The Use of Gendered Frames and Content in Media Coverage of Women Presidential Candidates
by Ridhi Madia

1. Summary
Motivation: It is the 21st century, and we have yet to elect a female president. In the past, when we had female presidential or vice-presidential nominees, their coverage was different than the coverage given to the male presidential candidates. What is the role of the media in this? Is the use of gendered content and gendered frames prevalent in media coverage of women presidential candidates?

Methods Used: Content analysis of media frames

Findings:
• Kanter’s 4 frames were used in the media coverage of Dole, Clinton, and Palin.
  • Dole was the “First Woman” and “Mother”
  • Clinton was the “Iron Maiden” and “Pet” and suffered from the “double bind”
  • Palin was the “Sex Object” and suffered from the “double bind”
  • Overall, these frames significantly impacted their campaigns

Contribution: This topic is highly relevant today because of the upcoming elections in 2016 and has been studied by various academics. This study focuses on previous female candidates (specifically Elizabeth Dole, Sarah Palin, and Hillary Clinton) and their portrayal in the media.

2. Hypotheses
Hypothesis: The media did use gendered frames and content when discussing Dole, Clinton, and Palin during their presidential and vice-presidential campaigns.

3. Media Frames Defined
Kanter’s 4 media frames from her book Men and Women of the Corporation (1977):
• Sex object: This frame refers to both sexuality and sex roles. An example of this is when the media discusses the appearance or behavior of a candidate and sexualizes them.
• Iron Maiden: Women who exhibit too many masculine traits are mocked because they go against the norm.
• Pet: This is sometimes also referred to as the “child” frame because women are seen as being too naive or unprepared to handle difficult tasks without a man’s help. This diminishes a woman’s capacity to lead.
• Mother: Females are typically viewed as the nurturing and understanding sex, which can be a positive advantage. However, this frame is also used to show that because women exhibit these emotional traits, they may not be good leaders.

4. Gendered Content Defined
• First Woman: The media coverage does not focus on her political ideology or her other achievements, but instead on her being the first to run for that position.
• The Double Bind: This concept is used to limit a woman’s role in leadership. Either she appears too masculine and not feminine enough to lead, or she appears too feminine and lacks the masculine traits to be put in a leadership role.

5a. Results: Dole
Dole’s “First Woman” and “Pet” frames negatively impacted her presidential campaign because of the lack of funds she was able to garner.
Most of her articles focused on her being the first serious female contender for the presidential election, but not her political platform.
• Constantly discussed as the wife of Bob Dole
  • The media “implicitly, if not explicitly, that she was a novelty in the race rather than a strong contender with a good chance of winning” (Heldman, Carroll, Olsen, 331).
  • Despite her second place ranking in the polls, she received less coverage than comparable male candidates.
    • “For Dole, the use of the “First Woman” frame also implied that she did not have enough political experience to be the president, and thus, she garnered less support than her other Republican competitors. This negatively affected her fundraising efforts as well. Ultimately, her lack of funds forced her to drop out of the election.” (My paper)

5b. Results: Clinton
Clinton’s portrayal as a masculine woman, actually helped her lose support from some of the electorate because they thought she lacked the necessary feminine traits.
• She was seen as a strong, tough woman who had experiences being in the white house as a former first lady, but regardless of these desirable qualities that male political candidates capitalize on, she consistently “lagged behind Barack Obama on measures of trustworthiness, honesty, and compassion, traits for which female candidates are usually given the edge” (Dolan, Deckman, Swers, 147).
• Thus, a lot of her TV ads focused on how she was a caring and compassionate woman.
• While some articles, did positively critique Clinton’s masculine traits, a majority of the content in these articles still focused on her appearance and feminine behavioral characteristics, not her political platform.

5c. Results: Palin
Palin also suffered from the “double bind”, like Clinton, but was affected with the “sex object” frame as well.
Although her campaign capitalized on her overtly feminine qualities and appearance, she appeared unqualified for the vice-presidential role.
• Constantly called “Caribou Barbie” and “Hottest Governor” (Carlin, Winfrey, 330).
• On average, at least 50 percent of these articles addressed her image; this is significant chunk of the entire article to focus only her feminine appearance.
• The media’s obsession with Palin’s physical appearance distracted the public from focusing on her practical and more masculine skills, and made her seem unqualified compared to Biden.

6. Conclusion
• The media and its use of the gendered frames and content were somewhat helpful initially to publicize and introduce these female candidates to people outside of the political arena, but in the long-run, the use of these frames proved to be highly detrimental to their campaigns.

7. Future Research
• Completely unfair to solely blame media for the use of gendered frames and content
• Media is dictated by supply and demand model
• “Unfortunately, people like seeing pictures of attractive women like Palin, are not okay with “masculine” women like Clinton, and prefer to see coverage of male candidates over female candidates (in Dole’s case).” (my paper)
• Thus, these gendered frames stem from societal beliefs and norms.
• I don’t believe that the media should completely stop using gendered frames or content
• This issue continues to be an issue of debate because of the possible female candidates in the upcoming presidential election in 2016.

8. Data
• I used Google and the Uioawa Library Catalog Smart Search tool to find most of my sources.
• I used 25 sample articles for my findings from:
  • major national network news stories online: CNN Newsroom, CBS News, NBC Night News
  • Well-known news magazines: USA Today, Newsweek
  • Books: The Impact of the Media on Political Women
  • Peer-reviewed Journals: Chronicle for Higher Education, Political Communication