The “image bite,” political language, and the public/private divide

NBC News coverage of Hillary Clinton from scorned wife to Senate candidate

David Kaufer, Shawn J. Parry-Giles and Beata Beigman Klebanov
Carnegie Mellon University / University of Maryland / Educational Testing Service, Princeton

Voice-overs with muted images, often known as the “image bite,” have become an increasingly used but understudied format of political language by the television news media. Because the media can use images to fit many contexts and purposes of commentary, the media images are susceptible to continuous de-contextualization and re-contextualization. Drawing from theories of feminist critical discourse analysis and gender performance as well as scholarship on the public/private divide, we examine the commentary of one U.S. television news organization’s (NBC) re-contextualization of the same stock footage of Hillary Clinton over 10 newscasts spanning 20 months from August 1998 to June of 2000. NBC re-enforces the public/private binary in conventional masculine terms. Yet it also worked, at times, to unify the binary when covering Hillary Clinton’s U.S. Senate campaign; on those occasions at least, NBC revealed the potential erosion of gender stereotypes and a small but still significant role for human agency in the study of gender ideology.

Keywords: Image bites, image de-contextualization, image re-contextualization, feminist critical discourse analysis, diachronic discourse analysis, public and private spheres, women in media, Hillary Clinton

1. Introduction

In a visual media age, the “image bite,” featuring the visual images of political events without the accompanying sounds, has become an increasingly important and “efficient vehicle of political information that viewers rely on to form judgments and
make inferences” (Grabe and Bucy 2009, 271). At a time when the visual tends to trump stand-alone scripts and the celebrity of the reporter rivals the public figures covered, the image bite lets the political figure show up but it is the commentator who brings the verbal frame to identify the significance of the appearance. In conjunction with some scholars engaged in the diachronic study of language in news broadcasts (Carvalho 2008), and others attentive to the de-contextualization and re-contextualization of discourse (Campbell 1990, Wodak 1999), this study tracks the diachronic use of image bites as they are de-contextualized from one news story and then re-contextualized in subsequent news broadcasts.

Our specific focus is to understand how one U.S. news organization, NBC, drew from a common stock of 8 image bites of Bill and Hillary Clinton across 10 newscasts between August 14, 1998 and June 22, 2000, spanning Bill Clinton’s admission of marital infidelity to Hillary Clinton’s Democratic nomination for the U.S. Senate. What unifies these 10 newscasts is that each airs the same imagery of a sobered Hillary and Bill Clinton attending a memorial service held at Andrews Air Force Base in suburban Maryland to honor the bombing victims of the U.S. embassies in Tanzania (Dar es Salaam) and Kenya (Nairobi) on August 13, 1998 (one day before the first broadcast in our sample). With the exception of the August 14, 1998 broadcast, which explicitly covers the memorial service and includes 8 images of Bill and Hillary taken during the service, leaving the service, or returning to the White House from the service, the remaining 9 broadcasts feature decontextualized visual imagery extracted from the memorial service and then recontextualized over a twenty month interval to contribute to stories about Hillary Clinton’s response to the Clinton-Lewinsky affair, her support of Bill Clinton during the impeachment process, and her bid for a U.S. Senate seat (Parry-Giles 2000).

In Appendix 1 we provide brief descriptions and word counts for each of the 10 broadcasts as well as word counts for that part of the script used as voiceover for one or more of the 8 memorial service images. The 8 images taken from the memorial service are enumerated and described in Appendix 2. Some broadcasts include rebroadcasts of previous stories; some images consequently not only recirculated with newly scripted voiceovers but were also reaired with the entire image bite and script intact. Tallying the number of times an image is either recirculated (RC) or rebroadcast (RB) across the 10 broadcasts yields what we call an RC/RB or circulation frequency score. Appendix 2 includes the RC/RB scores for each of the 8 images analyzed. Appendix 3 overviews the distribution of each of the 8 memorial service images over the 10 broadcasts.

As one can see from Appendix 2, NBC recirculated or rebroadcast most frequently (RC/RB score = 9) a zoomed-in facial profile of Hillary Clinton from the memorial service. NBC relied on this profile image in subsequent broadcasts to locate a “private” Clinton at a crossroads, deciding on whether to help her husband.
save the presidency, whether to seek a U.S. Senate seat, or whether to stay in an increasingly combative Senate race. NBC also routinely used “relational” images isolating on the Clintons together during⁵ and after⁶ the memorial service, often with pained expressions,⁷ to invite an interrogation of the internal machinations of their private marriage or their political partnership.

In tracking the 8 recontextualized video images of Hillary Clinton, we examine how NBC recycles the same store of video images both within and across broadcasts to map and remap a public woman across the public/private divide as she makes decisions about her presidential marriage and her own political career. We show that through much of its coverage NBC reifies the public/private divide in traditional masculine terms, and reports polling data that re-enforces similar dominant interpretations. Nonetheless, during the period of her Senate run, the network also attempts to depict Hillary Clinton as an agent troubling masculine stereotypes and, in so doing, exercises its own agency to trouble them as well. Such challenges to rigid binaries support what Holmes (2005, 56) refers to as the “chipping away at the parameters of what is considered acceptable behaviour” for women.

The central question of interest for our study was whether in its use of image bites over a twenty month period of rapid role transformation, NBC relegated Hillary to private roles and/or established her across both private and public spaces. This question assumes that the American viewers of these image bites could share at least a tacit awareness of the public/private divide as reflected in the language and images of the newscasts. To test this deeper assumption, we applied to the news transcripts a lexical cohesion algorithm developed by Beigman Klebanov et al. (2008), which extracts every word pair from a transcript of interest and measures the associative strength (called lexical cohesion) of the pair in terms of their occurrence in dictionaries (Miller 1990), in large corpora of texts (Deerwester et al. 1990) and in word association databases compiled over hundreds of English speakers in the U.S. (Nelson et al. 2004) and the U.K. (Kiss et al. 1973). Running the 10 transcripts of the broadcasts through Beigman-Klebanov’s algorithm, we discovered two large non-interactive clusters of words; one cluster was centered on “politics” (a public term) and the second on “marriage” (a private term).⁸

The outcome of the cohesion analysis provided systematic evidence that for communities of language users in the U.S. and the U.K., the domains of private and public, relative to the news transcripts we analyzed, are dramatically divided. This evidence, in turn, indicates that NBC confronted audiences who would likely perceive their broadcasts jumping a significant divide when the network coverage moved from Hillary’s strained marriage to her political alliance with her husband and ultimately to her own Senate candidacy. It further means we could trace NBC’s own rhetorical strategies, relative to its image bites, as we analyzed whether

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NBC’s coverage of Clinton sought to reinforce the public/private divide, attempted to bridge it, or both.

In the time period of the transcripts we analyzed, Clinton required a diverse repertoire of performative strategies to jump in such a short time frame from her role as a first lady and victim of adultery, to a counselor for her husband facing impeachment, to a candidate for elective office. In response, NBC tracked the changing accounts of Clinton’s decision-making in changing institutional contexts through the use of unchanging images. NBC accordingly needed in its framing of image bites to mirror her performative dexterity in order to keep up with her role changes as she crisscrossed the public/private divide.

2. The performative elasticity of the public/private divide

Still missing from our analysis, however, is a theory to help account for the performative elasticity that allows the public and private to be performed in ways that invite an assortment of (re)mappings. Such an approach assumes that both are embedded in “ordinary language, fashioned by everyday use, historical practice, and political discourse” (Landes 2003, 35). From Walsh (2001) we take the idea that women burdened by dominant masculine framings are relegated to private aspects of the public sphere. Gal (2002, 80ff) extends Walsh’s conception of the private within the public by explaining the capacity of language to redraw public/private boundaries through “fractal” recalibration, which allows the boundary, like cell division, infinitely to subdivide (see also Gal 1991, Gal and Kligman 2000). Public spaces can spawn private ones and private spaces can spawn public ones. The private space of home, for example, can promote the public space of the living room, which can in turn feature the private spaces of whispers. According to Gal (2002), then, the public/private divide constitutes a nested set of divisible boundaries, with each nesting requiring fresh calibrations inspired by a communicator’s inventiveness and longstanding cultural practice. The (re)calibrations of the public/private divide occur implicitly and with lightening speed making them “difficult to discuss explicitly” and hard to contemplate (Gal 2002, 85). Why then does the divide often seem so fixed and brittle? According to Gal, we tend to imagine the public/private divide within stereotypical binaries to secure our orientation in the language with others. This oscillating attention on the binary as an unstable creative construct of an individual agent or as a stable construct habituated by social practice, accounts for the historical resilience of the distinction as well as its fluid cognitive-linguistic instability.

In the next section, we provide evidence for NBC’s various (re)drawings of the public/private binary relative to its coverage of Hillary Clinton. If our analysis
has merit, we cannot simply see NBC as a media giant regulating Clinton to a privatized public sphere (though its coverage at times does exactly that). Rather, we need to see NBC as doing its best to “make sense” of one woman’s negotiation of public/private spaces as she takes on ever new identities across a complex political terrain. NBC’s reliance on a stable set of 8 image bites of Hillary Clinton with updated meanings provided an efficient way for the network to try to keep pace with the many identity shifts that Clinton makes.

3. Marking the public within the private and the private within the public

In the period between August 14, 1998 and September 19, 1998, prior to the release of the Starr Report and Bill Clinton’s testimony, NBC’s image bites of Hillary Clinton place her in the cultural script of a non-traditional woman acting as a professional counselor strategizing her accused husband’s political survival. It also situates her in the traditional script of a wife suffering private pain from her husband’s initially private and ultimately very public indiscretions. In the August 14, 1998 newscast, Tom Brokaw emphasizes Hillary in her public role as family counsel: “She’s a smart, tough lawyer who’s been down this road before, and as NBC’s Andrea Mitchell reports tonight, she is using all of her skills to help save his presidency.” Mitchell invokes the legal profession when she refers to Clinton as “toughened” and a “key player” on Bill’s defense team. In addition to depicting Clinton as a seasoned counsel to her husband, the same newscast then shifts to the private side of Hillary, catching her in the following quote: “We know everything there is to know about each other, and we understand and accept and love each other.” Mitchell further tracks the private side when she wonders aloud, “How does she cope? What other wife would tolerate so much embarrassment” (The president under oath)? We find Gal-like (2002) image bites in this broadcast that embed private within public spaces. In starting with the public space, Lisa Caputo, Clinton’s former aide, controls the voice-over when the memorial image is shown, intoning:

(1) She is a lawyer by trade and has an incredible legal mind.

At that moment, the image from the memorial service shows Clinton whispering something into the president’s ear. Their faces are touching as he leans down to hear her. He mouths “alright” as he straightens back up. This image lasts 8 seconds as Caputo continues with 2:

(2) And I think she is helping to advise [Bill] every step of the way.

The visuals and words frame one another to reinforce the concept of Hillary Clinton as the chief legal advisor to Bill on the Kenneth Starr (Independent
Counsel) investigation. As we see images of the coffins being placed in the hearses, Mitchell takes over the voice-over narration:

(3) In fact after yesterday’s emotional memorial service for victims of the Nairobi bombing, a close advisor tells NBC News that Mrs. Clinton was more focused than her husband at the White House advisory session, zeroing in on the bottom line … save the presidency, don’t lie to the grand jury, even if that means making embarrassing admissions.

The words and images paint Clinton as the cold calculating professional able to help a husband who is too emotionally broken to help himself. As Mitchell concludes the story, however, a new private space opens from within the public space of a counselor at arm’s length from her client. This is not described as a marital reconciliation (with the private space in control) but more as a distant professional relationship where the ice has broken and professional competence blossoms into personal trust:

(4) And friends say because the Clintons are now each other’s best council, if anything, this crisis has brought them closer together.

In this newly evoked private-within-public space, the asymmetry of the lawyer-client relationship gives way to the symmetry of friends who respect one another’s professional counsel. It is far from the powerless private space of the masculine interpretation of women. It is the private space that only grows in insider power as it privatizes. Hillary emerges as the central node of Bill’s old boys’ network.

Although Mitchell’s words suggest that this personal crisis brought them “closer together,” the ending visual offers a sense of unresolved tension between the public/private. As the Clintons return from the memorial service, the two are shown walking together on the White House lawn. They are hand in hand, re-enforcing their closeness in the face of nearly unimaginable relational strain. Yet, their facial expressions lack emotion. Both are shown looking down or straight ahead rather than interacting with one another. Hillary is wearing sunglasses, which further inhibits any sense of emotional connection. Parsing the public side of this image, Clinton is helping her husband save the presidency in a professionally appropriate and detached manner. Parsing the private side, the couple is holding hands, but the visible strain on the marriage is unmistakable. The public and private framings compete for ascendancy but there is no winner.

As mentioned earlier, this is the sole NBC broadcast that refers to the memorial service by name. The remaining broadcasts in our sample de-contextualize these images and make no further mention of their source. In this as well as all subsequent broadcasts, NBC recycles these same image bites from the memorial service to comment afresh on Hillary’s private deliberations, the state of her hard-to-fathom marriage, and on her own subsequent Senate run.
The NBC broadcast of August 17, 1998 on the Lewinsky scandal is the first use of de-contextualized images in our sample and illustrates how quickly changing image bites can lead to quickly changing mappings of Hillary Clinton along the public/private divide. Field reporter Andrea Mitchell supplies the voice-over early in the story:

(5) She is right there at his side, smiling for the cameras, despite the biggest crisis of their 23 year marriage. Over a weekend of public humiliation and private pain …

As 5 is heard, an image of Clinton at the memorial service is shown that will become NBC’s signature portrait of the private Hillary. As mentioned at the outset, it is the most recurrent (profile) image of Clinton’s face — a facial angle that positions Hillary as “detached from the viewer” given the lack of eye contact (Wendorf 1990, 80). The background is dark, effacing any contextual cues, and the image features a close-up of Hillary’s nearly motionless facial profile. The area below her eye appears to be wet as if she has been crying. Lacking any direct knowledge of how Hillary is personally responding to her husband’s infidelity, NBC suggests that its camera has penetrated the public veneer, letting her face become a projection screen of private aloneness and strain. Whether Mitchell’s choice or a producer’s, the profile image helps authenticate Mitchell’s claim of Hillary’s “public humiliation and private pain.”

Voice-over 5 contributes to a highly masculinized image bite of Hillary as a woman scorned. But both the voice-over and the accompanying imagery change dramatically. An image of Bill Clinton is shown walking from behind the presidential limo with a frown on his face appropriate for a memorial service. The frown is sustained for 9 seconds until he gets into the car. Yet, as he maintains this frown, Mitchell now states:

(6) NBC News [has learned] she helped her husband prepare first to admit to adultery to Ken Starr, the man they both view as a mortal enemy.

This new image bite shifts Hillary to a nonconventional masculine frame, with Bill and Hillary steeling themselves against a common enemy. With the same image, Mitchell’s subsequent words now profoundly change the image bite and the attendant meaning:

(7) Then to face the nation and most difficult of all, to explain all this to her daughter. How does she do it?

The image bite now appears to reconcile the public Hillary, who is fighting alongside her husband for their public legacy, and a private Hillary, who must explain to the nation and her daughter why a man who privately betrayed her still deserves
her public fealty. The intonation of “How does she do it?” suggests incredulity as well as admiration, as if to open a space to reflect on Hillary’s ability to battle so many public and private fronts at once.

The same broadcast contains more traditional redrawings of Hillary as a long-suffering yet loyal wife. The redrawing is done by Jesse Jackson (political activist and religious leader) who enters the newscast on screen with a character testimonial, affirming the private Hillary’s “unconditional love” for Bill and her understanding that he is “not perfect.” And this love, Jackson implies, keeps the private Hillary rooted in her true priorities: “She has a marriage to protect. She has a daughter to raise” (President Clinton testifies).

Which of the various public and private Hillary Clintons is the correct one? These are precisely the questions that Walsh (2001) raises when she worries that performative constructions of women (either induced from their own behavior or from media depictions of their behavior) often result in judgments of inconsistency and insincerity. Yet, it is our contention that NBC required all these constructions to do full justice to the multiple and interdependent identities that Hillary Clinton exhibited across the time frame of our analysis.

By September 11, 1998, the day the Starr Report was released and Hillary Clinton’s humiliation was a matter of public record, NBC’s coverage expresses a more deeply private turn than the one featured on August 17th. This broadcast focuses almost exclusively on Hillary’s private struggle to maintain a brave public face. This continuing shift of emphasis to the private is reflected in the title of the broadcast, “Hillary Rodham Clinton maintaining strong front and dealing with humiliation and anger privately while still supporting her husband.” This framing approximates the dominant masculine stereotype of the “long suffering wife.” It comports with Walsh’s (2001) idea of a woman trapped in a privatized aspect of the public sphere. Gal (2002) would likely agree, though she would render the private space in control, from which a public space is generated referencing her husband’s public trial and defense.

On this fateful broadcast, Brokaw introduces Clinton as if she were a textbook case of female victimization:

(8) The first lady, betrayed, lied to, humiliated.

Brokaw’s language suggests that her public mask has been shredded as we are now watching her “struggling, in full view of the public, with a very personal crisis. How does she handle it?” In the present context, it is a matter of record in the Starr hearings that Bill lied to his wife and Kenneth Starr knew that fact before Hillary. So the foundation for Hillary building common cause with her husband against Starr at this juncture has been shattered. In offering answers to “How does she handle it?” the newscast disambiguates the meaning to indicate her handling of
marital betrayal. For answers, the newscast delves into Hillary’s religious commitment and interviews her minister, Reverend Gerald Mann, who praises Hillary for “continu[ing] to show all of us what grace, and courage, and mercy look like.” Lisa Caputo sympathizes that what Clinton is being asked to endure is “beyond painful” and “unprecedented,” accentuating the anomalous situation that poses extreme challenges for this “intensely private” first lady and the news organizations covering the story. The main unknown is whether, despite her humiliation, Hillary will wash her hands of her husband or rally to his side. Mandy Grunwald, former Clinton aide, muses that Hillary doesn’t know whether “to kill him or save him.”

In an image bite of interest, Mitchell states:

(9) The president’s aides even want her giving a speech defending him. Her staff says if she does, it will be on her own time when she’s ready.

On the word “defending,” the newscast displays the facial profile to reference Clinton’s indecision at this all important crossroads: Will Clinton come to the public defense of her husband’s presidency in spite of his private marital betrayal? Her indecision is further re-enforced as the profile image segues into the image bite of the Clintons standing side-by-side at the memorial service staring off in the distance. This latter image, sustained for 9 seconds, shows Bill and Hillary with facial expressions of suffering and despair. They are standing next to each other but are not interacting; their body language is formal and stiff. A single tear appears to have slid down the president’s face as he looks toward the camera and then away. A different but complementary image of the Clintons appears from the ceremony where both continue to look sad and despondent.

This imagery is framed by Brokaw’s on-camera closing words that foreshadow a marital relationship that can’t be mended without forgiveness:

(10) The first lady has said through a spokesman that she forgives her husband.

The words “through a spokesman” open an odd public space within the privacy of their relationship, underscoring the fact that the “president” and “first lady” are offices as well as individuals, and in this case, the “forgiveness” tendered has been enacted institutionally, first lady to president, rather than personally, wife to husband. Brokaw then concludes:

(11) For many days now, forgiveness is something that Mr. Clinton has been asking for, not only of his wife, but of the nation.

In 11, the public/private has been redrawn anew. The words “but of the nation” let us know that another public entity — the American public — is being invited to forgive the president along with his wife. The public’s reasons for forgiving the president reveal themselves to rely on Hillary’s private role as long-suffering
wife. As the victim of an adulterous affair, Hillary, arguably, is the principal party harmed. If *she*, as the principal injured party, can forgive him, the reasoning suggests, why can’t *we*?

One day later (September 12, 1998), NBC airs a *Dateline* episode entitled, “The president and the people.” This two hour episode features, in part, the titillating disclosures of the president’s now public affair and speculates about Hillary Clinton’s responses to such intimate details. Brian Williams, the host of this report, warns in a preamble that what he is about to read is “not for children” or the “faint of heart.” He then reads the graphic details of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair from the Starr Report, elaborating narratives involving thongs, cigars, and oral sex. The Starr Report helped satisfy the public’s prurient interest in what happened behind closed doors between Clinton and Lewinsky — a marked contrast to the Clintons’ own disciplined silence. Equipped with graphic words about the affair, the audience is left without images, save for the memorial service visuals, which now seem to show the scars of infidelity imprinted on Bill and Hillary. From Gal’s (2002) perspective, the salty details of the Clinton-Lewinsky once private and now public affair could only strengthen the redrawing of Hillary as the private “long suffering wife” who must now bear that burden in very public ways. Conventional masculine readings of Hillary’s predicament reach its peak at this point. Public sympathy toward Hillary spikes.

A later segment speculates over Hillary Clinton’s response to the Starr Report in a story titled: “Public respect for Hillary Clinton rising as world watches her graceful response to the scandal.” In introducing the segment, Jane Pauley states:

(12) **Hillary Rodham Clinton knows her husband of 23 years better than anyone, yet this revelation was news to her, we’re told.**

At this instant, the profile facial shot appears of Clinton from the memorial service. The audience hears of Hillary’s betrayal and then sees her in-profile and wet-eyed, alone in thought. The crossroads remains — what will she do? Whenever NBC lacks clear answers to pressing questions about Hillary, it seems, NBC turns to her facial profile. And in this broadcast, Pauley actually provides language that makes direct reference to that re-contextualized image on the screen:

(13) **People are looking into her eyes for an idea of what she’s going through.**

To dramatize what Hillary has been going through, NBC heightens her betrayal by then replaying Hillary’s last misguided display of loyalty when on September 9, just two days before the report’s release, Hillary had introduced her husband to an audience with words of Stepford loyalty:
(14) And I’m very proud of the person I’m privileged to introduce, I’m proud of his leadership; I’m proud of his commitment; I’m proud of what he gives our country.

The “Hillary” that Pauley portrays becomes a poster for masculine readings, and as Pauley reports, when bereft of political power, Hillary is beloved:

(15) Once vilified for ambition and political overreaching when she took on health care, now she’s admired for being the faithful loving wife.

Helpless and in pain, Hillary is anointed a positive role model. Pauley elevates Hillary’s private suffering to the measuring stick Americans are to use in assessing Bill Clinton as a president and a person:

(16) In the days ahead, Americans may look to Hillary Rodham Clinton to see how she handles hurt and disappointment in order to gauge their own feelings about the president.

Clinton’s persona as a beloved, influential, and betrayed woman is short lived, however. Within a week, NBC reasserts the political partnership of the Clintons during a September 19, 1998 episode of Time & Again. Recycling news stories from NBC Nightly News and Dateline in this hour-long retrospective, the focus returns to the Clintons’ indivisible political partnership, known for decades simply as “The Clintons.” Pauley narrates:

(17) They’re no ordinary couple. They’re a team, a political partnership that goes back more than two decades. They’ve been through a lot together, accomplished a lot together, and relied on each other when times were tough.

When Pauley articulates the words, “relied on each other when times were tough,” there is a fade to that now familiar image of the Clintons returning from the memorial service, walking on the White House lawn. Throughout the hour-long broadcast, this image reappears three times — once to begin the episode and twice to introduce new segments before Pauley transitions to a new story about the Clinton relationship. To reinforce NBC’s framing of the Clintons as a political partnership, the image within this episode of Time & Again is used to reference the entire Clinton marriage with no longer a special focus on the Clinton-Lewinsky affair. The Clintons are holding hands and, as before, their coupling is visually devoid of intimacy. But with the attending language of 17, the lack of intimacy in the image is no longer used to signify marital strain. It is rather used to signify the emotional distance and sober calculation that have made them the über power couple for decades. The image is used to announce Hillary’s restoration from aggrieved wife to a potent half of the “Clintons,” and determined to move beyond her husband’s affair.
4. Redrawing Hillary from wife and professional friend to dominant public figure

When news spreads that Hillary Clinton might vie for a Senate seat in early 1999, NBC’s coverage makes evident a seismic power shift in the Clinton household. Whereas Hillary had previously remained the tight-lipped spouse in the shadow of her husband, Bill now emerges as the chief aide lingering in the shadow of her campaign. And instead of seeking her help to salvage his office, she now seeks his help to secure her own. On February 15, 1999, Brokaw declares the impeachment trial “history” and opens up the “hot political buzz” of recent days, a buzz that “got even louder today” when the president “spoke openly about the possibility” of his wife’s candidacy. Turning the report over to Andrea Mitchell, she reviews the roles Hillary has played over the past: “loyal wife,” “political victim,” and “political savior” and now through a disclosure (“friends say”), makes us aware that Hillary is “close to deciding on a new role for herself, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton.”

As with previous newscasts, disclosures play a large role in leaking private information into public channels. Yet, in this newscast, the disclosures are about Clinton’s secret office-holding ambitions now coming to outside notice, with the “news” of this broadcast focused on Bill’s public support for his wife’s political run. The president has now joined the rank and file of Hillary’s “friends,” Mitchell suggests, “promoting speculation that she’ll run” with Hillary as the ultimate decision-maker: “I think she would be terrific in the Senate, but that’s a decision that she’ll have to make.” This string of Bill Clinton’s endorsing his wife ends with NBC’s first hint of controversy regarding Hillary’s ambitions:

(18) Would New Yorkers call her a carpetbagger?

The reference to carpetbagging leads into the memorial image. Andrea Mitchell’s voice-over depicts a formidable candidate Clinton, potentially intimidating her toughest opponent out of the race:

(19) Tonight the talk in political circles is that Mayor Giuliani may not even run if the first lady does, the conventional wisdom is she’s so strong she’d, quote, “clear the field.”

As Mitchell utters “clear the field,” NBC once again shows the facial profile image of Hillary at the memorial service. The image, so often used before to signify isolation and weakness, seems out of place as a metaphor for Hillary’s new found dominance. However, it does fit as a metaphor for Clinton’s now newsworthy uncertainty and mystery in terms of her Senate bid. What will she do? The profile image cannot answer but does emblematize Hillary again at a crossroads. The script that follows the profile image promises viewers that her decision is forthcoming:
(20) Which is why in fairness to other Democratic hopefuls, she has told friends she will make a decision soon.

Previous broadcasts had disclosed Hillary as a political partner, a betrayed wife, and, most significantly, a loyal and loving wife. This broadcast, however, exposes Hillary’s predatory political ambitions. The cultural archetypes behind these role shifts are polar opposites. A “loving wife” protects the boundaries of her family at all costs against invaders. A carpetbagger invades territorial and familial livelihoods. For a “loving wife,” the private is admired when it comes into view. A carpetbagger, like a conspirator, hides the private for self-protection as exposure threatens censure and opprobrium. The “friends” of a “loving wife” circle the wagons to protect her. The “friends” of a “carpetbagger” are “accomplices” and “co-conspirators” who lurk in the shadows with the power of denial. Once, Hillary’s friends were salt-of-the-earth women offering hugs of support. Now, they are her cronies who plot with her the taking of the Senate seat and worry that there won’t be enough political spoil for her. As Mitchell narrates in this broadcast:

(21) But friends have warned her, being a junior senator would be a step down from First Lady.

Mandy Grunwald, a friend and aide who only months before had questioned whether Hillary wanted to kill her husband or save him, is now preoccupied with the concern that “being a junior senator” may yield insufficient prestige for her (Talk of possible senatorial run).

A June 6, 1999 broadcast of Time & Again offers the most explicit effort thus far to unify Hillary Clinton as a private and public person. The unification is attempted around a matrimonial turn of phrase. One short segment titled, “For better or worse,” functions as a synecdoche for the private vows of marriage as well as the various “better or worse” public images of the Clinton political partnership circulating across the television airwaves. Most significantly, “for better or worse” suggests that emotional strength is the key to Clinton’s public and private perseverance.

This broadcast is introduced with Hillary’s facial profile image superimposed over a daylight aerial photo of the White House — marking the private and public connotations of the newly recontextualized image. The White House is known as the “people’s house” and it also functions as the chief executive’s and the first lady’s political work spaces. Yet, a sense of mystery also shrouds the White House; it functions as the first couple’s private residency and it represents the location of public space off the Oval Office where the president carried on his private indiscretions with Lewinsky. It also functioned as the site where Bill Clinton publicly admitted his private affair to an international audience during his Map Room speech. Consequently, the White House serves as a fractal spatial metaphor (Gal
2002) where the politicized spaces of the Clintons’ political partnership and the private spaces of their marital strain reproduce recursively within the image of their residence. This spatial metaphor now in background, the profile image no longer functions as insight into the private thoughts of an isolated Hillary Clinton. The image bite instead positions Clinton’s face against the peaks of her political alliance with her husband and the valleys of her marital pain.

The language that accompanies the profile image emphasizes Hillary’s calm emotional resolve to save her marriage and her husband’s presidency. The segment recalls the release of the Starr Report and the “mountain of intimate details about Bill Clinton’s and Monica Lewinsky’s once secret relationship.” Rather than imagine a woman too shaken by her husband’s infidelity to know whether to leave the marriage or stay, NBC’s retrospective is of a woman absolutely secure in her marital vows and capable of enduring unimaginable personal trauma in order to defend her husband’s presidency against Starr’s report. All such premises are needed to account for Jane Pauley’s words of admiration for Hillary’s emotional steadfastness:

(22) The release of such allegations must have been an ordeal for Hillary Clinton. But if it was she never let it show.

Framed by this language, the profile image connotes Clinton’s steadfast emotional resolve — both privately and publicly — in overcoming the hardships of her marital union in order to help defend her political partner against Kenneth Starr’s investigation of “more than 4 years.”

A January 27, 2000 broadcast of NBC’s Headliners and Legends goes even further to reconcile the public/private images of Hillary by identifying a unifying factor that lies at her core: fortitude. This core comes in the context of wondering whether Hillary has what it takes to stay in the Senate race. David Gregory narrates:

(23) From the start, there’s talk of carpetbagging. But trying to balance two roles, first lady and political candidate, created bigger problems for her than her address. Political missteps convince her detractors that she’ll drop out of the race. But Hillary’s fortitude prevails.

On the words, “Political missteps convince her detractors that she’ll drop out of the race,” the broadcast again features Hillary’s profile image. As we have seen, that image had become NBC’s emblem of Hillary at a crossroads. Will she run or drop out? The image only lingers for 2 seconds and is quickly followed by an image of Howard Wolfson, a campaign spokesman, indicating that it is official: Hillary Clinton is running for the Senate. When Gregory vocalizes the last sentence, “But Hillary’s fortitude prevails,” the visuals in foreground unveil a smiling Hillary Clinton in the present answering affirmatively: “Yes, I intend to run.”
For the first time, NBC designs a voice-over (“but Hillary’s fortitude prevails”) that counters the profile image that had become emblematic of her indecision. NBC offers the notion of “fortitude” as an explanatory device to reconcile the private and public identities of Hillary. Fortitude unifies an unflinching political warrior who now refuses to leave a tight race and an unflinching wife who had earlier refused to leave a troubled marriage. NBC also uses this broadcast to assault the very “Hillary-as-victim” image it had helped construct in previous newscasts. Bill Clinton biographer, David Maraniss, asserts:

(24) Hillary Clinton her whole life has never wanted to seem the victim. She’s always wanted to seem like the strong woman and this [Starr Report] just threw her off completely.

If Hillary has an image problem, the newscast suggests, the problem lies with the U.S. public who, as Gregory notes, gave her undeserved credit in the victim role during the Starr days, when the slightest display of “dignity, stamina, and strength [from that role] sent her approval rating soaring.” The public was not wrong, the broadcast suggests, to admire Clinton’s dignity, stamina and strength. The public was simply wrong to base these positive attributions on the perception of her as a victim.

5. Resistance against reconciling Hillary’s public/private roles

Three months later, the coverage that helped disrupt the masculine dichotomies of Hillary as a divided public/private figure was followed by stories accentuating the backlash against Clinton’s bold entry into the public/political spaces. By the NBC Nightly News broadcast of May 17, 2000, after Hillary had won the Democratic nomination for the U.S. Senate from New York, NBC furnishes framings that play into the stereotype of the dominant female who is too dominant for her own good. Such insights are reminiscent of Bourdieu’s (2001, 67) observation that when women dare assert male dominance, they forfeit their “femininity” and create backlash by challenging the “natural right” of men to positions of power.

The broadcast, “Hillary Clinton’s turn in the spotlight, with Bill by her side,” insinuates this assertion of power and the subsequent backlash. It first features Hillary as the star of the family with Bill politically dead (“he’s done…nobody cares,” asserts journalist Sally Quinn during this report). But then re-enforcing Bourdieu’s predictions about male domination in the presence of female assertiveness, NBC now turns a skeptical eye toward the rapidity of the marital power shift. Showing the images of a tense Bill and Hillary walking on the White House lawn holding hands without closeness, Mitchell intones:
(25) The same Bill Clinton who was impeached after scandalizing the nation and his wife?

Mitchell then wonders out loud:

(26) How did they go from this less than two years ago, to this?

At that instant, the video image switches to an energized rally where Hillary is praising her husband and Mitchell reports that Bill now sees Hillary’s political success as “one of the most historic parts of his legacy.” Mitchell suggests that the role reversal has been fast, too fast, and, by implication, too transgressive from private (presidential wife) to public (Senate candidate) spaces to be credible.

(27) Her candidacy starts with her being first lady. That does not necessarily constitute a plus, particularly among a lot of women.

From the start of Hillary’s campaign, Hillary endured a credibility problem with women. As Bumiller wrote for the New York Times on February 22, 2000, “Many of the same women who rallied to her side as a victim have mixed feelings about whether that should translate into support for her now that she is a political candidate.”

The final newscast widens further the credibility gap surrounding Hillary Clinton’s rapid ascension into the public spotlight as a candidate. This June 22, 2000 segment of NBC’s Nightly News “In Depth,” begins with Tom Brokaw introducing the latest NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll indicating how American women feel about “their lives, their jobs and Hillary Clinton.” The poll reported in this newscast finds that many American women aren’t buying Hillary’s new leadership role. When her personal life was in shambles, Hillary’s popularity skyrocketed. Many New York women now had come to see Hillary as exploiting her popularity for political gain. The broadcast shows the memorial image of Bill and Hillary standing side by side — looking tense, non-interactive, visibly upset, neither turning to the other for emotional comfort. This footage provides the image for Myers’s voice-over:

(28) She redefined the role of first lady, became an enormously sympathetic figure during impeachment.

And after the image is withdrawn, Myers continues:

(29) And today according to an NBC News poll, [Hillary Clinton] deeply divides the country
   (Poll shows Americans split on opinion of Hillary Clinton).
Although New York women struggled with Hillary’s image transformation, they ended up supporting her 60 to 39 percent in the Senate race against her opponent, Rick A. Lazio. No one expected Hillary to capture the women’s vote, but as feminist leader Gloria Steinem explained to a *New York Times* reporter days after the election, “I think women can tell the difference between their personal feelings and their political welfare” (Bumiller November 12, 2000).

6. Conclusion

This case study reveals how image bites can function as floating signifiers with reusability in multiple and diverse contexts of personal and public decision-making. It further casts light on the poetic license NBC took in extracting images of Bill and Hillary Clinton from a memorial service and then re-cycling them over a twenty month period to create commentary on the health of their marriage, Hillary’s participation in saving Bill Clinton’s presidency, and her own run for the U.S. Senate. Such de-contextualization practices are morally problematic when the images are staged to manipulate impressions (Drew, Lyons, and Svehla 2010), the stock and trade of the tabloid press. Defenders of such practices may plead innocent by acknowledging that the image bite may be “out of context” but still capture the authentic mood and emotion conveyed in the target context. Nonetheless, had NBC wanted to demonstrate that its de-contextualized practices served the public interest of authentic reporting, it should have disclosed the memorial service as the originating source of its visuals across all 10 broadcasts.

The meanings of image bites are framed, of course, by the interplay of words and image (Olson, Finnegan, and Hope 2008). That NBC was able to make so many diverse verbal framings from facial images of Bill and Hillary is not surprising given the long history of associating the human face with the seat of emotion, character, and identity (Hartley 2001). Capturing Hillary’s troubled face in profile, seemingly under the anguish of indecision, NBC was able to reuse this image, as we have seen, during the early disclosures of her husband’s affair with Lewinsky, the impeachment hearings, and her Senate run whenever she confronted a challenging decision.

The interplay of words and images, however, does not alone settle the meaning of an image bite. Establishing the full contextual meaning further requires the subjective background of the viewer. As Burnett (1995, 238) contends, “There is an ambiguous link between the movement … from image to language and back” that can only be connected by the viewer. As we saw in the polling data, while some female voters from New York resisted NBC’s efforts to transform Hillary from abused spouse to political candidate, another portion accepted this transformation, suggesting guarded progress for public women who wish to span private
and public roles. The electoral outcome ultimately strengthened Walsh’s (2001, 2) contention that “traditional public and private spheres are becoming increasingly weakened and permeable” by women who “are not passively positioned in relation to the institutional … constraints that operate on them.”

This case study thus also demonstrates the need to complicate feminist critical discourse analyses through attention not only to the discourses used to frame women’s behavior but also to the performances of women as they seek to resist and/or accommodate these framings. Such a performance-enriched critical approach punctuates the complex interplay among texts, ideology, and human agency as agents “(re)produce, resist, and oppose resistances to prevailing normative ideologies” (Lazar, Politicizing, 2005, 21–22). Our aim in this paper has been to call attention to this complex interplay across contexts where a major political figure was defined and redefined several times anew through changing words rolling over unchanging images. In many expected cases, NBC’s image bites interpreted Hillary Clinton’s performance through the conventional binaries. But in other less expected cases, it seemed an institutional accomplice in her own public actions to subvert them.

Notes

1. The analysis is based on the actual broadcasts of each episode that were preserved on VHS tape and transcribed by one of the authors as well as the official transcripts of the NBC Nightly News and Dateline, which are available on Lexis-Nexis Universe: General News Topics.

2. Appendix 1 is available at www.cmu.edu/hss/english/research/appendix_1_broadcasts_mapped_within_event_timeline.doc

3. Appendix 2 is available at www.cmu.edu/hss/english/research/appendix_2_images_of_clintons_taken_day_of_memorial_service.doc.


5. See Appendix 2, image D1, RC/RB score = 6.

6. See Appendix 2, image R1, RC/RB score = 8

7. Pained “relational” expressions are especially evident in images D1, L1, L3, and R1.

8. See appendices 2 and 3.
References


**NBC News Broadcasts**

Headliners & Legends. 2000, Jan. 27. MSNBC.


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Authors’ addresses

David Kaufer
Department of English
Carnegie Mellon University
Pittsburgh, PA. 15213. US.
kaufer@andrew.cmu.edu

Shawn J. Parry-Giles
Department of Communication
University of Maryland
2130 Skinner Building
College Park, MD 20742–7635. US.
spg@umd.edu

Beata Beigman Klebanov
Educational Testing Service
Princeton, New Jersey. US.
bbeigmanklebanov@ets.org

About the authors

David Kaufer is a Professor of Rhetoric in the Department of English at Carnegie Mellon University. His research interests lie at the intersection of rhetorical theory and discourse analysis. His books include Rhetoric and the Arts of Design (with Brian Butler) and in 2012 Arab Women in Arab News (with Amal Al-Malki, Suguru Ishizaki and Kira Dreher).

Shawn J. Parry-Giles is a Professor of Rhetoric and Political Culture in the Department of Communication at the University of Maryland. She is the author of The Rhetorical Presidency, Propaganda, and the Cold War, and the co-author of Constructing Clinton, as well as The Prime-Time Presidency: The West Wing and US Nationalism.

Beata Beigman Klebanov is a Research Scientist at the Educational Testing Service. Her dissertation work involved experimental and computational investigation of lexical cohesion in English texts, and was subsequently applied to studying political rhetoric. Her current research focuses on computational analysis of content and organization of test-taker essays.