

# Media Coverage of Presidential Sex Scandals: JFK, Clinton, Trump

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MEDIA COVERAGE OF PRESIDENTIAL SEX SCANDALS: JFK, CLINTON, TRUMP

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## INTRODUCTION

The news media, popularly known as the Fourth Estate, has taken onto itself the role of forming mass opinion on a variety of topics. One of the topics inevitably processed by the press and news is politics and, more specifically, political scandals and intrigues. This paper will deal with three formative presidential scandals that have put their mark on the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century so far. Those are the indiscretions of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, sexual assault charges and extramarital affairs of President William Jefferson (Bill) Clinton, and sexual assault charges filed against the current President Donald Trump. All three cases were covered by the media, although not to the same extent or by using the same resources. The aim of the paper is to explore how different media approached these scandals in their specific social and historical contexts. It will also observe how the media approach, or lack of it, created and affected the mass opinion.

This specific approach to the topic of presidential scandals takes into account various aspects of research. It has to outline the specific medium that has the most relevance in each case. It goes without saying that, for the duration of each scandal various media were engaged and used by millions of people both in the USA and in the world. The key for this research is identifying the one or two media during each scandal that had the most important role in sharing information and forming public opinions.

The main medium during the JFK era was television. Although it overlaps with the era of radio, the starting point that emphasized the importance it would have in the future was the JFK-Nixon presidential debate in 1960. It was the first televised presidential debate in history. As such, it made an impact not only on television as a medium, but on the audience, who now have a visual stimulus that they can connect with the topics they are hearing about. When it

comes to Bill Clinton and his era of the 1990's, television was still the primary resource for receiving information although the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal was among the first to be published on the internet which was, at that time, still in its early stages and not used among the wide, general population. The internet, especially social media usage, are the primary media used both by Donald Trump and by the people who have brought to the public eye his many indiscretions, affairs and serious sexual assault charges that can be dated back long before his presidency. It is also important to point out that newspapers are an important medium in all the three cases that will be studied. They are, alongside television, common ground on which the cases can be studied.

This research will also take a closer look at U.S. history from the 1960's till today with special emphasis on presidential history and the three presidents individually. Alongside U.S. and presidential history and media theory, the research will also comparatively observe the influences that these presidents might have had on each other. They have different backgrounds, political views, and different images of them are created in the public. While Kennedy and Clinton were Democrats, Trump is a Republican. Furthermore, JFK and Clinton were quite young when elected, 43 and 46 years old, respectively, and Trump was 70 years old when elected for office. Trump and Kennedy are similar in the sense that they both come from rich and influential families while Clinton comes from a middle-class family from Arkansas. What connects all three of them is their ability of using media to their benefit by emphasizing their charisma and rhetorical skills.

The aim of this research paper is to provide a new perspective on the aforementioned scandals in the context of American studies. By using these three presidents specifically and focusing only on sexual scandals, the goal is to provide a clear image of the strong media influence on public opinion and how those images can be perpetuated and emphasized for years and decades to come.

## **MEDIA AND PRESIDENTIAL SCANDALS**

As already said, the modern media have an important role in shaping the general public opinion on a number of topics. The making of new media, such as the Internet and, subsequently, social media, makes it virtually impossible for news to go unnoticed. As Chung points out:

The role of the media is increasingly influential in the public agenda setting process because most of our understanding and knowledge about social issues or public problems comes not from direct personal experience, but from diverse online and traditional media. Existing research shows that the effects of media as information providers and agenda-setters are minimal for those social issues that individuals have direct experience of. However, they have a significant effect on issues that people have no knowledge of or experience only indirectly, because the public has a need for information and orientation in this regard. (213)

What he refers to when he points out the “agenda setting process” is the effect the media have in determining what events and news will be shown and explained to the general public and to what extent. The media can set their own agenda different from what the public deems most relevant. This paper will not be dealing with this theory in detail, but it is important to point out that the vice-versa mode also exists. To state it more clearly, there is also a theoretical approach that observes how the public sets the agenda for the media and how the people navigate the media to what they want to see, hear and read about. As Chung concludes, the media have a larger influence on the public when the topic that they are dealing with is something not familiar to everyone, or something very specific happening to a limited and closed number of people. Presidential scandals belong to that group of events and news. Adut

claims the following, “Scandals are often unrelated to citizenship. They contaminate public life with sordid stuff, discredit institutions, divide societies, and degrade public morale. They involve a sharp discrepancy between participation and spectatorship: it is the elite who take part in them” (241). Presidential scandals catch the attention of the public because presidents have gained the status of celebrities and are important factors for each country. The three presidents referred to in this paper can, without doubt, be called celebrities not only during their time in the office but also before. Their specific backgrounds will be discussed in detail and individually for each president.

It is also important to define a presidential scandal before discussing specific cases. Although the term seems quite obvious, there is a large number of factors that determine an event as a presidential scandal. Basinger and Rottinghaus give their own definition of a presidential scandal, “We define a presidential scandal as allegations of illegal, unethical, or immoral behavior by the president, a senior administration official, or a nominee that comes to light during the president's term in office and that occurred before or while the individual occupied office” (291). All of the three cases that will be discussed include immoral and unethical behavior by the President himself, while both Clinton and Trump fit into the category of illegal behavior given the fact that they both had charges pressed against them. Rottinghaus gives a detailed classification of scandals, “Individual scandals are classified into three types: financial, political corruption, and personal” (133). Later on, he defines personal scandals, “Personal scandals involve the immoral or unethical personal behavior of an individual, especially adulterous in nature (Lewinsky affair during the Clinton administration)...” (133). Based on these definitions, it can be concluded that all three cases are individual personal presidential scandals.

The question that has to be asked is how the relationship between the presidents and the media came to be or, better said, how did that relationship evolve through time while

being influenced by the historical and political context and the overall changes in society? As already stated, JFK is often called the first television president and Trump constantly uses social media and the Internet. As Schieffer writes regarding JFK, “The best politicians were the masters of the dominant medium of their time. The founders were great writers when most people got their news by the written word; Franklin D. Roosevelt was the first to recognize the power of radio; Kennedy was the absolute best at television” (Schieffer). This development shows a trend among presidents, especially those in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They do not only use media as a means of communication with the nation, but they also harness it to their advantage using their own personal charm and appeal to their benefit. This trend can be recognized as something that scholars call the rhetorical presidency. As Zaller points out:

A major development in American politics in the last 50 to 100 years has been the rise of what has been variously called The Rhetorical Presidency (Tulis 1987), the "political spectacle" (Edelman 1988) and, more simply, Media Politics. This form of politics stands in contrast to an older model of politics, Party Politics. The defining feature of what I prefer to call Media Politics is the attempt to govern on the basis of words and images that diffuse through the mass media. This communication—whether in the form of presidential speeches, press conferences, TV ads, media frenzies, spin, or ordinary news—creates a sort of virtual reality whose effects are arguably quite real and important. (186)

Kennedy used television, Clinton also used television with special emphasis on TV interviews alongside his wife, and Trump is now using social media and television. Baum and Kernell point out, “Whether measured by public appearances, number of speeches, or days of travel, each recent president has in some way matched or eclipsed his predecessors' efforts to communicate directly with the American people. Substantial research has shown “going



public” is a viable leadership strategy” (99). As an example, both Kennedy and Clinton are often mentioned as excellent performers of vibrant, impressive, and memorable speeches and public appearances, while Trump uses Twitter to gain attention among the general public. All three presidents were and have been media personalities, celebrities and quite skillful in using the given media to their advantage.

These changes have been occurring in American public life throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and influenced each of their presidential styles. As Mausbach et al. point out, “The image of the ‘mute tribune’ that dominated the self- and public perceptions of the nineteenth century presidency has long since given way to a discursively constructed portrait of public presidential leadership” (168). Presidents use discourse, narrative and the media to construct their own public image. A shift has occurred in media culture and in society in general that encourages placing greater emphasis on style and form; on the way something is said rather than to focus on what is said. Such a shift can and is closely connected to the concept of the rhetorical presidency and the media have a vital role to play in this process.

As already mentioned, Kennedy was a master of televised press conferences and creating his self-image. This is in close connection to the general atmosphere of the society during his presidency. Mausbach et al. claim, “Whatever the preferred prism through which the presidency has been examined, scholars have not been able to escape the zeitgeist of a given period. Thus, during the 1950s and into the 1960s, it seemed to be generally accepted that the president knows best” (20). He introduced himself to the public as the brave leader that is going to lead the nation to strive in the difficult times that were ahead of them. It will later be discussed how this reflected on the image he made in the media during his presidency and what kind of memory of him still lives on in American collective consciousness. Going forward to the 1990's and the time of President Clinton, it can be noticed that his presidential style is even more influenced by rhetoric. As Mausbach et al. conclude:

Eventually, however, Bill Clinton's artful bricolage of policy positions and political coalitions, as well as his penchant for spin and playful rapport with reality (“I said I did not have sex with her as I defined it. [...] It depends on what the meaning of 'is' is.” Starr Report, Sec. XIV.D.2, and fn. 1091), would result in a “postmodern presidency” in the cultural sense after all. (24)

This famous example of Clinton using language and rhetoric for his own benefit, in this case to avoid charges of perjury, is just one of the instances that best describe his presidential style as being postmodern and focused on spinning the truth. Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that Clinton was still influenced by the ones before him. More specifically, he took his cue by the imperial styles of presidency that were predominant earlier in American history. Mausbach et al. offer the following explanation, “More ominously, Clinton espoused notions of executive privilege and presidential war-making authority that were strongly reminiscent of the ‘imperial presidency’. He invoked executive privilege more often than his four predecessors combined” (25). This just goes on to show that no presidential style, no matter how obvious and straightforward it seems, can be described, and labeled as being only imperial, only rhetorical, or post-modern.

The situation with President Trump is similar to that of Clinton. As will be discussed later, Trump has a specific and co-dependent relationship with the media in which he relies on them to broadcast his opinions publicly and the media use his controversial statements to draw attention to their shows, articles, blogs and so on. As Fuchs claims, “News articles in the mainstream media regularly focus on what Trump tweets. Some argue that we live in an age of post-truth, where ideology, personalities and emotions, rather than facts, themes and debate, shape politics” (174). Trump always plays “the emotional card” when posting tweets and does not take the time to check the facts that he is posting. Fuchs also claims, “In the age of Trump, Twitter and reality TV, political communication is accelerated, very fast and

superficial. There is no time and no space for substantial debates” (177). The post-truth characteristic is often attributed to his presidential style. This is particularly significant if it is taken into account just how often Trump, his staff and especially his, now former, advisor Kellyanne Conway use the term 'alternative facts' when they want to avoid admitting to lying. The term is used to defend false statements made by Trump himself or his team. The use of it only places greater emphasis on how something is being said, and not what is being said. Trump's emotional tantrums on Twitter appeal to his followers who do not take time to check whether he is saying the truth or just spreading the agenda he needs for his benefit.

Another important aspect that must be pointed out is the symbolical importance of the president for the entire nation. One of the most common tropes is that of the unity between the president and his nation. Emphasis is often placed on the president just being one of the people, one of their own. This intensifies the feeling of a community which, subsequently, leads to the nation placing more trust in the president. As Mausbach et al. point out, “At the same time, the idea of a communion, a covenant, between the nation and its presidents highlights the close link between political acts and culturally constitutive results, and serves as the basis of the meta-image of the presidential hero” (181). At the same time, the president is much more in the eyes of the American public. He is a heroic leader in charge of keeping the nation safe and unharmed and leading it in peacetime. Mausbach et al. notice the following:

The creation of the most dramatic, indeed sometimes melodramatic of presidential self- images, to which all American presidents contribute continuously, is based on the traditional American image of the president as the symbolic leader of the nation. The self-assigned fate of the lonely leader evokes the timeless image of the Western pioneer and the can-do spirit of the American frontier, establishing the president as the

first man to react to challenges to the community's security or to take the first step into the unknown. (182)

Given the fact that the USA has been one of the most powerful nations of the world for an extensive period of time, the president came to be the most important person in the world. The USA is a very young nation when compared to European ones such as France and England, and it is surprising just how important and wealthy it came to be in such a short period of time. As Chase claims, "The qualities that struck Tocqueville, such as individualism, egalitarianism, and a readiness to pursue disputes through litigation have persisted over time and been observed by other students of society" (280). This is partly due to the American mindset that often relies on the exceptionalism of the nation, on the notion that rules are different if you are American and that anything can be achieved in the land of never-ending possibilities. It is obvious that this is more of a rhetorical trope than an indicator of a real situation. Nevertheless, presidents have often been the symbols embodying American exceptionalism and importance in creating the world around them. It is no surprise that the figure of the president is a frequent inspiration in media, music, literature, films, and even modern artifacts such as video games. As Roper concludes:

This image of the president as a soap-opera star is one that Mailer himself has reworked during the subsequent forty years. In his estimation there have been only three presidents during this time who qualify, in separate ways, for such an accolade: Kennedy, Reagan and Clinton. Through a combination of personality and personal drama surrounding their time in office, this trio may be seen as one which illustrates the overwhelming significance now attached to the visual image in presidential politics, and the search for elusive 'star quality'. (208)

This so-called star quality can be observed with Kennedy and Clinton, but also with Trump given the fact that he was a celebrity and a reality star that often appeared on television and in films before his political career. Their presence in popular culture and celebrity status add another aspect to the figure of the president.

This paper will now focus on each president individually, observe their situations in the specific context in which they occurred and discuss the media approach to each of them.

## **JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY AKA JFK**

President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, better known under the abbreviation JFK, was born in 1917 into a wealthy and influential Boston family. This well-known fact would not usually be a part of a research paper, but it is relevant for the image JFK and his entire family have maintained through the years in public imagination of the USA and the world. As White claims, “The chasm which has emerged between how Kennedy is viewed by historians on the one hand and by the American people on the other raises the issue of how to account for this disparity. The most plausible explanation is the power of the Kennedy image-its enduring capacity to seduce and inspire the American people” (227). Historians have an empirical approach to all the scandals connected to JFK, mostly indiscretions during his marriage to Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, commonly known as Jackie O.

The American people have a general tendency to ignore or at least set aside all that which in other cases would be a point to cast judgement on another person and especially another president. Some of the most famous scandals have found their place in modern and popular culture. Besides affairs with celebrities such as Anita Ekberg and Grace Kelly, the most famous one is certainly the one with Marilyn Monroe. White points out a specific public moment in their relationship:

A year later, at a Democratic Party fundraiser and his forty- fifth birthday celebration at New York's Madison Square Garden, Monroe serenaded JFK with her famously sensuous rendition 'Happy Birthday'. This has become one of the great iconic moments in the history of twentieth-century popular culture. The event was televised at the time; and it has played an important part in shaping recent perceptions of Kennedy as many

millions of people have watched the footage of Monroe singing 'Happy Birthday on YouTube. (235)

This is a particular situation that entered popular culture. A number of films, TV shows and even cartoons have used this moment as inspiration. This emphasizes the pertinence of JFK's legacy in everyday culture.

One of the questions that have to be asked is whether the situations President Kennedy was in can be defined as presidential scandals or just indiscretions of a married man and how much did his power influence those women into having relationships with him. As Basinger and Rottinghaus point out:

The third and final issue in defining scandals is when that behavior must have taken place and when it was revealed, in order for misbehavior to count as a presidential scandal. The press might erupt if a new exposé of President Kennedy's personal life were published, but this should not be considered a presidential scandal. Had Kennedy's affairs been reported at the time by the journalists who were aware of them, they would have caused a scandal. (220)

Following this definition, it can be said that the categorical lack of media attention towards these scandals shifted the very nature of the situation. This is a vital point of observation for both the approach to the Kennedy case and the general influence of media in forming mass opinion. By the media not exposing or commenting on the scandals, it can no longer be defined as a presidential scandal as such. Also, the question of power has to be taken into consideration. Kennedy was never accused of rape or sexual harassment and it is generally acceptable that the affairs he had were a product of mutual consent. He was a charming man that seduced women with both his charisma and with the feeling of power he exerted. But, taking into account historical facts, it could not be claimed that the women were forced into

sexual relations and relationships. Finally, it can be discussed how and to what extent the media influenced his public perception.

Firstly, the image of JFK himself has to be taken into consideration. He was a Pulitzer Prize laureate, a war hero, a respected politician and seemed as an all-round ideal presidential candidate. As it is stated on the official JFK library webpage regarding his biography, “When he returned home, Jack was awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Medal for his leadership and courage” and, later on, “While recovering from surgery, he wrote a book about several US Senators who had risked their careers to fight for the things in which they believed. The book, called *Profiles in Courage*, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for biography in 1957” (Life of John F. Kennedy). He was portrayed as the person most capable to lead the US into a new age of prosperity following the Second World War. As Roper points out, “At the same time, the new frontier was like the old frontier: a place of challenge, of achievement, shaping national character and defining national purpose. President Kennedy - indeed the 'focus of the anxious crowd' - created and projected the image of the heroic leader, facing and meeting the crises of cold war confrontations” (216). It was Kennedy who set the tone for all of his successors by creating high expectations they had to live up to.

The image of him being the heroic leader was further expanded and perpetuated after his assassination in 1963. Images and recordings of his body, the First Lady in a blood-covered outfit and, later on, Jackie O. and his children dressed in black during the funeral are just some of the emotionally charged images that were globally shown. His funeral is considered to be the first event to be globally broadcast on television. All of the aforementioned supports his public perception as a hero martyr who died serving his country. Aside from JFK himself, the role his family played in creating his public appearance also has to be taken into account. The Kennedy family was a synonym for a perfect American family. They are, even now, often called the American royalty. Extramarital affairs of President



Kennedy were known but never really talked about, on a larger public scale, during his life. This was in accordance with the image of a family man that JFK persistently worked on. As White explains:

Another aspect of Kennedy's emerging image was the way he came to symbolize the family. This seems paradoxical given his philandering, which continued even after his 1953 marriage to Jacqueline Bouvier. Knowledge of his hedonistic lifestyle, however, did not become wide-spread until the 1970s, because prior to that point the press was far less prurient than it would subsequently become. As far as the American people were concerned, Kennedy was a credible symbol of family life. (229)

What has to be observed with special consideration is the specific historical context of that time. Those were the 1960's when society was still patriarchal, and the role model of the perfect family was embedded in the Kennedy family. Summers points out the following paradoxical situation:

Kennedy, known in certain circles for his habitual and reckless womanizing, enjoyed protection both from the national press corps and from political rivals, who sometimes attempted to document his liaisons but who never organized a public campaign to discredit him-even though, as the Catholic husband of a widely esteemed First Lady, the president was doubly vulnerable to exposure. (838)

It is almost astonishing that even his opponents decided to ignore the evidence they had to discredit him as a moral person. Taking into account political behavior today and in the recent past, it seems obvious that Kennedy was in a privileged position when compared to other presidents and especially the other two whose situations will be discussed in this paper, Bill Clinton and Donald Trump. Adut focuses on presidential control over the press:

Despite heightened attention, presidents could largely control the way they appeared in public. The moral integrity of the presidency was seen as a public good, and the press was fairly procumbent until the late 1960s. The private lives of presidents were presented in a flattering light; journalists kept silent about the mistresses of Harding, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Kennedy. (249)

In accordance with Adut's claims, White provides specific examples and details of how JFK and his team exerted influence over the press:

Those polished live televised press conferences, for which Kennedy was so praised, were the result of assiduous preparation. Aide Pierre Salinger would talk to the assembled journalists long before the press conference was due to begin. He would ascertain the issues they were most interested in and the questions they intended to ask, relay this back to JFK, who (with his advisers) would formulate appropriate answers. Journalists were not naive about how Kennedy was attempting to influence media coverage, and some accused him of press management - a charge he sought to refute. (238)

These situations bring into question important characteristics that were considered to be one of JFK's strong suits, and those are his rhetorical skills. It can be claimed without a doubt that Kennedy had charisma and charm, but the question that remains is whether he was a skillful rhetorician or public speaker with a highly organized team of people that made sure he came off to the public the best he could. Aside from television press conferences that were organized in advance, the press also silently agreed to another aspect in their relationship with Kennedy. It seems as if talking positive about the President's private life and ignoring the obvious issues was the accepted mode of behavior for the press. As Summers notices:

In fact, by the time that Mills blasted the "power elite" and Kennedy readied himself to lead it, everyone who held a position in the national firmament-from tabloid journalists to major publishers to partisan officials themselves-had learned to operate according to a tacit understanding guided by a political psychology: exposing certain personal vices of presidents imperiled the legitimacy of the state's claim to concentrated power. (851- 852)

Summers also develops his claim a step further and states:

The assertions of "privacy" and "irrelevance to public duty" behind which midcentury journalists hid their reticence merely obscured their dimly perceived understanding that to report what they knew about John Kennedy's adultery, for instance, would have been to risk not only fewer of those 'White House swimming parties but also allegations approaching treason. (852)

What Summers implies here is a heightened level of fear that was present with the press in the Kennedy era. This also points to a higher level of control over media by important political people and, subsequently, a higher level of censorship and less freedom for the press. Kennedy and his public relations team had both direct and indirect control over the media. The direct control can be noticed in the already discussed example given by White on how JFK and his team organized his televised press conferences. The indirect control was mostly present due to the overall atmosphere of Cold War anxiety, reticence, and caution present both in society and in politics in particular. The image of the President had to remain unsullied.

The President himself was very well aware of the importance the new medium, television, was going to have in the time to come. Perhaps the first moment that showed just how important television would be for the presidency of JFK was the first televised

presidential debate that occurred in 1960 and featured JFK and his opponent Richard Nixon. It is important to point out that the debate was shown on television and simultaneously over the radio. As White concludes:

But it seems probable that the four Nixon-Kennedy television debates, and particularly the first of them, were of decisive importance to the outcome of the election. A majority of those who listened to the first debate on radio believed it to be evenly matched, whilst most Americans who watched it on television thought Kennedy had triumphed - and that said everything about the power of the visual image. Nixon's voice was more resonant and sonorous than Kennedy's and that to some degree accounts for the way the radio audience perceived the debate. On television, however, Kennedy appeared more attractive and more impressive. (231)

Kennedy knew how to take advantage of the new medium for his benefit. The strength of the relationship between JFK and the media, both television and the newspaper, can be seen using some of the statistical data available on the official websites of the JFK library. As it is stated in the section entitled "JFK in history", "By November 1963, President Kennedy had held 64 news conferences, an average of one every sixteen days. The first, less than a week after his inauguration, was viewed by an estimated 65 million people" (John F. Kennedy and the Press). Using television to deliver messages to the nation became a common practice during his presidency and it has carried on till this day. The official web sites of the JFK library point out the importance of the relationship between JFK and television, "John F. Kennedy was the first president to effectively use the new medium of television to speak directly to the American people. No other president had conducted live televised press conferences without delay or editing" (John F. Kennedy and the Press).

There is a common trope in research regarding JFK calling him the first television president by a number of authors. If Kennedy can be called the first television president, then Trump can be called the first Twitter president. Simon draws a comparison between the two:

Both President Kennedy and Trump were strongly advised that improvisatory use of their respective media could set off an international incident. Most of Kennedy's inner circle was against the whole idea of a live press conference. But Presidents Kennedy and Trump were adamant about getting their message out unfiltered. As Kennedy's press secretary Pierre Salinger points out, most of the newspapers were against the young President, and JFK wanted to converse with the country before any negative press interpretation. Likewise, Trump's early morning tweets become news before the media can assess what actually is being said. (Simon)

Although there are a number of similarities in the approach that JFK and Trump have towards the media of their age, it is important to point out some differences. JFK mostly appeared on television as he knew that he possessed charm and charisma that appealed to the public. He used his personality, while Trump today mostly uses shocking, strange, and even scandalous statements written in the form of the popular *tweets*. It can be said that they used similar methods in theory, but they proved to be completely different in practice. JFK tried, in a metaphorical way, to seduce the public while Trump wants to implement a state of shock and mild fear, mostly by perpetuating various conspiracy theories.

Taking into account everything that has been written on JFK in this paper, several conclusions can be drawn. As the first television president, he used the media to his advantage. His charm and charisma appealed to millions of Americans and he is still remembered as one of the nation's most beloved presidents, despite his short term in office that was abruptly ended when he was assassinated in Dallas in November 1963. The many

extramarital affairs that he had were known to the public but never discussed during his lifetime nor for some time afterward. The reasons for such an approach are threefold. Firstly, the Kennedy family stood as a symbol of a perfect American family, something close to royalty. His wife, the popular Jackie O., is still one of the most popular, loved and influential first ladies in history. There was something about the ideal life and the American dream family that they embodied and such an idyllic, although false, image was not something that people wanted to see destroyed. Furthermore, the affairs were known, but the press did not report on them due to the large influence the President had over the media. Such news might not have been the end of his presidency, but they would certainly be the end for the news reporter in the professional world. Finally, the historic context was specific. During the Cold War, everything was done to assure that the American dream and American lifestyle be presented in the best way possible. It had to be shown as opposing the Eastern, Soviet lifestyle. Presenting the President without flaws became a matter of national interest. All of these factors contributed to a general disregard towards the scandals. The situation changed over the years as now the affairs became common knowledge and entered American popular culture. This new conjuncture points to a changing cultural context, the evolving role of the media, and the continuing imbrication of politics and media, in particular in its new forms, as my next sections will try to establish.

## WILLIAM JEFFERSON CLINTON

William “Bill” Clinton was elected President for two terms, firstly in 1992 and then again in 1996. His election ended the 12-year rule of Republicans in the White House. Generally, most Americans look positively on his two terms. This is mostly a consequence of a booming economy of that time. Despite the positive aura surrounding his time as president, he is still best known for his scandals, and in particular, the Monica Lewinsky scandal that shook American public life. The scandal itself left such a great mark in American culture that the details of the case are still examined even today, 22 years later. One of the arguments to support this claim is a documentary made in 2018 *The Clinton Affair* and directed by Blair Foster.

What sets apart this documentary from numerous others based on the same topic is a number of aspects on which it focuses. Firstly, it revolves around Monica Lewinsky, her private life and the changes that happened to her after the story broke out till this day. Furthermore, there is not a single interview of Bill or Hillary Clinton made for the documentary. They are only shown in old interviews and video recordings of that time. Although some may argue that the documentary is biased towards Lewinsky, it is still a fact that all of the unflattering and shameful details that include her were not censored out of the documentary, but are shown completely objectively. As pointed out earlier, this documentary shows the importance and pertinence that the Lewinsky-Clinton scandal has in American public life. One of the aspects that will be examined is how the media showed this scandal when it first happened.

The situation, simplified, was the following: the President cheated on his wife, had sexual relations with a young woman, an interne, inside the White House and then lied to the entire

nation about the nature of the relationship. It has been pointed out several times in the documentary by Lewinsky that she was in no way forced by Clinton. She felt attracted to him and a part of his attraction was the image of power and charisma he exerted onto other people. The situation with Lewinsky is not the same as with two other women who have filed accusations against Clinton for rape, Paula White, and Juanita Broaddrick. The other two women were both forced by Clinton into sexual relations, also in their workplace. This goes to show how Clinton has used his power for years to force women into doing things that they would not want to do. Lewinsky can be considered a lucky exception given the fact that she was seduced by Clinton, but she gave her consent.

One would expect that such a scandal would destroy him, of course, in the metaphorical sense of the word. What really happened was that the support he got grew bigger, as if the public did not care about the scandal. As Zeller points out:

Although evidence of the importance of political substance has been accumulating for some three decades, no one could have predicted that Clinton would survive the opening round of the Lewinsky affair nearly so well as he did. This is because it has never been quite so starkly clear just how relentlessly the majority of voters can stay focused on the bottom line. Nor, to my knowledge, has it ever been quite so clear that it is possible for public opinion and media opinion to go marching off in opposing directions. (186)

The outcome of the scandal was unexpected in the true sense of the word. But this paper will focus not on the consequences but on the media approach that affected the public opinion.

Television was the most important medium of the time for the ordinary American citizen. Most of the news was received through television and the press, while the Internet was still at its beginnings. It is important to point out that the 455-page long report composed by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr was indeed first published on the Internet. This is a



specific moment from which it can be seen just how important the Internet will be in the future. But still, most of the drama happened in the press and in prime-time television. Viewers were glued to their seats and waiting for the next juicy detail. As LaRocque explains, “All of this indicates how the US news media have now, on the surface, become driven by the personal dramas of celebrity figures, and have taken on the structure of weekly television serials or soap-operas” (455). At the time and later on, other affairs emerged to the surface. Others were far more dangerous for the president given the fact that he was accused of sexual harassment and financial frauds. Basinger and Rottinghaus list the following scandals, “Bill Clinton was involved in seven separate scandals that we identified: three sexual scandals (Paula Jones, Monica Lewinsky, and Juanita Broaddrick), three political scandals involving fundraising for the 1996 elections, and one financial scandal (Whitewater)” (223). Nevertheless, none of these scandals have significantly influenced Clinton's career and presidency.

During the time the scandal appeared, television and newspapers were filled with every detail of the Lewinsky affair. Viewers around the country and in the world were bombarded with new information on a daily basis. Unlike the Kennedy affairs which were covered up, the Lewinsky scandal was common knowledge. That is partially so due to Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr who led the investigation and compiled the report of the case. During this time, the public started to feel negatively towards Starr. Silva, Jenkins-Smith and Waterman give an example, “Starr quickly developed a negative image in the minds of many Americans. On the nightly news, he held impromptu meetings with the press while taking his garbage to the curb outside his house. The image created was not flattering: Starr was only interested in digging up the president's garbage” (474). Besides the negative image of Starr that was created, the content of the report was often brought into question. It was claimed that it was mostly oriented on sex and that it offered such specific details which were

not important for the case itself but were there to attract attention. It could be argued that Clinton survived the scandal so well partly due to the fact that the media created a negative image of Starr and his report.

What is also fascinating is how the media decided to ignore other, important political decisions made by Clinton yet published and talked about extensively on his sexual affairs. As LaRocque points out, “For example, rumored details about Clinton's purported sexual pursuits are deemed by the media as eminently 'newsworthy'. At the same time, numerous policies and pursuits of Clinton and his government that have a massive impact upon the lives of millions around the globe receive only the most superficial and distorted coverage by the media” (456). With Clinton, the case is that the media placed so much emphasis on the sexual scandal that they, intentionally or non-intentionally, ignored major foreign affairs decisions made by Clinton during that time. An impeachment process was started against Clinton for the Lewinsky scandal where he was eventually acquitted. Zinn, however, decides to focus on another aspect of the impeachment process:

What the incident showed was that a matter of personal behavior could crowd out of the public's attention far more serious matters, indeed matters of life and death. The House of Representatives would impeach the president on matters of sexual behavior, but it would not impeach him for endangering the lives of children by welfare reform, or for violating international law in bombing other countries (Iran, Afghanistan, Sudan), or for allowing hundreds of thousands of children to die as a result of economic sanctions (Iran). (446-447)

This kind of behavior by the media is in accordance with the sensationalistic approach to politics. The development towards the sensationalistic, in the context of this research, can be traced back to Kennedy all the way to Clinton and it continues on to Trump. During

Kennedy's presidency, the White House, its residents and staff were considered to be on the foreground of the nation, somewhat close to heroes. It is not rare to hear the comparisons to Camelot. The White House and the presidency were considered to be infallible, and the problems and scandals, as already discussed, were kept behind closed doors as much as possible. Parallel to the development of the media was the growing interest the nation had for their presidents and their personal lives became center of attention.

It is interesting to point out how Clinton, in the context of scandals, is widely connected to Monica Lewinsky while other scandals, such as corruption and financial malfeasance, went under the radar and were soon forgotten in the American collective consciousness. Politicians became celebrities and their personal drama became a national drama. As Roper explains, "If American presidential politics had indeed become a soap opera, then in Bill Clinton it found its perfect lead. He too had star quality, and, like Larry Hagman's character in Dallas, his public image would be based upon his uncanny ability to come back from personal and political disasters which would have defeated most other people" (210). Besides focusing on the sensational and the personal in politics, the media approach also raised a number of questions on privacy and security. Posner claims:

What is more worrisome to many people is the erosion of privacy by technology that the investigation of Clinton dramatized. Without tape recordings and DNA tests, without television and the internet, without e-mail messages that are difficult to erase, the world would not have become intimate with the details not only of President Clinton's sex life but also of Monica Lewinsky's sex life and that of her friends and ex-lovers. (210)

What this shows is that the media, combined with technology, radically influenced the massive spread of information regarding the scandal. It was not only discovered and

relentlessly circulated but it overwhelmed the American, and even global, public life and remains an influence till this day.

What can be concluded on the Clinton case is the following. Unlike the Kennedy affairs where the media looked the other way, Clinton affairs, specifically the Lewinsky scandal, were broadcast throughout the USA and the world. This involved the press, television and the internet. A number of details entered public life and they are still a part of it. What this case goes to show is just how opposite media opinion and public opinion can be. Clinton successfully surviving this scandal is a political and cultural phenomenon that can never be fully understood or explained. Part of it is due to the growing economy and stability of that time. Also, it is important to point out how the media constructed and perpetuated a negative image of the Independent Counsel which made it seem as if he was personally against Clinton and that he was not behaving professionally. Another important aspect is whether the president has a right to privacy and a personal life far from the public eye. It could be argued that he is a public persona, even a celebrity and that a lack of privacy is just one of the negative sides of performing such a duty. On the other hand, it is a right of each person to have their privacy and the ability to leave that side of their lives far from the public eye. Did the affair affect Clinton's ability to perform his presidential duties? It certainly did, but only because the media brought the scandal to the level of a national issue instead of focusing on other, real national issues of that time. That media frenzy contributed to the fact that the Lewinsky scandal still lives on in American public life, media, films and literature.

## DONALD TRUMP

Donald Trump made his presence in American public life during the 1970's when he took over his father's family business. Later on, especially during the 1980's and 1990's, Trump became a celebrity of its own kind. His lavish lifestyle and deceptively perfect marriage to his first wife Ivanka made them prominent in the public eye. Trump continued to draw attention both with his business successes and failures, but also with his scandalous private life. After divorcing Ivanka, who gave birth to 3 children, he married model Marla Maples, who gave birth to a daughter. A second marriage was not enough for Trump as he got divorced again in 1999 and married model Melania Knauss in 2005. They have been married ever since and have one son together. Subsequently, she is the current First Lady of the United States. Although this short description of Trump's private life seems quite eventful, to say at least, the other side of the story, the unofficial one, can also be described as exciting.

The sexual scandals of President Trump can mostly be summed up as sexual assaults for which he has or has not been charged, and as extremely sexist and misogynist behavior towards women he wanted to sleep with. As Ehrenreich describes in detail, "The president of the most powerful nation in the world, it has been alleged, employed prostitutes to pee on a Moscow hotel bed and enjoyed being spanked with a copy of Forbes magazine featuring his likeness on the cover" (13). This especially powerful description is just one of the many morally debatable situations that involve Trump. He has been accused of inappropriate behavior on several occasions, even towards his wife Ivanka. At the time, she even accused him of rape which she later denied after being pressured by his attorneys. As Wilson claims of the case, "It is not particularly comforting to know that Trump's lawyers pressured a statement out of his ex-wife that asserted Trump was so brutal and violent that it felt like rape, but did not necessarily meet the legal requirements of rape" (216).

Besides this situation of marital rape, he was also accused of allegedly raping a 13-year old girl and making aggressive sexual advances towards a number of women. Wilson also points out the following, “More than a dozen women stepped forward to talk about how he sexually grabbed them and how he watched women undressing at his beauty pageants (something he confessed to Howard Stern)” (219). This, alongside other allegations, sexist comments, and behaviors, shows how deeply disturbed Trump is when it comes to women. His mindset can best be described as sexist, misogynist and degrading of women. He is convinced that his power, which came from money, can get him whatever he wants. This is true in the material sense, but he also applies this principle when it comes to his relationships with women. Wilson also points out the following, “Trump is so oblivious to reality that he thinks women get all the advantages and opportunities in life and men are never given a fair chance in politics or anywhere else, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary” (232). Trump both uses his power to gain control over women and ignores the major cultural and global problem of male privilege over women. All of these attitudes and scandals that arose as a consequence are very well known and covered by various media. Trump lives in such an age that it is virtually impossible for anything to stay hidden for a longer period of time.

The special, interdependent relationship Trump has with the media is best summed up by Fuchs, “In the world of the capitalist spectacle, the capitalist media need Trump just like Trump needs the media. The mainstream media helped make Trump, both economically and politically. A truly critical strategy would be to provide no free promotion to Trump by ignoring him” (183). He has always been a celebrity in his own eyes and tried to be in the center of attention. Before the presidency, he was not only a businessman but a television personality with his reality show *The Apprentice*. Besides television and newspapers, his campaign and presidency were marked by the use of the internet and especially social media.

During the campaign, Trump and his marketing team used a number of online resources that border on the illegal and are definitely morally questionable. As McVeigh and Estep explain in detail:

While Trump used the term “fake news” to refer to the main-stream media, real fake news was spreading online. Deliberately deceptive for-profit websites flourished. Social media venues, Facebook in particular, connected hundreds of thousands of Americans to phony news stories. Russian bots— fake social media accounts that automatically distributed high volumes of messages to social media users— delivered pro-Trump content through millions of posts. Political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica was accused of improperly using Facebook users’ personal data to direct pro-Trump messages to users deemed to be persuadable. (195)

It is obvious that Trump uses the media in any way possible, with special emphasis on manipulation through social media networks like Facebook and Twitter. The daily posts that he makes on Twitter have become the unofficial medium of the president and the White House. They are also excellent material for analyzing many aspects of Trump's presidency and his personal attitudes. Besides the aforementioned sexist comments towards women, he also uses Twitter to threaten his political opponents, disseminate his messages and bluntly attack all those who disagree with him. As Fuchs describes:

Trump uses Twitter’s brevity of 140 characters for a politics that does not rely on arguments, but on negative emotions that he tries to stir among his followers. Twitter is the best medium for the emotional and ideological politics of outrage, scapegoating, hatred and attack because its ephemerality, brevity and speed support spectacles and sensationalism. At the same time, the custom of liking and retweeting on Twitter

appeals to Trump's narcissistic side, allowing him to indulge his status as a celebrity, brand and political leader. (176)

Not only is his use of Twitter questionable, it is also baffling that this unofficial medium became the way the president of the most powerful nation of the world communicates with his nation and the world. As much as his predecessors mostly used newspapers and television, Trump is now focused on his Twitter posts and the reaction he gets with them. McVeigh and Estep also claim, "Although Trump didn't develop his own network of newspapers to disseminate his message, his use of Twitter—a one-way channel to millions—was a modern-day substitute" (194). As mentioned previously, JFK is often called the first television president, and Trump can be called the first, and perhaps the last, Twitter president.

Besides the comparisons made between JFK and Trump, a relationship between Trump and Clinton can also be discussed. The two have a long-lasting relationship which is a consequence not only of their similarity in age, but also their permanent and overlapping importance in American public and political life. Bill and Hillary have even made an appearance at Trump's wedding to his third wife Melania in 2005. The seemingly decent and even friendly relationship changed when it became obvious that Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump will be running against each other in the 2016 election. From that point onwards, the relationship became hostile, especially from Trump's point of view. As Wilson states, "For Trump, who has demonstrated a penchant for sexism his entire life, the double standard is remarkable, especially since Trump called Bill Clinton a 'great president' in 2008 when Bill was campaigning for Hillary and had the exact same past" (230). The opinion Trump had of Bill Clinton changed when he realized that pointing out Clinton's scandals could benefit him in the campaign. By attacking Bill, he also affected Hillary's reputation. Trump took the ironic attacks on Bill Clinton even a step further during the campaign. Leonard states the following example:



And, in a series of stunt-like moves, Trump suggested via Twitter that he might invite Bill Clinton's former mistress Gennifer Flowers to attend his and Hillary's first presidential debate. Though that threat never materialized, prior to their second debate Trump called a press conference with women who claimed to have been in some ways sexually victimized by the Clintons— including Paula Jones, who accused Bill Clinton of harassment in the 1990s— and brought the women to the debate as his guests. Arguably, this was also a move designed to divert attention away from Trump's own history of sexual assault, epitomized by his 'Grab 'em by the pussy' comment to Billy Bush in 2005, reports of which broke days before the second debate. (180)

With his relationship towards Bill Clinton, Trump showed his hypocrisy and the desire to succeed in the political world no matter what. To make things even more ironic, one of his most infamous sexual misdemeanors came to light during that time. Once again, like the entertainer he is, Trump managed to get the public to look the other way.

Donald Trump is first and foremost an entertainer used to public attention. This kind of mindset spread into his presidency. Despite a number of sexual assault charges, misdemeanors and sexist comments towards women, he does not stand down in any way nor does he believe he has to change anything when it comes to his behavior. Furthermore, he perpetuates that behavior and emphasizes it with his relentless use of Twitter. He often appears in newspaper articles, makes televised public appearances, but Twitter is still his number one choice when it comes to communicating his attitudes to the public. This has gotten so out of proportion that his Twitter account is practically the official means of communication between the president and the nation. He uses it to spread his message without censorship and filter, while the press and television mostly try to have a critical approach. The coverage of his numerous sexual scandals has always been wide. Especially since the moment he announced his presidential campaign, special media attention has been

given to all that that has been hidden and unknown till that moment. The difference between Trump as opposed to Clinton and JFK is that the number of his opponents is much greater than the opponents of the other two former presidents. But this does not diminish the fact that Trump still has a large supporting body of voters. As McVeigh and Estep point out:

The Trump campaign linked power loss to identity politics and found ways to deliver his message, unfiltered, to core supporters. He courted favorable coverage from friendly news sources, and he attacked the mainstream media, which he called “fake news.” While Trump contributed to the skepticism many Americans hold toward the mainstream media, he also benefited from shifts that had been underway for decades in how the media covered politics. (200)

Trump found his place in politics during a turbulent time for the country. He used the changes that were happening to spread messages that were accepted by a large number of people. And while he is a complete catastrophe as a president in the eyes of many it cannot be denied that his followers are as determined as ever. Trump is president in a time where anything is allowed to gain what you want which is a strategy that has worked for him and against him many times during the years.

## CONCLUSION

The modern media have become a powerful force in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. With the growth and development of television, the internet and social media, there is not much that can stay hidden and certainly not for long. This is especially true for politicians who take on themselves important roles and have to deal with extreme public attention to their personal lives. The three presidents researched in this paper, JFK, Clinton and Trump, have all made their mark on American public life and popular culture. This can be traced back to several different media that placed great emphasis on their personal lives.

When it comes to JFK, during his lifetime and slightly afterwards, he has been considered a true family man, dedicated to his nation as much as he was to his family. The truth is far from that. He had a number of extramarital affairs with famous women of that time, the most prominent one being Marilyn Monroe. The media, mostly the press and television, have generally ignored those affairs out of various reasons. The image of JFK as being the perfect, dedicated family man had to be maintained. This was a time where he was introduced as the new heroic leader of the nation during difficult times and it was thought to be in the best interest of the country to preserve his image as immaculate as possible.

This is not the case with Clinton. During his presidency in the 1990s, television was the main source of information for the majority of the American public. This was also a time when the internet started being used by a growing number of people and its influence began to rise. Clinton's sexual scandal with Monica Lewinsky made the front covers of each newspaper and was the most talked about topic in the country for months to come. It also got online given the fact that the report made about the case was first published on the internet. The report itself was later described as being too sex-oriented and that it offered details of

sexual encounter which were not relevant for the investigation against Clinton. This did not stop millions of people from reading it. This scandal mostly showed just how the press can focus on a particular topic to such an extent and, on the other hand, to completely ignore other, more important news of the time. This is the case with Clinton whose political decisions never got as much attention, not even close, as did his affair with Monica Lewinsky.

Clinton survived the scandal and rose above it, but it still remains to be seen whether the current president Trump will survive all the scandals that he has been linked to. From the many public sexist comments towards women, including his current wife, towards charges for aggressive sexual advances to rape allegations, Trump is a public figure that has, for so long, showed great disrespect towards women who he finds to be objects in his sexual games. The media never had any trouble in covering stories about him because he was always very upfront and acted like he did not do anything wrong or that he did not have anything to hide. He uses the media as much as they use him. A special place in this interdependent relationship goes to Twitter which is his favorite way of announcing decisions and expressing opinions.

What this research wanted to show was just how important media coverage is in shaping the public opinion on three similar cases of immoral and unethical behavior by three people performing the duty of the President of the United States. The range of media coverage went from completely ignoring the scandals with Kennedy, to completely focusing on them and ignoring everything else with Clinton and to a mutually dependent relationship between Trump and the media. All three presidents have been relevant for shaping American popular culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century and their sexual scandals have played an important role in this process.

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## Abstract

This research paper deals with media coverage of important sexual scandals by former U.S. presidents John Fitzgerald Kennedy and William Jefferson Clinton, and by the current president Donald Trump. The three were chosen because they made an important influence on American popular culture and are an inspiration behind several films, books, TV shows, documentary shows and so on. Their sexual scandals vary, and the most severe ones are rape allegations of Clinton and Trump. By choosing the manner in which to cover all of these scandals, the media influenced the opinion of the public not only on the severity of the scandal, but also on the character of the president in question. Kennedy was spared media frenzy mostly due to his image in public that had to be maintained and the importance of that image for the wellbeing of the nation, considering the historical context. Clinton, on the other hand, encountered a completely different situation. The press, television and the internet were swarming with unflattering details of his extramarital affair with Monica Lewinsky. As for Trump, his relationship with the press is very intricate. He has always been a media personality and enjoys the attention. He uses the media as much as they use him to gain public attention. For him, Twitter is the way to broadcast his opinions and attitudes to the public. Each of the presidents had different amounts of media coverage and by different media, specific to their historical context and period, but their influence is still present.

**Key words:** US presidents, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, William Jefferson Clinton, Donald Trump, sexual scandals, the media