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Sex, Lies, and Stereotypes: Gendered Implications of Fake News for Women in Politics

Bonnie Stabile (iD), Aubrey Grant, Hemant Purohit, and Kelsey Harris

George Mason University

This analysis examines the literature on gendered media coverage of women candidates for higher office, and considers how biases in the treatment of candidates based on gender may be evident in or exacerbated by the promulgation of fake news. Using the 2016 Presidential election cycle in the United States as a case study, two fake news stories are investigated, which, like most fake news stories at the time, exhibited coverage in favor of the candidacy of Donald Trump and demonized or denigrated his opponent, Hillary Clinton. Findings suggest that the Pizzagate and Hillary Health Scare stories evince gendered narratives supporting stereotypes of women as unfit for leadership positions, and either villainize or trivialize women, depending on their perceived degree of power. Using a dataset of news articles and tweets from the months surrounding the 2016 election, evidence is offered of more negative coverage of the female versus male contender, in keeping with the findings of the literature, though the presence of potentially confounding factors, including personality and party, is acknowledged.

Keywords: fake news, gender bias, women in politics

Fake news took on a particularly virulent form in the 2016 U.S. election campaign between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, which was also uniquely fraught with raucous discussion of gender. Women had run for the White House before, but never came as close as Clinton. Politicians had been embroiled in sex scandals before, but never as close to election day, or in quite the same coarse manner characterized by Trump's audiotaped boast of grabbing women's genitals, and accusations by several women of unwanted sexual contact with him, revealed in October 2016.

Fake news overtook mainstream media story engagement on Facebook just before the 2016 election, reaching 8.7 million shares, reactions or comments about fake news compared with 7.3 million for mainstream news (Lee, 2016). Though it is not known to what degree, such stories stoked the more usual course of campaign character assaults, with the candidates questioning each other's competencies and decrying character flaws. There is, however, evidence of a partisan bent to the proliferation of fake news in the election cycle, with 17 out of 20 fake news stories favoring Trump, while fact-based mainstream news stories predominantly favored Clinton (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Lee, 2016). Gender difference joined party

Correspondence should be sent to Bonnie Stabile, Schar School of Policy and Government, George Mason University, 3351 Fairfax Drive, MS 3B1, Arlington, VA 22201, USA. E-mail: bonniestabile@gmail.com

difference on the top party tickets in 2016, as 85% of fake news stories favored the male candidate.

Gender differences in traditional media coverage of female versus male candidates and their influential role in the success (or lack thereof) of women's bids for office has long been established (Dolan, Deckman, & Swers, 2018; Kittilson & Fridkin, 2008, p. 372). Gender frames most often influence election framing by reinforcing existing bias and sexism (Gordon, Gordon, & Nabor, 2018). Sexist media coverage demonstrably hurts women in politics, causing them to lose support and be seen as less effective, and any reference to a female candidate's appearance in the media has been shown to be detrimental to her candidacy (Bates, 2015). Therefore, it is worth considering to what extent these forces could be seen at play in the nature of fake news stories during this historically consequential election campaign.

Two fake news stories that gained traction during the 2016 election cycle are examined here to consider the extent to which they reflect gender differences and biases observed in mainstream coverage of female candidates as evidenced in the academic literature. The first fake news story considered, known as "Pizzagate," alleged that Clinton was responsible for running a child sex trafficking ring from the basement of a Washington, DC pizza restaurant. The second is the "Hillary Health Scare," which made claims that candidate Clinton was suffering from a debilitating health condition and thus unfit for office. While this latter story sensationalizes Clinton's health in a way that comports with conventional characterizations of women as lacking the physical constitution to lead, the Pizzagate story creates a fantastical tale of the candidate violating traditional gender norms of women as nurturing, virtuous protectors of children, and casts her as a grotesquely violent sexual predator.

Due to the unique nature of these candidates and this particular campaign, the analysis does not aspire to draw generalizable conclusions about the treatment of women in fake news stories. It does, however, endeavor to illustrate how fake news stories, drawing on or inspired by existing gender biases shown to negatively affect women candidates through mainstream news media, can be operationalized to influence the electorate.

BACKGROUND

A study examining the prevalence of rape myths in social media dialog on sexual assault yielded the unexpected finding that Clinton's name was associated with deception and sexual assault more than twice as often as Trump's—in 12,000 versus 5,000 tweets—during the fall of 2016, a surprising finding given that Trump had been accused of multiple instances of sexual harassment and impropriety, perhaps most notably in the scandal dubbed "Pussygate" that came to light at that time (Havens, 2017), and Clinton herself had no such record (Stabile, Grant & Purohit, 2018). Clinton was, however, the subject of the apocryphal Pizzagate story that famously claimed that she herself was a child sex abuser; and she was often blamed for the sexual transgressions of her husband and reviled for representing the rapist of a teenage girl as a public defender early in her career (Nathans, 2016).

The preponderance of tweets citing Clinton's trumped up and second hand associations with rape and sexual assault suggests that the characterization of Clinton as culpable for

sexual misdeeds had registered in the public mind as much, or arguably, perhaps even more, than Trump, whose actual misbehavior was widely documented, though contested in its scope (Relman, 2016). A study by the Kennedy School of Government found that Trump's treatment of women received only one quarter of the coverage that Clinton's various alleged scandals did in the mainstream media (Creedon, 2018), and that Clinton had received more negative coverage "by far" than any other candidate leading up to the primaries (Shorenstein Center, Harvard Kennedy School, 2016). This led to the question of whether fake news might have more resonance when aimed at women, and why. A literature review was undertaken on how women candidates for higher office are portrayed in conventional media, and a dataset of news and Twitter messages was analyzed to see how gendered fake news themes might manifest there.

Fake News

A typology of fake news devised from a review of the academic literature (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018) identifies six categories, two of which are evidenced in the Pizzagate and Hillary Health Scare stories examined here: news fabrication, and photo manipulation. Pizzagate, which has no factual basis, is an example of fabrication, and the Hillary Health Scare involved the manipulation of real images to create a false narrative sensationalizing a brief, near-fainting episode experienced by the candidate. And, if false information comports with beliefs already held, it can end up being firmly entrenched—especially when it evokes moral outrage—and stubbornly difficult to correct (Konnikova, 2018).

Partisanship is a demonstrated predictor of belief; Cassino and Jenkins found that Republicans are more likely than Democrats to believe that President Obama was not born in the United States, for instance (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 229). The finding that stories favoring Trump and disparaging Clinton constituted the vast majority of fake news is potentially consequential, in that Republicans could be more likely to believe them.

There is some evidence to suggest that believing fake news can influence voting decisions (Blake, 2018). While it is unknown whether fake news had a role in swaying the 2016 election, the less than one percentage point margin by which Clinton lost the three states said to be responsible for Trump's win (Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin) could lead one to logically conclude that even a small amount of influence could have been consequential (Blake, 2018).

Gender Bias and Politics

Gender bias in media coverage is just one of the acknowledged "structural blocks to women's voices in public discourse and the social and political participation that flows from that discourse" (Byerly, 2014, p. 323). The consideration given here to whether and how fake news might exacerbate such bias in the treatment of women candidates is set against a deeper backdrop of literature that attests to historic and systemic biases against women seeking and holding elected and other leadership positions in the public sphere (Carli & Eagly, 2001; Hill, Miller, Benson, & Handley, 2016). Women candidates have been found to be subject to

more media attention and editorializing based on appearance, femininity, and stances on "women's issues" (Lawless, 2009, p. 71); less recruitment by party elites (Niven, 1998); and harsher evaluation in light of gendered stereotypes that question women's ability to lead (Dolan et al., 2018, p. xx). Women have also been found to be dissuaded from running for office due to their own, sometimes inflated, perceptions of the existence of stereotypes and bias, which can lead to an apparent "ambition gap" or lack of self-efficacy in office seeking (Butler & Preece, 2016; Fox & Lawless, 2011; Kanthak & Woon, 2015; Preece 2016; Schneider, Holman, Diekman, & McAndrew, 2016). Whether due to structural or societal factors, from media mergers that conglomerate power in the hands of men more than women (Byerly, 2014), to a rise in overt violence against politically active women globally (Krook, 2018), such forces can contribute to the underrepresentation of women.

Though commonly characterized as "the first," Hillary Clinton is actually the most recent among 100 women who have sought party nomination for the presidency, including 12 who made major bids between 1872 and 2016 (Heldman, Conroy, & Ackerman, 2018, p. 49). In the study of these candidacies, five primary forms of gender bias have been identified, including the portrayal of women as less serious contenders; more negative overall coverage of women; greater questioning of their validity as candidates; stereotypically gendered coverage; and being subjected to "double-bind" expectations of being both insufficiently or excessively masculine (Heldman et al., 2018, p. 50). Framing women as frail or sick is one way that women candidates are portrayed as not up to the task of leading (Heldman et al., 2018, p. 50).

Gender frames most often influence election framing by reinforcing existing bias and sexism, and studies of the 2016 Presidential election confirm that traditional gender biases predominated media coverage during that news cycle (Creedon, 2018). An examination of the media framing of three women [candidate Kamala Harris, journalist Megyn Kelly and then-potential First Lady Melania Trump] during the 2016 election cycle concludes that the treatment of women is damaging, dehumanizing, and stereotypically gendered (Gordon et al., 2018). Stereotypes about feminine traits have been shown to lead some to view women as less competent than men (Valentino, Wayne, & Ocino, 2018, p. 219). Several scales have been developed to measure sexism, including Glick and Fiske's Ambivalent Sexism Inventory, which notes both hostility and paternalism as elements negatively portraying women as inferior to dominant males, while positively viewing women as lovers and nurturing homemakers (Valentino et al., 2018, p. 218).

Noted gender differences in media coverage of men and women candidates are shown to be more dramatic in Presidential campaigns (Dolan, et al., 2018; Kittilson & Fridkin, 2008, pp. 372–373). Kittilson and Fridkin cite several studies showing that media coverage of Elizabeth Dole, who ran for the Republican nomination for President in 2000, focused more on her "appearance, sex and viability" than of her male opponents (Kittilson & Fridkin, 2008, p. 373), and conclude that persistent gender stereotypes used in portraying women candidates may hurt women at the polls (Kittilson & Fridkin, 2008, p. 386), since stereotypes, in addition to political party, help voters make selections (Dolan et al., 2018; Bauer, 2015). Historically, the American electorate has identified stamina, strength, and endurance—commonly viewed as masculine traits—as qualities necessary in their Presidents (Hale & Grabe, 2018, pp. 454–455), compelling female candidates to overcome negative assumptions regarding their physical strength (Conroy, 2018, p.119).

Visual images—including candidates' appearance and nonverbal behavior—also serve as cues that voters use to formulate opinions on candidates, and the success of female politicians may be affected by the interaction of visual images and gender stereotypes (Bauer & Carpinella, 2018, pp. 395–397). Research has found that perceived masculine and feminine facial cues influence voters' perceptions of candidates and their likelihood to vote for them (Carpinella, Hehman, Freeman, & Johnson, 2016; Hehman, Carpinella, Johnson, Leitner, & Freeman, 2014).

Valentino et al. demonstrate that hostility toward women and feminists was consequential during the 2016 Presidential election, noting that anger, such as that provoked by the first strongly outspoken major party Presidential candidate, is a mobilizing force for bringing people to the polls (Valentino et al., 2018, pp. 232–233). Studies show that voters react with moral outrage toward power-seeking women (Heldman et al., 2018, p. 101). Indeed, Heldman et al. assert that female candidates are trivialized until they are seen as competitive, and then they are villainized (Heldman et al., 2018, p. 66). We argue that fake news has proven to be an effective mechanism of that villainization.

METHODS

In order to assess how fake news stories reflect gendered characterizations of female candidates, the 2016 election cycle was used as a case study. First, consideration is given to whether and how gendered media portrayals are shown in the literature to influence female candidacies. Then, in an existing collection of Tweets and news stories, the occurrence of top keywords and terms associated with the Pizzagate and Hillary Healthcare stories is identified within that dataset, to see how much traction each garners in these venues.

Tweets were collected through a keyword-based crawling technique—where identified key terms were tracked and tweets filtered—using a method of Twitter Streaming API, performed through the CitizenHelper system (Karuna, Mohammad, & Purohit, 2017). Over 700 key terms related to rape, sexual assault, and violence against women were identified by a team of three faculty members and one graduate student research assistant. Identified terms were tracked during the period of 1 August 2016 through 1 December 2016, during which time more than 5,434,784 tweets were collected. Next, a subset of tweets was created by filtering the original set to include a keyword associated with deception, such as "fake," "lying," or "hoax," resulting in 31,000 tweets.

For the purposes of the current analysis, tweets containing each of the candidates' names were identified in this existing dataset, yielding 11,784 references to "Clinton" and/or "Hillary," and 4,644 mentions of "Trump" and/or "Donald". A team of researchers (one faculty member and one doctoral student) created a set of keywords exemplifying the themes of both the fake news stories surrounding Pizzagate and the Hillary Health Scare, and the actual story of "Pussygate" related to the release of tapes where Trump is heard talking about grabbing and kissing women. Tracked terms used in conjunction with the female and male candidates' names include "ill," "sick," and "abuse" for the former stories, and "grab," "grope," and "harass" for the latter.

The database NexusUni, formerly LexisNexis Academic, was searched for all articles from U.S. news sources containing the keywords "rape" and "sexual assault" published during the period of 1 August 2016 through 1 December 2016. The resulting set of 22,000 stories was filtered for inclusion of a deception term, as was the collection of tweets, resulting in a set of 9,000 news stories. Of these, 4,198 contain a reference to Clinton, and 5,127 contain a reference to Trump. Keywords from the Pizzagate, Hillary Health Scare, and Pussygate stories were also identified and tracked in these news stories that reference the candidates by name.

Twitter is a popular resource for social science scholars, as the platform offers wide-scale data for roughly 300 million active users (Ahmed, 2017). And, since fake news is largely circulated through social media (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), it makes sense to assess a prominent social media source, in addition to traditional print media, when considering the implications of fake news. According to the Pew Research Center, Twitter is used by roughly 19% of the U.S. adult population and around 45% of adults aged 18–24 years old (Smith & Anderson, 2018) Though Facebook is the top social media platform, and was a prominent site for sharing fake news during the observed election cycle (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), Twitter is more often used by researchers due to the accessibility of their data to developers in comparison with other platforms (Ahmed, 2017).

Pizzagate

In the months leading up to the 2016 election, a fake news story circulated about Hillary Clinton operating a child sex ring in vaults or tunnels under the Comet Ping Pong restaurant in Washington, DC, which culminated in the real life drama of an armed vigilante, Edgar Maddison Welch of North Carolina, entering the restaurant on December 4, 2016, searching for the underage children that were allegedly hidden there, firing his gun two or three times, finding nothing, and finally surrendering to police (Fisher, Cox & Hermann, 2016). The rumor about Hillary Clinton being a pedophile had begun months earlier via a far-right thread on 4chan; building upon it, several Facebook posts in October 2016 claimed that Clinton was involved in an international child enslavement and sex ring and that the NYPD sex crimes unit was investigating (Robb, 2017). This "news" was posted on Twitter, and soon went viral with the help of automated bot networks (centrally controlled groups of Twitter accounts) and repackaging by Trump followers, including several Trump campaign members.

Through social media, the child sex ring story was linked to actual news stories of new Clinton e-mails found on former Congressman Anthony Weiner's (the husband of Clinton's aide, Huma Abedin) computer and the WikiLeaks release of e-mails from Clinton's campaign chairperson, John Podesta. Within the e-mails from John Podesta to his brother, Tony Podesta, were dinner plans including the word pizza, and 4chan users connected the phrase "cheese pizza" to the abbreviation "c.p." for child pornography (Aisch, Huang, & Kang, 2016). After this so-called connection was made, the Comet Ping Pong restaurant was implicated by theorists because the restaurant's owner, James Alefantis, had ties to John Podesta and the Democratic party (Aisch et al., 2016). Various conspiracy theories about the pizza restaurant and neighboring businesses swirled in the days following, including disturbing

fake news stories and videos about cannibalism, underground tunnels, and Satanism (Aisch et al., 2016). Alex Jones of Infowars, an influential conspiracy-theory outlet, picked up the story in November 2016, which launched the pizzagate hashtag, further spreading the story that eventually spurred Welch to action.

From October 2016 to the date Welch walked into the pizza restaurant, #Pizzagate and related hashtags were shared about 1.4 million times by more than 250,000 accounts (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017; Robb, 2017). Despite Welch not finding any evidence of a child sex ring at the pizza restaurant and statements by the police refuting the fake news stories leading up to the event, theorists continued to claim that the stories were truthful and that the mainstream media were conspiring to cover it up (Aisch et al., 2016).

Hillary Health Scare

Clinton's health and fitness for public office were not new to the 2016 election cycle, as her physical capacity and perceived impairments had been covered by far-right Websites for years (Conroy, 2018, pp. 116–117). Aligned with mass media coverage, Trump planted seeds of doubt in her ability to serve as President (Conroy, 2018, pp. 118–120). During the first Presidential debate on September 26, 2016, Trump argued that Clinton did not have the "look" to be President and stated "[s]he doesn't have the stamina. To be President of this country, you need tremendous stamina." (Chan, 2016).

In a 2014 *New York Times* article, Karl Rove suggested that Clinton suffered from a traumatic brain injury as a result of a December 2012 fall (Smith, 2014). While on the campaign trail in June 2016, footage of Clinton shaking her head was doctored by a pro-Trump blogger to look as though she had suffered a seizure, and conservative media out-lets picked up the footage, dedicating significant coverage to discussions of Clinton's health (Krieg, 2016).

In September 2016, Clinton was diagnosed with pneumonia after becoming unsteady and needing help getting in to a van after a September 11 memorial event at Ground Zero (Seitz-Wald, Alba, Mitchell, Welker, & Hunt, 2016), and images of Clinton being helped into the van were widely circulated (Conroy, 2018, p. 116). The previous week she had suffered a coughing attack at a campaign event in Ohio, which she dismissed as seasonal allergies (Rafferty, 2016). Her occasional coughing had been the subject of con-siderable attention in right-leaning media, as a long time conservative meme, and the sub-ject of a Clinton-bashing Twitter feed called @hillarycoughing (Grove, 2016). In the dataset assembled for this study, Clinton's name is associated with the terms "ill" or "sick" over 25,000 times in newspaper articles (Table 1), and over 1,700 times in tweets (Table 2).

One quarter of all respondents in a nationally representative survey believed that stories of Clinton's ill health were either "probably" or "definitely" true, including 12% of former Obama supporters (Gunther, Beck, & Nisbet, 2018). A 2016 Trump campaign ad called "Dangerous" played up this story, featuring grainy images of Clinton coughing, stumbling, and being held up by aides, while a voiceover proclaims that "Hillary Clinton doesn't have the fortitude, strength or stamina to lead in our world" ("Dangerous," 2016).

TABLE 1

Top Five Keywords Related to Pizzagate or Hillary Health Scare Stories Compared to "Pussygate" in a Subset of 9,000 News Articles Collected Between August 1, 2016 and December 1, 2016

Hillary Clinton		Donald Trump	
Top keywords used	Number of times used	Top keywords used	Number of times used
Ill or sick	25,120	Harass/harassment	1,314
Fat or ugly	1,065	Grab/grabbing or grope/groping	2,216
Children	841	Access Hollywood	366
Tired or Weak	557	Bill Bush	281
Abuse	556	Perv/pervert	230
Strength or stamina	267	Pussy	221
Disabled	135	Chauvinist	17
Collapse	120		
Pneumonia	53		
Total number of times top keywords were used	28,174	Total number of times top keywords were used	4,645

TABLE 2

Top Five Keywords Related to Pizzagate or Hillary Health Scare Stories Compared with "Pussygate" in a Subset of 31,000 Tweets Collected Between August 1, 2016 and December 1, 2016

Hillary Clinton		Donald Trump	
Top keywords used	Number of times used	Top keywords used	Number of times used
Ill	1,647	Harass or harassment	72
Abuse	44	Grope, grab, or groping	62
Children	38	Perv or pervert	37
Pedo or pedophile	23	Pussy	15
Sick	20	Billy Bush	6
Total count of top five keywords	1,772	Total count of top five keywords	192

RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

The two fake news stories examined here show clear connections to the playbook of gendered portrayals of female candidates in traditional media, perhaps most especially the "double-bind" expectations of being insufficiently and excessively masculine flagged by Heldman et al. (2018). Insofar as men are considered to be strong, and women weak, stories that play up women's purported physical shortcomings or propensity to be ill comport with existing stereotypes of women as the weaker sex, and thus are likely to gain traction and be hard to shake (Konnikova, 2018). Such characterizations call into question women's viability as candidates (Kittilson & Fridkin, 2008) and portray women as less competent than men (Valentino et al., 2018). Visual images, also used to solidify existing biases, often to the detriment of female candidates (Bauer & Carpinella, 2018), may be even more effective weapons against women when doctored or dramatized in fake news stories such as those sensationalizing Clinton's coughing or stumbling.

When women challenge gender norms by seeking powerful positions traditionally held by men, they may be trivialized by references to their appearance or frailty, or alternatively viewed as "excessively masculine"—especially once their bids for power gain traction—at which point they may evoke anger and moral outrage (Valentino et al., 2018). Heldman et al. contend that Clinton was subject to a longstanding "Lady Macbeth narrative" that villainizes power-seeking women, through damaging, concocted stories like Pizzagate, which provide a fictional focus for rage felt for would-be female power transgressors (Heldman et al., 2018, p. 109).

Evidence of disparities in how women versus men are covered in both traditional print media and on social media platforms can be seen in counts of keywords typifying the scandals—real and imagined—with which each candidate is associated. We find terms associated with fake news stories denigrating Clinton as weak or predatory to be much more in evidence than terms associated with Trump's actual scandal (also known as "Pussygate") precipitated by the release of the Access Hollywood tape in which he is heard to say of women that you can do anything with them, including, "Grab 'em by the pussy" ("Donald Trump's Taped Comments About Women," 2016). Over a four-month period in 2016, keywords like "ill"; "weak"; "tired"; "sick"; and "abuse" show up over 28,000 times in the observed dataset, while mention of words typifying Trump's statement and related behavior, including "harass," "grab," and "grope" appear under 5,000 times (Table 1). Similarly, on Twitter, fake news related terms about Clinton appear nine times as often (1,800 vs. 200) as terms related to real news stories about Trump's unseemly behavior toward women (Table 2).

While known and potential shortcomings are acknowledged in the identification of terms and the dataset that serve as the basis for this analysis, the order of magnitude of the findings speaks in favor of the veracity of the conclusion. These case studies support the findings in the literature that women are subjected to more negative press coverage than men, and more specifically concur with the observation that, though Clinton's candidacy was unique, it shed light on several ways in which women's bids for office are more complicated than men's due to gender stereotyping and sexism (Lawless, 2009, pp. 70–71)

CONCLUSION

Among the many concerning implications of the growing prevalence of fake news is the extent to which such stories might exacerbate existing gender disparities by promulgating stereotypes and biases against women in politics that influence the behavior of the electorate. This examination of Pizzagate and the Hillary Health Scare, as briefly compared to the competing, but real scandal of Pussygate, suggests that there can be more backlash against women for violating gender norms that have excluded them from positions of power than for men who act badly in conforming to gender norms of male entitlement and sexual dominance.

Whether consciously exploited, advanced through subconscious bias, or some combination of such factors, the findings of this analysis suggest that fake news has the potential to compound the problem of preexisting gender bias that "undemocratically privileges male Presidential candidates" (Heldman et al., 2018, p. 50), while healthy democracy relies on the

ability of politics to center "around the unmasking of various disguises of oppression" (Wolin 1994, p. 23, as cited by Johnson, 2017, p. 234).

ORCID

Bonnie Stabile http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9162-8332

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