

Different Sourcing Decisions in Coverage of the Trump Access Hollywood Tape

Introduction

For many years, American liberals and conservatives have relied on different sources for news consumption (Mitchel, et. al 2014). This trend persisted throughout the 2016 election, where people who voted for Donald Trump relied heavily on *Fox News* for campaign news while people who voted for Hillary Clinton used a variety of sources such as *CNN*, *MSNBC*, Facebook and more (Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, 2017). These news sources portrayed the two presidential candidates differently depending on the publication's ideological leanings (Faris, et. al, 2017). This means that Americans with differing ideologies consistently received information that differed in how favorably Trump or Clinton was portrayed.

The ability of media to influence how a political individual is portrayed has been researched in many past studies. One example is a study done by Dhavan V. Shah and others, which was published in 2002 and examined how President Bill Clinton maintained high approval ratings despite the very public scandal of his affairs. The study found that by using different frames to present Clinton's scandals, media publications were able to present stories about Clinton's infidelities in a way that actually intensified public support (Shah, et. al, 2002). This paper aims to expand on that research by applying the same concepts to a scandal which emerged in the 2016 presidential campaign.

On October 7th, 2016, *The Washington Post* posted a video from 2005 revealing a vulgar conversation between then-presidential candidate Donald Trump and television star Billy Bush. In this video, Trump bragged about sexually assaulting women and attempting to seduce a

married woman. This story was reported by publications across the political spectrum, who used quotes from both the 2005 tape and from Trump's ensuing apology to support their articles. As we learned from in class readings, sourcing sometimes inserts bias, regardless of whether the author of the article intends to do so or not (Ray & Weinstein, 2018). This paper seeks to analyze sourcing across liberal, neutral and conservative media to find out whether Trump's portrayal differs in favorability across ideologically different sources. I expected sourcing decisions to vary across publications, with more liberal sources choosing to include more direct quotes from Trump's statements in the 2005 tape and conservative sources to include more direct quotes from Trump's ensuing apology video. Additionally, I expected the content of the sourcing in conservative media to be less incriminating than in neutral and liberal media. These differences would allow for liberal sources to portray Trump as more vulgar to their readers, who were less likely to vote for Trump, and for conservative sources to portray Trump as more repentant to their audience, who were much more likely to vote for Trump.

Methods

The corpus used includes four liberal sources, four neutral sources and four conservative sources. Sources were chosen through the "Ad Fontes media bias chart" and all sources are at least partially in the News rectangles of the media bias chart. Neutral sources all came from the neutral column, left sources are at least partially in the skews left columns and right sources are at least partially in the skews right column. The one outlier is *Fox News*, which falls into the Hyper-Partisan Right column and is in-between "Extreme/Unfair interpretation of the news" and "Nonsense damaging to public discourse" (Otero, 2018). This source was included because of its

large following among Trump voters and ensuing influence over public discourse (Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, 2017).

Table 1: Sources and Ideological Leanings

Left	Neutral	Right
Buzzfeed News Washington Post Politico The New York Times	Reuters ABC News NBC News USA Today	Christian Science Monitor The Wall Street Journal The Weekly Standard Fox News

Articles were found through restricting the date range on Google News from October 7th, 2016 to October 8th, 2016 and searching “Trump Access Hollywood”. The earliest article that the publication published on the story was used. In some cases, an article could not be found through Google and so I searched “Trump Access Hollywood” on the source’s website instead. Generally, it was easier to find more liberal or neutral sources through Google News than it was to find conservative sources. This might be a result of Google tracking my usual preferred media or a result of *Fox News*’s overshadowing popularity among conservatives (Mitchel, et. al 2014).

Data was collected by reading through each article and highlighting in four different colors: 1) direct quotes of Trump’s statements on the 2005 tape 2) paraphrased quotes from Trump’s statements on the 2005 tape 3) direct quotes from the Trump’s ensuing apology video and 4) paraphrased quotes from Trump’s ensuing apology video. Direct quotes from the 2005 tape were considered least favorable to Trump, while direct quotes from the apology video were considered most favorable to Trump. Paraphrased quotes from the 2005 tape were considered favorable towards Trump when the publication’s decision to paraphrase seemed to soften the offensiveness of Trump’s statements. Paraphrased quotes from the 2005 tapes were considered unfavorable when it seemed that the publication was paraphrasing to mock Trump’s statements.

Paraphrased quotes from the apology were considered unfavorable towards Trump, because the decision to paraphrase over directly quoting allowed for the publication to insert their own opinion, thereby giving Trump less of an ability to explain his 2005 statements. Many sources chose to paraphrase a direct quote immediately before the direct quote as a way of introduction. In these cases, the paraphrased quote was not included in analysis because the direct quote clearly clarified the information in the paraphrased quote.

After data collection, analysis was done by recording the number of sentences in each of the four categories. The categories were then organized from largest to smallest. The number of sentences was not compared across articles because of the varying length of the articles. Instead, comparisons were made between categories within the same article, and then the comparatively different sizes of the categories were compared across articles. Additionally, each quote in every category was deemed either favorable, unfavorable or neutral towards Trump.

Findings:

After analysis, the data suggested that Trump was portrayed more positively by conservative sources and more negatively by neutral and liberal sources, in keeping with my hypothesis. Across ideologically different sources, the leading category consistently was direct quotes from the 2005 tape and the second largest category was direct quotes from the apology, but the content of the quotes differed considerably. The two outliers are: the article by *USA Today*, which had the most quotes from the apology video and the second most from the 2005 tape, and the piece by *The New York Times*, which had an equal number of quotes from the two categories. Generally, paraphrased quotes from the apology and the video were very close in number across ideologically different sources.

Table 2: Sizes of the Four Categories Across Sources

Note: *Left, neutral and right is indicated in parenthesis next to the source. The number of sentences in each category is in parenthesis next to the category for each source.*

	Direct Quotes From 2005 Tape	Direct Quotes From Apology	Paraphrased Quotes from the 2005 Tape	Paraphrased Quotes from Apology
Buzzfeed News (L)	14	5	0	1
Washington Post (L)	20	11	1	0
Politico (L)	13	9	4	1
The New York Times (L)	7	7	5	1
Reuters (N)	7	2	1	1
ABC News (N)	15	3	1	2
NBC News (N)	14	3	3	2
USA Today (N)	6	7	3	2
Christian Science Monitor (R)	4	2	2	0
The Wall Street Journal (R)	13	6	1	2
The Weekly Standard (R)	12	2	2	0
Fox News (R)	11	2	2	0

This table indicates that regardless of ideological leaning, sources consistently prioritized the same category of quote. Right leaning sources generally produced slightly shorter articles, but had proportionally more of their articles devoted to sourcing. Additionally, regardless of the size of the articles, the same categories of quotes consistently dominated the story.

Though the size of the different categories was proportionately consistent across sources, the content of the categories often differed. The only exception is sourcing related to Trump's apology. The content of sourcing from Trump's apology appeared to be consistent across

publications, though occasionally liberal and neutral sources paraphrased the apology in a mocking tone. Favorability of sourcing related to the 2005 tape varied much more across publications. For example, the direct quote: “Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything” was much more likely to be paraphrased or not included in right leaning sources than in left or neutral leaning sources. The word “pussy” was included in three of the left leaning sources, two of the neutral sources and only one of the right leaning sources (Sinclair and Rockwell, 2019). *Fox News* paraphrased this direct quote to: “Trump also used a vulgar anatomical term”. This softens the offensiveness of the statement by putting emphasis on the vulgarity of the term, rather than the action of grabbing a woman by her genitals. By choosing to omit this direct quote, right leaning sources were able to leave out a statement suggesting sexual assault.

On the other hand, paraphrasing the 2005 tape sometimes inserted a mocking tone into the article. In an article by *The New York Times*, paraphrasing the 2005 tape allowed for the publication to juxtapose crude language with a professional tone, thereby emphasizing the offensiveness of Trump’s statements. An example is, “Mr. Trump recounts to the television personality Billy Bush of ‘Access Hollywood’ how he once pursued a married woman and ‘moved on her like a bitch, but I couldn’t get there,’ expressing regret they didn’t have sex.” This excerpt begins in an official tone but then quickly deteriorates into much cruder language that includes the derogatory term “bitch”. This makes Trump’s statements seem more shocking because the vulgar tone comes after a much more professional tone. Another example comes from *Politico*, which says, “Trump’s campaign was sent reeling on Friday after a private tape was published in which the reality TV star bragged about groping, kissing and attempting to have sex with married women- and he said he was entitled to do so because he’s a ‘star’”. This excerpt lists multiple examples of inappropriate behavior, which steadily builds a more negative

portrayal of Trump, and then gives an insubstantial justification in response. By using Trump's word "star" and putting it in quotations, the publication mocks Trump because the publication sets Trump up poorly and then makes it clear that the flimsy justification is in Trump's own words.

Another way in which sourcing differed is in the focus on sexual assault versus the focus on infidelity. Right leaning sources were more likely to quote Trump's attempts to seduce a married woman, whereas left leaning sources were more likely to quote Trump's attempts to force himself on women without consent. This difference was reflected in some of the headlines of the articles. Headlines from neutral sources *NBC News* and *ABC News* were: "Trump on Hot Mic: 'When You're a Star... You Can Do Anything' to Women" and "Trump Brags About Groping Women in Vulgar Remarks Caught on Tape, Chalks It Up to 'Locker Room Banter'". A headline from the conservative source *The Weekly Standard* was "On Hot Mic in 2005, Trump Brags About Trying to Seduce a Married Woman". The headlines from the two neutral sources suggested that the most important take-away was Trump's claims of sexual assault, while the conservative source seemed to express that his pursuing a married woman was the most crucial detail. Focusing on Trump's infidelities makes the story seem less newsworthy, as Trump's numerous infidelities have been reported on in the past (Delkic, 2018). These articles present different levels of misbehavior because infidelity is not nearly as bad as the illegal act of assaulting someone. Additionally, these articles suggest different degrees of relevance, since many people were already aware of Trump's disloyalty.

In summation, the data across publications reveals that though there were more quotes from the 2005 tape than from the apology and paraphrasing from the two categories was roughly equal, the substance of the direct and paraphrased quotes differed greatly. Conservative sources

paraphrased quotes from the 2005 tape to tone down the offensiveness of Trump's statements, while liberal and neutral sources paraphrased quotes from the 2005 tape to mock Trump. Additionally, conservative sources were more likely to hint that the most egregious take-away from the 2005 tape was Trump's infidelity, while liberal and neutral sources were more likely to hint that his attacks on women were most offensive.

Implications and Future Research:

This research suggests that though articles may use similar quantities of evidence and even evidence from the same source, the overall portrayal of an individual can differ greatly in favorability based on the content of the quotes. The content of sourcing along with a decision to paraphrase instead of directly quote can change the tone of evidence, thereby influencing the opinions of the general public. The tendency of liberal and neutral sources to portray Trump less favorably than conservative sources shows how partisanship can persist even when a public figure is entangled in scandal. This shows that how sources are used and contextualized is just as important as the sources themselves, if not more so.

The findings also reveal key differences in the way sexual assault is acknowledged across ideologically different sources. The tendency of right leaning sources to focus more on Trump's infidelity or his crude language than on the act of attacking women, sometimes entirely failing to quote his claims of assault or even paraphrase them, circumvented the salient topic of sexual assault. In the 2005 tape, a future presidential candidate exposed himself as a person that has gravely mistreated women. Still, some news publications never directly quoted his claims of assault or used the term: "sexual assault," (Sinclair and Rockwell, 2019). This negligence caused

many news publications to fail at holding an important public figure responsible for his appalling actions.

Further research should investigate if sexual assault in politics is consistently given different attention across the political spectrum of media, or if this is only true for this scandal. Already, the way in which media describes sexual assault is being studied, but often more attention is given to how these descriptions have changed over time rather than how these descriptions differ across media. A paper by Jenny Kitzinger reviewed research on how the media portrays sexual assault and found that over time, descriptions have evolved to portray victims more accurately, but problems still persist (Kitzinger, 2004). Further research could investigate how fairly sexual assault is addressed across the political spectrum. Such research would be important because it would help to expose sources who fail to accurately portray the issue of sexual assault in full. Further research would work to change how we portray sexual assault in the United States and in politics, thereby doing justice to the victims of such attacks.

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Appendix:

Left:

- BuzzFeed News
 - <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/jimdalrympleii/donald-trump-in-2005-i-did-try-and-fuck-her-she-was-married>
- Washington Post
 - https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-recorded-having-extremely-lewd-conversation-about-women-in-2005/2016/10/07/3b9ce776-8cb4-11e6-bf8a-3d26847eed4_story.html?utm_term=.67e5c0473568
- Politico
 - <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/10/trump-wapo-229299>
- New York Times
 - <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/politics/donald-trump-women.html>

Neutral:

- Reuters
 - <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election/trump-in-crisis-after-lewd-remarks-about-women-come-to-light-idUSKCN1271RV>
- ABC News
 - <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-caught-tape-vulgar-language-women/story?id=42655874>
- NBC News
 - <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/trump-hot-mic-when-you-re-star-you-can-do-n662116>
- USA today
 - <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2016/10/07/trump-washington-post-women-billy-bush-video/91743992/>

Right:

- Christian Science Monitor
 - <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2016/1008/Trump-issues-apology-for-sexist-comments-Is-it-enough>
- Wall Street Journal

- <https://www.wsj.com/articles/donald-trumps-lewd-comments-about-women-spark-uproar-1475886118>
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