived and discussed. If digital technology encourages an environment where multiple voices contribute to the scandal frame, then we would expect to see an increase in discursive interactivity in news discourse of current scandals. Possible examples of discursive interactivity include references to additional information the audience can seek to inform their scandal interpretation, asking questions, and soliciting audience participation in the scandal narrative.

### ***Personalization***

Personalization has also increased in the modern media and political era. Social media are oriented toward personalization and self-promotion (Zulli, 2018) as each individual operates his or her social media accounts, choosing which issues to associate with, events to participate in, and discussions to entertain,

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<sup>2</sup> The analytical framework discussed here is further elaborated in Zulli (forthcoming).

often offering personal anecdotes or opinions as the argument. The current political environment is also marked by increased personalization wherein political language is made simple, ordinary, and personal to appeal to the wider voting base and make politicians more accessible to laypeople (Bennett, 2012). This discursive personalization is a key feature of the "ubiquitous presidency" (Scacco & Coe, 2016) and a requirement if political figures want to participate on social media (McGregor, Lawrence, & Cardona, 2017). Arguably, mainstream media has become more personalized alongside advancements in digital technology. Two common characteristics of cable news, for example, are internal fragmentation and panel discussions, where dialogic interactions disrupt storytelling and individual opinions are presented as fact (Ben-Porath, 2007; Farhi, 2018). Many journalists have also incorporated social media into their news reporting practices, adopting the social media norms of personalization and transparency while contesting the norm of objectivity (Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton 2012; McGregor & Molyneux, 2020).

Following extant literature (e.g., McGregor et al., 2017; McGregor & Molyneux, 2020; Scacco & Coe, 2016), if the current media era is marked by increased personalization (from social media users, politicians, and news media), then we would expect to see similar personalization in political elites and mainstream media discourse in response to scandal allegations. This personalization has significant implications for the construction of political scandals. If political scandals are being interpreted through individualized experiences/perspectives, and discussions are couched in personalized language, then it may be challenging for a collective scandal narrative to form in the current media era. Personalized interpretations of transgressions, especially on certain news outlets (i.e., cable news), may explain why some scandals do not resonate with certain audiences, despite their significance. Given this shift, it is expected that current journalist and elite responses to scandal allegations will be increasingly personalized. Various indicators might suggest personalization, but most would involve personalized discourse and self-disclosure of some kind (Lim, 2008; Scacco & Coe, 2016). Possible examples of personalization in scandal discourse include the use of "I" language by journalists and alleged transgressors and sourcing social media content in response to a transgression.

### ***Liveness***

A third shift in the modern media environment that likely affects political scandals is technological and perceptual "liveness." Liveness is defined as the "live transmission" that "guarantees a potential connection to our shared realities as they are happening" (Couldry, 2003, p. 97; see also Couldry, 2011), and is characteristic of most technology today. Liveness is technologically coded through various signs such as the 24/7 news cycle, signals to "breaking news," or live updates on news stories or social media feeds, all of which suggest that individuals have access to events as they are happening. Liveness also reflects the perception that "immediate" and widespread participation in social and political events is necessary to be relevant in an information-saturated environment (Dahl, 2016; Deller, 2011). Technological and perceptual liveness encourages quick posting and reposting, which demotivates extensive contextualization and puts pressure on editors to "hit the publish button" as quickly as possible before a new event captures national attention (Dahl, 2016, p. 72).

If liveness is characteristic of the modern media era, then we might expect to see greater fragmentation and less contextualization in current political scandal discussions. Fragmentation has long

been discussed as a journalistic norm (Bennett, 2016) and is commonly understood through Iyengar's (1991) characterization of episodic framing, which focuses on reporting specific events that are sensationalized and disconnected from the broader context. Fragmentation and episodic framing are set in contrast to contextualization and thematic framing. Whereas contextualization would include historicizing and making connections among political events to establish their significance and relevance, fragmentation largely eliminates those useful reference points from news reporting. Fragmentation, then, can significantly affect attitudes and opinions of political issues (Gross, 2008; Iyengar, 1991). Because political scandals unfold over time (Dewberry, 2015; Thompson, 2000), fragmented discussions might hinder a holistic scandal narrative from forming. Only discussing the current or "breaking" scandal information, without a larger discussion about the implications of a transgression, may lead to the perception that scandals are mere spectacles without real consequences (see Kellner, 2015). Given the features of liveness that might suggest even greater fragmentation in the modern media era, it is expected that current scandal discussions will be increasingly isolated from broader contextualization as well. Possible examples of fragmentation in scandal discourse include limited references to previous scandals to help construct the morality dimensions, actions taken or not taken, upcoming actions, and less in-depth discussions.

### **News Construction of Hillary Clinton's Whitewater and E-Mail Scandals**

The above framework speaks to three shifts in the media environment that have particular implications in the context of political scandals. Although this framework is broad enough that it could be applicable in any scandal context, to make this comparison, I examined the discourse surrounding Hillary Clinton's involvement in two scandals that occurred in two different media environments: Whitewater and her use of a private e-mail server during her time as Secretary of State (henceforth referred to as "e-mail use").

These scandals were selected for three reasons. First, and importantly, they facilitated an analysis of different media eras. Whitewater unfolded before the full integration of the Internet into American public life (the early 1990s) and in an era of broadcast news dominance (e.g., ABC, CBS, and NBC; "Network Evening News," 2006) and healthy print publications (e.g., *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*; "Newspapers," 2019). E-mail use occurred in a digital media environment where social media, cable news, and online news publications contributed more meaningfully to the news agenda (Faris et al., 2017; Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, & Shearer, 2016; Weprin, 2016). Both scandals also received a significant amount of news coverage, indicating their prominence in the American political agenda at their respective times (Faris et al., 2017; Kurtz, 1994). Finally, these scandals implicated the same person. Scandals are highly nuanced and individualized, so Clinton provided a useful anchor to compare scandal narratives in different media environments.<sup>3</sup> Clinton is also one of the few politicians to have a national presence that spans decades. To provide context for the analysis, I briefly sketch the key details of each scandal.

Whitewater, as an event, but not yet a scandal, began in the late 1970s when the Clintons entered into a failed housing development investment venture with James and Susan McDougal. James McDougal,

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<sup>3</sup> The goal of this project was to interrogate the role of media environments in the construction of political scandals, not whether Whitewater and e-mail use should be considered political scandals or how these scandals were similar or different.

who owned Madison Guaranty Savings and Loan Association, was accused of funneling funds into Whitewater (and into Bill Clinton's gubernatorial campaign) and eventually convicted of bank fraud. On March 8, 1992, an exposé in *The New York Times* questioned the Whitewater affair, prompting a four-year investigation by the Justice Department. Hillary Clinton and her law firm, Rose Law, came under intense scrutiny for representing McDougal and the Savings and Loan, being accused of shielding the bank from federal regulators. There was also concerned speculation over missing Whitewater tax documents. On January 26, 1996, Clinton was called to testify before a grand jury, making her the first, first lady to do so. Ultimately, the Clintons were never convicted of any crimes, even though 15 other people were convicted of fraud, tax evasion, conspiracy, and embezzlement (Gross, 1995).

On March 2, 2015, news broke that Hillary Clinton, while serving as Secretary of State, used personal e-mail addresses connected to a private server, which some argued violated federal law. Clinton was scrutinized for potentially compromising national security and her lack of transparency when questioned about her e-mail use (e.g., providing only selected e-mails and not turning over her server until months into the investigation). The majority of e-mails were said to contain innocuous information, but some were deemed classified on further review. On July 5, 2016, Clinton was interviewed about her e-mail use by then FBI Director James Comey. Although Comey noted that Clinton's e-mail use was extremely careless, he decided not to prosecute her on any formal charges. Eleven days before the 2016 presidential election, additional Clinton e-mails were found on a laptop shared by Clinton's top aid, Huma Abedin, and her estranged husband, Anthony Weiner. The FBI reopened the e-mail investigation, suggesting that the recovered e-mails contained information relevant to the case. However, the FBI determined, once again, that Clinton should not face any criminal charges ("Hillary Clinton," 2017).

### **Method**

This study content analyzed three types of news discourse to compare the nature of scandal discourse in a traditional and modern media environment: broadcast news (ABC, CBS, NBC), newspapers (*The New York Times* [NYT], *Wall Street Journal* [WSJ]), and cable news (CNN). Data collection for Whitewater began with news articles that occurred on the date Whitewater became a matter of national interest, March 8, 1992, and continued until January 26, 1996, when Clinton was called to testify before the grand jury. Data collection for Clinton's e-mail use began with news articles that occurred on the date her private e-mail account was exposed, March 2, 2015, and continued until the 2016 presidential election. The NexisUni and Factiva databases were used to retrieve full-text news articles and transcripts.

The sample of texts for Whitewater consisted of any story that mentioned "Hillary (Rodham) Clinton" and "Whitewater" during the aforementioned period. For e-mail use, stories were selected using the search terms "Hillary (Rodham) Clinton," "e-mail(s)," and "State Department." The process returned 1,519 stories for Whitewater and 4,876 stories for e-mail use. To keep the coding task manageable, 20% of each network was manually coded, resulting in a final sample of 303 stories for Whitewater (20 from ABC, 27 from CBS, 14 from NBC, 92 from NYT, 21 from WSJ, and 129 from CNN), and 977 stories for e-

mail use (30 from ABC, 50 from CBS, 31 from NBC, 131 from *NYT*, 99 from *WSJ*, and 636 from CNN). Using the single story as the unit of analysis, the following categories were coded as present/absent.<sup>4</sup>

**Interactivity.** Three codes were used to track interactivity. "References to previous news stories" indicated when a story or journalist discursively signaled other information the audience could seek to learn about the scandal in question (e.g., a past news story; "Fueling suspicion are yet more headlines, including one in the New York Times"). "Questions" indicated when a journalist asked an explicit question about the details, legality, or morality of the scandal being discussed. These questions could have been directed toward the assumed audience or other individuals featured in the news segment (e.g., "First of all, is there any reason to believe that Mrs. Clinton has done something illegal?"). "Calls to action" indicated when a story or journalist issued an explicit call for the public to participate in the scandal narrative or take action in some way and included (1) social media calls (e.g., "liking" a story, tweeting a comment; "What's your take? Tweet us #NewDayCNN, or post your comment on Facebook.com/NewDay?"), (2) informational calls (e.g., subscribe to podcasts or newsletters), (3) letter-writing calls, or (4) other calls.<sup>5</sup>

**Personalization.** Two codes were used to track personalization. "Reporter 'I' language" indicated when journalists used personalized language to offer an opinion about the scandal in question ("I don't think that there is any remote chance of illegality on the Clintons' part. That is my personal view"). "Clinton voice" indicated (1) when Clinton herself was directly quoted to contextualize elements of each scandal, (2) when she used "I" language in this discourse, and (3) when journalists sourced Clinton's social media content in response to the scandal (e.g., "I want the public to see my e-mails," and "So, you were talking about that tweet that Hillary Clinton issued on Wednesday . . . let's dig down on that").

**Liveness.** Four codes were used to track liveness and fragmentation in news discourse. "References to previous scandals" indicated when previous scandals (e.g., Watergate, Iran/Contra, Benghazi) were referenced to contextualize the events and merits of the current scandal (e.g., "Is there any justification whatsoever for comparing Whitewater to Watergate?"). "References to previous actions" indicated when previous actions that addressed the current scandal were discussed in news stories (e.g., completed investigations, turning over e-mails; "The FBI formally closed its investigation into Clinton's private server back in July"). "References to future action" indicated when future actions to address the current scandal were discussed in news stories (e.g., upcoming hearings, desire for more investigations; "The new Republican majority made it clear again today they intend to open a whole new offensive in the Whitewater investigation"). "Mere mention" indicated the extent to which a news story did or did not discuss a scandal. Mere mention was coded as present if the scandal in question was only discussed in two sentences or less.

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<sup>4</sup> Coding categories were derived from previous literature on interactivity, personalization, and fragmentation (e.g., Bennett, 2016; Dahl, 2016; Endres & Warnick, 2004; Gross, 2008; Iyengar, 1991; Lasorsa et al., 2012; Lim, 2008; McMillan, 2002; Scacco & Coe, 2016; Stroud et al., 2016; Trammell et al., 2006; Warnick et al., 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Categories for calls to action were derived after a preliminary review of the data.

One person completed the content analysis. As a check of reliability, a second person coded at least 9.5% of the data drawn at random.<sup>6</sup> Chance-corrected agreement (using Krippendorff's alpha) demonstrated strong reliability: references to previous stories (.88), questions (.78), social media calls (.94), informational calls (.93), letter-writing calls (1.0), other calls (1.0),<sup>7</sup> reporter "I" language (.86), Clinton voice (.81), Clinton "I" language (.83), references to Clinton's social media (1.0), references to previous scandals (.93), references to previous action (.88), references to future action (.81), and mere mention (.92).

### Results

Before considering the variables of interest, the striking difference in the total amount of coverage for the two scandals warrants consideration. Speculation about Whitewater began March 1992 with a *NYT* article and ended January 1996 with Clinton's grand jury testimony. During this nearly four-year time span, 1,519 stories discussing the scandal appeared. E-mail use, on the other hand, only remained a matter of national interest for a little over a year and a half, and yet many more stories were produced. Between March 2015 and November 2016, 4,876 stories discussing Hillary Clinton's e-mail use appeared, which is more than three times the amount for Whitewater. This proportional difference is likely due to several factors. First, the influx of scandal news coverage suggests an increased interest in matters of political scandal in the modern media era. News journalists could be more consciously acting in their traditional, albeit idealized, role as watchdogs to provide more accountability to political leaders (see Brown & Gitlin, 2011). The increased scandal coverage could also be due to technology rendering political scandals more visible. Finally, given that e-mail use fully unfolded during a presidential election, journalists likely found more relevance in reporting the controversial events due to their potential significance on vote choice. Regardless of the reason, the fact remains that the scandal in the modern media era saw significantly more news coverage than the one in the traditional media era. With this baseline assessment in mind, I turn my attention to how the news media discussed these two political scandals vis-à-vis the shifts in the modern media environment.

### Interactivity

The first indicator of interest was the extent to which news stories fostered interactivity through "references to previous news stories." If interactivity is a feature of the modern media era, then we would expect to see an increase in these references during discussions of e-mail use. Discussions of e-mail use did include more discursive nods to additional content compared with discussions of Whitewater, although the differences were only marginally significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1,280) = 3.208, p = .073$ . Of the 977 e-mail use stories, 150 (15.4%) referred to other news stories or resources the audience could seek to inform their scandal interpretations, whereas only 34 of 303 Whitewater stories (11.2%) made such references.

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<sup>6</sup> Coders were trained on the codebook and practiced coding on articles that were not included in the final sample. After reliability was achieved, disagreements among coders were remedied and incorporated into the sample.

<sup>7</sup> This number reflects the raw agreement among coders as there were no occurrences of "other calls to action" in the reliability sample.



The second indicator used to assess interactivity in modern news discourse was “questions.” Questions contribute to a “spirit” of interactivity because they allow the audience, political elites, and other journalists to passively, and in some cases, more actively, contribute to the discussion. Questions also suggest that scandal interpretations might not be agreed on by all. Because more voices can contribute to news production in the modern media era, it was expected that journalists would ask more questions about e-mail use. The data do not support this expectation,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1,280) = 1.973, p = .160$ , although e-mail use was questioned more than Whitewater (22.6% to 18.8%). However, when the networks are isolated, news discourse on CNN, the largest network in this sample, does indicate that questions have taken on a greater force in their current news reporting,  $\chi^2(1, n = 765) = 10.886, p = .001$ . More than one-fourth of CNN stories (25.9%) questioned e-mail use, compared with 12.4% of Whitewater stories.

The third indicator, “calls to action,” is a more explicit representation of interactivity in news discourse as these solicitations indicate a clear desire for engagement and collaboration. As expected, interactivity through calls to action significantly increased in news discourse during the modern media environment,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1,280) = 34.739, p < .001$ . Of the 977 e-mail use stories, 103 (10.5%) contained explicit calls to write a journalist, “like” a news story about the scandal, tweet an opinion, subscribe to a podcast, or follow social media page for more information about the scandal. It is important to note that all calls to action during e-mail use were facilitated by technology; 65 stories (63.1%) contained social media calls (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), 63 stories (61.2%) encouraged audiences to subscribe to a podcast or online newsletter, and 35 stories (34%) contained calls to e-mail the journalist.<sup>8</sup> Whitewater, on the other hand, contained no calls to action, which makes this shift in news discourse even more compelling.

There are several plausible explanations for this trend. First, and as demonstrated by the above results, the increase in calls to action is likely the result of technological innovation. Whereas in a traditional media environment audience engagement primarily took the form of letter writing and call ins, digital technology opens up a range of activities—tweet, like, comment, follow—that decrease the time and energy investment required of traditional engagement. Importantly, even letter-writing invitations, a common form of traditional engagement, increased in the modern media era due to e-mail options. Increases in calls to action also likely demonstrate the recognition from media outlets that audience engagement needs to be prioritized in a modern media environment, especially because viewership is still used to determine successful news programming. Collectively, the data suggest that political scandal news discourse in the modern media environment is *somewhat* more interactive than in a traditional media environment.

### **Personalization**

The first indicator of personalization was “reporter ‘I’ language.” This indicator signaled the extent to which journalists used phrases such as “I think,” “I feel,” and “In my opinion” to discuss the legality and morality of the scandal in question. The data suggest that journalists used more personalized language during e-mail use than during Whitewater,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1,280) = 52.640, p < .001$ . Of the 303 Whitewater stories, only 36 (11.9%) contained reporter “I” language. However, 326 of 977 (33.4%) e-mail use stories

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<sup>8</sup> Calls for social media engagement and podcast/newsletter subscription were often included in the same news story. News stories with invitations to write journalists typically only solicited participation in this manner.

contained such language. While discussions of e-mail use included nearly three times the amount of personalized language, it is important to note that cable news largely drives this trend,  $\chi^2(1, n = 765) = 26.187, p < .001$ . Whereas only 24% (31 of 129) of CNN's Whitewater coverage included personalized reporter language, nearly half (48.6%; 309 of 636) of CNN's e-mail use coverage had such language.

The second indicator used to track personalization was "Clinton voice," particularly how much she spoke and the personalization of that discourse. Because digital technology enables alleged transgressors to more readily contribute to the scandal narrative, it was expected that Clinton would speak more often and with more personalized language in the modern media environment. Both assumptions were supported in the data. Clinton was quoted significantly more during e-mail use (31.4%) than during Whitewater (16.2%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 1,280) = 26.793, p < .001$ . Clinton also used more "I" language when responding to e-mail use,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1,280) = 27.698, p < .001$ . Only 33 of the 303 (10.9%) Whitewater stories contained "I" language from Clinton, whereas 246 of the 977 (25.2%) e-mail stories contained such language. Although the increase in reporter "I" language could be due to a shift in journalistic norms in the modern media era, Clinton's use of personalized language is most likely due to (1) the timing of the e-mail scandal, which was during a presidential election; (2) Clinton's attempt to be more personable and relatable during the campaign (another by-product of digital technology; see Scacco & Coe, 2016); and (3) the increasing expectation that alleged transgressors must respond to scandal allegations with a personalized account of events (see Dewberry, 2015).

The final indicator used to track personalization was "references to Clinton's social media" during political scandal discussions. Social media did not exist during the Whitewater scandal, so, naturally, zero of the 303 articles contained references to social media discourse. This indicator was not included to test whether there would be significant differences in social media use between Whitewater and e-mail use, but rather to what extent (1) Clinton used social media to respond to scandal allegations and (2) journalists are now incorporating this discourse from social media into their news reporting practices. The results indicated that only 41 of 977 e-mail use stories (4.2%) referenced something Clinton said on her social media platforms. This low number is likely an indictment on Clinton's hesitancy to comment on the scandal rather than journalistic reluctance to report on her social media posts.

Collectively, the above indicators suggest that news discourse is more personalized in a modern media environment. Journalists are using more personalized language, which suggests the more explicit use of opinions and perspectives while discussing scandal allegations. Clinton herself also increased her personalized language during e-mail use. Although it is possible to explain this trend with her participation in the 2016 election, Clinton has a long history of remaining relatively silent on scandal allegations (Kelley, 2001). She could have approached e-mail use in the same manner as Whitewater, but the data suggest otherwise. And, even though very few references to Clinton's social media content were made during e-mail use, the comments that Clinton made on her personalized accounts were circulated in mainstream news discourse.

### ***Liveness***

"References to previous scandals" was the first indicator used to track "liveness" in political scandal news coverage. Liveness suggests that there is less time and incentive to fully contextualize an issue before another interesting and relevant topic captures national attention. Accordingly, it was expected that scandal discussions during the modern news environment would receive less contextualization than during the traditional news environment. The data support this expectation,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1,280) = 5.207, p = .022$ . Whitewater was compared to other political scandals in 113 of the 303 (37.7%) news stories, whereas only 296 of the 977 (30.3%) e-mail use news stories made such references. This trend toward fewer scandal comparisons in the modern media era is particularly compelling considering the vast number of scandals to which e-mail use could have been compared. By 2015, Clinton alone had been involved in, or associated with, Whitewater, the Lewinsky scandal, travel-gate, the Clinton Foundation scandal, and the Benghazi controversy, not to mention the indiscretions by other politicians (e.g., Donald Trump's scandals during the 2016 election). Whitewater did not have as many reference points, and yet those scandal comparisons occurred more often.

The second indicator used to track liveness was "references to previous actions." Similar to the above results, the data indicate that news discussions of Whitewater contained significantly more references to past investigations or steps taken to address the scandal (22.8%) compared with e-mail use (17.5%).  $\chi^2(1, N = 1,280) = 4.216, p = .04$ . Whitewater news coverage also contained more "references to future actions,"  $\chi^2(1, N = 1,280) = 18.164, p < .001$ . Of 303 Whitewater stories, 81 (26.7%) referred to upcoming actions and events intended to address the scandal. Only 155 of the 977 (15.9%) e-mail use stories, however, made such references. Even though Whitewater unfolded over a longer period (i.e., four years vs. a year and a half), and thus there was more time for events such as investigations to occur, the data suggest that the modern media environment is perhaps more interested in breaking news and reporting on events at the moment rather than discussing how a scandal unfolds over time.

The final indicator used to track liveness was "mere mention." If liveness is in fact characteristic of the modern media environment, then it would be expected for current scandals to not receive as much *sustained* attention as scandals in the traditional media environment. As expected, e-mail use received less in-depth discussion than Whitewater,  $\chi^2(1, N = 1,280) = 52.111, p < .001$ . During Whitewater, only 16 of the 303 stories (5.3%) discussed the scandal in two sentences or less. This means that nearly 95% of news coverage coded for this analysis dedicated substantial attention, if not the entire news segment/article, to Whitewater. During e-mail use, however, nearly a fourth (24.2%) of news coverage discussed the scandal in two sentences or less, indicating that journalists spent significantly less time actually discussing the scandal despite the amount of news coverage given to e-mail use. Importantly, both CNN,  $\chi^2(1, n = 765) = 39.668, p < .001$ , and the other news outlets,  $\chi^2(1, n = 515) = 10.307, p = .001$ , reflected this trend of less in-depth scandal discussion in the modern media era.

Collectively, liveness is overwhelmingly supported in the data. News discourse of e-mail use contained substantially less contextualization via references to previous scandals, previous actions, and future actions. Moreover, discussions of e-mail use were less in-depth. In this case, breadth of discussions does not necessarily equate to depth of discussions.

### Discussion

This study sought to nuance our understanding of political scandal discussions in the modern media environment. With the recognition that digital technology provides a unique opportunity for engagement, I detailed these shifts in terms of interactivity, personalization, and liveness. Several points warrant discussion.

Consistent with previous research (Stroud et al., 2016), the results of this study suggest somewhat more discursive interactivity in the modern media era. In particular, journalists did solicit participation in the scandal narrative, which is the most explicit representation of interactivity. However, journalists and news organizations only called for audience engagement in 10.5% of the news stories examined during e-mail use and did not readily report the content that resulted from these solicitations, signaling the continued reluctance of journalists to include vernacular discourse in their reporting. These results are significant when considering the research that shows how political scandal news coverage can cause skepticism and distrust between the media and the public. Previous research has found that news discourse surrounding political transgressions can, depending on how the narrative unfolds, increase public cynicism and harm the media's credibility, as was the response to the media coverage during the recent Ford "Crack-Tape" scandal (Richardson & Smith Fullerton, 2016). In this example, the media's scandal narrative did not match public perception of the transgression, resulting in public backlash. Given that digital technology enables interactivity, there exists a unique opportunity for news outlets to better reflect public opinion during moments of scandal. The results of this study should thus be instructive for journalists looking to "build better conversations" and "include citizens in the discussions about the officials who lead them" (Richardson & Smith Fullerton, 2016, p. 155). A natural next step to this research will be to examine how calls to action from journalists meaningfully contribute to public involvement in the scandal frame (e.g., retweets, comments). Doing so will also reveal the extent to which journalistic narratives of political scandals do or do not cohere with audience interpretations.

Notably, this study reveals a unique opportunity—and one Clinton missed—for alleged transgressors to participate in their scandal narrative. Extant research demonstrates that presidential rhetoric and information delivered by political elites can shape public opinion and affect how people make evaluations (Druckman & Holmes, 2004; Page, Shapiro, & Dempsey, 1987), thus potentially influencing how a transgression is perceived and discussed. The media may also take cues from political elites regarding their involvement in political scandals (Domke, 2004), simply repeating their prepared statements instead of investigating the legitimacy of scandal allegations. If interactivity and personalization are key components of the modern media and political era, then journalists will be looking for ways to include the voices of those implicated in a scandal into their news reports as an anchor for subsequent discussions. Although journalists covering e-mail use quoted Clinton more often, Clinton rarely used social media to her advantage.<sup>9</sup> When she did use social media, mainstream media sourced her statements. Following the research that highlights

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<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that social media can also serve as a scandal liability. For example, Anthony Weiner's sexting scandal was largely due to his use of Twitter (Almond, 2016). Average individuals can also use social media to scandalize political behavior from the ground up (see Warner et al., 2012), which can disincentivize politicians from using social media. Accordingly, Clinton may have avoided social media to prevent further scandal.

the important relationship among political elites, media framing, and public opinion (Domke, 2004; Druckman & Holmes, 2004; Page et al., 1987), politicians should be mindful of the unique ways they can contribute to their own scandal frame in the modern media era.

Although interactivity, personalization, and liveness have theoretical utility beyond political scandals, these characteristics have particular consequences in the context of scandals. In particular, the results of this study provide important insight into the potential for a scandal to form, or not form, in the current media environment, lending insight into Entman's (2012) conceptualization of the "silent scandal." Political scandals are constructed through repeated framing and a collective understanding of the morality violations (Lull & Hinerman, 1997; Thompson, 2000). For Entman (2012), however, such a collective scandal understanding is hindered because of media fragmentation and journalistic misregulation of the scandal narrative. The data on increased personalization and questioning on CNN presented herein provide additional explanations for why some scandals materialize while others do not. Recall that journalists offered more personalized interpretations of e-mail use than Whitewater. News discourse on CNN—a network that had a record number of viewers during the 2016 election (Weprin, 2016)—contained significantly more questions about e-mail use's scandal classification compared with Whitewater's. These cues potentially hinder a collective narrative from emerging from elite news sources and can explicitly or implicitly indicate an opportunity to debate a "scandal" designation at the public level. If the discourse surrounding e-mail use is indicative of political scandal discussions writ large, then scholars may need to consider if a bona fide "scandal" is theoretically possible in the current political and media era. At the very least, it is likely that the threshold for *agreement* on scandalous behavior is now much higher (see Zulli, forthcoming). Fully making this point requires the comparison of current political scandals. However, there is reason to believe that the scandal threshold is indeed increasing (Freedland, 2018); whereas Bill Clinton was impeached in the House of Representatives for lying about his inappropriate sexual relationship with intern Monica Lewinsky, Trump's \$130,000 payoff to a pornographic actor (among other inappropriate behavior) went relatively unaddressed. Although Trump was impeached over his Ukraine quid pro quo transgression, agreement on the nature (Was this even a quid pro quo with Ukraine? Did he use his power for political purposes?) and severity (Was it *really* that bad?) is hard to come by.

The contextualization and depth of scandal discussions also matter. There is a growing interest in political scandals. Zeleny (2010) observed that it is rare anymore for much time to pass "without headlines from Washington to New York and beyond filled with word of scandal or allegations of wrongdoing" (para. 1). The amount of news coverage dedicated to e-mail use compared with Whitewater provides evidence of this increased interest. Yet the results of this study indicate less contextualization and sustained discussions of political scandals in the current news environment. These competing realities—more attention, but less sustained discussion—could significantly affect the development and perception of political scandals. Ideally, these microdiscussions would combine over time to create a full scandal narrative.<sup>10</sup> However, a comprehensive understanding of a scandal, and therefore an appreciation for its significance, is potentially limited if these discussions lack contextualization or depth. Many short references to political transgressions

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<sup>10</sup> Political scandals have a certain temporal and sequential structure and are intimately linked to "time." Thompson (2000) argues that there are four distinct moments in mediated political scandals: the prescandal, scandal proper, culmination, and aftermath.

could also lead to scandal fatigue (see Kumlin & Esaiasson, 2012). Indeed, the strength of the scandal frame may be undermined as political misconduct becomes normalized through repeated discourse in news media. Scholars should thus explore this phenomenon of more scandal news coverage, but less substantial and sustained discussions.

This study had several limitations that future research might seek to address. To facilitate a baseline comparison of media environments, this study examined news discourse from publications and outlets that were both present and consistent between the two scandals. This focus on newspapers, broadcast, and one cable news outlet limits the ability to fully measure the extent to which interactivity, personalization, and liveness affect current scandal discussions. There will likely be more fragmentation in Twitter discussions of political scandals because the technological structure of the site restricts discourse to 280-characters. Social media platforms are also designed for interaction in ways mainstream media outlets are not. Methodologically, the use of content analysis enabled a quantitative comparison of media environments but perhaps limited the interpretive nuance that this study could provide. Finally, future research should consider expanding the number of political scandals under investigation to provide further proof of the trends reported in this study. Political scandals are highly individualized, which makes theoretical comparisons challenging. Although I have attempted to situate the specific acts of Whitewater and e-mail use as secondary to the media context, and thus feel comfortable with the trends that emerged from this comparison, adding more scandals to the sample will help to validate these trends. For now, this research provides a useful foundation for research that examines the nature of political scandal discussions in the modern media environment.

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