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## Media and the Discussion of High-Profile Sex Crime Accusations

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# **MEDIA & THE DISCUSSION OF SEXUAL CRIME**

**Peri Dropping & Theresa Wadsworth**

# Context

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- Professor Anita Hill accused Clarence Thomas (scotus nominee) in 1991
- Dr. Blasey-Ford accused Brett Kavanaugh (scotus nominee) in 2018



# Theory Section

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## AGENDA-SETTING THEORY >>

- “significant correlation between issues that the public deemed important and stories that were presented by the local and national media.” (McCombs and Shaw, 1972)
- Two assumptions:
  - Media filters and shapes reality.
  - The more attention media gives to an issue, the more likely the public is to perceive the issue as vital.
    - Memory based on interaction, or personal relation (either emotional or physical).
  - (Carroll and McCombs, 2003)

# Theory Section

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## FRAMING THEORY >>

- Interaction between two frames:
  - MEDIA FRAME: “the way media and media gatekeepers organize and present the events and issues they cover, and the way audiences interpret what they are provided,” (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987)
  - INDIVIDUAL FRAME: “mentally stored clusters of ideas that guide individuals’ processing of information.” (Entmen, 1993)
    - individual frames are influenced by media
- Three components: (Scheufele, 1999)
  - Journalist Centered
    - Ideology, attitudes, professional norms
    - The way they process information as they report it
  - Type/orientation of the medium
  - External Sources
    - Political actors, interest groups, societal pressure
- Particular issues can have recurring popular frames- issue specific frames
  - “three frames recurrent in the news during the final stages of the Clinton presidency. They identified ‘Clinton behavior scandal’, ‘Conservative attack scandal’, and ‘Liberal response scandal’.” (Shah, 2002)

# RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

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RQ1: Has media coverage of sexual assault accusations become more prominent?

RQ2: Was there more sympathetic language used for accusers in 1991 or 2018?

RQ3: Has the linguistic portrayal(who gets more sympathy) of accused/accusers changed since 1991?

# Method:

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- *The New York Times*: means of seeing a definitive trend in media reporting.
- time period: 24-hour news cycle
  - the first 24 hours after the hearing for Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas and Dr. Blasey-Ford/Brett Kavanaugh.
- This was done by going into *The New York Times* archives for October 12-13, 1991 and September 27-28, 2018.
- The archival search terms used “Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, Ford, Blasey-Ford, Kavanaugh.”
- We eliminated any ‘opinion, newsbrief, and video content’ from the list.
- With the remaining articles, we tallied descriptive words to portray the accusers and the accused in either a negative or positive connotation.
- Compared the media reporting from 1991 to 2018.
- Vocabulary/descriptive words examined - liar, unstable, bitter, composed, angry, happy.

# Results

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**The first research question - Has media coverage of sexual assault become more prominent?**

In comparing media coverage of sexual accusations from 1991 to 2018. Our research shows media coverage has not become more prominent, but has remained quite similar and possibly decreased.

- 1991 - 14 articles the day following the hearing.
- 2018 - 12 articles the day following the hearing.
- The only difference as far as media, would be the online videos and internet coverage as that was not available in 1991.



# Results

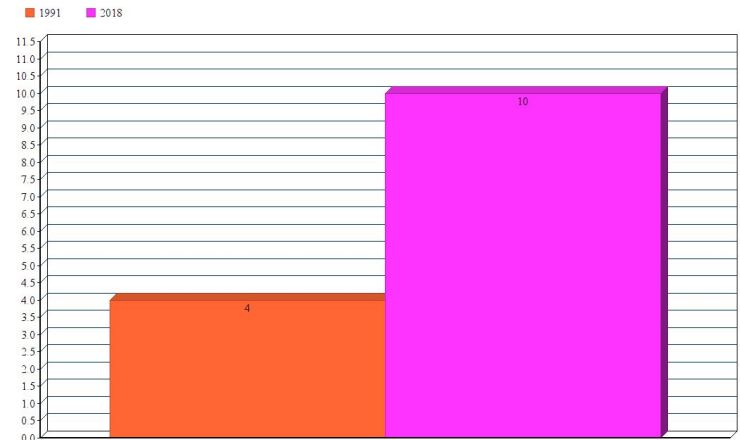
**The second research question – Was there more sympathetic language used for accusers in 1991 or 2018?**

- There was more sympathetic language in 2018
  - Negative language went down and positive language went up.
- 2018 articles emphasized courage, and power, credibility of the accuser.
- Mix of positive and negative attributes towards the accusers

Use of negative vocabulary to Describe Accusers



Use of positive vocabulary to Describe Accusers



# Results

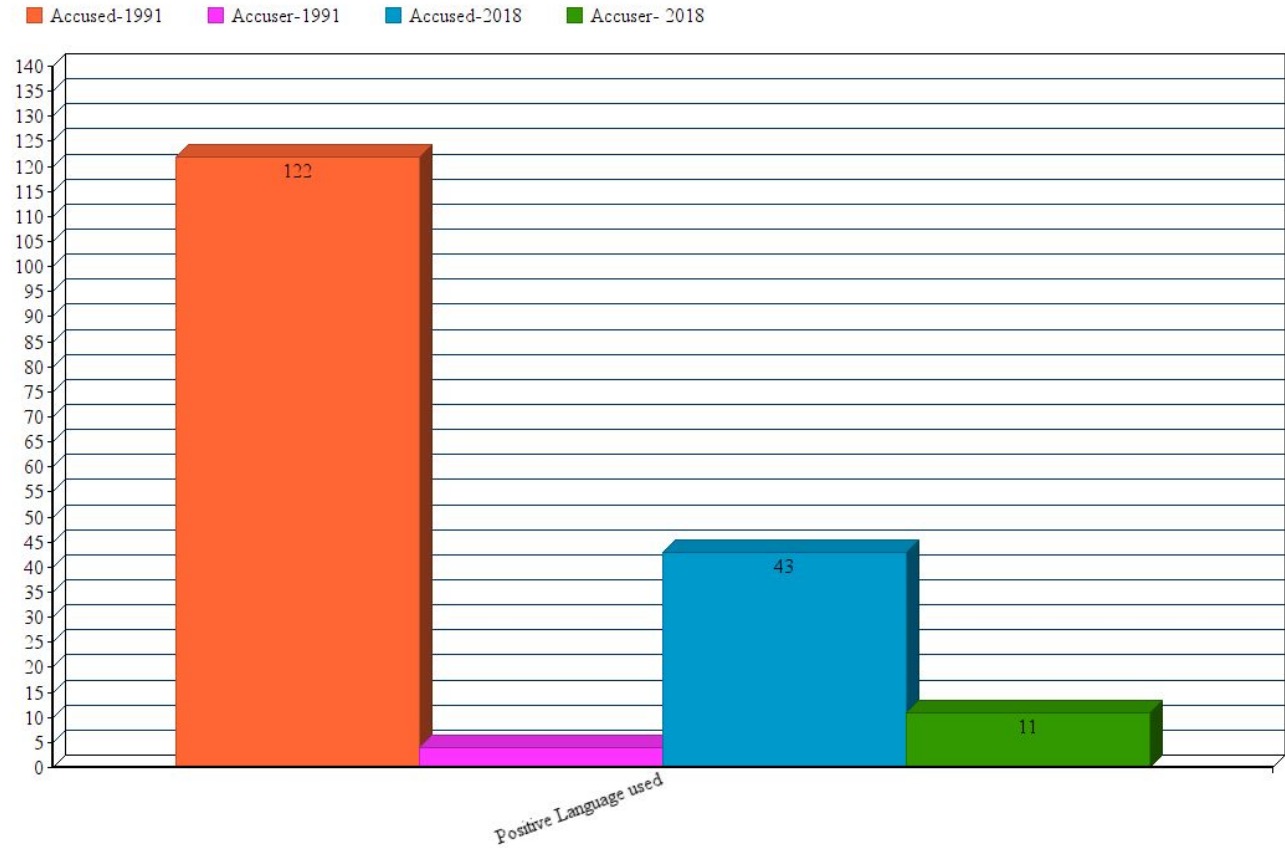
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The third question – whether or not the linguistic portrayal ( who gets more sympathy) of the accused/accusers has changed since 1991?

- The accused still receives more sympathetic language in 2018, but the disparity between the two groups has closed quite a bit.

# Uses of Positive Language.

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# Discussion -

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The accusations of Anita Hill towards Clarence Thomas and Dr. Blasey-Ford towards Brett Kavanaugh happened decades apart.

- Demonstrates a shift in framing and agenda setting by the media. This is important because media frames have a hand in shifting our individual frames.
  - The public is looking for there to be integrity for our courts, and have a commitment to our society by addressing sexual violence and hold people accountable for their actions, including those within our legal system. All involved deserve respect, and to be treated fairly.

# Conclusion

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- We saw that there has been little increase on the reporting of sexual crimes, accusers are being described with more sympathetic language than in the past, social movements are having some sort of impact on the reporting of these mediums, and lastly when it comes to sympathy, the accused still gets the most.

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