

The Grudge Against Drudge: Clinton and the Rise of the 'New Media' in the 1990s

Bill Tamburelli

March 18, 2022

History Senior Honors Thesis

Course Instructor: Dr. Brad Bouley

Thesis Advisor: Steve Zipperstein

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Historical Context.....	9
CHAPTER 1: The 1992 Campaign.....	12
<i>Historiography of the 1992 Election.....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>The 1992 Presidential Campaign.....</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>How and Why Did Clinton Win the 1992 Election?.....</i>	<i>23</i>
CHAPTER 2: The 1998 Impeachment.....	28
<i>Historiography of the 1998 Scandal and Impeachment.....</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>New Media Emerges: The Internet.....</i>	<i>31</i>
<i>January 1998 and The “Drudge Report”.....</i>	<i>34</i>
<i>The Impeachment of Bill Clinton and Media Sensationalism.....</i>	<i>39</i>
<i>Effects on the American Electorate, Media, and Government.....</i>	<i>50</i>
Conclusion.....	57
<i>Lasting Implications.....</i>	<i>59</i>
<i>Final Thoughts.....</i>	<i>61</i>
Epilogue: One Nation, Indivisible?.....	62
Bibliography.....	68

Acknowledgements

Before beginning, there are multiple people who greatly aided in the development of this thesis. I owe a massive debt of gratitude to my faculty mentor, Professor Steve Zipperstein. In the past two years, Professor Zipperstein has inspired, supported, and guided me through the latter half of my undergraduate career. Especially in these last two quarters, he has been of vital help with this thesis. Thank you to Professor Steve Zipperstein for all of the assistance and feedback that he has given me. I would also like to thank Dr. Randy Bergstrom for his assistance in the process of applying for and obtaining the Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities grant. Lastly, I would like to thank Dr. Brad Bouley for the guidance and feedback he has provided in the past two quarters. Without all of these fantastic mentors and professors, this thesis would never have reached its potential.

There are some exceptional peers who aided in this thesis as well, giving crucial feedback and peer-editing my numerous installments. Thank you to Tamia McDonald, Grace Molinari, Emely Lopez, and John Young for the moral support and feedback they have given. Lastly, I would like to thank my parents – Steve and Lynne Tamburelli – for the incredible support they have given me not just during this thesis, but for the entirety of my life.

Introduction

On November 3, 1992, Bill Clinton was elected as the 42nd President of the United States of America. For Clinton, while it was a great triumph; his 1992 campaign suffered from numerous scandals and other vulnerabilities – both factors that normally would negatively impact a candidate’s campaign. For many political analysts, the unthinkable occurred: Clinton, the newcomer without name recognition and haunted by the scandals that followed him, was able to beat the seasoned political veteran and incumbent Republican George H.W. Bush. Throughout the campaign, Clinton’s character became an issue and was regarded as unpresidential and unfit for the office. In early 1992, it was reported by the tabloid, *The Star*, that he had extramarital affairs, as well as accusations of dodging the 1969 Vietnam draft.¹ Facing a candidate like Bush, a World War II hero and a man grounded in the Reagan-era “family values” these accusations would be expected to significantly impair Clinton’s chances of winning the election. Clinton’s rise was, in large part, due to his use of “new media” – cable news and other outlets, such as MTV – where he was able to market himself to the American public directly.

To fully understand Clinton’s ascent, there must be an analysis of Bush’s presidency and campaign, as well. Throughout most of his tenure, Bush enjoyed high approval ratings, as well as foreign policy successes – such as Operation Desert Storm and overseeing American foreign interests in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. However, foreign policy seemed to be one of his only strengths, and in the post-Soviet Union era, Bush could not achieve similar successes with his domestic agenda. He struggled to keep economic promises,

¹ “Bill Clinton 1992: Road to the White House,” *CNN* online, 1996, <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/multimedia/timeline/9809/starr.report/cnn.content/clinton.92/>.

with his biggest misstep being the 1990 tax raise, after promising “no new taxes.”² At the same time, the United States was experiencing a mild recession, which did not help his campaign. A critical shortcoming was Bush’s failure to engage with the growing popularity of new media outlets, something that Clinton excelled at in promoting his policy and message to the American electorate. By the time Bush did appear on other, newer media outlets, as compared to the traditional channels like ABC, NBC, or CBS, it was likely too late to impact the outcome. This factor, while not entirely responsible for Bush’s failure and defeat in the 1992 presidential election, nonetheless played a considerable role in Clinton’s victory.

However, in 1998, Bill Clinton’s integrity was again rocked, when a fringe internet news outlet, the Drudge Report, broke the ignominious story of how a 21-year-old intern, Monica Lewinsky, had an affair with the President. Originally, *Newsweek* was prepared to publish the story, but at the last minute, an editor killed the report and prohibited publication of it. However, Matt Drudge, creator of the Drudge Report, broke the story on his website based only upon rumor at that point.³ As Drudge’s article gained intense attention, other outlets scrambled to confirm the report. Clinton initially denied the affair, even swearing under oath that he had no such present relationship with Monica Lewinsky – but eventually, as more information kept trickling out, Clinton was forced to reckon with his wrongdoings. Initially, many Americans were intrigued by the scandal and Clinton’s fate. Media coverage about how the President of the United States had an affair with a young intern was everywhere. By the actual impeachment trial, however, most Americans had heard enough about the scandal. Despite the perpetual

² “George Bush’s Failure – Bill Clinton’s Promise,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), October 25, 1992.

³ Howard Kurtz, “Clinton Scoop So Hot It Melted; Newsweek Editors Held Off On Scandal Story,” *The Washington Post*, January 22, 1998.

coverage, only 25 percent of Americans held that the scandal and subsequent impeachment was important, resulting in negative ratings for the press.⁴ With the need for audience ratings driving the frantic scramble to be the first-to-report, the rise of alternate and new media outlets quickly became toxic to the American electorate.

In large part, Clinton's unorthodox use of various new media outlets such as talk shows, cable television, and "town halls," was responsible for both his ascent in 1992 to the presidency and publicizing the scandals that eventually led to his impeachment in 1998. In this thesis, "new media" is defined using three criteria – first, these outlets or programs must have been created in the 1980s or 1990s. Secondly, they must be heavily deregulated, or even unregulated by the FCC or other bodies. Lastly, they must have an increase in viewership as compared to the declining traditional formats. The scope of this thesis covers cable news networks, such as CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC, primetime talk shows like *The Arsenio Hall Show*, as well as early internet journalism such as the infamous Drudge Report. These outlets became more mainstream in the 1990s when the American population started drifting away from traditional media, such as ABC, CBS, and NBC, as well as print journalism like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. According to Gallup, between the years of 1995 and 1999, viewership of nightly news on ABC, CBS, or NBC dropped by approximately 10 percent.⁵ A similar poll by the Pew Research Center conducted in 1998 revealed that more than 40 percent of Americans watched cable news regularly, compared to 57 percent who watched network news regularly.⁶ Although the number of viewers who watched network news was still higher, considering that

⁴ "Popular Policies and Unpopular Press Lift Clinton Ratings," Pew Research Center, February 6, 1998, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/1998/02/06/popular-policies-and-unpopular-press-lift-clinton-ratings/>.

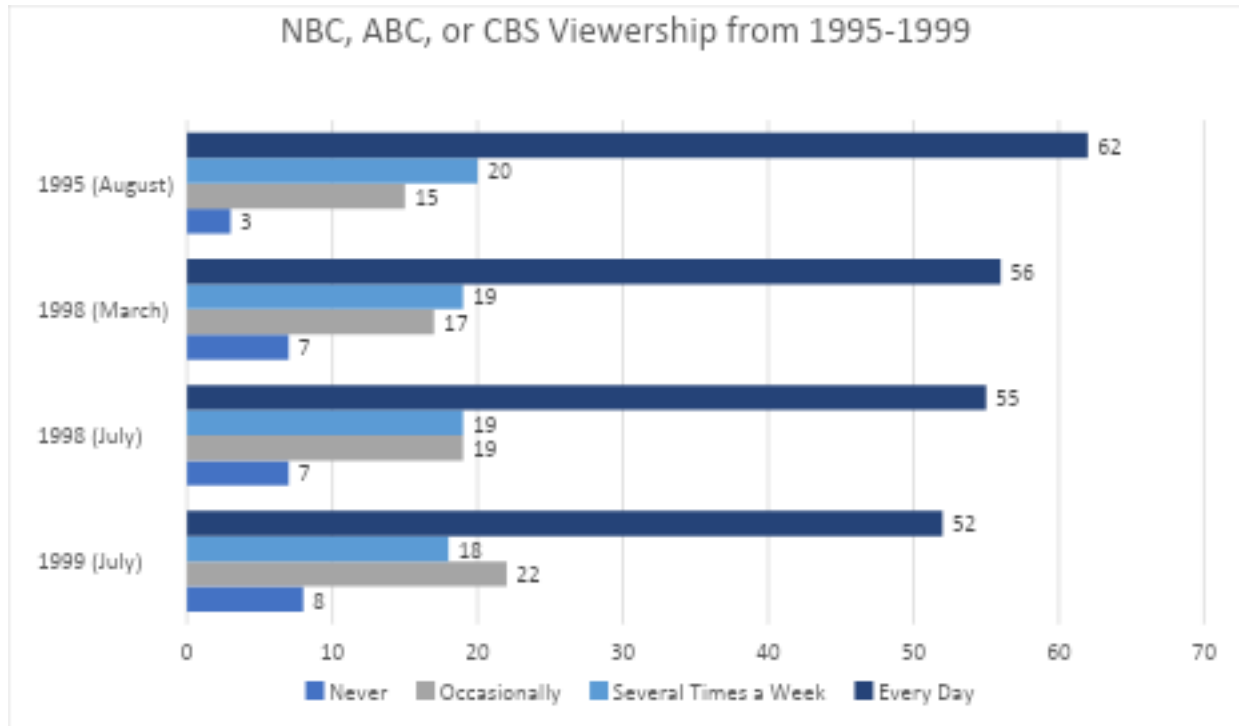
⁵ "Media Use and Evaluation," Gallup, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1663/media-use-evaluation.aspx>.

⁶ "Internet News Takes Off," Pew Research Center, June 8, 1998, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/1998/06/08/internet-news-takes-off/>.

cable news was still a newcomer in the television arena, 40 percent of Americans, representing 120 million people, was a significant number.

Figure 1. Reported use of broadcast news from 1995 to 1998. Note the decrease in everyday viewership amongst people who watched normal news – it decreased 10 percent in a matter of four years.

Source: Gallup "Media Use and Evaluation," <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1663/media-use-evaluation.aspx>.



These “new media” outlets also had far fewer regulations imposed on them compared to normal broadcast networks. NBC, ABC, and CBS all had to adhere to strict guidelines and rules imposed on them by the Communications Act of 1934. For example, these networks had to give equal airtime to all political candidates, in order to give each a fair chance at promoting their message to the American population.⁷ The FCC also prohibits broadcast networks from airing any false or distorted information – something that cable news, talk shows, or internet

⁷ 47 CFR § 73.1941 (1994).

journalism does not have to adhere to.⁸ Cable networks like CNN and Fox News have much more freedom over content than what is possible on broadcast networks, including who they choose to appear on their shows. Due to the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, cable networks became heavily deregulated and able to air opinionated programs – they are not held to the same standard as the broadcast companies.⁹ Mainstream media, due to this reason, must remain largely neutral in their programming but cable news and other shows can pander to niche audiences. For example, CNN caters to left-leaning Americans who most likely identify as part of the Democratic Party, whereas Fox News markets to right-leaning Americans who identify as part of the Republican Party.¹⁰

By covering Clinton’s candidacy and presidency during the 1990s, this thesis will explore the rise of alternative news sources and how the resulting political polarization affected the American electorate. There is one main question this thesis will attempt to answer: what drove Americans to seek other news sources and why? To answer this difficult question, this thesis will examine how and why Clinton won the 1992 election, what caused Clinton’s approval rating to rise during his 1998 impeachment, as well as analyze the overreach of “new media” coverage and its effects on political polarization. These heavily unregulated new media outlets targeted more fringe elements of the American political spectrum, whereas traditional journalist vehicles were bound by regulations and prescribed ethics. These new outlets created an ecosystem where opinion and rumor became headlines, which quickly evolved into partisan echo

⁸ “Broadcasting False Information,” FCC, January 8, 2021, <https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/broadcasting-false-information>.

⁹ “Cable Television,” FCC, June 15, 2021, <https://www.fcc.gov/media/engineering/cable-television>.

¹⁰ Howard Kurtz, “Crazy Like a Fox: Question His News Judgment, Perhaps, But Never Underestimate Roger Ailes,” *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), March 26, 1999.

chambers. Americans sought confirmation bias to corroborate their own thoughts and beliefs, resulting in spiraling political polarization. The ratings race aimed to create 'outrage' over otherwise unnoteworthy occurrences, thus furthering the growing political divisiveness.

Historical Context

To his voters, Clinton was a breath of fresh air in the White House, especially after a twelve-year hold by Republicans Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush. Americans were energized by his youthful energy: he was the first president to be born after the Second World War and represented the Baby Boomer generation finally taking control of government.¹¹ Clinton signified a change with his fresh ideas; given he was still a moderate Democrat from traditionally conservative Arkansas. In this way, Clinton seemed much more relatable to the electorate with his charming and approachable personality and the way he portrayed himself, for example, his appearance on *The Arsenio Hall Show* where he played a saxophone with the band.¹² Clinton appealed to his generation and Generation X, who were coming of age during the information revolution – a period where rapid advances in technology, media consumption, and the spread of information took place.

Media was quickly evolving during this period as well. During most of the latter half of the 20th century, television was dominated by three main broadcasting networks: ABC, CBS, and NBC. These broadcast networks had to remain largely nonpartisan to promote fairness and objectivity. However, in the early 1980s, cable news started to develop and cater toward more

¹¹ Joseph Hayden, *Covering Clinton: The President and the Press in the 1990s* (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 5.

¹² Arsenio Hall, "The Arsenio Hall Show," CSPAN, June 3, 1992, Video, 4:30, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?26472-1/clinton-appearance-arsenio-hall-show>.

fringe elements of the American political system. CNN, created by Ted Turner in 1980, was originally imagined to be a nonstop, 24-hour news network. By the 1990s, CNN had catapulted into the mainstream by providing nonstop news coverage of certain events, especially the First Gulf War in 1990. By 1998, Fox News Channel, a right-leaning cable news network, had also capitalized on CNN's gains by creating the first news channel that catered to the right of American politics. Both Fox and CNN didn't have to adhere to the FCC's rules regarding broadcast networks since they used cable systems and subscription services, and thus, they were able to air opinionated and partisan programs that were intentionally marketed toward Americans who identified with those political leanings.

Cable news wasn't the only new form of media consumption during Clinton's presidency, however. In the mid-1990s, the internet became more accessible and available to Americans, who started creating their own websites and blogs without any governmental regulation. The internet, while a great tool to access an infinite amount of information and knowledge, also gave rise to rampant misinformation as well as websites that reported on rumor and innuendo. During Clinton's presidency, the Drudge Report, a small news blog started by Matt Drudge broke the news on Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky, a 21-year-old White House intern. However, it was also reported that Drudge didn't seek confirmation of the story before publishing it – nearly collapsing an American presidency over innuendo and speculation.¹³ Once the story was published on the internet it gained quick traction, leading other news outlets – both traditional and new – to seek confirmation and formulate their own reports on it. The Drudge Report, driven by the internet's freedom and access irreparably damaged Clinton's legacy by publishing

¹³ Howard Kurtz, "Clinton Scoop So Hot It Melted; Newsweek Editors Held Off On Scandal Story," *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), January 22, 1998.

a report without initially confirming its accuracy. Even though the report later proved to be true, it set a precedent for the future of how the internet could be used to sway public opinion.

The rise of new media outlets during Clinton's presidency has been thoroughly studied in the past twenty years. In the wake of his 1998 impeachment, political analysts and historians, namely Joseph Hayden in his analysis, *Covering Clinton: The President and the Press in the 1990s*, have carefully examined how the new media influenced the traditional outlets – and in a larger context, affected both the American political system and the electorate itself. Historians and political scientists, such as Karen Popp, a former Associate Counsel to Clinton, have discussed how the new media during Clinton's era has contributed to the decline of trust in the traditional media as well. Analyzing secondary sources on this matter reveals a solid understanding of the ways in which the media both assisted and damaged a president's legacy and its effects on the integrity of the media.

To understand the rise of the new media and its influence, there must be a two-pronged approach, looking at both Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign, as well as his 1998 impeachment. While there are other important factors and events that occurred in the years between those two specific points, those two milestones are major inflection points in the history of the role of the new media and its influence on the electorate, as well as the political system. The new media, unregulated and unbound by ethics and FCC rules, polarized the American public through championing partisanship and providing echo chambers and political safe spaces to Americans who sought them out.

CHAPTER 1: The 1992 Campaign

Historiography of the 1992 Election

Clinton's rise during the 1992 presidential election cycle was, in part, due to his incredibly effective use of newer media outlets that both better showcased his policy platform better as well highlighted his personality, which most Americans deemed to be like the "average Joe." In a thorough analysis of the relationship between Clinton and the press, from his campaign to his impeachment, Joseph Hayden argues that the newer (and at the time, unorthodox) media outlets were a significant reason for his popularity in 1992. Hayden argues that during the campaign, the use and breadth of the new media, which consisted of cable news and talk shows skyrocketed during 1992.¹⁴ Clinton capitalized on these outlets, knowing that the traditional media would be less forgiving, especially regarding his past scandals. At the same time, his appearances on such forums gave his campaign a more direct channel to the American electorate, since there was not a journalist relaying the information. Hayden uses a term – "teledemocracy" – to describe the media's influence on the electorate, and how Clinton effectively used newer outlets to spread his policy and message to a wider audience.¹⁵ "Teledemocracy" implies that the media, and especially television networks, are largely responsible for the political socialization of the electorate. Recognizing the shift in viewership from traditional outlets to newer ones, Clinton's campaign utilized this data and shifted their focus, veering away from broadcast networks because they thought the traditional media focused too much on his past instead of his policy ideas.¹⁶

¹⁴ Joseph Hayden, *Covering Clinton: The President and the Press in the 1990s* (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 2.

¹⁵ Ibid. 3.

¹⁶ Ibid. 7.

However, Hayden, other historians, and political analysts concluded that the newspapers were still responsible for the political socialization of the American electorate in 1992, albeit recognizing the growing influence of television – especially newer outlets. In a study conducted in 1998, Russell Dalton and others concluded that traditional print journalism, as compared to broadcast networks, has much more variation in election coverage due to governmental regulation of broadcast channels enforced by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).¹⁷ While this is true, print journalism has fewer governmental directives imposed on them, the main newspapers, such as *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*, abide by certain journalistic ethics and informal rules so that misinformation does not spread and trust remains instilled. The researchers use statistics and data analysis to further their argument, noting the different types of press coverage (positive or negative) and the impacts those had on newspaper readers by gauging political behavior and choice.¹⁸ However, even though these newspapers still abided by traditional journalistic principles when reporting pure news, editorials are a different arena. They serve as a source of political socialization – exerting a small influence on readers. They don't have nearly as much sway or bias as new media, as Hayden writes that the newer programming allowed campaigns, especially Clinton's, a friendlier and freer platform for messaging as compared to older, traditional media, whether it was broadcast networks or newspapers.¹⁹ Clinton was nowhere near a perfect political candidate – he had multiple scandals and past events haunt him throughout his campaign. He overcame this

¹⁷ Russell Dalton, Paul Beck, and Robert Huckfeldt, "Partisan Cues and the Media: Information Flows in the 1992 Presidential Election," *American Political Science Review* 92, no. 1 (March 1998): 111.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Joseph Hayden, *Covering Clinton: The President and the Press in the 1990s* (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 9.

through use of talk shows and even cable news throughout 1992 which both allowed him to showcase his charismatic personality as well as better articulate his policy ideas.

Analyzing specific examples of both traditional journalism and the new media, utilized by Clinton's campaign during 1992, reveals that the new media already had a sizeable impact on the American public. A *New York Times* article, the epitome of traditional media, noted how only 40 percent of "each candidate's supporters strongly favor their man," as well as reported the differences between Clinton and Bush's strengths and weaknesses as candidates.²⁰ These traditional media outlets used specific datasets and statistics to support their reports and arguments. Traditional journalists and reporters are bound by certain ethical standards so that they cannot misrepresent information or show blatant favorability when reporting the news, despite their biases. Their reports are supposed to be largely objective and could be trusted, in contrast to newer media. However, the new media, like *The Arsenio Hall Show*, utilized by Clinton to showcase his relatability to the general American population, is much different from traditional media and became widely watched by Americans. In an appearance by Clinton on *The Arsenio Hall Show*, his most memorable performance came when he played a saxophone with the band – something deemed so unconventional and controversial for a presidential candidate to do.²¹ Clinton used the appearance on the talk show to make him seem more normal and average compared to most politicians. Clinton's campaign strategists knew this, however, and capitalized on this opportunity to use newer outlets to gain publicity for him. According to Hayden, Clinton's advisors pushed for greater publicity on the new media channels

²⁰ "George Bush's Failure – Bill Clinton's Promise," *The New York Times*, October 25, 1992.

²¹ Arsenio Hall, "The Arsenio Hall Show," CSPAN, June 3, 1992, Video, 4:30, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?26472-1/clinton-appearance-arsenio-hall-show>.

to circumvent negative coverage from the broadcast networks, while at the same time, showcasing how Clinton was an average and relatable person.²²

Clinton won the 1992 election over Bush by roughly five percentage points (in the popular vote). His unconventional, and at the time, unorthodox usage of newer media outlets proved to be a successful strategy for his campaign, as evidenced by Hayden. The combination of Clinton's success at showcasing his charisma through talk shows and cable outlets, with Bush's failure to do so, as well as the mild recession that America experienced in 1991, were major factors in why Clinton won the 1992 presidential election. Bush's failure to effectively govern the United States after the conclusion of the Cold War was damaging, especially given the timing of such an event. Clinton, capitalizing on his opponent's weakness, better articulating policy differences, as well as using new media to highlight his 'likeable persona' was a winning strategy for him. He was able to avoid the harsher confrontations of traditional media coverage, especially given his past and appeal to many more Americans through these new outlets.

The 1992 Presidential Campaign

At the beginning of his 1992 presidential campaign, Bill Clinton seemed like a promising candidate to the American electorate. Clinton gained many Democratic endorsements in the early days of his campaign and was considered to be a "rising star" in the political world.²³ He ran an effective operation, garnering votes, donations, and momentum leading into the 1992 election year. However, in early January of that year, the biggest challenge to his presidential

²² Joseph Hayden, *Covering Clinton: The President and the Press in the 1990s* (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 20.

²³ "Bill Clinton 1992: Road to the White House," *CNN* online, 1996.

<http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/multimedia/timeline/9809/starr.report/cnn.content/clinton.92/>.

campaign broke. A young woman named Gennifer Flowers told the world that she had a sexual affair with Clinton for over a decade, during his time as Arkansas's attorney general as well as its governor.²⁴ Clinton's campaign initially took a toll from this scandal, with him having to defend himself while denying the allegations. The story broke initially on the supermarket tabloid "Star" – but was widely adopted by other traditional outlets, such as *The New York Post*, *Boston Herald*, and broadcast television channels. Political analysts and pollsters, at the time, thought that this scandal would decimate Clinton's campaign hopes and lead to the reelection of Bush in November.²⁵ However, Clinton's use of both new and traditional media saved his campaign from what was thought would be his downfall.

Clinton's advisors and staff were quick to respond to the allegations and get Clinton on national television to denounce the affair and promote his character. Just about a week later both Clinton and his wife Hillary appeared on CBS's primetime show *60 Minutes*, airing immediately following the Super Bowl. In this instance, Clinton took advantage of traditional media to save his campaign. His advisors knew that the Super Bowl would be widely watched among Americans and that having him featured on a *60 Minutes* episode that followed the event would get his message across to a large number of viewers. Normally, Clinton would appear on other "new media" outlets, such as *The Arsenio Hall Show* or MTV on a "town hall" event. However, the allegation against Clinton by Flowers prompted him and his team to schedule a time to appear on traditional media, with Hillary, so that they could try to salvage his campaign and show that despite marital problems, they love and support each other. In the

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Joseph Hayden, *Covering Clinton: The President and the Press in the 1990s* (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 5.

interview, Clinton was asked “you said that your marriage has had problems – that you’ve had difficulties... What do you mean by that? Help us break the code” by *60 Minutes* reporter Steve Kroft.²⁶ Clinton responded with “I think the American people – at least people that have been married a long time – know what it means and know what the whole range of things that it can mean... I’m not prepared tonight to say that any married couple should ever discuss that with anyone but themselves.”²⁷ Clinton, at first stumbled to provide much of an answer in this interview. This can be attributed to Clinton’s infrequent use of traditional media, as well as wanting to protect himself against any further evidence that may be presented by Flowers. Clinton, asked about whether he is prepared to deny any extramarital affairs, dodged Kroft’s question about marital infidelity.²⁸ This was a calculated move by Clinton, as it was later revealed that Flowers had taped phone messages of them, which confirmed the relationship.²⁹ Clinton’s campaign and political future seemed condemned during the first half of this interview – he was not answering the questions directly, he stumbled on some responses. Even though he acknowledged past problems in his marriage, he deflected questions on extramarital affairs. However, the breakthrough moment came toward the end of the interview, and not from Clinton himself, but from Hillary. She interjected, stating “I’m not sitting here as some little woman, standing by my man like Tammy Wynette. I’m sitting here because I love him, and I respect him, and I honor what he’s been through and what we’ve been through together. If

²⁶ *60 Minutes*, “Hillary Clinton’s First 60 Minutes Interview,” featuring Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton, and Steve Kroft, aired January 26, 1992, on CBS, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-UqKNgrwK8E&ab_channel=60Minutes.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Joseph Hayden, *Covering Clinton: The President and the Press in the 1990s* (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 6.

that's not enough for people, then heck, don't vote for him."³⁰ This moment was the one that likely saved Clinton's presidential campaign, and he knew that as well, as he visibly grasped Hillary's hands tighter and looked at her emotionally.³¹ Surprisingly the format and interview that saved his campaign came from traditional media, when Clinton was known to utilize the "new media" much more than outlets like CBS. However, Clinton still mainly employed other new outlets after the scandal was largely behind him which largely helped him win in November of 1992.

After the Flowers scandal was largely behind them, Clinton and his campaign advisors kept utilizing the "new media" to their advantage. Of course, Clinton still gave interviews and answered the traditional journalists' questions but his main, and arguably most influential, appearances came on primetime talk shows, like *The Arsenio Hall Show* as well as "town hall" events hosted by networks such as MTV. Coverage on cable networks, especially CNN, provided favorable reporting on his campaign, especially compared to Bush's. These outlets provided Clinton a well-suited vehicle to showcase his empathetic personality and to discuss his policy platform better than traditional media.

In terms of news reporting, Clinton found better success with CNN's coverage, which tended to be more favorable, compared to other outlets, such as NBC. CNN was also able to report breaking news about the campaign at a moment's notice, since their network was dedicated to news 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This was written about extensively in an article published in *The American Behavioral Scientist*, by then-White House Press Secretary

³⁰ *60 Minutes*, "Hillary Clinton's First 60 Minutes Interview," featuring Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton, and Steve Kroft, aired January 26, 1992, on CBS, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-UqKNgrwK8E&ab_channel=60Minutes.

³¹ Ibid.

Dee Dee Myers, who served in that position from January 1993 until December 1994. She wrote that the campaign “recognized that the basic, fundamental character of ‘news’ had changed... Where people once obtained most of their information from daily newspapers and the 6 p.m. news network, CNN brings events from Milwaukee to Mogadishu [*sic*] into America’s living rooms 24 hours a day.”³² Clinton’s campaign recognized the changing nature of the media landscape and utilized it early-on in his bid for the presidency to gain an advantage over Bush. CNN provided Clinton’s team favorable coverage, as well as being able to respond at a moment’s notice to new developments in the race for the presidency. In a CNN news broadcast, from August 27, 1992, the anchor uses terms such as “lashed out” and “attacked” when describing Bush’s rhetoric toward Clinton, as well as not highlighting any aspect of Bush’s policy platform.³³ Compare that to the coverage of Clinton in the same broadcast where they cover Clinton’s energy policy as well as using much less inflammatory language.³⁴ The favorability of CNN’s coverage toward Clinton was very apparent and aided his campaign. However, the cable networks were also used by his team to accomplish strategic goals, as well. As Dee Dee Myers states,

The emphasis on taking advantage of technology to monitor and ultimately shape the news helped us accomplish at least five tactical and strategic goals. First, the campaign developed a strategy of rapid response around a ‘get hit – hit back harder’ philosophy. The war room became the 24-hour hub of the campaign, constantly monitoring newswires, talk radio, and CNN... this constant monitoring of breaking news, surrogate attacks, and opposition research provided the decision makers with the information to readily and rapidly respond to any attacks.³⁵

³² Dee Dee Myers, “Perspectives,” *The American Behavioral Scientist* 37, no. 2 (1993): 181.

³³ Bernard Shaw, “CNN Evening News,” Cable News Network, Atlanta, Georgia: CNN, Aug. 27, 1992.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Dee Dee Myers, “Perspectives,” *The American Behavioral Scientist* 37, no. 2 (1993): 182.

CNN provided the campaign with a nonstop stream of political information, giving birth to what is now known as a campaign “war room” – a subunit of the communications team that is devoted to watching, analyzing, and responding to any political attack or accusation. This development gave Clinton’s campaign an upper hand, as his team was able to respond at a moment’s notice. CNN provided his operation a clear advantage that traditional media could not.

Traditional forms of media such as newspapers and broadcast television were, at the time, seen as largely unbiased and believable.³⁶ Broadcast networks had to abide by certain FCC rules that enforced equal opportunity rules for candidates as well as fair coverage of political events. Broadcast news networks also did not air 24-hour coverage of events, unlike CNN. For Clinton’s team, this form of media was outdated and could not be used to their advantage. An NBC news report from April 16, 1992, is much fairer to both campaigns, where the reporters covered Bush’s new policy proposal, while covering the hardships that the Clinton campaign faced:

The ‘Slick Willie’ nickname is no joke to the Clinton campaign. The candidate is struggling to counteract images, like this week’s unflattering Time Magazine cover... There was some better news for Clinton in the new NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll: our new poll shows Clinton trailing Bush by eight points... much narrower than the 36-point margin six months ago.³⁷

NBC, in its coverage of political issues and elections, had to remain largely unbiased and fair to the campaigns. The FCC, at length, states what traditional broadcast networks can and cannot do: that these networks must give reasonable access to facilities, they must provide equal

³⁶ “Internet News Takes Off,” Pew Research Center, June 8, 1998, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/1998/06/08/section-4-news-media-credibility/>.

³⁷ Tom Brokaw, “NBC Evening News,” National Broadcasting Company, New York, NY: NBC, Apr. 16, 1992.

opportunity for candidates, and maintain an online political file whenever a candidate purchases airtime.³⁸ The commission also makes note that these networks cannot “intentionally distort the news” – such as blatant bias or rigging the broadcast with false or misleading information.³⁹ These rules are in place for broadcast networks specifically due to their nature: broadcast networks are not ones that can be subscribed to, unlike cable networks; these networks are available to anyone who has basic television equipment. The FCC enforces these rules to ensure that the public interest isn’t harmed by the news. Clinton’s campaign was unable to effectively utilize these networks for those reasons: broadcast news was largely seen as unbiased and did not have 24-hour coverage, which did not aid his campaign in the way that CNN did. However, Clinton was able to find success in using other outlets such as primetime talk shows.

A large part of Clinton’s appeal and credibility came from his appearances on what, at the time, was deemed as unorthodox for a presidential candidate to use: primetime talk shows, such as *The Arsenio Hall Show*, as well as town halls on networks like MTV. On these newer media platforms, Clinton was able to better showcase his empathetic and seemingly “average” personality, compared to the mainstream outlets. His campaign was also able to circumvent most negative news coverage through these newer programs since he was able to appeal to the American people on an emotional level. This gave Clinton more of a “relatable” aura, where the average American was most likely able to identify more with him than with Bush 41. On the mainstream platforms, he was constantly questioned about his scandals which impacted his

³⁸ FCC, “The Public and Broadcasting,” FCC.gov, September 2021, <https://www.fcc.gov/media/radio/public-and-broadcasting#POLITICAL>.

³⁹ Ibid.

ability to get his key asset, relatability, across to the viewers. Besides primetime talk shows, Clinton utilized other new media formats, such as MTV's 1992 program, "Young Voters' Forum."⁴⁰ In this program, which aired in mid-June of 1992, Clinton answers unrehearsed questions from a younger audience on a network that was not considered to be an informative, political news channel. One such question probed Clinton's experience with his family during his childhood, and Clinton gave an incredibly personal answer about his relationship with his brother.⁴¹ His appearance on MTV was an outlet to which Clinton could showcase his character and empathy better than regular news channels. While the polling impact was not immediate, the appearances aided Clinton in also exposing his policy platform. It was seen as largely unorthodox at the time, but it helped his image going into the final stretch of the 1992 campaign. The traditional outlets also recognized this change from mainstream news to newer shows, where candidates were able to showcase their personality and platform better:

It is also obvious that the politicians this year – Bill Clinton and Al Gore, in particular – understand that there may be more effective ways than an hour on 'Meet the Press' to get into our heads and hearts. Clinton does a saxophone recital... Gore evokes Elvis Presley in his acceptance speech... The Public Broadcasting Service, the most 'scientific' and information-driven medium in the television wasteland, struggles against MTV and 'Entertainment Tonight' to maintain a 2 percent share of the prime-time minutes.⁴²

Clinton's appearance on MTV, combined with his use of other newer shows and outlets, propelled him to the top of the Democratic primary and eventually, aided his victory in November 1992. Initially, these types of shows were seen as untraditional and unbecoming of a presidential candidate. However, they eventually gave him credibility and rapport with the

⁴⁰ Bill Clinton, "Facing the Future with Bill Clinton – Young Voters' Forum 6/12/92," theleeoverstreet, October 21, 2018, video, 1:32:15, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rLN117VChTQ&ab_channel=theleeoverstreet.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Richard Harwood, "PBS vs. MTV; So Many Media, So Little Time," *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), Sept. 2, 1992.

American electorate. He was able to effectively dodge most problems that arose during his campaign and articulate his policy thoroughly, which would have been more difficult in the mainstream media.

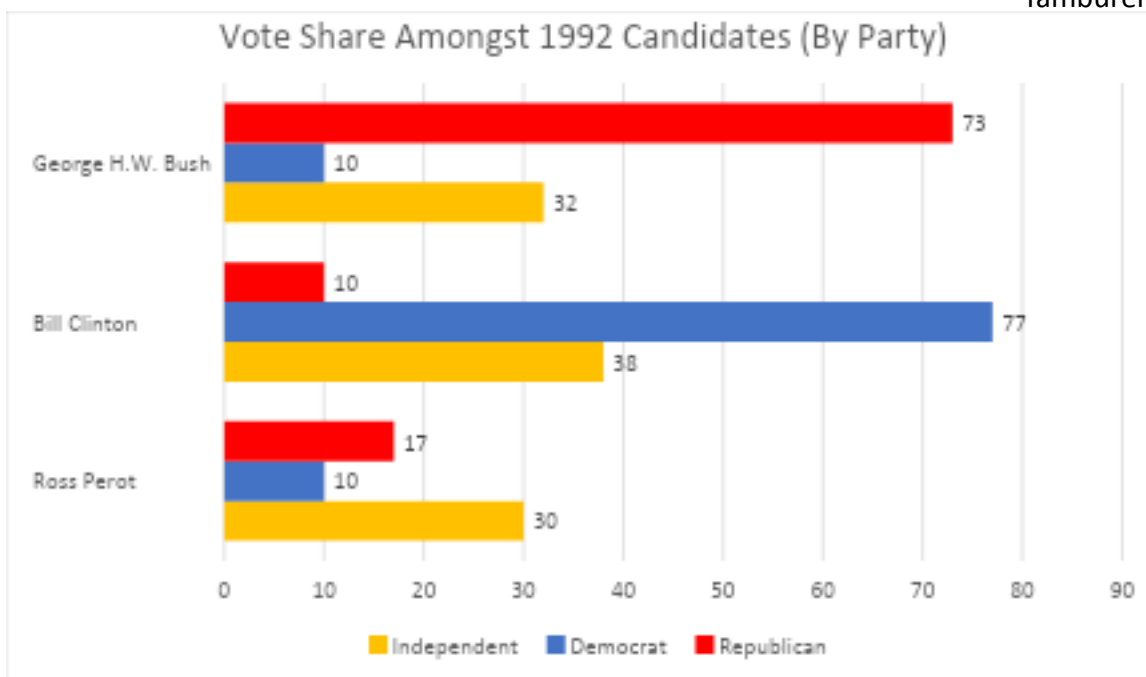
How and Why Did Clinton Win the 1992 Election?

While Clinton's use of new media platforms played a major role in his electoral win, there are other factors that also contributed to his momentum. Whereas Clinton excelled in promoting his persona and policy platform, Bush largely failed in utilizing the media, until it was too late. Bush's presidency was also haunted by an economic recession, domestic problems, and the reversal of some of his campaign promises. However, Clinton was also aided by the third-party candidate, H. Ross Perot, who ran as an independent. Of course, this was not intentional aiding by Perot, but his own candidacy drew some Republicans away from Bush's campaign, which indirectly helped Clinton.⁴³ These three factors were major parts in Clinton's win – his effective use of new media alone was not powerful enough to propel him to the presidency. To fully understand Clinton's ascent, there must be an analysis of these considerations as well.

While Clinton was incredibly successful at utilizing new media to his advantage, he was not the first to use it in this way – that is something that Perot capitalized on initially. In early 1992, Perot was not in the presidential race; in fact, he told the American public he was not planning on running.⁴⁴ However, this announcement came from the CNN show, *Larry King Live*,

⁴³ "How Groups Voted in 1992," Roper Center, Cornell University, accessed Jan. 19, 2022, <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/how-groups-voted-1992>.

⁴⁴ Joseph Hayden, *Covering Clinton: The President and the Press in the 1990s* (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 14.



where the host, Larry King, and Perot talked at length about the issues that America was facing, both domestic and abroad. Eventually, at the end of the show, King asked Perot a question: what it would take for him to enter the presidential race. Perot responded that if volunteers from every state wrote him in on a ballot, he would join the race and according to Hayden, “viewers besieged CNN’s Atlanta switchboard to find out how they could contact Perot.”⁴⁵ Perot was the first to utilize the new media to promote a message, even if he wasn’t on the campaign trail yet, which inspired Clinton’s team to do the same, and arguably, more

effectively. Perot entered the presidential race independently but drew a considerable portion of Republicans away from Bush’s campaign: 17 percent of Republicans voted for Perot, compared to 10 percent of Democrats who voted for him.⁴⁶ Perot ended up garnering nearly 19 percent of the total popular vote – amounting to over 19 million votes nationwide, compared to

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ “How Groups Voted in 1992,” Roper Center, Cornell University, accessed Jan. 19, 2022, <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/how-groups-voted-1992>.

Clinton's 43 percent and Bush's 37 percent.⁴⁷ Perot's candidacy, while inflicting some damage to Clinton's campaign, did much more harm to Bush's considering seven percent more Republicans voted for him compared to Democrats. However, Perot paved the way for Clinton to utilize new media outlets, a major factor in what propelled him to the presidency.

Another major factor in Clinton's electoral win in 1992 was Bush's failure to adapt to changing media outlets and successfully utilize them. Whereas Clinton and Perot were able to take advantage of the new media platforms and promote their message, Bush was largely stuck in the past, using traditional outlets and news conferences to attack his political opponents and spread his message. However, more Americans were tuning into the newer programs and related more to the candidates who utilized them. The new media provided a way for the candidates to showcase their personalities, something that Americans wanted to see. They wanted to be able to relate to a candidate, not just hear policy points and political attacks. The differences in Clinton's and Bush's promotional strategies are encapsulated in this one excerpt: "Bush press secretary Torie Clarke... lambasted both [Clinton's] performance and his judgement: 'I thought it was embarrassing... I don't think most Americans want to see their president wearing a goofy tie and sunglasses and blowing on a saxophone, and then talking about smoking pot with a late-night TV host.'"⁴⁸ However, this is exactly what many Americans wanted to see from a presidential candidate – relatability – and that is where Bush failed. Viewers were able to see Clinton's actual personality instead of just hearing about policy proposals and other political conversations. Bush's campaign team was stuck in the past as they

⁴⁷ "The American Presidency Project," UC Santa Barbara, accessed Jan. 19, 2022, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/elections/1992>.

⁴⁸ Joseph Hayden, *Covering Clinton: The President and the Press in the 1990s* (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 19-20.

were not able to recognize the changing attitudes of the American electorate and adapt themselves until it was far too late. By the time Bush's team acknowledged the practicality of appearing on newer media outlets, Clinton had a months-long lead and established rapport with many voters due to his personality and proposals.

The last major factor external factor that helped Clinton and hurt Bush was the latter half of Bush's presidency. Bush enjoyed many accomplishments in the arena of foreign policy during his first two years in office. He oversaw the collapse of the Soviet Union and America's ensuing unrivaled dominance, as well as supervised the execution of Operation Desert Storm, which weakened Iraq's authoritarian regime under Saddam Hussein. Bush was a successful diplomat during his presidency but he faced many problems domestically. These internal problems damaged his credibility amongst the American electorate and largely led to his defeat in November 1992. Bush also repudiated one of his biggest campaign promises in 1990: "no new taxes."⁴⁹ In 1988, when then-candidate Bush was in the race for the presidency, he made a promise to his voters: that in his tenure, he wouldn't enact any new taxes on the American public. However, in an agreement with Congress in 1990, Bush had to raise and create new taxes to avoid cutting vital government programs and spending.⁵⁰ Bush's repudiation of that vital promise coupled with his failures in domestic policy, such as the 1991 economic recession and the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles, made him seem out-of-touch and ineffective to lead post-Cold War America. Bush's inability to ease economic problems became a major political vulnerability, that both Clinton and Perot were quick to attack on. According to the Pew

⁴⁹ "George Bush's Failure – Bill Clinton's Promise," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Oct. 25, 1992.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Research Center, unemployment rose from 5.6 percent in 1989, to 8.1 percent in 1992.⁵¹ The average American, feeling the economic pressure from the looming, albeit short, recession, was more inclined to vote for the challenging candidate instead of the incumbent. This has been a common theme throughout the 20th century in American politics: during an economic recession, the incumbent president in an election year will likely lose.⁵² This was the case with Bush – his failure to effectively handle the recession, other domestic problems, and inspire hope in the economy (and his leadership), cost him the election. However, Bush’s electoral defeat must also account for the aforementioned variables: Perot’s popularity and the rise of new media. Together, these three factors helped propel Clinton to the presidency, and while not in the aggregate, are the main reasons for his electoral win in November 1992.

CHAPTER 2: The 1998 Impeachment

Historiography of the 1998 Scandal and Impeachment

The affair between Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky was largely publicized because of new media. By the time the story had reached the front pages of trusted and traditional sources, such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, it was already widespread on the internet’s gossip blogs and other “news” websites. Early internet reports were able to greatly influence traditional media, in this sense, such as the celebrity and political gossip website, *The Drudge Report*, which happened to break the Lewinsky scandal story first. In the

⁵¹ “Two Recessions, Two Recoveries,” Pew Research Center, Dec. 19, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/12/13/two-recessions-two-recoveries-2/>.

⁵² Reuters Staff, “FACTBOX: Recessions and Presidential Elections,” Reuters, April 1, 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-politics-recessions/factbox-recessions-and-presidential-elections-idUSN0122201820080402>.

academic journal *Political Psychology*, author Diana Owen notes that “Political scandals that break in the tabloid press go on to grace the front page of *The New York Times*. As the Clinton/Lewinsky story unfolded, the supermarket tabloids generated storylines that would later appear prominently in mainstream print and broadcast media.”⁵³ At the dawn of the World Wide Web – a topic discussed briefly later – anyone with knowledge of code and a connection to the internet could make their own websites. There was no government regulation of the quickly-evolving web, which made it both a beneficial – and dangerous – place. Just as in Drudge’s bombshell report about the Lewinsky affair, the internet was gaining more influence over the way in which journalistic norms were changing. In Drudge’s article, the column makes statements that do not have any sources cited behind them. It notes that Lewinsky “wrote long love letters to President Clinton, which she delivered through a delivery service. She was a frequent visitor at the White House after midnight, where she checked in the WAVE logs as a visiting secretary named Betty Curry, 57.”⁵⁴ Despite these sensational details, Drudge doesn’t cite any source for the knowledge, effectively using hearsay to exaggerate his story. However, Drudge’s unproven report had effects on how traditional journalists shared the news. As sources were vague on the subject, reporters rushed to create their own take – sometimes using inaccurate information or sensationalizing the story. For example, Howard Kurtz, a journalist for *The Washington Post*, wrote in an article, published a few days after Drudge’s: “As the media furor over the charges reached a fever pitch, the magazine belatedly posted Michael Isikoff’s story on its American Online site, four days after top editors pulled the potentially explosive

⁵³ Diana Owen, “Popular Politics and the Clinton/Lewinsky Scandal: The Implications for Leadership,” *Political Psychology* 21, no. 1 (2000): 164.

⁵⁴ Matt Drudge, “NEWSWEEK KILLS STORY ON WHITE HOUSE INTERN,” The Drudge Report, January 17, 1998, http://www.drudgereportarchives.com/dsp/specialReports_pc_carden_detail.htm?reportID={1438D0F5-6CE1-4B2E-8496-E7A52B8ABA5B}.

piece from this week's issue late Saturday."⁵⁵ Kurtz's use of words such as "furor," "fever pitch," and "explosive" sensationalize his take on Drudge's story – a practice that started to become increasingly common.

However, the sensationalism of reporting was not the only aspect of longstanding journalistic norms that had been impacted by the internet. Credibility, fact-checking, and accurate sourcing had been greatly impacted, especially after Drudge's story about the Lewinsky affair. As Owen writes, "Established mechanisms of quality control, such as fact-checking and sourcing, have been abandoned. The political news agenda can be set by rumor and innuendo... As a result, many members of the public have come to view all media sources as equivalent in quality."⁵⁶ Due to the ambiguity surrounding the Lewinsky affair, after the story initially broke, reporters scrambled for confirmation of the report, sometimes using unverified sources.⁵⁷ The means by which traditional media had long operated by – accurate sourcing and factual reporting – had fallen in this new media environment. The media overemphasized the story as well, with cable networks such as MSNBC becoming "all Monica, all the time" – in an attempt to smear Clinton, increase ratings, and thus generate more profit.⁵⁸ As these new outlets gained traction and popularity amongst Americans, it forced traditional outlets to change and adapt the way they report the news to stay relevant and profitable. Credibility in the media suffered because of this. As reflected in a Pew Research poll, conducted about three

⁵⁵ Howard Kurtz, "Clinton Scoop So Hot It Melted; Newsweek Editors Held Off On Scandal Story," *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), January 22, 1998.

⁵⁶ Diana Owen, "Popular Politics and the Clinton/Lewinsky Scandal: The Implications for Leadership," *Political Psychology* 21, no. 1 (2000): 164.

⁵⁷ Jules Witcover, "Where We Went Wrong," *Columbia Journalism Review* (March/April 1998), https://ia801802.us.archive.org/13/items/sim_columbia-journalism-review_march-april-1998_36_6/sim_columbia-journalism-review_march-april-1998_36_6.pdf.

⁵⁸ Joseph Hayden, *Covering Clinton: The President and the Press in the 1990s* (Connecticut, Praeger Publishers, 2002): 82.

weeks after the Lewinsky story became public, a majority of respondents – 51% – noted that press coverage of the scandal was “fair/poor,” and 65% noted that the press was fact-checking poorly.⁵⁹ The media, in its intense focus on the optics and salacious details of the Lewinsky affair, damaged its own credibility – which never fully recovered during the ensuing impeachment of Clinton.

New Media Emerges: The Internet

In order to fully analyze the effects of new media on Clinton’s impeachment from the Lewinsky affair, there must be an understanding of the history of the internet – the internet played a massive role in defining the events of 1998 for the Clinton Administration and America. It was the online news column, *The Drudge Report*, that broke the Lewinsky story to the world, and it was the internet that facilitated the publishing of the Starr Report in September 1998. While this paper does not cover the history of the internet in its scope, a brief understanding of the development and usage of the World Wide Web is needed to analyze its eventual effect on information broadcasting and the American electorate.

In the early 1990s, the internet was still in an embryonic state – it was mainly used by the government and multinational companies as a way to communicate and send data and information rapidly. However, by the mid-to-late 1990s, the internet became much more widespread amongst average consumers, who now had access to the World Wide Web (“WWW”). Even though the World Wide Web was very much in its infancy during the period from 1996 to 1998, it rapidly grew in usage and functionality. With ordinary people able to

⁵⁹ “Popular Policies and Unpopular Press Lift Clinton Ratings,” Pew Research Center, February 6, 1998, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/1998/02/06/popular-policies-and-unpopular-press-lift-clinton-ratings/>.

create, publish, and advertise their own websites, the internet quickly became an emerging form of information consumption.⁶⁰

The internet was initially conceived as a way for universities across the United States and the world to share information and data with each other in a rapid fashion. It was closed off to the private sector – only used by the government and academia to privately share intelligence.⁶¹ However, with widespread adoption, use, and heightened interest by scholars and professionals, the World Wide Web came into being. It was born out of the commercialization of the TCP/IP⁶² in the 1980s, when private companies wanted access to the growing infrastructure of the internet.⁶³ With restrictions on access becoming more lenient, computer scientists began working on a platform called the World Wide Web – a way for ordinary people to access information that is contained on the internet. The World Wide Web was a way for everyone to enjoy the privileges of rapid information dissemination and people with intricate knowledge of code were able to publish their own websites. By 1994, TCP/IP and the World Wide Web were becoming quickly adopted by corporations across the United States, and by 1995 a growing number of Americans were accessing the internet for the first time through electronic mail (“e-mail”) and websites.⁶⁴

By 1998, the internet had taken a foothold on American society and with that came both challenges and opportunities. It rapidly became a new media platform, where companies and

⁶⁰ Jon Guice, “Looking Backward and Forward at the Internet,” *The Information Society* 14, no. 3 (1998): 201.

⁶¹ Robert Kahn, Barry M. Leiner et. al, “The Evolution of the Internet as a Global Information System,” *International Information and Library Review* 29, no. 2 (1997): 146.

⁶² TCP/IP stands for “Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol” and is the primary function of how modern internet works. It is essentially the way in which computers communicate with each other and with the internet.

⁶³ Robert Kahn, Barry M. Leiner et. al, “The Evolution of the Internet as a Global Information System,” *International Information and Library Review* 29, no. 2 (1997): 148.

⁶⁴ Jon Guice, “Looking Backward and Forward at the Internet,” *The Information Society* 14, no. 3 (1998): 204.

ordinary people alike could create their own websites and publish information. Between 1996 and 1998, the number of people who went online once per week increased approximately 500%.⁶⁵ As access to the internet became cheaper and essential to everyday life, usage of the World Wide Web became widespread. Americans used it to peruse the news, marketplaces and to send information rapidly to each other through e-mail. Anyone with the ability to connect and browse the internet could access a vast and seemingly infinite amount of knowledge from the comfort of their home. Moreover, the number of Americans who used the internet as a source of newsgathering jumped from 5.3% to 34.5% between 1995 and 1999.⁶⁶ However, this also provided some challenges: malicious actors on the internet could publish their own information on their own websites, and this was not regulated by any governing body or committee. Thus, while the World Wide Web served a great purpose, which was to provide access to knowledge rapidly, it also could be easily manipulated to provide false, or inaccurate information that could spread just as quickly. During the latter half of the 1990s, the use of the internet as a form of news consumption exponentially grew, while newspaper and television audiences slowly shrunk – a warning sign of the power, and danger, of the internet.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ “Internet News Takes Off,” Pew Research Center, June 8, 1998, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/1998/06/08/internet-news-takes-off/>.

⁶⁶ Guido Stempel III, Thomas Hargrove and Joseph Bernt, “Relation of Growth of Use of the Internet to Changes in Media Use from 1995 to 1999,” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 77, no. 1 (2000): 73.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

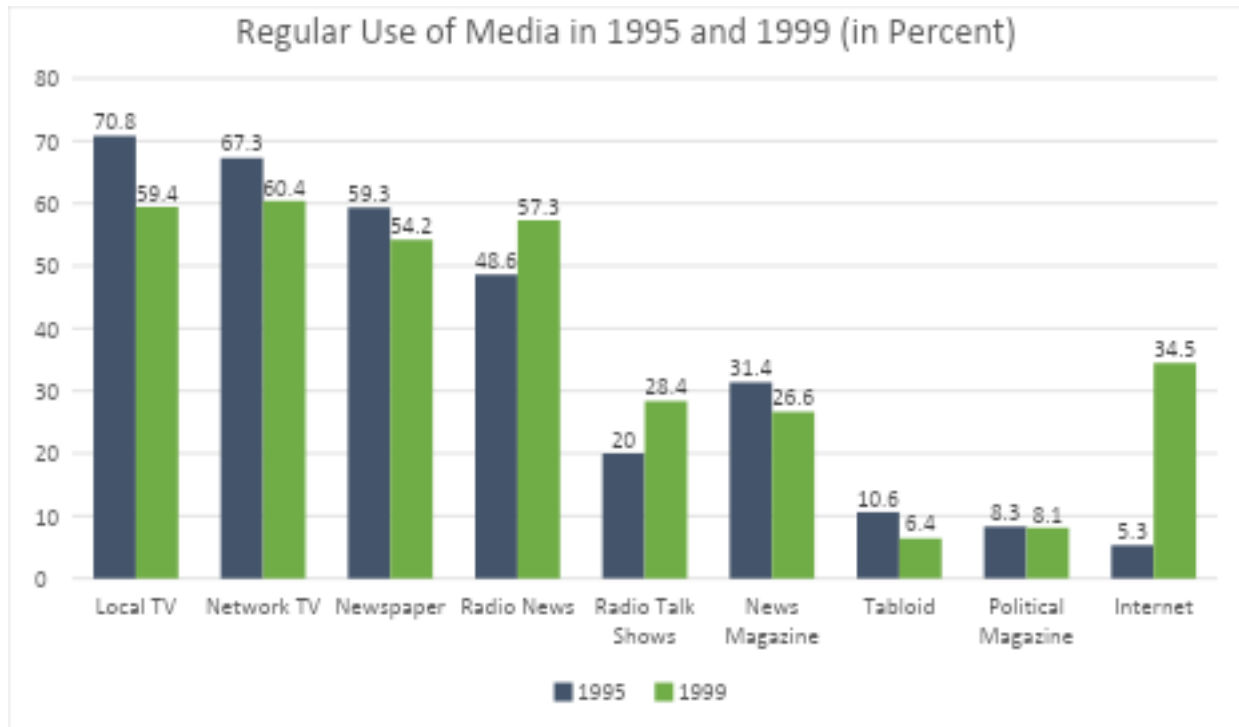


Figure 3. Reported use of media in 1995 and 1999 in percent. Notice the overall declining trend in use amongst traditional media, as compared to the exponential increase in internet use.

Source: Guido M. Stempel III, "Relation of Growth of Use of the Internet to Changes in Media Use From 1995 to 1999."

January 1998 and The "Drudge Report"

Throughout his presidency, Bill Clinton suffered from multiple scandals and until January 1998, the most significant of those was a deal that became known as Whitewater. The Whitewater scandal started when the Clintons' bought land in the Ozark Mountains and formed Whitewater Development Corporation. The Clinton family joined with James and Susan McDougal to form the company and finance the building of vacation homes on the lot.⁶⁸ However, Clinton was elected governor of Arkansas shortly after, and McDougal bought a savings and loan bank, called Madison Guaranty. Soon after, Madison Guaranty folded, and

⁶⁸ "Whitewater Timeline," The Washington Post, The Washington Post Company, 1998, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/whitewater/timeline.htm>.

McDougal was under investigation for fraud. Clinton allegedly used his power and position as then-governor to impede an investigation into McDougal.⁶⁹ The allegations of Clinton's impediment of the investigation sparked a federal investigation in 1992 at the beginning of his first presidential term. Then-Attorney General Janet Reno appointed Robert Fiske as independent counsel to examine Clinton's involvement in the Whitewater deal but he found no evidence "to corroborate the charges against Clinton, and in June he cleared the president."⁷⁰ However, the House of Representatives and Senate, both led by Republicans and unsatisfied with Fiske's findings and acquittal, appointed Kenneth Starr, their own special counsel, to investigate Clinton. Starr was a former federal appeals court judge who worked under Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush but had no background in criminal or prosecutorial dealings.⁷¹

Starr's investigation led him to indict many people close to Clinton, damaging his credibility and trust amongst the American people. Clinton's ratings never significantly decreased, however, and when the press challenged him, his approval ratings generally rose.⁷² It was the sexual harassment case brought forward by Paula Jones, a former employee who worked under Clinton during his time as Arkansas governor, that led to new scrutiny into Clinton's character. It was during the Whitewater investigation and the Jones lawsuit when the scandal around the president's affair with Monica Lewinsky was made known to reporters. Through Jones's case, a reporter named Michael Isikoff met with multiple people, including Linda Tripp, a former White House employee who tipped off Isikoff and Jones's lawyers to the

⁶⁹ Joseph Hayden, *Covering Clinton: The President and the Press in the 1990s* (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 79.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ "Whitewater Timeline," The Washington Post, The Washington Post Company, 1998, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/whitewater/timeline.htm>.

⁷² Joseph Hayden, *Covering Clinton: The President and the Press in the 1990s* (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 80.

Lewinsky affair. Tripp had intimate knowledge of Lewinsky's sexual affair with Clinton, as Lewinsky opened up to her about it during her time at the Pentagon. Tripp then suggested the lawyers' subpoena herself and Lewinsky, allegedly wanting to garner a book deal about the affair.⁷³ The story was not made public initially, as Isikoff was still gathering evidence and information. However, the Drudge Report, a fringe news website created by Matt Drudge, published the story in January 1998.

The Drudge Report began in 1996, "as a weekly subscriber-based email dispatch."⁷⁴ However, it moved online sometime later and became a published webpage. It was born in the era of the "new media" – when any person could start, publish, and host their own webpage without any regulations. The Drudge Report was initially a celebrity and political gossip website but had quickly grown in the era of the internet. The website – and news reporting – were forever changed after January 17th, 1998, with the blockbuster title: "NEWSWEEK KILLS STORY ON WHITE HOUSE INTERN."⁷⁵ It was Drudge's biggest story yet – and one that greatly impacted the Clinton Administration and Clinton's legacy. The beginning of the report read:

The DRUDGE REPORT has learned that reporter Michael Isikoff developed the story of his career, only to have it spiked by top NEWSWEEK suits hours before publication. A young woman, 23, sexually involved with the love of her life, the President of the United States, since she was a 21-year-old intern at the White House.⁷⁶

This story, instead of breaking by traditional media outlets, such as Newsweek or broadcast journalism, broke on the obscure and mostly unknown Drudge Report. Unlike traditional

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ "Drudge Report: Web Archive," Library of Congress, 2022, <https://www.loc.gov/item/lcwaN0010145/>.

⁷⁵ Matt Drudge, "NEWSWEEK KILLS STORY ON WHITE HOUSE INTERN," The Drudge Report, January 17, 1998, http://www.drudgereportarchives.com/dsp/specialReports_pc_carden_detail.htm?reportID={1438D0F5-6CE1-4B2E-8496-E7A52B8ABA5B}.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

journalism, Drudge sensationalized the report as well, with the wording “involved with the love of her life, the President of the United States.”⁷⁷ The sensationalism of what Drudge had stated captivated many Americans – the story spread rapidly, where trusted news organizations started to scramble to confirm the accuracy of the Drudge story. Days after the revelation, traditionally trusted news outlets, such as ABC, *The Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times* worked to follow sources and evidence to report on it themselves.⁷⁸ Once the story broke and spread, the damage was already done: Starr had already received this information during his investigation of Clinton, and now the public knew about it as well. In the following days, Drudge’s story about Lewinsky had already made an impact on the White House Press Corps, with reporters asking then-White House Press Secretary, Mike McCurry, questions about whether Clinton had an affair with Lewinsky or not – and whether this is a larger problem:

Q: But on that subject, the Cabinet members told us before the discussion began, the President did discuss the scandal surrounding him. What did he say to the Cabinet about that scandal?

MR. MCCURRY: What the Cabinet members told you...

Q: Mike, one of the people who has emerged in this whole Lewinsky affair is this Linda Tripp, who has a GS-15 Army Intelligence, came out as an operative of the Bush White House... Doesn’t her credentials and her own political activity indicate that this is really a very clearly targeted operation to discredit the President and the presidency, and that Mr. Starr, with his own connections to the – people, is playing the role of the grand inquisitor?

MR. MCCURRY: I didn’t pay this guy, by the way. Look, I don’t know enough about her. I don’t know enough about the circumstances of her involvement in this issue to address that, nor do I know that anyone at the White House does, so I think it would be highly improper for us to speculate as to motive.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Joseph Hayden, *Covering Clinton: The President and the Press in the 1990s* (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 82.

⁷⁹ Mike McCurry, “Press Briefing by Mike McCurry,” American Presidency Project, U.C. Santa Barbara, January 23, 1998, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/press-briefing-mike-mccurry-85>.

During this press briefing, McCurry hosted numerous questions on the legitimacy of the Drudge article. McCurry spoke on the fear of conspiracies – namely, how the Washington press corps were eager to develop their own takes despite hardly any information being available. Drudge's story impacted the press briefing in multiple ways: first, reporters were scrambling to find any confirmation to the story or any developments to it, and secondly, the press was trying to create a backstory and sensationalize it, primarily through what they knew about Tripp. Drudge's success with the report about Lewinsky, through his exaggeration and dramatization of it, changed how reporters interacted with the president and politics. However, the biggest impact on media was the degradation of the public trust in its content.

Drudge's report about the Lewinsky affair damaged the credibility of the traditional media. In his initial report, Drudge notes that "NEWSWEEK and Isikoff were planning to name the woman. Word of the story's impending release caused blind chaos in media circles; TIME magazine spent Saturday scrambling for its own version of the story, the DRUDGE REPORT has learned."⁸⁰ By stating, with or without proof, that Isikoff and Newsweek were planning to identify Lewinsky but did not, Drudge suggested that these news outlets were protecting Clinton and Lewinsky from public scrutiny. As credibility in traditional outlets started to decline during this period, trust in online sources, such as the Drudge Report, grew due to the "shoot first, question later" tactic that they often employed. "Shoot first, question later" became more commonplace, because news organizations did not want to hesitate to break a story – indecision would result in lost scoops and lower viewership. In effect, reporters would break the

⁸⁰ Matt Drudge, "NEWSWEEK KILLS STORY ON WHITE HOUSE INTERN," The Drudge Report, January 17, 1998, http://www.drudgereportarchives.com/dsp/specialReports_pc_carden_detail.htm?reportID={1438D0F5-6CE1-4B2E-8496-E7A52B8ABA5B}.

story and follow up on evidence and details later. Online news became more popular due to this: by 1998, 20% of Americans were getting their news from web sources at least once per week – and 54% of internet users went online to find more information about a report they heard on traditional media.⁸¹ With the internet being unrestricted in terms of content, Americans were free to explore alternate media sources and many did. Drudge's story on the Lewinsky affair forever changed the way in which news and media work, damaging the credibility of traditional sources, creating a platform for alternate news, and making media sensationalism mainstream.

The Impeachment of Bill Clinton and Media Sensationalism

The impeachment of Bill Clinton was primarily due to the Lewinsky scandal and his coverup of it. He was impeached by the House of Representatives in December 1998 on two counts: perjury and obstruction of justice. The votes for impeachment in the House were mainly along party lines, as virtually no Democrats or Republicans had crossed the aisle.⁸² The road to Clinton's impeachment was marred by partisanship and media sensationalism – even though the vast majority of Americans did not support the impeachment of Clinton in any fashion. Clinton's impeachment was the result of three factors: Starr and his virtually unlimited power, increasing Congressional partisanship, and media dramatization of the scandal.⁸³

⁸¹ "Internet News Takes Off," Pew Research Center, June 8, 1998, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/1998/06/08/section-1-americans-online/>.

⁸² Joseph Hayden, *Covering Clinton: The President and the Press in the 1990s* (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 94.

⁸³ Karen Popp, "The Impeachment of President Clinton: An Ugly Mix of Three Powerful Forces," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 63, no. ½ (2000), 223.

The appointment of Starr as independent counsel gave him a wide latitude of power without any checks and balances that could counter it. Starr was responsible for investigating Clinton's involvement in the Whitewater land deal – not Clinton's personal affairs with people that were completely unrelated to Whitewater. However, after the Lewinsky revelations, Starr seemingly shifted his focus from Whitewater to Clinton's personal relationships – something not explicitly mentioned in the Independent Counsel Reauthorization Act of 1994. The Act, which did not quantify Starr's power or scope of the investigation, was supposed to continue the Congressional inquiry into Whitewater, but the vague and inexplicit language in the act gave Starr virtually unlimited power, as he could, in theory, inspect whatever he wanted.⁸⁴ This is exactly what happened: On January 16th, 1998, the Special Division⁸⁵ granted Starr jurisdiction over the Lewinsky affair, stating that he could investigate "whether Monica Lewinsky or others suborned perjury, obstructed justice, intimidated witnesses, or otherwise violated federal law... in dealing with witnesses, potential witnesses, attorneys, or others concerning the civil case *Jones v. Clinton*."⁸⁶ This expansion in investigatory jurisdiction was completely out of the Whitewater scope and should have been left out of Starr's examination of Clinton. By granting him control over both the Whitewater and Lewinsky affairs, Starr had practically limitless authority. When he submitted the Starr Report to Congress, which was a 400+ page document detailing the Lewinsky affair and Clinton's perjury, he recommended that Congress impeach Clinton. Starr's exploitation of the Independent Counsel Reauthorization Act of 1994 helped him

⁸⁴ Congress.gov. "Text - S.24 - 103rd Congress (1993-1994): Independent Counsel Reauthorization Act of 1994." June 30, 1994. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/103rd-congress/senate-bill/24/text>.

⁸⁵ The Special Division is a creation of the Ethics in Government Act. It is comprised of a panel of three U.S. Court of Appeals judges and was responsible for the appointment of Kenneth Starr to investigate Whitewater.

⁸⁶ Karen Popp, "The Impeachment of President Clinton: An Ugly Mix of Three Powerful Forces," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 63, no. ½ (2000), 228.

redefine what was deemed as a “high Crime and Misdemeanor” – the ambiguous Constitutional standard to impeach a President.

The increasingly divided and partisan Congress also played a sizable role in Clinton’s impeachment. The impeachment vote in the House of Representatives in December 1998 was along party lines with virtually no Democrats or Republicans crossing the aisle – even though the majority of Americans opposed the impeachment. Even as this partisanship in Congress culminated during the Lewinsky affair, it started much earlier, during the delivery of the Starr Report. Starr, after documenting his findings and finalizing his report,

[he] chose to make the delivery... to Congress as dramatic and public as possible. As shown on television screens across the country, boxes and boxes of materials – including a 453-page summary, 3,000-plus pages of appendices to the summary, and 60,000 pages of additional related materials – were carried into the Capitol building.⁸⁷

Congress allowed this to happen – they let Starr create a dramatic scene about his findings, to show the American people that there was plenty of evidence to impeach and remove Clinton from the presidency. It was seemingly orchestrated since the House would be in session to receive such materials – Congressional Republicans most likely wanted to make a media spectacle as well as worry the White House and Democrats that there was enough to impeach. Two days following the arrival of the Starr Report to Congress, the House of Representatives voted to release the information and summary to the public, “including an on-line version on the World Wide Web... By September 28, 1998 – less than three weeks later – all of the report, except for a small amount of redacted material, was published.”⁸⁸ These were obvious partisan maneuvers by the Republican Party, designed to damage Clinton’s reputation and create

⁸⁷ Karen Popp, “The Impeachment of President Clinton: An Ugly Mix of Three Powerful Forces,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 63, no. ½ (2000), 232.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

growing support for his impeachment. The Republicans tried one more move: to release and televise the President's grand jury testimony, filmed before the release of the Starr Report.

However, the televising of the tape proved to backfire on Republicans:

Buffalo News correspondent Douglas Turner explained that the 'humiliating grilling... did not live up to its advance billing as a rare look at Clinton losing his composure, snarling, even stomping out of the room. Instead, viewers saw a composed and patient first witness, whose performance ranged from evasive to steely to combative.'⁸⁹

As a result of the public being able to view Clinton's testimony and composure during the questioning, his approval ratings increased, while the Republican Congressional ratings decreased.⁹⁰ The combination of Clinton's poise during the testimony, as well as the feeling that Republicans were trying to punish Clinton for a personal affair, resulted in his elevated approval ratings.

While increasing partisanship played a role in Clinton's impeachment, the most significant impact was the media sensationalism of the Lewinsky scandal. The *Drudge Report's* dramatization of Lewinsky and Clinton's extramarital affair was just the beginning of a broader shift in media attitudes and reporting. The rise of new media platforms forced the traditional outlets to change, otherwise, they would become antiquated, irrelevant, and risk losing an audience. The dawn of cable news networks, such as CNN and Fox News, created the 24-hour news cycle – combine that with the internet's largely unregulated nature – Americans began to shift towards these platforms. Mainstream outlets had to adapt and change with the landscape – they recognized that Americans wanted something different. The public desired news that was increasingly niche and appealed to their political and social views. That is exactly what CNN, Fox

⁸⁹ Joseph Hayden, *Covering Clinton: The President and the Press in the 1990s* (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 91.

⁹⁰ "Clinton Probe Partisan, Poll Says," *The Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), September 28, 1998.

News, and the *Drudge Report* offered to their audience: CNN was more sympathetic to the Democratic Party; Fox News was the first channel to appeal to conservatives, and the *Drudge Report* attracted Americans who wanted the latest political and celebrity gossip.⁹¹ The increasing viewership of these outlets forced other media players to sensationalize and appeal to these elements.

The way in which media outlets covered the Lewinsky affair and the ensuing impeachment of Clinton initially captivated many Americans, as according to Popp, who was a former Associate Counsel to Clinton:

It is not surprising that the media – comprised, for the most part, of profit-driven enterprises – focused so intently upon the Lewinsky matter. It had all the trappings of a great story – sex, which sells; a bare-knuckled political clash, which is good theater; and good guys and bad guys, even if the hats did keep changing mid-scene. These elements of a sensational story were an engine that a media outlet could harness to grow its fortunes.⁹²

The Lewinsky scandal was the perfect storm for the media – it had all of the right elements of a captivating story – happening in real-time, which in turn, would drive profits and ratings. The new media was able to capitalize on these factors to gain greater viewership and ratings.

Analyzing a report from the *Washington Post*, written by Howard Kurtz in the aftermath of the *Drudge Report's* coverage, the change in journalistic tone is noticeable, even in the title, which happens to be “Clinton Scoop So Hot It Melted; Newsweek Editors Held Off On Scandal Story.”⁹³

Kurtz claims: “The story detonated in the media with Watergate-like intensity. CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News Channel provided live coverage of the White House spokesman Mike McCurry’s

⁹¹ Joseph Hayden, *Covering Clinton: The President and the Press in the 1990s* (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 82.

⁹² Karen Popp, “The Impeachment of President Clinton: An Ugly Mix of Three Powerful Forces,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 63, no. ½ (2000): 238.

⁹³ Howard Kurtz, “Clinton Scoop So Hot It Melted; Newsweek Editors Held Off On Scandal Story,” *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), January 28, 1998.

grilling at his daily briefing... Moments later, Rush Limbaugh read listeners the latest Drudge update.”⁹⁴ It is apparent that Drudge’s report and story immediately impacted media coverage and newsrooms – intense, sensational language, such as “detonated,” littered reports about the Lewinsky scandal. This language is similar to what Drudge had used in his initial report about Lewinsky and what he continued to do in the aftermath, as he saw the results and effects of his article on mainstream outlets and new media. Compare this to the New York Times article from earlier, titled “George Bush’s Failure – Bill Clinton’s Promise,” in which the wording of the article is not sensationalized: “Bill Clinton, though highly regarded by other governors, has not previously been tested on the national stage. He has, when pressed, shown a discomfiting tendency to blur truthful clarity.”⁹⁵ The stark contrast in language and sensationalism is evident: in 1992, journalists largely refrained from melodrama; in 1998, it became commonplace. This drastic change in reporting only damaged the credibility of the media.

As media sensationalized the Lewinsky scandal and other reports, it had a dull impact on many outlets. Outlets had increased viewership, but credibility had declined. Even though Americans had been initially captivated by the report and the details surrounding Clinton and Lewinsky, many grew quickly tired of the nonstop coverage. As Popp notes, MSNBC “boosted its ratings by striving to become the all-Monica, all-the-time network” and how programs featured on the network would constantly report on the scandal, even if nothing new had occurred.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ “George Bush’s Failure – Bill Clinton’s Promise,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Oct. 25, 1992.

⁹⁶ Karen Popp, “The Impeachment of President Clinton: An Ugly Mix of Three Powerful Forces,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 63, no. ½ (2000): 239.

The impact was immediate: MSNBC's "The Big Show" was 148% larger in 1998 than in 1997 – mainly due to the network's constant airing of Lewinsky developments.⁹⁷

While the never-ending coverage of the scandal improved network viewership for many, it led to decreased trust and credibility for media outlets as well. By early February 1998, Americans had grown tired of the ceaseless coverage, and the polls reflected the public's attitudes: Clinton's approval rating grew, while press ratings decreased. According to the Pew Research Center, after his State of the Union address in February, Clinton's approval rose to 71%, while 51% of those same respondents gave the press a "fair/poor" rating.⁹⁸ This happened to be at the beginning of the scandal as well – the aforementioned Starr Report had yet to be released, and the House of Representatives had yet to impeach Clinton. The impacts of the media's growing "shoot first, question later" tactic had implications for public trustworthiness and credibility as well. On CNN's show, *Larry King Live*, six former press secretaries from past presidents gathered to discuss Clinton's fate and the media coverage surrounding him, with Larry Speakes, who was Ronald Reagan's secretary noting that "American journalism [is] 'a rumor mill run wild.'"⁹⁹ Americans eventually recognized this, as a Pew Research report released in June 1998, notes that words such as "biased" or "sensational," were used to describe the media more often than "informative" or "fair."¹⁰⁰ A Gallup poll reflects this, as 72% of Americans polled felt that there had been too much media coverage, and 55% felt that the media acted

⁹⁷ Alicia Shepard, "White Noise," *American Journalism Review* (January-February 1999), <https://ajrarchive.org/Article.asp?id=520>.

⁹⁸ "Popular Policies and Unpopular Press Lift Clinton Ratings," Pew Research Center, February 6, 1998, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/1998/02/06/popular-policies-and-unpopular-press-lift-clinton-ratings/>.

⁹⁹ Joseph Hayden, *Covering Clinton: The President and the Press in the 1990s* (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 88.

¹⁰⁰ "Internet News Takes Off," Pew Research Center, June 8, 1998, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/1998/06/08/section-4-news-media-credibility/>.

irresponsibly in their reporting of the scandal.¹⁰¹ The media's constant coverage and sensationalism of the Lewinsky affair had backfired on them – Americans had felt that the ceaseless reporting and exaggeration of the story had gone too far. However, this was only the beginning – the impeachment inquiry and vote was months away still, and the media did not stop in their coverage of Clinton and Lewinsky.

By the time the Starr Report was released, and the House of Representatives began the impeachment inquiry against Clinton, media coverage about the affair and the possibility of impeachment increased. On a CNN editorial segment from December 1998, the anchors and journalists analyzed the potential effects of Clinton's impeachment on American society and government. In the report, CNN tried to convince their audience that regardless of the outcome in the impeachment trial, American life would not be altered.¹⁰² To strengthen their claim, they cited Watergate, Nixon's eventual resignation, and ensuing events – noting that most of these events would happen anyway, even if Nixon did not resign.¹⁰³ CNN's ending argument was that Clinton's impeachment would not alter the functions of government drastically and that the institution of the presidency would not be weakened.¹⁰⁴ By making this claim, however, CNN sensationalized Clinton's impeachment by comparing it to Nixon's impeachment. They aired footage of the impeachment debates – with one Representative noting that “If this Congress impeaches the president on these grounds, today will go down as one of the saddest days in American history.”¹⁰⁵ The specific use of the CSPAN footage from the House debate is used to try

¹⁰¹ Frank Newport and Alec Gallup, “Clinton's Popularity Paradox,” Gallup, January 31, 1998, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/4264/clintons-popularity-paradox.aspx>.

¹⁰² Joie Chen, “CNN WorldView,” Cable News Network, Atlanta, Georgia: CNN, December 20, 1998.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

to convince the audience that the likelihood of removal is minor. CNN was not the only outlet to do this, however; traditional media sources were also sensationalizing the impeachment. An article from *The New York Times*, also published in December 1998, discusses the reaction by Clinton and his staff to the House's impeachment vote:

As dusk darkened a gray, clammy day in Washington, the President grasped Hillary Rodham Clinton's hand and waded back through the Democrats to attend a meeting of his senior foreign policy advisors... After announcing his decision on Iraq, Mr. Clinton donned [a] black tie for a holiday dinner at the White House. That brought to a jarringly festive end [to] his darkest day in an almost unimaginable sequence of events set in motion 20 years ago when he and Mrs. Clinton signed papers on a money-losing land investment along the White River in the Ozark Mountains.¹⁰⁶

The usage of wording such as “dusk darkened a gray, clammy day,” as well as “a jarringly festive end [to] his darkest day” are sensationalized statements, written so the reader could try to imagine exactly what was happening and what was going on in the Clinton White House.¹⁰⁷ The intended effect of such language was to create an image of Clinton as weary and defeated – trying to capture the mood of Clinton and the White House at the time. Throughout Clinton's impeachment, the media was quick to report and dramatize the impeachment proceedings, in what should have been a somber time for the country. Instead, media companies, both traditional and new, followed Drudge's example on reporting – exaggerating and over-reporting certain events for the sake of ratings and profit. The lasting repercussions of these decisions left Americans wary and tired of media sensationalism.

The constant coverage and exaggeration of the Lewinsky affair and Clinton's impeachment left a sour taste in many Americans' mouths. The media was reporting on

¹⁰⁶ “Impeachment: The President – Clinton Impeached; President Digs In,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), December 20, 1998.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

Clinton's impeachment and scandal incessantly – it was reported that the Associated Press published over four thousand stories in the year after the *Drudge Report's* initial story, just about the Lewinsky affair.¹⁰⁸ That averages to over eleven stories a day, in the period between January 21st, 1998, and January 21st, 1999. This obsession with Clinton and Lewinsky's affair and the eventual impeachment damaged credibility and trust in the media as Americans were tired from the constant reporting of it. In an article published by *The New York Times*, Pew Research revealed that Americans were much more concerned about other events that happened during the course of the year: "[Americans] cared less about impeachment than they did about the school shootings in Arkansas, the shootings in the Capitol, the November elections, the summer heat wave and the military strikes against Iraq, Afghanistan and the Sudan."¹⁰⁹ Media outlets had overplayed their hand, alienating the American public through the ceaseless reporting of Clinton's impeachment. In turn, Americans became wary of media – especially new media. Cable news networks, primetime talk shows, and the internet altered the rules by which traditional journalists had been abiding by for decades – they largely used "shoot first, question later" tactics and sensationalism to maintain relevance and an edge over other outlets. As Diana Owen states, "new media thrive by treating politics as entertainment, and their political role is amplified when scandal can be framed in dramatic, personal terms."¹¹⁰ New media, followed by traditional outlets, over-sensationalized the Lewinsky affair, which in turn, resulted in Americans

¹⁰⁸ Michael Gartner, "How The Monica Story Played In Mid-America," *Columbia Journalism Review* (May/June 1999), <https://web.s.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=d5e69c87-5214-48f6-bb68-39d9b4e620dd%40redis>.

¹⁰⁹ "Impeachment: The Media; In Poll, Public Says Clinton Scandal Wasn't '98's Most Compelling Event," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), December 23, 1998.

¹¹⁰ Diana Owen, "Popular Politics and the Clinton/Lewinsky Affair: The Implications for Leadership," *Political Psychology* 21, no. 1 (March 2000): 162.

discounting the seriousness of the allegations and the impacts that it would have on the government. Americans had more interest in other stories than the first impeachment of an American president since 1868 because most viewed it as a politically motivated exercise. The new media's incessant coverage of the impeachment can be attributed to two factors: profit and ratings. New media at the time, such as CNN, Fox News, and the *Drudge Report*, were all growing outlets still and relied on high ratings to attract advertisers. Thus, a loop was conceived: in order to generate more profit, they depended on advertisers, and to get high-paying advertisers, they needed to keep ratings up. Since these outlets did not have prescribed and well-established rules and norms, they were "not accountable to journalistic... authorities," which meant coverage can be blatantly biased and vary in trustworthiness.¹¹¹ This became dangerous to traditional media which saw a decline in their viewership and ratings, thus, they had to adapt to remain relevant.¹¹² New media ethics and norms trickled slowly into traditional outlets where less rigorous journalistic research resulted in headlines for many.

Effects on the American Electorate, Media, and Government

By February 12, 1999, Clinton had been acquitted in the Senate on the two charges that the House voted on: perjury and obstruction of justice. After the removal attempt failed, he was able to get back to governing the country, putting the Lewinsky scandal largely behind him. While most Americans were supportive of the President and against his removal, the impeachment process, from the never-ending media coverage to the partisan impeachment votes in the House, changed the way the American electorate viewed the political process, the

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² "Internet News Takes Off," Pew Research Center, June 8, 1998, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/1998/06/08/section-2-reading-watching-and-listening-to-the-news/>.

institutions of government, and the media. Political observers noticed the way in which the parties became more polarized, unlike the decades prior.¹¹³ The Republican Party's handling of the Starr Report and the impeachment inquiry shifted their appeal towards the fringe elements of their coalition – namely the “Religious Right” and others that were not considered centrist conservatives.¹¹⁴ Clinton's impeachment was based on morality and character issues, which were of concern to fundamentalist Christians in the Republican Party, but not central to the actual functions of his job.¹¹⁵ Americans started wondering if the government could effectively govern anymore after a partisan attempt at removing a popular President.¹¹⁶ Finally, Americans questioned whether they can truly trust the media since the new media platforms profoundly altered the way in which traditional sources reported. This included instituting the 24-hour news cycle, as well as sensationalizing stories and implementing the “shoot first, question later” technique. Though the Clinton acquittal proved that American institutions *could* work, it also proved, for the first time, that the institutions could also be subject to partisan whims which fundamentally damaged trust in government and media.

The media significantly damaged its credibility during the course of the Lewinsky scandal and the ensuing impeachment of Clinton – even after he was acquitted. Both traditional and new media outlets were responsible for acquiescing to, and capitalizing from, the partisan furor that engulfed the United States government for over a year. Starting with Drudge's January 1998

¹¹³ Karen Popp, “The Impeachment of President Clinton: An Ugly Mix of Three Powerful Forces,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 63, no. ½ (2000): 236.

¹¹⁴ Lloyd Grove, “Clinton's Public Enemy; Even Before Monica Lewinsky, Bob Barr Had Impeachment on His Mind,” *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), February 10, 1998.

¹¹⁵ Sara Fritz, “Weyrich Concedes Defeat as Defender of Morals,” *Louisville Courier-Journal* (Louisville, KY), March 6, 1999.

¹¹⁶ Michael Kagay, “Public Opinion and Polling During Presidential Scandal and Impeachment,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (1999): 457.

article, the media was forced to reckon with a changing landscape – one where unsubstantiated reports became the source of news. In order to remain relevant in the evolving news industry, traditional outlets had to adapt to become more like the new media:

Into the vacuum created by a scarcity of clear and credible attribution raced all manner of rumor, gossip, and especially, hollow sourcing, making the reports of some mainstream outlets scarcely distinguishable from supermarket tabloids. The rush to be first or to be more sensational created a picture of irresponsibility seldom seen in the reporting of presidential affairs. Not until the story settled in a bit did much of the reporting again begin to resemble what has been expected of mainstream news organizations.¹¹⁷

Due to the traction and gain in followers that Drudge's story had produced, other outlets followed his model. Only after the story had run its course did some of the outlets return to a semblance of traditional journalism. However, even after the initial bombshell report about the Lewinsky affair, new media continued to feed into the partisan nature and sensationalism that the story could produce: "news organizations, including MSNBC and talk radio shows, found that scandal coverage increased their ratings."¹¹⁸ Media organizations are inherently motivated by profit and ratings, and despite Americans discounting the seriousness of the scandal and impeachment, they continued to report on it. That is largely due to the way in which many news outlets framed the scandal: as entertainment, rather than a major political event. However, in doing so, media outlets framed the perception of political scandal as theater, rather than an incident to be taken seriously:

The ways in which the mass media frame political news have been shown to influence the public's perceptions of political actors, issues, and events... As serious as the political implications of the Clinton/Lewinsky affair were for presidential leadership, the

¹¹⁷ Jules Witcover, "Where We Went Wrong," *Columbia Journalism Review* (March/April 1998), https://ia801802.us.archive.org/13/items/sim_columbia-journalism-review_march-april-1998_36_6/sim_columbia-journalism-review_march-april-1998_36_6.pdf.

¹¹⁸ Diana Owen, "Popular Politics and the Clinton/Lewinsky Affair: The Implications for Leadership," *Political Psychology* 21, no. 1 (March 2000): 167.

scandal had a firm rooting in the realm of popular culture. The public experienced the events via media that framed the scandal in the familiar terms of a made-for-TV drama.¹¹⁹

Rampant sensationalism, combined with over-reporting and relying on ambiguous, and usually hollow sources, inherently changed how the media, both traditional and new, functioned.

Whereas this was not the first instance of such factors in the mainstream media, new outlets forced many of the conventional methods of reporting to change permanently and all at once.

The credibility and trust once instilled in the mainstream media had been indelibly damaged and new media outlets, especially internet news, were to blame.

The unregulated nature of the internet shoulders the most responsibility for the decline of public trust in the media. The internet in its infancy was a place where anyone with enough coding experience could design and publish a website with any sort of content on it. The internet was initially designed as an infrastructure for universities to share information rapidly, however, the development of the World Wide Web made it accessible to anyone with the right equipment.¹²⁰ These advancements in technology is what made it possible for Matt Drudge to create *The Drudge Report*, and eventually, publish the bombshell report about Lewinsky's affair with Clinton. Since the internet is an abstract concept and space, journalists on it were not held to the same standard that mainstream and traditional reporters were. However, due to the popularity, reach, and accessibility of the internet, mainstream outlets had to acclimate to the changing nature of journalism. That involved being the first to report on a breaking story ("shoot first, question later"), as well as sourcing information from nebulous and indefinite sources. In a study to examine the credibility of information on the internet, respondents were

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Jon Guice, Looking Backward and Forward at the Internet," *The Information Society* 14, no. 3 (1998): 202.

asked to “judge whether the information on the Web page was more or less in-depth and biased than similar televised information” – the results were that 71% judged the webpage as more “in-depth” and over 43% said the information was “less biased” than the television.¹²¹



Figure 4. Polls conducted by Gallup regarding whether news organizations get facts correct or if their stories are inaccurate. Notice the sharp rise between 1998 and 2000 in the “Often Inaccurate” data points. After the rise of internet news, media became harder to trust.

Source: Gallup “Media Use and Evaluation,” <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1663/media-use-evaluation.aspx>.

However, reports and news on the internet are not held to the same journalistic standard as traditional mainstream outlets. Just as Drudge did in January 1998, reporters can publish any information they want to, even if it is inaccurate, misleading, or incomplete. The central tenets of traditional reporting – objectivity, facts, and trustworthy sources – were thrown to the wayside on the internet, in the name of popularity and shock value. The sensational nature of

¹²¹ Thomas Johnson and Barbara Kaye, “Cruising is Believing?: Comparing Internet and Traditional Sources on Media Credibility Measures,” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (1998): 326.

the internet and new media damaged the credibility that traditional outlets had long enjoyed in American political discourse, altering the way in which average Americans viewed scandal, governmental issues, and the news itself. However, the government bears some of the blame for the decline of trust in politics and administrative processes; the partisanship that the Republican Party displayed prompted Americans to question whether the government can effectively administer.

The way in which Clinton's impeachment progressed from September 1998 until his acquittal in February 1999, damaged how the American electorate viewed government, as well as fragmented the government itself. By the time of the release of the Starr Report, nearly two-thirds of the American electorate thought that Clinton should not be impeached for his actions.¹²² While the vast majority of the nation did not approve of his behavior and actions regarding the affair with Lewinsky and the attempted cover-up, Americans believed that this was a matter of Clinton's personal life – not an act that warrants impeachment and removal. The public, however, endorsed a resolution of censure against Clinton – with 52% of Americans being in favor.¹²³ Senator Dianne Feinstein, a Democrat from California, introduced such a resolution; however, Senate Republicans opposed the bill, favoring the partisan path that commenced in the House.¹²⁴ Despite public opinion being strongly against impeachment, Congressional Republicans moved forward with their plan. In doing so, the House of Representatives lowered the standard of impeachment and alienated the American electorate. Instead of it acting as a somber balance of power, in the case that a president truly abuses his

¹²² Michael Kagay, "Public Opinion and Polling During Presidential Scandal and Impeachment," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (1999): 460.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Peter Baker, "Senate Acquits Clinton; Censure Blocked," *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), February 12, 1999, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/clinton/stories/update021299.htm>.

power and commits a “high Crime or Misdemeanor,” Congressional Republicans used it to blatantly score political points against Democrats and Clinton in the name of morality. The majority of Americans disagreed with Starr’s methods as well, as they thought he was more concerned with removing Clinton than in being impartial in the pursuit of truth.¹²⁵ Ultimately, the inquiry nearly cost them control of Congress in the 1998 midterm elections. Yet they persisted even after the election results largely were a referendum on the Republicans’ handling of the impeachment question. Republicans share significant responsibility for the polarization and partisanship during this period. In the face of overwhelming public disapproval for impeachment, they marched forward in pursuit of it. They disregarded any offers and pleas from the Democrats, and completely ignored public opinion, sowing the seeds of distrust in the government.

The question of governance, especially in the aftermath of the impeachment, was one on many Americans’ minds. Throughout the impeachment process, “negative government stereotypes were reinforced... The investigation was viewed as wasteful with conservative estimates of more than \$40 million spent by the Office of Independent Counsel to probe what many saw as a private affair.”¹²⁶ The public did not understand why the Republicans were determined to pursue impeachment, when most Americans saw Clinton’s affair as a matter of his personal – not public – life. The trust in government to effectively govern in the public interest was damaged due to this – the partisan investigation consumed vast monetary and

¹²⁵ Molly Sonner and Clyde Wilcox, “Forgiving and Forgetting: Public Support for Bill Clinton During the Lewinsky Scandal,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 32, no. 3 (1999): 556.

¹²⁶ Steve Koven and Julie Kunselman, “Trust in Government: Lessons from the Clinton Impeachment,” *International Journal of Public Administration* 26, no. 2 (2003): 207.

administrative resources, for no apparent reason. However, the damage to the government was deeper:

The Volcker Commission Report noted that public service was neither as attractive nor as effective in meeting perceived needs as it was in previous years. The Report contended that only a small percentage of senior government executives would recommend that young people start their careers in government... It is hard to image that the Clinton impeachment will reverse these disconcerting trends and inspire confidence in public service. The impeachment may further erode the talent pool for public service.¹²⁷

The impeachment of Clinton damaged the government in more ways than just the erosion of trust – it negatively impacted the number of people willing to work for the government due to increasing partisanship and the assumption that the government has become increasingly ineffective. The trust in the government that had been instilled in generations of Americans had begun to erode after the events that transpired in the year after January 17th, 1998 – starting with media sensationalism, followed by the Starr Report and the ensuing pursuit of impeachment by Congressional Republicans. The effects of media on Clinton's impeachment had extensive consequences for government, media, and the American electorate – ones that were largely irreversible.

Conclusion

The evolution of media throughout the 1990s helped largely shape Clinton's presidency and his legacy – without new media in particular, the outcome of the 1992 election, as well as his impeachment proceedings in 1998 would likely have ended differently. Clinton's various character issues would have been much more significant to the American electorate in 1992 if it

¹²⁷ Ibid.

had not been for cable news outlets and primetime talk shows, which allowed him to emotionally connect with Americans, something that he couldn't do through traditional outlets. If it were not for the internet and cable news in 1998, Clinton's legacy would have remained largely intact and untouched – the Lewinsky story would not have broken with the fervor it did. That is not to say that Clinton would not have been impeached – Kenneth Starr had already known about the Lewinsky affair and perjury committed, before the Drudge story became public. However, the unrelenting media attention paid to the story, along with the increasingly Congressional partisanship, gave Starr cover to recommend impeachment. In effect, new media both built Clinton up and eventually tried to tear him down.

However, it was the American population that gave power to these new media outlets – viewership increases ratings, which amplified profit. In turn, it led to these outlets finding ways to increase ratings and viewership by constantly reporting and sensationalizing what Americans find exciting; in essence, it became a form of a feedback loop. This leads back to the main question posed in the introduction of this thesis: what drove Americans to seek other news outlets and why? In both the 1992 election and the 1998 impeachment, new media capitalized on the feelings and emotions of Americans, as well as the political theater involving the private life of an American president. In 1992, these cable news networks and primetime talk shows gave Clinton an outlet to express his compassionate and empathetic personality – a unique capability of these programs and a way to get a rare look into the persona of a presidential candidate. Traditional networks, due to the regulations placed on them by the FCC, could not blatantly favor a candidate. Americans resonated with these outlets more since they allowed for direct communication from Clinton. In 1998, the internet and cable news exploited the salacious

nature of Clinton's private life – treating it as dramatic theater, instead of a political stain that could have wide-ranging impacts on the American presidency and politics in general. Americans were drawn to these new media outlets because these mediums catered to their inherently voyeuristic and sensationalistic nature far more than traditional outlets.

Lasting Implications

The effects of the new media outlets on traditional media, as well as the government, were not visible immediately. The events of 1992 and 1998 have had lasting implications for the media and government – namely an increase in sensationalism, inaccurate reporting, as well as political polarization. These consequences eventually affected American society as well. The legacy of the media during the 1990s is one that is tarnished by targeted personalization, melodrama, and intentional journalistic hastiness, and its effects are still felt in America. While the government did become more polarized before Clinton, the media's actions catalyzed this divide, driving Republicans, Democrats, and the American public apart and into their respective echo chambers.

In 1992, the media's actions largely affected the government and political polarization. The election of Clinton as president alienated some Americans, who were part of Ronald Reagan's new Republican coalition – Clinton was seen as a grossly immoral leader to these voters. To many Republicans, it was a distasteful turn from the Reagan-era social policies of the 1980s. With the various scandals surrounding Clinton – namely his extramarital affair with Gennifer Flowers – these voters saw Clinton as a stain on the nation, the presidency, and new media, who largely heralded him. Besides Clinton's personal misgivings, these Americans

thought that by the sheer virtue of Clinton's appearances on programs such as *The Arsenio Hall Show* disqualified him as a viable president, since it was regarded as unbecoming of a president to be on such shows. In effect, the new media's parading of Clinton and the disregard for his personal issues drove a sizeable portion of the American electorate away from the new media, as well as politics.

In 1998, the new media's actions affected the ways in which traditional journalism works and how the media was trusted. The release of Drudge's story about the Lewinsky affair had permanently altered traditional journalistic practices. Instead of accurate reporting and objectivity, the new media had created an atmosphere where inaccuracy and sensationalism were rewarded, and the traditional outlets followed suit. Headlines and stories that were featured on fringe news websites, as well as tabloids, made their way to the traditional media, fundamentally changing how news organizations were perceived. Instead of framing political events and stories as incidents that could have governmental implications, new media framed these as entertainment and theater, because it increased ratings and profit. In order for the traditional outlets to remain relevant, they were forced to change and adapt the ways in which they report and publish news. In effect, rumor and innuendo became headlines and political echo chambers became more commonplace.

The effects of 1992 can be seen during Clinton's 1998 impeachment. As polarization increased, it led to the partisan investigations that plagued Clinton's presidency in the latter half of his eight-year tenure. The impeachment inquiry and subsequent vote by the House of Representatives were nearly along party lines – the entire exercise of the impeachment was seen largely as partisan by the American public, who overwhelmingly disapproved of it.

However, Republicans signaled that they did not care about the court of public opinion and marched forward anyway. The partisanship and the lowering of the standard of presidential impeachment had damaged American political discourse and created mistrust in the government. Americans who recognized that this was a purely partisan exercise began to question if the government could effectively work for much longer. While the effects of Clinton's impeachment had yet to be seen in the immediate aftermath, it was clear that Americans' perception of government had fundamentally changed, and that trust had declined in the government to act in the nation's best interest.

Final Thoughts

The rise of new media in the 1990s damaged American society in ways that were not immediately seen. Cable news networks, primetime talk shows, and the internet had a large role in polarizing the American electorate, and while these formats are not in the aggregate, they accounted for a large portion of what Americans had been listening to and viewing in the 1990s. By dramatizing politics, turning events into theater, and targeting an audience based upon their political beliefs, new media allowed for the creation of political echo chambers, in which members of their respective political parties could be fed information and propaganda which only supported their political leanings. These political bubbles eventually drift farther apart and become more and more insulated, and isolated, from each other. Thus, the opposite bubbles become distrustful of each other, only leading to more division. New media thrived by giving into these divisions and echo chambers, and Americans sought these outlets out to

confirm their own thoughts and prejudices. The resulting effect is a fractured and less cohesive government and American population that cannot agree on a common set of facts and truths.

Epilogue: One Nation, Indivisible?

The effects of “new media” on the government and population were not immediate, and they were not instantly visible at the end of Clinton’s presidency in 2000. Polarization and distrust in media and government had increased during the latter half of his tenure – but whether or not this was an ongoing trend was unclear at the time. However, extrapolating this thesis and its research can provide insight regarding America’s current political climate, the hallmarks of which are dysfunction, distrust, and extreme polarization. “New media” actors are largely responsible for this – the internet and cable news amplified various conspiracy theories about the government and political parties, all while isolating their audience from other views. To thoroughly examine this, the insurrection of January 6th, 2021, will be the lens in which the effects of “new media” are studied in today’s climate. For the purpose of brevity, this epilogue will examine the 2020 election and insurrection in a bubble – not analyzing “new media” throughout Donald Trump’s first three years in office. The United States today is one nation, divided more than ever before, with the exception of the Civil War.

The 2020 presidential election set forth the domino effect that led to the events that occurred on January 6th, 2021. The attacks by Trump on the integrity of the election started well before November 3, 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many states changed their voting laws to expand the mail-in ballot option – several of these states being predominantly Democrat-leaning.¹²⁸ However, Trump made numerous claims throughout this period to undermine the integrity of mail-in voting, planting the seeds to challenge the legitimacy of the

¹²⁸ Nathaniel Rakich and Jasmine Mithani, “What Absentee Voting Looked Like in All 50 States,” FiveThirtyEight, February 9, 2021, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/what-absentee-voting-looked-like-in-all-50-states/>.

election in the case he lost.¹²⁹ For example, Trump tweeted in June 2020 that “MILLIONS OF MAIL-IN BALLOTS WILL BE PRINTED IN FOREIGN COUNTRIES, AND OTHERS. IT WILL BE THE SCANDAL OF OUR TIMES” without citing any sources or evidence to bolster his claim.¹³⁰ This behavior continued all the way until the November election, and even continuing after, when Joe Biden won both the popular and Electoral College votes.¹³¹ Trump didn’t just attack mail-in voting though, he also criticized electronic voting machines that had been used before. In doing so, Trump was planting doubt into his supporters’ minds about the validity of the election – and it worked. In the aftermath of the election, Trump mounted legal challenges, in an attempt to overturn the election results and 94% of Trump supporters supported his efforts.¹³² It is apparent that Trump’s efforts to create distrust in the electoral process worked as the country had become incredibly divided on the question of the legitimacy of the outcome. However, it was not only Trump who had planted these seeds – these sentiments were echoed by now-prominent cable news networks, such as Fox News, as well as other fringe internet websites that had gained popularity during Trump’s presidency.

“New media,” as defined in the introduction of this thesis, had been around for approximately twenty years by the time the 2020 presidential election occurred. However, it became much more toxic: the voracity of the partisanship on cable news networks was much worse and the internet had grown into an uncontrollable stream of information, including

¹²⁹ Miles Parks, “Ignoring FBI and Fellow Republicans, Trump Continues Assault on Mail-In Voting,” NPR, August 28, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/08/28/906676695/ignoring-fbi-and-fellow-republicans-trump-continues-assault-on-mail-in-voting>.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ “The American Presidency Project,” U.C. Santa Barbara, Accessed March 14, 2022. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/elections/2020>.

¹³² “Sharp Divisions on Vote Counts, as Biden Gets High Marks for His Post-Election Conduct,” Pew Research Center, November 20, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/11/20/biden-trump-and-the-post-election-period/>.

conspiracy theories and other disinformation that had propagated on social media platforms.

The growth of these outlets had become even more dangerous to American institutions and the population, as they were still heavily deregulated or unregulated. Throughout the 2020 election, these dangers manifested into the eventual insurrection at the Capitol on January 6th. During an opinion segment that aired in early December 2020 on the “Hannity” show on Fox News, host Sean Hannity echoed Trump’s claims of a “stolen election” – claiming that “surveillance videos in two states... now cast what is real significant doubts on the integrity of the 2020 election.”¹³³

These cable news networks had become more dangerous throughout the twenty-year period between Clinton and Trump’s presidencies – they had expanded their opinionated programs and echoed baseless claims. The lasting implications of the “new media,” as discussed earlier, have come to fruition during Trump’s tenure. The traditional norms of journalism and reporting had collapsed in the name of ratings and popularity. Cable networks had become more blatantly partisan, isolating its viewers from other opposing views with their “opinion” shows. However, conspiracy websites also had a sizeable role in the dissemination of disinformation during this time. InfoWars, a prominent right-wing website for conspiracies, published an article by Trump political operative Roger Stone, two days before the 2020 election, where he details how the Democrats are going to “steal” the election. Stone mentioned that “[Democrats] are already in the process of resorting to widespread voter fraud to stop the quickly rising Trump and have troweled up a practical army of at least 600 sleazy lawfare specialists from the bottom of the Democrat lawyer cesspool, eagerly scheming to pressure election boards to ratify various

¹³³ Charles Creitz, “Hannity: Georgia Gov. Kemp ‘Taking Baby Steps in Right Direction’ While Others Ignore ‘Evidence,’” Fox News Online, December 4, 2020, <https://www.foxnews.com/media/hannity-georgia-brian-kemp-baby-steps-right-direction>.

Democrat election-stealing fraud schemes.”¹³⁴ These instances of spreading conspiracy theories without any credible evidence or sources has resulted in the rapid decline of trust in democracy and American institutions, and the increase in political polarization. Left untouched and unregulated for nearly two decades, cable news and the internet have grown into monsters of our own creation that have divided the American population seemingly beyond repair, and forever damaged the credibility of the media and the government. The most significant impact of these “new media” outlets had yet to be seen however, until January 6th.

January 6th, 2021 is arguably the darkest day in recent American history – and it was largely the result of “new media.” During the certification of the presidential election by Congress, Trump supporters had stormed the Capitol building where the joint session of Congress was meeting. Hours earlier, they had been gathered outside the White House in a rally to support Trump’s bid to overturn the results of the election, where Trump told them “We fight like hell. And if you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore” and that “fake news” had been responsible for the rigging of the election.¹³⁵ What is deemed “fake news” by Trump are the outlets that criticize him, or seen as part of the mainstream, liberal-leaning outlets. Following his speech, Trump’s supporters marched and stormed the Capitol, eventually being forced out by the National Guard hours after the insurrection began. This insurrection was caused by “new media” and its symbiotic relationship with Trump. As mentioned earlier, Trump had instilled in his supporters’ minds that any news outlet that criticizes him is “fake” and cannot be trusted; thus, they started to flock and subscribe to other outlets, such as InfoWars or

¹³⁴ Roger Stone, “ROGER STONE: How the Democrats Plan to Steal the 2020 Election,” InfoWars, November 1, 2020, <https://www.infowars.com/posts/roger-stone-how-the-democrats-plan-to-steal-the-2020-election/>.

¹³⁵ Brian Naylor, “Read Trump’s Jan. 6 Speech, A Key Part of Impeachment Trial,” NPR, February 10, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966396848/read-trumps-jan-6-speech-a-key-part-of-impeachment-trial>.

One American News Network (OANN).¹³⁶ Unlike Fox News Network, these outlets were even more politically extreme – largely focusing on conspiracies and disinformation that was too inflammatory for the other outlets. InfoWars and OANN spread the conspiracy that the election was “stolen” and “rigged,” and convinced their audience that Trump had won the vote in a landslide, all the while decrying Democrats and claiming that a Democratic “cabal” was responsible.¹³⁷ In doing so, a portion of Trump’s supporters became swayed that Joe Biden was not a legitimate president and that they had to save the country. The end result was the storming of the Capitol on January 6th – Trump’s supporters were so induced by the propaganda and disinformation spun by these outlets that they felt they had no other choice. “New media,” incited by Trump, had trumpeted various conspiracies, leading to the violence that followed Trump’s speech and rally that day. While Trump bears all the blame for the violence that occurred, “new media” is responsible for the amplification of this message into the division, polarization, and disinformation that plagues American society. January 6th was a result of the decades of unregulated “new media” that had begun during Clinton’s presidency.

To answer the question in the title, “One Nation, Indivisible?,” the clear answer is that this nation is divided more than ever, with the exception of the Civil War. “New media” has divided Americans in a way that seems irreversible – the population is too isolated and insulated in their respective political echo chambers to achieve any real unity or consensus. The trend that had started under Clinton, with the development of sensationalist, niche outlets that catered more toward fringe elements of the political spectrum had continued and worsened

¹³⁶ Lisa Richwine, “Fox News Extends Streak, Sets Cable News Records in 2020,” Reuters, December 29, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-media-news-ratings/fox-news-extends-streak-sets-cable-news-records-in-2020-idUSKBN29404E>.

¹³⁷ Ben Warren, “Time Mag Celebrates ‘Cabal of Powerful People’ Influencing 2020 Election,” InfoWars, February 5, 2021, <https://www.infowars.com/posts/leftist-rag-celebrates-shadow-campaign-to-manipulate-election/>.

over time. This research gives insight into America's current political climate and where it largely originated from. The rise of "new media" and its deregulated and unregulated nature are largely responsible for the political polarization and governmental mistrust that Americans experienced in the Clinton years, as well as now. The isolation that these outlets provided in the 1990s had grown into large, inescapable echo chambers that has permanently altered American political discourse. The damage that "new media" inflicted upon the government and the American population has become irreversible through the last two decades, leading to the question, where do we go from here?

Bibliography

- "The American Presidency Project." U.C. Santa Barbara. Accessed March 14, 2022.
<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/elections/2020>.
- "The American Presidency Project." U.C. Santa Barbara. Accessed January 19, 2022.
<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/elections/1992>.
- Baker, Peter. "Senate Acquits Clinton; Censure Blocked." *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), February 12, 1999.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/clinton/stories/update021299.htm>.
- "Bill Clinton 1992: Road to the White House." *CNN* online, 1996.
<http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/multimedia/timeline/9809/starr.report/cnn.content/clinton.92/>.
- Brokaw, Tom. "NBC Evening News." National Broadcasting Company. New York, New York: NBC, April 16, 1992.
- Chen, Joie. "CNN WorldView." Cable News Network. Atlanta, Georgia: CNN, December 20, 1998.
- Clinton, Bill. "Facing the Future with Bill Clinton – Young Voters' Forum 6/12/92." theleeoverstreet. October 25, 2018. Video, 1:32:15.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rLN117VChTQ&ab_channel=theleeoverstreet.
- "Clinton Probe Partisan, Poll Says." *The Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), September 28, 1998.
- Creitz, Charles. "Hannity: Georgia Gov. Kemp 'Taking Baby Steps in Right Direction' While Others Ignore 'Evidence.'" Fox News Online. December 4, 2020.
<https://www.foxnews.com/media/hannity-georgia-brian-kemp-baby-steps-right-direction>.
- Dalton, Russell, Paul Beck and Robert Huckfeldt. "Partisan Cues and the Media: Information Flows in the 1992 Presidential Election." *American Political Science Review* 92, no. 1 (March 1998): 111-126.

Drudge, Matt. "NEWSWEEK KILLS STORY ON WHITE HOUSE INTERN." The Drudge Report. January 17, 1998.

http://www.drudgereportarchives.com/dsp/specialReports_pc_carden_detail.htm?reportID={1438D0F5-6CE1-4B2E-8496-E7A52B8ABA5B}.

"Drudge Report: Web Archive." Library of Congress. Accessed February 9, 2022.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/lcwaN0010145/>.

FCC. "Broadcasting False Information." Last modified January 8, 2021.

<https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/broadcasting-false-information>.

FCC. "Cable Television." Last modified June 15, 2021.

<https://www.fcc.gov/media/engineering/cable-television>.

FCC. "The Public and Broadcasting." Last modified September 2021.

<https://www.fcc.gov/media/radio/public-and-broadcasting#POLITICAL>.

Fritz, Sara. "Weyrich Concedes Defeat as Defender of Morals." *Louisville Courier-Journal* (Louisville, KY), March 6, 1999.

Gallup. "Media Use and Evaluation." Accessed January 17, 2022.

<https://news.gallup.com/poll/1663/media-use-evaluation.aspx>.

Gartner, Michael. "How the Monica Story Played in Mid-America." *Columbia Journalism Review* (May/June 1999).

<https://web.s.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=d5e69c87-5214-48f6-bb68-39d9b4e620dd%40redis>.

"George Bush's Failure – Bill Clinton's Promise." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), October 25, 1992.

Grove, Lloyd. "Clinton's Public Enemy; Even Before Monica Lewinsky, Bob Barr Had Impeachment on His Mind." *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), February 10, 1998.

Guice, Jon. "Looking Backward and Forward at the Internet." *The Information Society* 14, no. 3 (1998): 201-211.

- Hall, Arsenio. "The Arsenio Hall Show." CSPAN. June 3, 1992. Video, 4:30.
<https://www.c-span.org/video/?26472-1/clinton-appearance-arsenio-hall-show>.
- Harwood, Richard. "PBS vs. MTV; So Many Media, So Little Time." *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), September 2, 1992.
- Hayden, Joseph. *Covering Clinton: The President and the Press in the 1990s*. Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002.
- "Impeachment: The Media; In Poll, Public Says Clinton Scandal Wasn't '98's Most Compelling Event." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), December 23, 1998.
- "Impeachment: The President – Clinton Impeached; President Digs In." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), December 20, 1998.
- Johnson, Thomas, and Barbara Kaye. "Cruising is Believing?: Comparing Internet and Traditional Sources on Media Credibility Measures." *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (1998): 325-340.
- Kagay, Michael. "Public Opinion and Polling During Presidential Scandal and Impeachment." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (1999): 449-463.
- Kahn, Robert, Barry M. Leiner, Vinton G. Cerf, David D. Clark, Leonard Kleinrock, Daniel C. Lynch, Jon Postel, Lawrence E. Roberts, and Stephen Wolff. "The Evolution of the Internet as a Global Information System." *International Information and Library Review* 29, no. 2 (1997): 129-151.
- Koven, Steven, and Julie Kunselman. "Trust in Government: Lessons from the Clinton Impeachment." *International Journal of Public Administration* 26, no. 2 (2003): 197-212.
- Kurtz, Howard. "Clinton Scoop So Hot It Melted; Newsweek Editors Held Off On Scandal Story." *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), January 22, 1998.
- Kurtz, Howard. "Crazy Like a Fox: Question His News Judgment, Perhaps, But Never Underestimate Roger Ailes." *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), March 26, 1999.
- Maggiotto, Michael and Gary Weekin. "'His to Lose': The Failure of George Herbert Walker Bush, 1992." *The American Review of Politics* no. 14 (1993): 163-182.

McCurry, Mike. "Press Briefing by Mike McCurry." The American Presidency Project. U.C. Santa Barbara, January 23, 1998.

<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/press-briefing-mike-mccurry-85>.

Myers, Dee Dee. "Perspectives." *The American Behavioral Scientist* 37, no. 2 (1993): 181-184.

Naylor, Brian. "Read Trump's Jan. 6 Speech, A Key Part of Impeachment Trial." NPR. February 10, 2021.

<https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966396848/read-trumps-jan-6-speech-a-key-part-of-impeachment-trial>.

Newport, Frank and Alec Gallup. "Clinton's Popularity Paradox." Gallup. January 31, 1998.

<https://news.gallup.com/poll/4264/clintons-popularity-paradox.aspx>.

Owen, Diana. "Popular Politics and the Clinton/Lewinsky Affair: The Implications for Presidential Leadership." *Political Psychology* 21, no. 1 (2000): 161-177.

Parks, Miles. "Ignoring FBI and Fellow Republicans, Trump Continues Assault on Mail-In Voting." NPR. August 28, 2020.

<https://www.npr.org/2020/08/28/906676695/ignoring-fbi-and-fellow-republicans-trump-continues-assault-on-mail-in-voting>.

Pew Research Center. "Internet News Takes Off." June 8, 1998.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/1998/06/08/internet-news-takes-off/>.

Pew Research Center. "Popular Policies and Unpopular Press Lift Clinton Ratings." February 6, 1998.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/1998/02/06/popular-policies-and-unpopular-press-lift-clinton-ratings/>.

Pew Research Center. "Sharp Division on Vote Counts, as Biden Gets High Marks for His Post-Election Conduct." November 20, 2020.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/11/20/biden-trump-and-the-post-election-period/>.

Pew Research Center. "Two Recessions, Two Recoveries." December 19, 2019.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/12/13/two-recessions-two-recoveries-2/>.

Popp, Karen. "The Impeachment of Bill Clinton: An Ugly Mix of Three Powerful Forces." *Law and Contemporary Problems* 63, no. ½ (2000): 223-243.

Rakich, Nathaniel and Jasmine Mithani. "What Absentee Voting Looked Like in All 50 States." FiveThirtyEight. February 9, 2021.

<https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/what-absentee-voting-looked-like-in-all-50-states/>.

Reuters Staff. "FACTBOX: Recessions and Presidential Elections." Reuters. April 1, 2008.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-politics-recessions/factbox-recessions-and-presidential-elections-idUSN0122201820080402>.

Richwine, Lisa. "Fox News Extends Streak, Sets Cable News Records in 2020." Reuters. December 29, 2020.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-media-news-ratings/fox-news-extends-streak-sets-cable-news-records-in-2020-idUSKBN29404F>.

Roper Center. "How Groups Voted in 1992." Cornell University. Accessed January 19, 2022.

<https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/how-groups-voted-1992>.

Shaw, Bernard. "CNN Evening News." Cable News Network. Atlanta, Georgia: CNN, August 27, 1992.

Shepard, Alice. "White Noise." *American Journalism Review* (January-February 1999).

<https://ajrarchive.org/Article.asp?id=520>.

Sonner, Molly, and Clyde Wilcox. "Forgiving and Forgetting: Public Support for Bill Clinton During the Lewinsky Scandal." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 32, no. 3 (1999): 554-557.

Stempel, Guido III, Thomas Hargrove, and Joseph P. Bernt. "Relation of the Growth of Use of the Internet to Changes in Media Use From 1995 to 1999." *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 77, no. 1 (2000): 71-79.

Stone, Roger. "ROGER STONE: How the Democrats Plan to Steal the 2020 Election." InfoWars. November 1, 2020.

<https://www.infowars.com/posts/roger-stone-how-the-democrats-plan-to-steal-the-2020-election/>.

“Text – S.24 – 103rd Congress (1993-1994): Independent Counsel Reauthorization Act of 1994.”
Congress.gov. June 30, 1994.
<https://www.congress.gov/bill/103rd-congress/senate-bill/24/text>.

Warren, Ben. “Time Mag Celebrates ‘Cabal of Powerful People’ Influencing 2020 Election.”
InfoWars. February 5, 2021.
<https://www.infowars.com/posts/leftist-rag-celebrates-shadow-campaign-to-manipulate-election/>.

The Washington Post. “Whitewater Timeline.” The Washington Post Company. 1998.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/whitewater/timeline.htm>.

Witcover, Jules. “Where We Went Wrong.” *Columbia Journalism Review* (March/April 1998).
https://ia801802.us.archive.org/13/items/sim_columbia-journalism-review_march-april-1998_36_6/sim_columbia-journalism-review_march-april-1998_36_6.pdf.

60 Minutes. “Hillary Clinton’s First 60 Minutes Interview.” Aired January 26, 1992, on CBS.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-UqKNgrwK8E&ab_channel=60Minutes.