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Citation

Gabler, Neal. "The Press and Edward Kennedy: A Case Study of Journalistic Behavior." Shorenstein Center Discussion Paper Series 2015, D-92. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, March 2015.

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Shorenstein Center
on Media, Politics and Public Policy

Discussion Paper Series

#D-92, March 2015

The Press and Edward Kennedy: A Case Study of Journalistic Behavior

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HARVARD Kennedy School
SHORENSTEIN CENTER
on Media, Politics and Public Policy

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It is fair to say that during his lifetime not many people were neutral about Senator Edward M. Kennedy, the youngest of America's Gracchi brothers. Kennedy polarized. He was either the heir to his brothers' legacy or the one who sullied it, the voice of the nation's dispossessed or a populist demagogue, a hard-working legislator or a reckless libertine, a man of unshakable conviction to a set of timeless principles or a liberal anachronism, a practical politician or an intransigent ideologue, a hero or a coward. These images, many of which took on almost mythic dimensions over the last 50 years, may have sprung from actual events, but they only settled in the national consciousness after the media had massaged them. Whatever we came to think of Edward Kennedy, those thoughts were largely a product of how the media interpreted him.

The influence of the media is by now a very, very old and very, very oft-told story. Scholars have written extensively about media proclivities and biases, especially in the political realm where these things may actually affect our lives. But the issue of media influence is usually explored within a relatively limited context — an election or a legislative campaign or a scandalous episode. It is rarely examined over the course of a public figure's entire life to determine if the same forces that operate in chapters also operate through an entire book. Or put another way, we know how the media shape individual elections and particular public attitudes. But how do they shape the public perception of a person not just at a single point in time but at several points in time and over a longer course of time?

The life of Edward Kennedy provides an especially apt, perhaps unique, opportunity to answer this question for a host of reasons. There is, of course, the longevity. He served in the Senate for nearly 47 years, which gives a considerable timeline to anyone wanting to see how the media reported upon or even helped create the ups and downs, the flows and ebbs of his life. More, Kennedy was almost continuously in the public and media eye. As Kenneth Auchincloss put it in *Newsweek*, "The scrutiny was relentless, and as a result more is probably known about Ted Kennedy's character — for good or ill — than about the character of most other

American politicians. His private faults have been laid bare in public, and his private generosities too. Even for a nation endlessly fascinated with the personal lives of its political chieftains, Ted Kennedy is overexposed,"[1] though, in truth, Auchincloss may be overstating how much this information really revealed about Kennedy's character, faults and generosities and how much was just the media-generated fiction that it had somehow penetrated his soul. Barring personal experience, we could only know what the media told us. Then there was the fact of his being a Kennedy, which resulted not only in a surfeit of attention but also in a certain kind of attention — typically adoration or condemnation. And beyond the intensity of feelings that Kennedy evoked, there was the fact that as a Kennedy he was one of only a handful of politicians who crossed over from the world of public officialdom to the world of celebrity, which meant that he was covered by tabloids and gossip magazines as well as by newspapers, newsmagazines and television news broadcasts. And finally, there was the fact that Kennedy's own behavior, which often was characterized as misbehavior, provided grist for the media mill.

Based on conventional wisdom and various studies of media manipulation, one might very well make certain assumptions about how the media would have covered Kennedy. One might have assumed that both at any given point in time and over longer stretches of time the various components of the mainstream media would tend to tell the same story and make the same interpretations of it because the media tend to coalesce around one version with remarkably few outliers (the "herd instinct"); that the media, which love the dramatic arcs of storytelling, would tend to conform Kennedy's story around a trajectory of peaks and valleys because this would provide greater entertainment value (the "drama syndrome"); that policy-oriented coverage early in Kennedy's career would yield increasingly to horse-race coverage and personal coverage later in his career (the "gossip instinct"); that, as Michael Robinson and Margaret Sheehan discovered, coverage over time would become more evaluative, if only slightly so (the "post-Vietnam, post-Watergate cynicism"); and that since coverage tends to follow the political *zeitgeist*, Kennedy, as a liberal, would receive more favorable

coverage early in his career when liberalism was the country's consensus ideology and less favorable coverage later when conservatism became the consensus (the "*zeitgeist* influence").

Methodology

Our hope was to test these assumptions by examining press coverage throughout Kennedy's professional life, less as a way of assessing Kennedy, frankly, than as a way of assessing how the media go about their business. To do so, we divided the media into four tiers of what we thought would be descending order from both more neutral reporting and, for want of a better word, more high-minded reporting: newspapers (the *Chicago Tribune, New York Times, Washington Post)*; newsmagazines (*Newsweek* and *Time*); broadcast news programs (ABC, CBS, NBC); and tabloids/celebrity magazines (*National Enquirer*, *New York Post* and *People*).

From these sources, we hoped to determine the **amount** of coverage Kennedy received by aggregating mentions of him and how the amount rose, dropped or leveled off over time; how much the amount of his coverage **compared** to that of other politicians of similar magnitude and similar situation (namely, presidential candidates in the years of their candidacy); and the **nature** of the coverage, ie., whether it emphasized policy, politics or personal matters. To do the last of these, we selected four years — 1977, 1987, 1997 and 2007 — and then collected all the articles in the *New York Times* in which Kennedy was named in the headline. Then we coded whether the article was predominantly about policy, about process (including politics) or about something personal.

To determine the **direction** of the coverage — whether it was favorable or unfavorable — we also generated two sets of terms — one set a series of positively connoted words, the other a series of negatively connoted ones — and by running associations of these words with the name "Kennedy" in various media, we sought to determine whether the narrative changed over time, especially whether it alternated between positive and negative, as one might expect from the "drama syndrome,"

though tending to become somewhat less positive post-1980, as one might expect from the "*zeitgeist* influence."

Alas, we labored with limited time, limited resources and limited personnel — namely, my research assistant and myself. It was easy enough to run certain gross data, for example mentions, over the entire 47 years of Kennedy's career. For more exhaustive analysis, however, we subjected four major chapters in Kennedy's life to both quantitative and qualitative examination: his first run for the Senate and subsequent election in 1962; the incident at Chappaquiddick Island in 1969 in which Kennedy drove his automobile off a bridge and a young female passenger drowned; his run for the Democratic presidential nomination against incumbent Jimmy Carter in 1979-1980; and the incident at Palm Beach, Florida, in 1991, in which Kennedy's nephew, William Kennedy Smith, was charged with rape and Kennedy himself became an object of scorn and ridicule for rousting his son and nephew to go drinking and then for walking around his Palm Beach compound in either a shirt or nightshirt sans pants later that evening. We thought that by burrowing into these stories and then comparing the coverage of them, we might be able to say something useful about how the media came to shape the narratives. What makes this particularly interesting is that at least for the last three of these, many of us already have narratives in our heads.

But even while limiting ourselves to four stories in a life that generated dozens of them, some caveats are necessary. Though ideally we would have liked to have had *all* the papers, magazines and news broadcasts available in each of the four chapters on which we concentrated, there was no complete set of data to mine. Various publications and television networks either were not available during 1962 and 1969 or dropped out of the data base later on. Moreover, even when we had publications and broadcasts, the indexing of them was often highly inconsistent. The number of articles or broadcasts mentioning Kennedy in both Lexis-Nexis and ProQuest would change from one accession to the next, and there were frequently duplications, which threw off our numbers. When we asked Lexis-Nexis to refine the algorithm to avoid the duplications, they did so, but we wound up losing hundreds of articles that had previously been

listed. As for ProQuest, our protests of inconsistency were met with a simple, frustrating response: the database is organic and keeps changing, though why it would change for historical newspapers remains a mystery to us. Finally, yet another problem worth mentioning is that we didn't have an army of coders. In fact we had only a single soldier: me. No matter how scrupulous I attempted to be, this obviously makes for tremendous subjectivity. There was, however, no alternative.

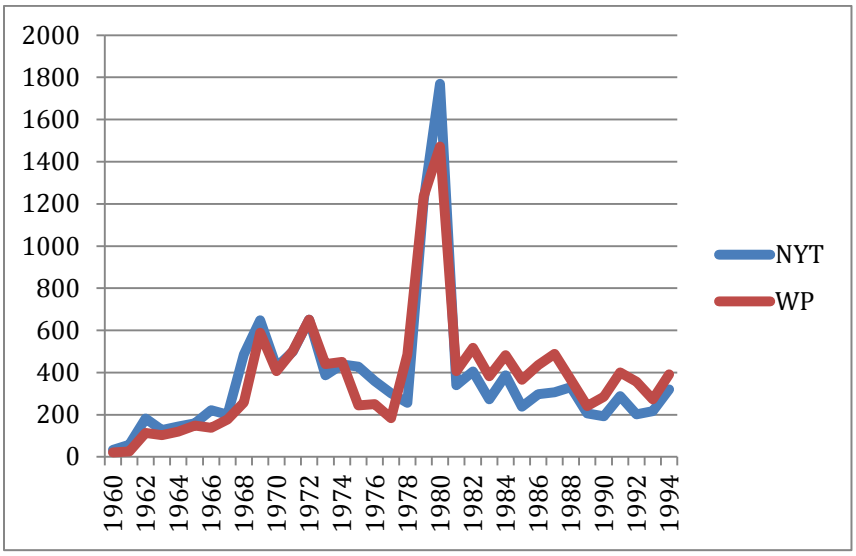
In effect, then, this is less a study than an approximation of a study. It steers us toward conclusions without ever quite braking at the destination. What I can say is that I did keep my eye on the scenery throughout the trip. I personally read every single article in *Time, Newsweek* and *People* magazine on "Edward," "Ted" or "Teddy" Kennedy. I personally read hundreds of articles in the *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Times* and *Washington Post* concerning the 1962 Senate race, Chappaquiddick, the 1980 presidential race by Kennedy and the Palm Beach incident, and read dozens of transcripts and watched dozens of reports from various television networks. We accumulated hard data that we believe is trustworthy despite the gaps. But data alone can never tell the whole story or provide the necessary detail and nuance, which is why we have supplemented that data by reading and excerpting the material itself.

The Kennedy Arc

One starts the investigation of Edward Kennedy's press coverage with the issue of "how much." The answer is "a lot," peaking, naturally, in 1980 when he made his presidential run. In the ProQuest data base Kennedy was mentioned 12,998 times in the *New York Times* from 1960 through 1994 and 13,308 times in the *Washington Post* in the same period — remarkably close numbers that suggests that the papers were generally covering the same episodes. This is more or less confirmed, as **Fig. 1** shows, since the arcs in the papers are almost identical, as one might expect; they presumably follow Kennedy's political, legislative and personal news, which are not different from one paper to another. There are small peaks in 1968 with the death of Robert Kennedy and speculation about Edward Kennedy's availability for the presidency, and again in 1969

with Chappaquiddick, another peak in 1972 with more presidential speculation, a tall mountain in 1979 and 1980 with his presidential campaign, tiny peaks in successive election years and another in 1991 that may be a mix of Palm Beach and the widely covered hearings of Clarence Thomas after his nomination to the Supreme Court since Kennedy sat on the Judiciary Committee that conducted those hearings.

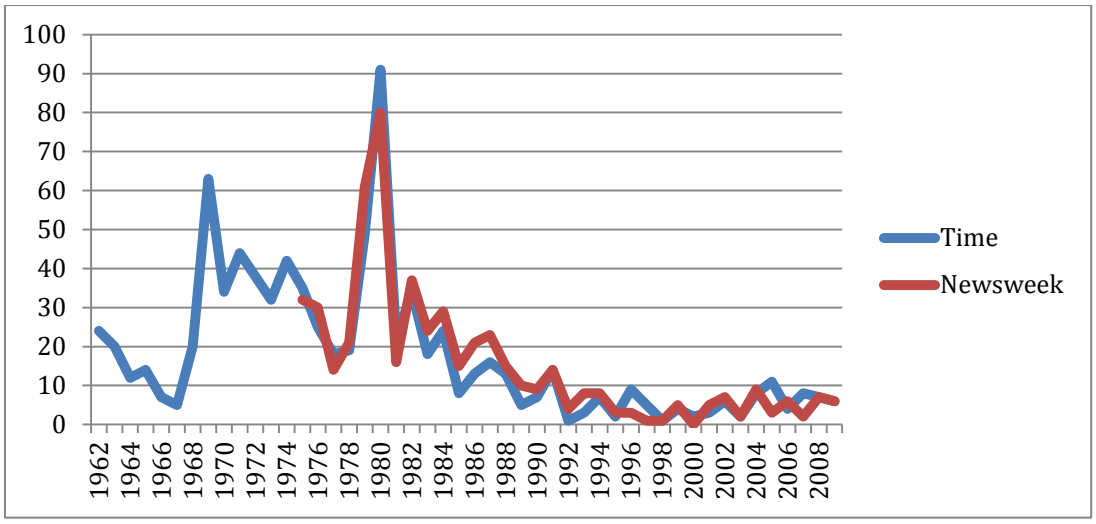
Fig. 1: Mentions of Ted or Edward Kennedy in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*
Source: ProQuest Historical Newspaper Database



One sees a very similar picture in Kennedy's coverage in *Time* and *Newsweek*, [**Fig. 2**]: a huge spike in 1979 and 1980 during the presidential consideration and run, a big falling off, and smaller peaks in presidential years and in 1991, though the overall trajectory is downward as Kennedy's presidential prospects evaporate and that strain is removed from the narrative.

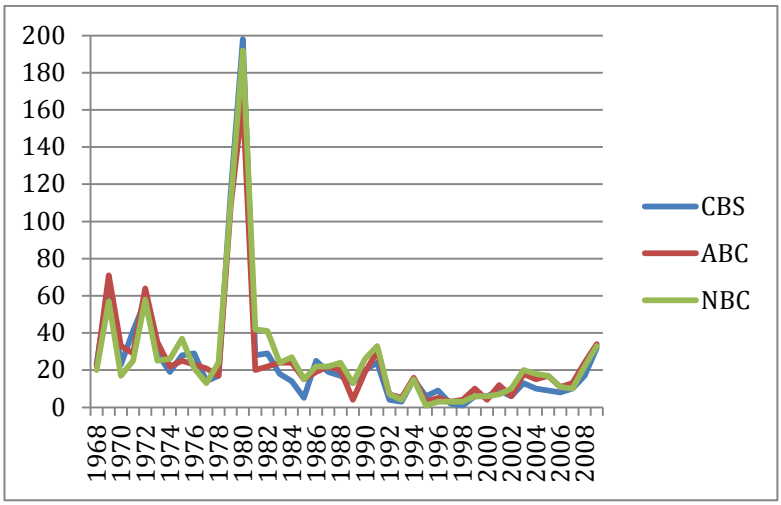
Fig. 2: Mentions of Edward Kennedy in *Time* and *Newsweek*

Source: *Time* Online Archive and LexisNexis Academic



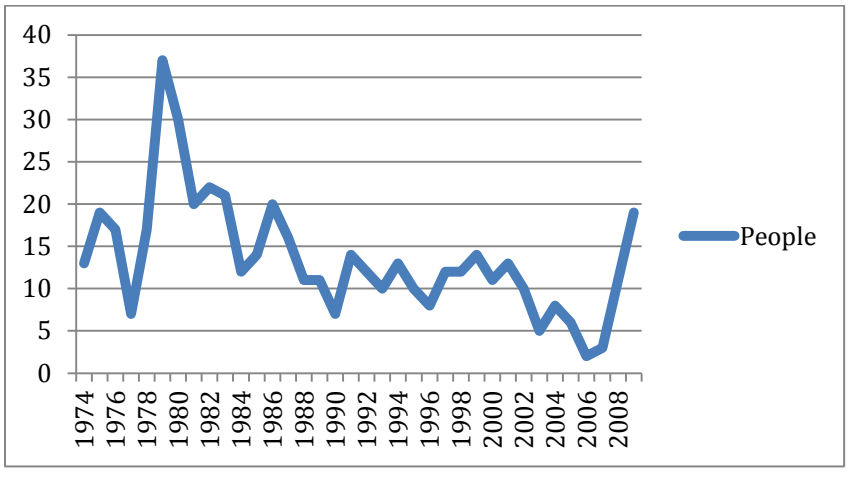
Finally, there are the mentions of Kennedy from 1968 through his death on the three major broadcast networks: ABC, CBS and NBC. [**Fig. 3**] Here again the graph lines virtually "hug" one another. There is the tall 1980 spike, smaller spikes in 1969 due to the incident at Chappaquiddick and in 1972 over speculation that he might mount another presidential campaign. The only other hill, actually a foothill, is in 1991 due to coverage of the incident at Palm Beach in which his nephew, William Kennedy Smith, was accused of rape, and even then the total mentions in the year come to roughly thirty apiece on each of the networks. In short, when you are running for president or have the possibility of a presidential candidacy, you get a lot of coverage; when you aren't, you don't. In some years, in the 1990s, Kennedy barely rates a mention throughout the entire year.

Fig. 3: Mentions of Ted or Edward Kennedy on Network Evening News Broadcasts
Source: Vanderbilt Television News Archive



This is true not only on television but in what may be the preeminent celebrity/human interest magazine, the aptly named *People*. Kennedy was mentioned in the magazine 485 times (as "Ted Kennedy") from the magazine's inception in 1974 to his death in 2009. The trajectory **[Fig. 4]** shows the same path as the others — a spike in 1980 and 1991 — though there is a slight spike again in 1986 that is due primarily to mentions in articles about other Kennedys, Robert's older children, running for office.

Fig. 4: Mentions of Ted or Edward Kennedy in *People*
Source: *People* Online Archive



But while the *number* of hits may tell us something about the extent of Kennedy's coverage, a comparison of his hits with that of other politicians gives us some relative idea of whether he was being covered more or less than his political confreres. A comparison in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* [**Figs. 5** and **6**] of Kennedy mentions with Reagan mentions, both four years before the latter's presidency and during his presidency; of Kennedy with Dole, who was Senate majority leader, from 1990 to 1996 (a period that includes his 1996 presidential run); and of Kennedy with John McCain from 1996 to his primary presidential run in 2000 shows that Kennedy received more press than Reagan and Dole except for when the former was running for the presidency or was serving as president and the latter was running for the presidency, and just about the same coverage as McCain except for when McCain was running for the presidency, even though Kennedy, after 1984, was no longer a real presidential contender and thus didn't attract the kind of media attention that Dole and McCain would attract as prospective candidates. This lends support to Stephen Hess's observation that the "best way for a senator to be noticed by the national media is to run for president, or, if it is credible, to hint broadly of his or her availability for the job."[2] The numbers don't show a great advantage for Kennedy in the non-presidential election years, but the fact that he keeps pace does speak to his media presence.

Fig 5: Mentions of Kennedy and Other Party Leaders in the *New York Times*
Source: ProQuest Historical Newspapers Database

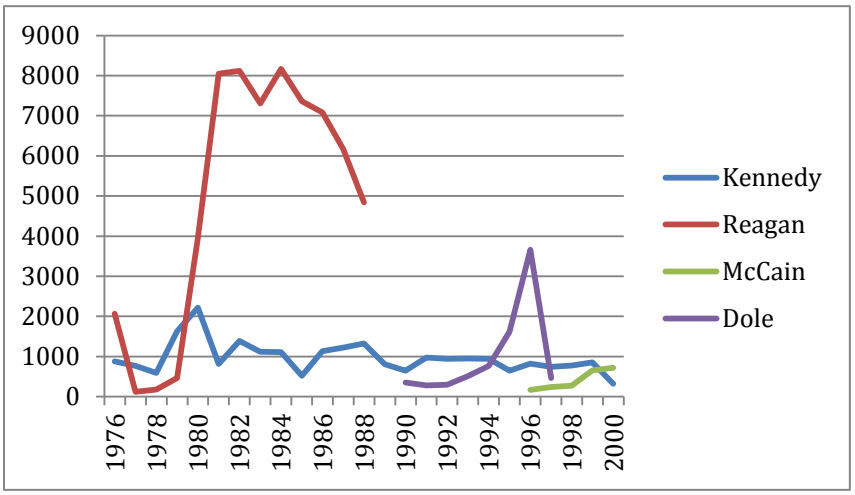
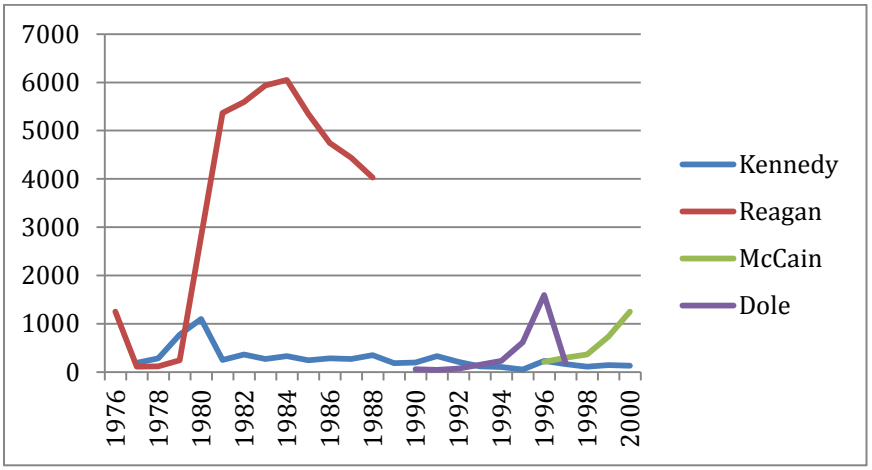


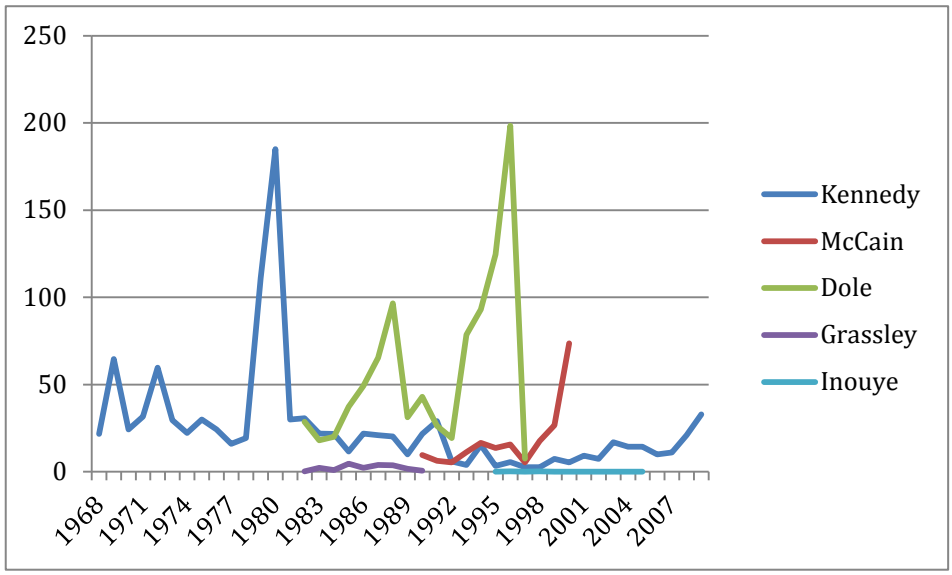
Fig 6: Mentions of Kennedy and Other Party Leaders in the *Washington Post*
Source: LexisNexis Academic



Making the same comparisons to Kennedy mentions and mentions of other politicians on network news broadcasts gives a similar result. [**Fig. 7**] Presidential candidates, prospective presidential candidates and Senate leaders, like Dole, get more coverage than Kennedy. But when we added two other senators to the mix who were neither presidential prospects nor in the senate leadership, Charles Grassley, a

Republican from Iowa, and Dan Inouye, a Democrat from Hawaii, we found that Kennedy's coverage substantially exceeded theirs. He was not just another senator.

Fig 7: Average Mentions of Kennedy and Other Senators across Network Evening News Programs
Source: Vanderbilt Television News Archive (ABC, NBC, CBS)

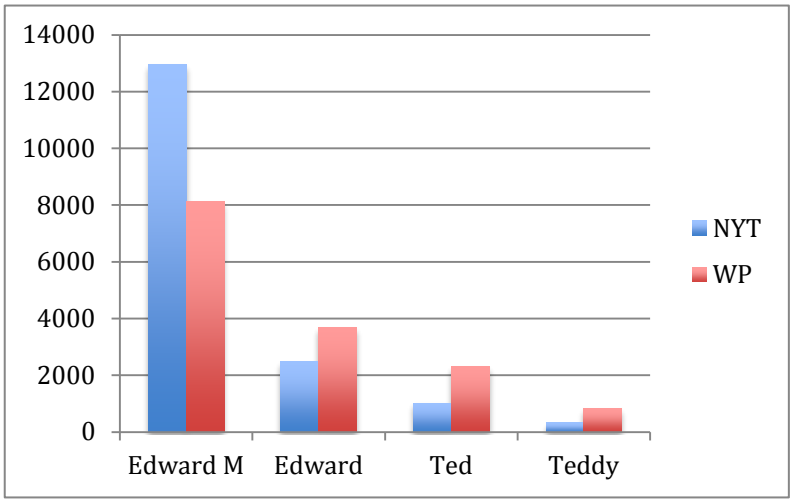


Yet another study comparing Kennedy coverage to that of other politicians, in this case his fellow senators, was conducted by Hess for the Brookings Institution. Using a system that awarded points to senators for media mentions or appearances-- one point for mentions on network newscasts, two for actual appearances on those newscasts, and three for appearances on Sunday morning interview shows — Hess found that Kennedy in 1983 ranked seventh among senators while John Glenn, a presidential aspirant, ranked first. However, Kennedy's press secretary, Robert Shrum, told Hess that Kennedy routinely declined invitations to appear on Sunday talk shows, which made his relative lack of press coverage a matter of his own choice rather than the media's.[3] Using other databases — among them mentions in the *Periodical Guide* and mentions in AP reports — Hess found Kennedy consistently ranked in the top ten senators, just under leaders and prospective presidents, and in several years he ranked first.[4]

Another issue that conveys both the media attitude toward Kennedy, albeit subtly, and that differentiates different media tiers is the formality or lack thereof in the

way in which different publications and broadcasts referred to Kennedy: from "Edward M. Kennedy" (most formal) to "Edward Kennedy" to "Ted Kennedy" to "Teddy Kennedy" (least formal). [**Fig. 8**] In keeping with its image of formality as the decorous "gray lady," the *New York Times* overwhelmingly referred to him as "Edward M. Kennedy," then "Edward Kennedy," then "Ted" and only a handful of times as "Teddy." Similarly, the *Washington Post* referred to him overwhelmingly as "Edward M. Kennedy," though it did so less frequently than the *Times*, using "Edward," "Ted" and "Teddy" slightly more frequently than the *Times* did. But there was no creeping informality in either paper. The ratios remained fairly constant over time.

Fig. 8: Formal and Informal Mentions of Kennedy in the *New York Times* (1960-2007) and the *Washington Post* (1960-1994)
Source: ProQuest Historical Newspaper Database



Time magazine [**Fig. 9**] preferred "Edward" and then "Edward M.," though it used "Ted" and "Teddy" more frequently as a ratio of total mentions than either of the newspapers, which would be in keeping with the idea of their being slightly less formal than the two premiere newspapers. Television, often considered an intimate medium, was, in fact, more intimate, or at least familiar, with Kennedy than the newspapers and newsmagazines. [**Fig. 10**] By a Lexis-Nexis search of ABC and CBS transcripts from 1990 through 2011 (two years past his death), which has the problem of short-handing references in the summaries that the search engine includes with each broadcast (ie.,

using "Ted" in the summary when he was called "Edward" in the program), "Ted" was the name of choice, far outpacing "Edward." "Teddy" was almost never used. Not surprisingly, *People* magazine [**Fig. 11**] was also more informal than the newspapers and newsmagazines, though not as informal as television. *People* used "Ted" as its preferred designation, then "Edward," then "Edward M." and then "Teddy," which it used roughly half as much as either "Edward" or "Edward M." So there was a slightly greater sense of familiarity in *People* — slightly but not brazenly.

Fig. 9: Formal and Informal Mentions of Edward Kennedy in *Time* (1960-present)
Source: *Time* Online Archive

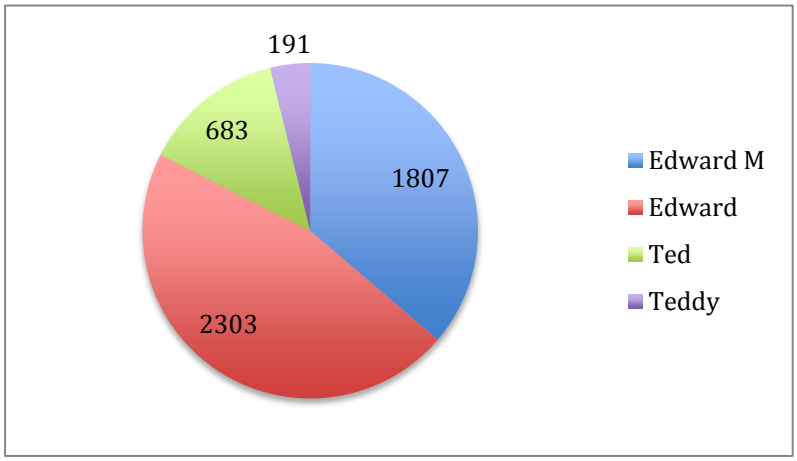


Fig. 10: Formal and Informal Mentions of Kennedy on ABC (1980-2011) and CBS (1990-2011) Evening News Programs
Source: LexisNexis Academic

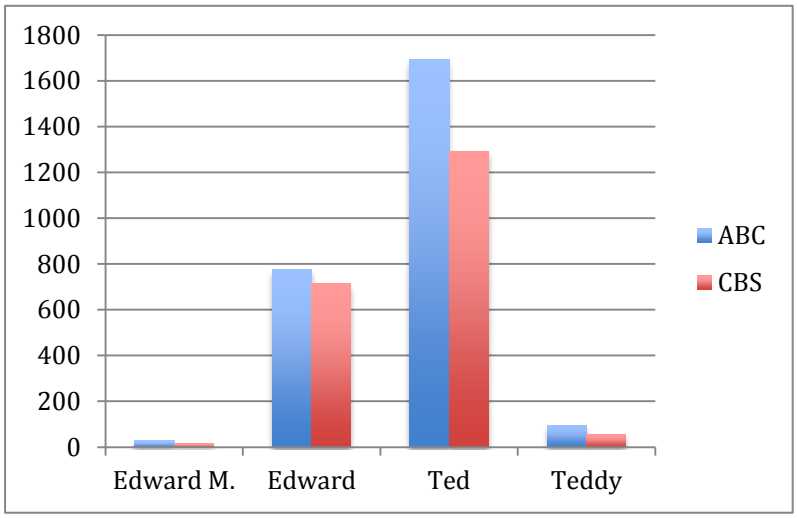
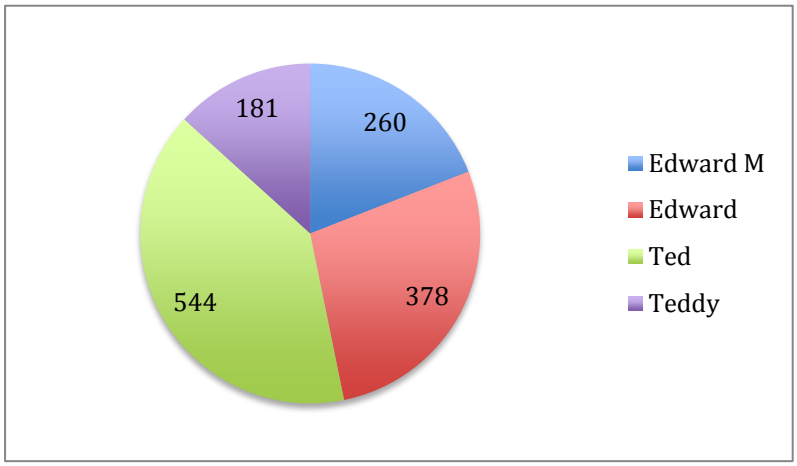


Fig. 11: Formal an Informal Mentions of Kennedy in *People* (1960-present)
Source: *People* Online Archive



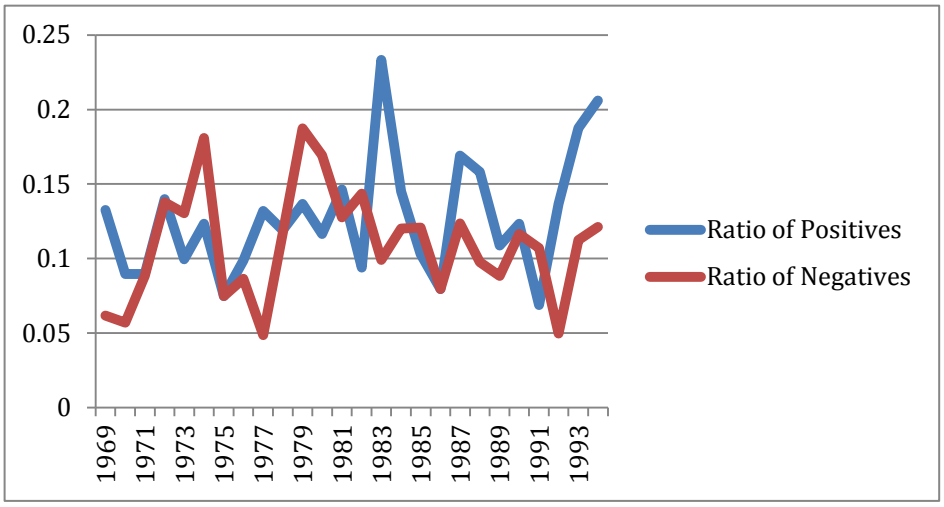
More to the point than the number of mentions and the names used in them were the subjects of the mentions. These conclusions are probably the least reliable given the size of our database: articles from the *New York Times* for four separate years, a decade apart, in which Kennedy was named in the headline. (This selection reduced the number of hits from an unmanageable number around 1,000 to a manageable but very small number one could count on one's fingers.) There were 18 articles in 1977, only six in 1987, nine in 1997 and four in 2007. The data showed that in 1977, 12 of the articles were

about substantive policy, four about politics and process, and two about the personal; in 1987 the numbers were two about policy, two about process, and two personal; in 1997 there were three about policy, two about process and four personal; and in 2007 one about policy, one about process and two personal. The trendlines are precarious. At best, the data suggest that Kennedy's personal life was covered as extensively as his political and legislative lives, but even that might be a stretch since personal events that are weighty enough to be headlined are certainly going to outweigh the hundreds of mentions about policy and politics that don't merit a headline. In short, we can't say much without collecting much more data.

Of course, the most important aspect of the Kennedy story is precisely that: the story. How was Kennedy portrayed in the media? Was he portrayed positively or negatively? Did the portrayal differ by media? Did it change over time? Certain words, of course, have a positive connotation: "handsome," "charismatic," "tragic," "curse," "deferential," "powerful," "courageous," "compromise," "bipartisan," "pragmatic," "bold." Others have a negative connotation: "big government," "cheating," "alcohol," "wrong," and, in the context of Ted Kennedy, "Chappaquiddick." The fact that the study ran more positive words than negatives — for the latter we kept getting the equivalent of "false positives" — and that the database changes over time means that a ratio of negatives and positives to the total number of articles in which either was listed was a more telling statistic than the total numbers themselves. Even so, there was quite a bit of "noise" — all Kennedys get factored in — and the negatives are dominated by both "Chappaquiddick" and "wrong," two words that cling to Kennedy. [**Fig. 12**]

Fig. 12: Ratio of Articles in Five National Newspapers With "Kennedy" in the Title and Select Positive and Negative Words in the Text

Source: ProQuest Historical Newspaper Database



Still, considering all these warnings, what the data suggest is that the positives and negatives travel more or less in tandem; that while there are peaks and valleys, the positive peaks are not necessarily negative valleys or vice versa; and that the narrative does not change dramatically over time from positive to negative or vice versa. I say "more or less" because there are more negatives as a ratio in 1979 and 1980 when Kennedy is running for the Democratic presidential nomination and scores of articles perfunctorily mention Chappaquiddick or discuss the factors that are hurting his campaign. And there is a much higher positive ratio in 1983, the Reagan administration notwithstanding, when Kennedy is no longer a viable presidential candidate and is getting kudos for his legislative abilities working within the constraints of a Republican government. There is a higher ratio again in 1987-1988, which may be attributable to the fact that Kennedy is not a presidential candidate and thus is more likely to be treated as a statesman, though one would have to read each and every one of these articles to make a precise determination of the context of the positives and negatives. To which one must also add that the vast, vast majority of articles contain neither positive nor negative words. What we can say is that the Kennedy saga, to the extent the media have devised one, is complex, with nearly equal parts positive and negative; that the conservative *zeitgeist* of the 1980s and beyond doesn't seem to have generated more negatives for him;

and that there is an overall "mountain range" on the graph that indicates the story itself gets alternately more traction and less traction in the media — which looks a little like the dramatic arc of a novel or a movie, albeit a movie that is winding down toward the end.

To understand that arc more fully, one can attempt to get inside some of its most riveting scenes, which is precisely what this study does.

Four Scenes

The 1962 Senate race. Edward Kennedy is little more than President Kennedy's kid brother until he declares his intention to contend for the Democratic nomination for his older brother's former Senate seat, to which a placeholder, Benjamin Smith, had been appointed, presumably because Edward Kennedy was not yet constitutionally old enough to assume it. The *New York Times* published 26 articles on Kennedy's race — from his consideration of running, through his announcement to run, through his victory at the Massachusetts Democratic convention where he was designated the party's official choice, to a bruising primary campaign against the convention's runner-up, state Attorney General Edward McCormack, who also happened to be the nephew of the new Speaker of the House, John McCormack.

Every one of these *Times* articles is neutral save one. The other 25 simply recount the fight for the seat. Some make reference to Kennedy's inexperience, but not so heavily that they seem to weigh in against him. Others speculate about his victory, but don't write as if this would be the preferred outcome. The sole exception to this neutrality is an editorial on September 19, 1962, the day after Kennedy has won the primary against McCormack. Here the *Times* takes off its kid gloves and throws a haymaker. His victory, the editors write, is "demeaning to the dignity of the Senate and the democratic process."[5]

The *Washington Post* ran 18 articles on Kennedy's race. Again, these are neutral in tone. A few, as in the *Times*, are speculative about the outcome of the race. A few allude to a potential Kennedy dynasty but are not critical of such an eventuality. Here the

exception is a feature piece on September 17 titled, "A Man Who Knew Ted Kennedy When." The man in the article was Kennedy's old Harvard football coach, and the story is gushingly favorable. "He was a good one," opines Coach Lloyd Jordan. "He was the kind of player a coach appreciates." Jordan goes on to describe him as a "worker" who "made up for his lack of natural ability and size with a fierce sense of determination."[6]

The *Chicago Tribune* also ran 18 pieces on Kennedy's Senate campaign. Five of these were AP wire reports. Others were written by *Tribune* staff from wire service reports. There was, however, one piece, by *Tribune* Washington Bureau Chief Walter Trohan, that unleashed a fusillade at Kennedy the gist of which is that he and all the Kennedys were the beneficiaries of "proxies" who did things for the Kennedys so they wouldn't have to do those things for themselves: that Ted had cheated at Harvard and was expelled for having a proxy take his Spanish exam; that he and his siblings lived by proxy through their father's wealth; and that his Grandfather Fitzgerald had fraudulently won election to the House of Representatives through the votes of illegal proxies. Trohan's attack is fierce, but it is a rare instance in 1962 of Kennedy-phobia.

The most extensive coverage in any single outlet was Kennedy's first cover story in *Time*, titled "Teddy and Kennedyism," on September 28, after he had won the primary. It ran 3826 words and read like a Kennedy-authored campaign biography. It quoted his sister, Jean Smith, "Even as a child, Ted had a terrific animal energy. People naturally gravitated to him. He was always a leader of the family on things such as whether we would play football or go sailing. You never had to push Ted — you always had to hold him back." It cited his cheating at Harvard and then essentially absolved him for returning to school and earning "honor grades in history and government in his senior year." It cited his brothers calling him the "hardest working one of the bunch," and it illustrated that verdict with scenes of Kennedy campaigning: "At a textile machinery plant in Worcester, Teddy moved eagerly through the din and the smell of hot metal to shake the hands of the men in the foundry. One man gestured that his hand was too greasy to shake. 'Gimme that, buddy!' cried Kennedy, slamming his own big hand into the worker's. Then he strode on, his hand black with grease below his neat,

white cuff." And observing Kennedy at the Massachusetts Democratic convention, it depicted him as a political comet: "Teddy thought like a winner, talked like a winner, and acted like a winner."[7] He was certainly treated like a winner.

One could scarcely get more fawning coverage. But that was all to change.

Chappaquiddick. Heading into 1969, Edward Kennedy had received remarkably favorable press in 1968, much of it obviously due to sympathy for him after the assassination of his brother Robert in June of that year. *Time* ran a post-election valedictory titled "The Distant Horizon" that cast Kennedy as a "shining champion who had not been bloodied at all in the conflict."[8] The ratio of positive mentions in 1968 was nearly .15, while negative mentions were just above .05 — three to one positive. He began 1969 with another *Time* cover — this one celebrating his emergence from mourning over his brother and his surprising victory over Russell Long as the Senate Majority Whip. Titled "The Ascent of Teddy," it burnished his image: "In political terms, Kennedy's victory was a very personal triumph. Whatever he accomplishes for the party and the Senate, his already lustrous presidential prospects are clearly enhanced. His new power makes him heir to the majority leadership of the Senate and gives him ample justification for maneuver that his previous rank and name could hardly supply."[9]

Then came the incident at Chappaquiddick. It did not change Kennedy's glowing coverage in one fell swoop; that would take several swoops. In fact, the initial coverage of Chappaquiddick was either neutral or even favorable to Kennedy. That coverage arrived in a flood. The *New York Times* ran 44 pieces on Chappaquiddick from July 21 to August 3 on the inside pages, and 10 more on the front page. On July 26 and July 27 alone, the days after Kennedy's televised explanation, there were eight and nine stories respectively. Similarly, the *Washington Post* ran 42 stories in the same period — 29 inside the paper and 13 on the front page. The *Chicago Tribune* ran 47 stories, though 20 of these were wire reports. In the tabloid *New York Post*, Chappaquiddick captured the front page 11 times from July 22 through August 15.

And television covered it just as extensively. In the same period — July 21 to August 3 — "The CBS Evening News" ran 18 minutes, 10 seconds worth of coverage, including a full 7 minutes and 10 seconds on July 31. It was the broadcast's lead story three times. ABC's "World News Tonight" ran 15 minutes, 30 seconds of coverage with two lead stories. "The NBC Nightly News" ran 26 minutes, 30 seconds of Chappaquiddick coverage. It was the lead story twice in this period, and NBC also made it the lead on August 27 and again on August 28 with stories, on an impending inquest, that ran 4:30 and 3:40 respectively.

But the real issue is not how much coverage but what kind of coverage. The first *Times* story, on July 20, frames Chappaquiddick in terms of the Kennedy tragedy narrative: "another in a series of violent events that have hounded the Kennedy family ever since it came to prominence in American life."[10] A *Washington Post* editorial on July 24 also placed the accident in the Kennedy tragedy narrative as even its title plainly says, "The Latest Kennedy Tragedy," though it adds a new wrinkle. It insists that Kennedy must discuss the accident fully: "He can say nothing more and take his chances with the record as it is or as it may unfold without his help, in which case he cannot expect to be judged like other men — or even other Kennedys — for this has not been his lot."[11]

Other articles speculated about the effect the accident might have on his political career — "Kennedy's Career Feared Imperiled" in the *Times* on July 21 — without necessarily criticizing his behavior and indeed attributing the concern to the Senator's friends.[12] And again, on July 27: "A Tragic Accident Imperils a Great Career," which concludes that his fate is likely to be decided by Massachusetts' voters.[13] Even the first spate of editorials was not condemnatory. Rather they expressed sympathy for Kennedy and asked him to explain his actions, not because they doubted him but because they wanted him to allay doubts. As late as July 26, a week after the accident, the *Times* ran a wholly positive piece about Kennedy titled "A Diligent Senator," which extolled him for his work in the Senate.[14]

But even before Kennedy prepared to face the cameras, there were some hints of doubt about him. "Silence Dims the Story of Crash" headlined a piece in the *Chicago Tribune* that also mentioned a "conspiracy of silence."[15] The tide of sympathy began to turn more decisively after Kennedy delivered his televised explanation and mea culpa on July 25, in which he also threw himself on the mercy of his constituents in Massachusetts to determine whether he should run again, and when it turned, it wasn't the reporters who did it. It was largely the columnists and editorial writers who felt that he hadn't sufficiently answered the lingering questions about the case. The *Times* ran seven articles on Chappaquiddick the next day including an editorial that scolded him for not having issued his story earlier. The *Post* ran a similar editorial citing unanswered questions. NBC anchor John Chancellor, among others, compared the speech to Richard Nixon's bathetic 1952 "Checkers Speech" in which Nixon, like Kennedy, threw himself on the mercy of the voters after he was accused of maintaining a political slush fund.

Whether he was creating a mood or, as is more likely, capturing one, James Reston, the day after that, July 27, wrote a *Times* column that put the situation in a new context. Reston began semi-sympathetically. He called Kennedy "a kind of tragic 'profile in courage.' What he has really asked the people of Massachusetts is whether they want to kick a man when he is down, and clearly they are not going to do that to this doom-ridden and battered family." But then Reston injected another issue: character. "The chances are that this spectacular and tragic accident has startled him out of his rather casual ways and made him choose between his impulses and his responsibilities and family ambitions."[16] The question, Reston concluded, was whether Kennedy could live with himself. What made this rather strange is that no reporters had questioned Kennedy's ways or suggested that he was casual or impulsive — only young. Quite the contrary. Just a day earlier in Reston's own paper, Kennedy was described as that "diligent senator."

Over the next week there was a raft of columns, many of which analyzed whether Kennedy's story had fatally damaged his presidential prospects with his speech. (He even managed to push the aftermath of the moon landing off front pages.)

July 26 and August 1 editorials in the *Post,* the latter titled "The Questions That Won't Go Away," both raised the issue of unanswered questions and their effect on Kennedy's political future. On July 26, David Broder, also in the *Post*, quoted skeptics about Kennedy's account,[17] but it was a sign of a residual sympathy and the tenacious hold of the tragedy narrative that on the same page the *Post* ran a piece titled, "Kennedy Success Haunted by Tragedy."[18] Columnist Marquis Childs, also in the *Post*, gave vent to another sentiment, especially among columnists. He declared the end of Ted Kennedy, the end of the Kennedy era, and the end of the Democratic Party. "Having endured so much tragedy, Edward Kennedy deserved better than this," Childs wrote. "He deserved better of himself in those dark and awful hours when he must have known what fate had written for him."[19] In effect, Kennedy was a victim of the gods.

Even those who were generally sympathetic to Kennedy found themselves surrendering not to the doubts but to the story imperatives. The *New York Post,* then a liberal paper, couldn't let go. Its front-page headlines ran: "Kennedy at Girl's Funeral" (July 22); "Suspend Ted's Auto License" (July 23); "Ted: Guilty" (July 25); "First Calls Back Kennedy" (July 26); "Ted to Keep Senate Job" (July 30); "Judge Requests Inquest on Ted" (August 1); "Set Inquest in Ted's Case" (August 6); "Battle Over Mary Jo Autopsy" (August 7, and one should note that Mary Jo Kopechne was well-known enough to be identified by her first name alone); "Ted Hits Back at 'Whispers'" (August 14); and "Begin Court Duel Over Mary Jo" (August 15). It had turned into a legal soap opera irrespective of the direction of the coverage.

In the final analysis, of the *Times'* 54 stories, five were basically positive, stressing the Kennedy tragedy narrative in four cases and the Senator's legislative acumen in the fifth — "A Diligent Senator" mentioned earlier. Two pieces were negative in tone — a July 31 editorial and the Reston piece. The rest were neutral accounts of the accident, legal proceedings and political fallout. Of the *Washington Post*'s 42 articles, two were positive, four were negative, including columns like Marquis Childs's, and the rest were neutral. Of the 47 articles in the *Chicago Tribune,* none were positive, three were negative, two of them editorials and the third that piece that questioned Kennedy's silence.

Unfortunately, with only summaries and not complete transcripts it is impossible to determine the direction of the network news coverage.

But where one might best detect the gradual slide from sympathy to ambivalence to doubt is *Time*, which had been one of Kennedy's biggest boosters. Its first Chappaquiddick story, "Wrong Turn at the Bridge," published even before Kennedy's mea culpa but after the release of his police report, states, "Both the charge and Kennedy's own statement raised more questions than they answered."[20] This became a theme — a new narrative of skepticism. The next week the narrative strengthened with a 5000-word cover story on Kennedy bannered, "The Kennedy Debacle: A Dead Girl, A Career in Jeopardy." It began, "In his sorrow, last summer, he seemed larger than anyone had remembered" and went on to say that "Kennedy's lost night on Chappaquiddick off Martha's Vineyard and the mystifying week that followed brought back all the old doubts," though it didn't specify exactly what those doubts had been.[21] On August 8, *Time* ran another piece challenging Kennedy's account: "Kennedy Case: More Questions." The next issue it again ran a piece expressing more doubts: "Inquest of Suspicions." At the same time, the tragedy narrative hadn't completely been expunged. On August 22, *Time* ran a 700-word piece on "The Anguish of Edward Kennedy" that took an almost Aeschylean approach to his situation and speculated about his personal torment. "However much he has fallen in public esteem," said *Time*, "it is probably in the deeper recesses of his own mind that Kennedy is suffering most and experiencing the harshest judgments."[22]

Journalistically speaking, one of the most interesting features of the gradually mounting skepticism about Kennedy's account is what one might call "assumption journalism." Kennedy gave a fairly forthright description of the events that boiled down to: he was taking Mary Jo Kopechne to the ferry to return to Edgartown; he took a wrong turn; the car hit the narrow bridge and careered off; he attempted to save her, then was too dazed to report the accident immediately (a negligence he himself called "indefensible" and never tried to gloss); he swam the channel back to Edgartown; and then reported the accident in the morning. But the media never took Kennedy's story at

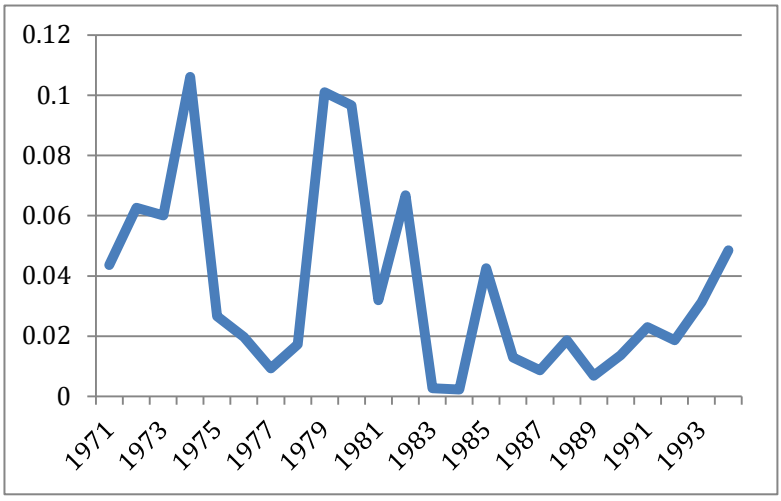
face value because they *assumed* that Kennedy was lying. They *assumed* that Kennedy wasn't taking Kopechne back to the ferry but must have had some other destination and some other intention, presumably a romantic one. They *assumed* that he was not suffering from shock after an accident turned the car on its top or that he was in denial but that he had either panicked or was immediately calculating the effect of the political damage, which is why he didn't promptly report the accident. They *assumed* that he didn't swim back to the main island of Martha's Vineyard but that he must have somehow been taken across. And they *assumed* that he spent the next hours cooking up some story to tell before he went to the authorities in the morning.

The problem with these assumptions is that Kennedy's story isn't entirely implausible. In fact, it is no less implausible and maybe even more plausible than the alternative story that "assumption journalists" posited. Taken point by point, there is no reason, other than salaciousness and gossip, to assume that Kennedy was spiriting Kopechne away for a brief romantic rendezvous. (According to *Time*, "Some who have long watched the Kennedys can say with certainty that he often flirts with pretty girls in situations indiscreet for someone named Ted Kennedy," though the "some" and "often" seemed to contradict the "certainty.")[23] There is no reason to believe that he wasn't in shock after the accident, and *Time* actually consulted three medical experts who gave credence to Kennedy's story.[24] Nor is there any reason to believe that he wasn't in a state of denial about the accident, as he had confessed. There is no reason to believe that he didn't swim back to Edgartown, and subsequent studies of the tides against which he would have to have swum have proven inconclusive. (If he had taken a rowboat, why wouldn't he have just said so?) There is no reason to believe that he spent the hours between the accident and his reporting of the accident concocting a story if only because, as the media keep demonstrating, he surely would have concocted a better one. Again, his story makes as much sense as anyone else's…unless you make certain unproven assumptions.

Though it takes us from hard data and textual analysis into the realm of speculation, it is entirely possible that the preoccupation with "unanswered questions"

and "mysteries" is just another way of stoking the story function, which is one of the staples of journalism. As *Newsweek* titled one major story, it was "A Scandal That Will Not Die."[25] Put this way, the media had a stake in doubting Kennedy's story — a stake in perpetuating the idea that there is something nefarious that he was hiding. (Kennedy would say that if he were indeed lying, some hard evidence certainly would have arisen in the years since to refute him.) And, in fact, the "stickiness" of the Chappaquiddick story is testament to just how much the media fed the inconclusiveness. Kennedy would never shake it. As **Fig. 13** shows, Chappaquiddick kept reappearing — spiking on the fifth anniversary, then again during Kennedy's presidential run, which, during early speculation about his intentions, happened to coincide with the event's 10th anniversary, and then again, with smaller spikes, in 1982 and 1985, for reasons not entirely fathomable, and rising again in 1994 during Kennedy's senatorial campaign that year. Overall, it was more closely associated with Kennedy than any other term (629 times in the search of terms from a variety of newspapers, magazines and television networks), and it clearly was the primary force in revising his narrative. No longer was Kennedy just the victim of the implacable fate that had fallen upon his family. An alternative narrative portrayed him as reckless, impulsive, untrustworthy — a drunk and womanizer who had written his own fate. In Shakespearean terms, he had gone from being Prince Hal to Falstaff, which raised a new question: How would the image affect his both his cultural and political standing?

Fig. 13: Ratio of Articles in Five National Newspapers With "Kennedy" in the Title and the Word "Chappaquiddick" in the Text
Source: ProQuest Historical Newspaper Database



The 1980 Campaign. For years — actually for three presidential cycles — Kennedy had generated dozens of stories about his presidential prospects. As mentioned earlier, this is clearly one of the things that kept his name in the news: the idea that he would someday be the leader of the Western World. When he finally did declare his candidacy on November 7, 1979, after this decade-long cat-and-mouse game, he unleashed, as one might have expected, a torrent of coverage. From three days before his declaration through the Democratic National Convention the following August, the *New York Times* ran 593 pieces that had Kennedy's name in the headline, the *Washington Post* 651, the *Chicago Tribune* 124. As for television network news, ABC had 236 mentions of him on their evening news broadcast in 1980; NBC 299; and CBS 326. One can see from the earlier charts — Figs. 1,2,3,4 — that Kennedy's coverage soared in every medium during his 10-month campaign. He would never receive more coverage than he did in that period. He would never receive anything close to it.

Like all campaign coverage, Kennedy's fell into narrative configurations. As Harvard media scholar Thomas Patterson has described it, when it comes to elections, the press has only four stories to tell: "a candidate is leading, or trailing, or gaining ground or losing ground. The press has a distinctive narrative for each situation."[26] In Kennedy's case, the narratives were sharpened dramatically because he wasn't just any

candidate; he was a kind of *uber*-candidate. He entered the race with tremendous anticipation, not only because he was a Kennedy but because the incumbent president against whom he was running was reeling. Patterson cites what he calls the "bandwagon" story in which the "news of a candidate who has gained momentum and is rapidly gathering support takes the form of a compelling drama," and he adds that "the overall portrayal of a candidate who is succeeding in his battle to get ahead is at least relatively favorable."[27] That description suited Kennedy to a T. His wasn't a bandwagon; it was a juggernaut.

But something rather peculiar, even unique, occurred in Kennedy's campaign. He entered prospectively as an easy winner. His bandwagon was speeding. Then, before he had even declared, he granted an interview to CBS reporter (and, not insignificantly, aspiring CBS anchorman) Roger Mudd that was part of a one-hour special on Kennedy titled "Teddy," scheduled to air on November 4, the Sunday before his announcement of candidacy. As Kennedy would later remember it, Mudd had told him they would be talking about Kennedy's mother Rose, so Kennedy waved off aides who would have run interference for him in an overtly political interview. Mudd, of course, insists otherwise. After talking about Rose, Mudd asked Kennedy about Chappaquiddick, to which Kennedy said that he had already answered those questions, and then asked him why he wanted to run for the presidency, to which Kennedy gave a rambling response about American greatness, resources and the need for leadership. It was not an inspiring performance, and CBS ran with it, not only featuring the most damning excerpts on the "CBS Evening News," but also buttressing the interview with subsequent criticisms of Kennedy's nascent campaign. "His campaign is still having some problems," substitute anchorman Bob Schieffer said — the "still" referring to Kennedy's less than two weeks on the campaign trail, and Phil Jones carped that "few detailed alternatives to Carter policies have surfaced" and that Kennedy "often appears to be a man without a plan."[28] In fact, one could say that with some justice that Mudd's interview and CBS's flogging of it capsized Kennedy's campaign before it even began.

It may go too far to say that the media were spoiling for a Kennedy blow-up anyway — a way of rapidly accelerating the demise of the "bandwagon" narrative into the "losing ground" story that would make the campaign so much more interesting for them. But whether they wanted to take down Kennedy or not, the press was very selective in leaping on this single interview and ignoring others; according to a Lexis-Nexis search of "Mudd" and "Kennedy," the results of which failed to include television network news broadcasts, it was cited 39 times during the campaign. Indeed, Kennedy also granted an hour interview to the "20/20" program on ABC that same week. To the best of my knowledge, no one has ever mentioned that interview, either at the time or now, while Mudd's is cited constantly. Kennedy also delivered a defense of his behavior in the face of crisis on NBC's "Meet the Press" earlier the same day as the CBS special — a defense *Washington Post* television critic Tom Shales described as "moving and electrifying."[29] Again, I have never seen that interview cited anywhere outside of Shales's article. To which one might conclude that fumbling is news; speaking articulately, even movingly, apparently is not, which only confirms Thomas Patterson's dictum that "[c]ontroversies are the real issues of election journalism."[30]

But what is nevertheless surprising is how much this single interview provided the storyline for the rest of Kennedy's campaign — a kind of journalistic Chappaquiddick that Kennedy couldn't seem to shake. Just as the press had averred in their Chappaquiddick coverage that Kennedy hadn't lived up to the family legend, so in their election coverage Kennedy's electoral sin seemed to be that he had not met the press's expectations of what a Kennedy campaign was going to be like: a smooth, purring machine. On November 15, just 10 days after Mudd's interview, the *Times* ran a seminal piece by B. Drummond Ayres titled, "Price of Kennedy's Quick Entry into Campaign was a Ragged Start," which expressed disappointment at the fact that Kennedy's campaign launch wasn't flawless, and explicitly cited the Mudd interview. "It was difficult to explain his incoherence," Ayres quoted a Kennedy aide. "I was hurting. It was such a strange experience to see an articulate man suddenly become inarticulate." Already, as one can see here, the Mudd interview had become a metaphor

for the rest of the campaign. The article went on: "Subsequently, reporters traveling with the Senator have mentioned bungled syntax or halting rhetoric, and even Kennedy partisans concede that this stump performance has been spotty...."[31] In short, the Mudd interview had created an entirely new set of expectations: the expectation of ineptitude. Kennedy's nearly 20 years in politics had been obscured by a few minutes on network television.

This assault on Kennedy did not go entirely unnoticed in the press itself. On November 22, *Washington Post* television critic, Tom Shales, wrote an indictment of Kennedy's early media treatment, titled "Teddy's Torment." "The presence of Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D.Mass) in the presidential election ahead is providential for TV," Shales said. "It assures much higher levels of viewer interest in the campaign than would otherwise be the case." But Shales added, "It means there will be an additional contest to watch: Kennedy versus the boys on the bus, a square-off held to determine who will be able to make the more advantageous use of whom." And Shales left no doubt who he thought had won the early rounds: the press. Shales called the fascination with Kennedy's gaffes a "soap opera," and he attributed it to the reporters' need to refute the gleaming television *pictures* of Kennedy over which they had little control. That led to a sanguine conclusion about Kennedy's relative, long-term strength against the press corps that was tormenting him: "Sen. Kennedy is clearly the front-runner; he is the Television Candidate for President."[32]

But Shales would be wrong. The images of a handsome Kennedy could not negate the constant carping. The same day that Shales's piece ran, another *Post* article complained that Kennedy's attack on Carter was "muffled."[33] A week and a half later, in the same paper, columnist Richard Cohen called him "cold and lifeless" and said he talked "like a zombie." After citing the Mudd interview yet again, Cohen added, in what was becoming another campaign meme, "Maybe we expect too much. Maybe it is not Jimmy Carter who can't compete with the Kennedy image. Maybe Kennedy can't either."[34] It was a very high standard: the myth of his brothers. But it was a standard the media were constantly invoking.

Another bombshell dropped on December 3, when Kennedy, tired after a 14-hour day of campaigning, granted a late-night interview to a local newsman in his San Francisco hotel room and began railing against the Shah of Iran at a time when American hostages were being held by an anti-Shah mob in that country. He accused the Shah's regime of being "one of the most violent in the history of mankind" and of the Shah himself stealing "umpteen billions" from his country.[35] The media's reaction was interesting. None of Kennedy's tirade was deemed important enough by the station, KRON, that recorded the interview to be included in the portion they aired. Nothing leapt out at them. It was local newsmen sitting in on the interview who decided that Kennedy's remarks were worth reporting, and when they did so, the wire services picked it up.[36] What Kennedy said *wasn't* exactly earth-shattering, but by now the "Kennedy ineptitude" narrative was so central to the campaign coverage that the media magnified the statement until it erupted into what was perceived as a colossal goof.

The very next day, the *Post* ran a front-page story, "Kennedy Attack on Shah Brings Critical Barrage," reporting, primarily, criticism from the Carter administration that Kennedy's statement had somehow emboldened the hostage-takers.[37] Kennedy's argument that condemning the current Iranian government doesn't mean absolving the Shah's government was almost completely disregarded in the media, though it was perfectly defensible. Instead, the media unsheathed its weapons. "Teddy's the Toast of Tehran" headlined the *New York Post* on December 5 with another story on page two headlined, "Everybody Goes After Teddy." "Ted Kennedy's Amateur Hour" ridiculed syndicated columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak.[38] "Kennedy's Ragged Start" opined *Newsweek.*[39] The *New York Times* B. Drummond Ayres, who had generally written sympathetically about Kennedy, called Kennedy's comments a "verbal gaffe of major proportions," and placed it in the context of yet another article enumerating Kennedy's failings on the stump.[40] ABC made his remarks its second story on December 3 and the next day cited a report that Iranian papers were saluting Kennedy. It ran yet another and longer piece on Kennedy's quotes on December 6 and then, on December 7, ran a piece that placed the comments in the context of Kennedy's foundering campaign. ABC

returned to that narrative a week later, on December 14, with a three-minute report on Kennedy's verbal fumbles and, again, toted out his Shah remarks. NBC opened with the story on December 3, and CBS gave the remarks 4:40 that same day. On December 8, CBS ran another critical story by Phil Jones on Kennedy's missteps.

Still, it wouldn't die. On December 10, a full week after the comments, the *Washington Post* ran a front-page story by T.R. Reid titled "Kennedy's Nomination Route Looks Long and Rocky; 'Invincible' Image Has Been Shattered" that crystallized the anti-Kennedy argument in the press while attributing his plummeting polls to the candidate. "The striking development in the first month of Kennedy's race for the White House," Reid wrote, "has been the rapid demise — both inside and outside the campaign staff — of the once widely held notion that Kennedy, heir to the nation's richest political legend, is unbeatable" and said he had gone from Superman to Clark Kent.[41] What the *Post* failed to say is that the media were the ones who had provided the kryptonite.

The kicker may have been that polls were now recording not only the public's growing disenchantment with Kennedy but its conclusion that Kennedy was a poor campaigner. A Harris poll issued on January 17 showed that by a margin of 59% to 32% respondents agreed with the statement that "as a campaigner, Kennedy has seemed to be spotty and erratic."[42] But very few people had actually *seen* Kennedy campaign by this time; he had only been on the hustings for two months with time off for the holidays. The only place most people could have seen him was on television. But as for broadcast coverage, even Kennedy's announcement for the presidency received only 6:30 on ABC and 4:50 on NBC, and these were the largest chunks devoted to his campaign in those first two months save for a 5:20 interview with Kennedy that ran on NBC on January 17. More typically the news broadcasts would show very short campaign snippets with Kennedy delivering a few lines. But because many of those snippets were placed in the context of the Kennedy meme of ineptitude — eg., Kennedy making some verbal slip — they created an idea rather than reported on one. Kennedy, in short, was a lousy campaigner because the media said he was.

Nor did the piling on stop with the ineptitude meme. There was always the chestnut of Chappaquiddick, which seemed especially to engage the media now that Kennedy was running for president. The *New York Post* had attempted to centralize Chappaquiddick as early as November 8, the day after Kennedy's announcement, by featuring an interview with Mary Jo Kopechne's parents headlined, "Tell the Truth, Teddy" and under that running another article, "The Story that No One Really Believes." (The Kopechnes were little quoted in the piece; it was the words of Rep. Robert Dornan, an anti-Kennedy Republican who had camped out on the Kopechnes' doorstep, that were chiefly reported.) The *Chicago Tribune*, another conservative paper, had also run a series of negative columns and editorials, several of which mentioned Chappaquiddick. The tone can be gleaned from a Bob Weidrich column which stated, "Ted Kennedy should adopt the white feather of cowardice as the logo for his presidential campaign."[43]

This was the national press's obsession, not the local media or the public's. The *Washington Post*'s T.R. Reid reported that in Kennedy's first campaign swing, through 14 states, only one local interviewer questioned Kennedy about Chappaquiddick and not a single person in numerous question-and-answer sessions raised the issue — not one. By contrast, Reid wrote, 8 of 13 questions on ABC's "Issues and Answers" were devoted to Chappaquiddick, though he needn't have looked any farther than his own paper, which ran a 6000-word, two-part, front-page series on Chappaquiddick November 11 and 12 followed by another front-page assessment of its political impact on Kennedy by Martin Schram.[44]

Schram found that "Chappaquiddick is, politically a ticking time bomb," and to prove it, he recounted how many in the media were now disinterring it, including CBS, ABC and the *Washington Star*, which published a special section on Chappaquiddick the same day as the Mudd interview. This might have seemed like a self-fulfilling piece of post-modernist prophecy: It was a ticking time bomb because the media had set the timer and then busily went about discussing how everyone was awaiting the detonation. Schram himself cited a *New York Daily News* poll conducted in October that found only

25% of respondents said Chappaquiddick would influence their vote, but of these 42% were Republicans who would have been unlikely to have voted for Kennedy under any circumstances. And he cited still other polls that indicated between 75% and 80% of voters said Chappaquiddick would have no effect whatsoever on them.[45]

Even so, the media's Chappaquiddick obsession wouldn't abate, particularly among those media outlets which were hostile to Kennedy's candidacy. In early January, Chappaquiddick, which had settled into a slow boil by then, began roiling again. By mid-January, as Kennedy was suffering from the general impression of ineptitude and vulnerability, the *Reader's Digest* and the *Washington Times* both published articles in which they suddenly decided to revisit the issue of Chappaquiddick. The *Digest* had conducted new tests at the bridge with a forensic specialist and concluded that Kennedy had been driving much faster than the 20 mph he had originally claimed — the *Digest* said 34 mph — and conducted another test that showed the currents in the Edgartown Harbor channel Kennedy allegedly swam were pulling in a different direction than he had claimed, which, the *Digest* said, put Kennedy's story in doubt. The *Washington Times* also disputed Kennedy's account of the currents in the harbor.

Neither of these stories might have been particularly significant, their timing of appearing just a week before the Iowa caucuses notwithstanding. But they were then picked up by the mainstream media *again*, not as another rehash of Chappaquiddick but as yet another element in the Kennedy decline narrative. The *New York Times* which had been loath to peddle the narrative, nevertheless ran two stories on the *Digest* and *Washington Times* articles and then ran a front-page story of its own two months later disputing Kennedy's account.[46] The *Washington Post* reported the *Digest* and *Washington Times* studies too.[47] ABC ran a story on the studies on January 14, and CBS ran a two-minute story on them on January 18. When Kennedy felt compelled to answer with an oceanographic study of his own, he only perpetuated the story.

It was no wonder, then, that respondents who had generally dismissed Chappaquiddick a few months earlier were now invoking it as a reason for distrusting

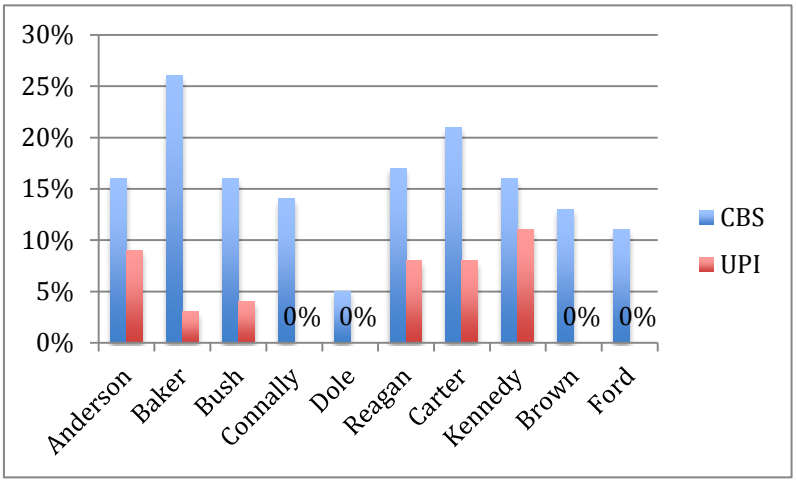
Kennedy, which turned Chappaquiddick into a Moebius strip: the campaign was foundering because of Chappaquiddick, Chappaquiddick was raised because the campaign was foundering. While it is impossible to tell whether there was an earlier subterranean negativity toward Kennedy about Chappaquiddick that the polls did not detect, the media's preoccupation with Chappaquiddick is the most likely reason the polls turned, since Kennedy didn't do or say anything himself that would have changed public attitudes so dramatically, not even the minor gaffes that permitted the media to portray him as inept. A NYT/CBS poll in July 1979, had shown that only 80% of Americans even remembered Chappaquiddick and of those only 23% said it would make them less likely to vote for him.[48] As he announced his candidacy, another NYT/CBS poll found that 69% of Democrats thought favorably about him. Two months later yet another NYT/CBS poll found that favorability had plummeted to 51%, and most respondents cited Chappaquiddick as a major reason.[49] The poll said that those who believed he had told the truth about Chappaquiddick fell from 30% two months earlier to 22% in January.[50] Corroborating that analysis, a Gallup *Newsweek* poll in January showed that 55% of respondents said that he had acted "improperly" at Chappaquiddick.[51] And if it was no wonder that voters were now thinking about Chappaquiddick, it was no wonder either that Kennedy was crushed by Carter in the Iowa caucuses by a 2 to 1 vote.

Thomas Patterson once brilliantly observed that "[j]ournalists reason from effect to cause."[52] This certainly seemed to be the case with Kennedy, though the process was complicated by the fact that the media helped create the cause and then reasoned back to it. The effect was obvious. His poll numbers had begun slipping almost as soon as he announced. Though one could certainly have attributed the slide to the country rallying around President Carter after the hostages were taken in Iran, which occurred just three days before Kennedy's announcement of candidacy, and to the public cheering Carter's tough stance against the Soviet Union after its invasion of Afghanistan that same month, there was a more dramatic and exciting conclusion: that Kennedy just wasn't what he had been cracked up to be. "Kennedy Myth Starts to Crumble" was how conservative

columnist Pat Buchanan put it two days after the Iowa loss.[53] Even the *Times* ran two separate pieces rehashing yet again Kennedy's flubs.

The process of Kennedy's demise has been partially documented in Michael Robinson and Margaret Sheehan's account of the media coverage of the 1980 campaign, *Over the Wire and on TV*, in which the two scholars looked closely at UPI wire service reports and CBS television reports of the campaign. [**Fig. 14**] They found that both UPI and CBS were more or less balanced in their coverage — ie., they tended not to make evaluative comments about candidates — but to the extent they did Kennedy got the worst press of any candidate on UPI in January (and, again, in June), while tying Carter for the worst press on CBS in both January and March.[54] (Robinson and Sheehan did not analyze coverage in November and December when Kennedy was taking some of his severest hits.)

Fig. 14: Percentage of Bad Press Given Each Candidate
(Jan 1 – Nov 3, 1980) Presidential Campaign Stories Only
Source: Robinson and Sheehan



After the Iowa debacle and even more negative press — the anti-Kennedy *New York Post* ran a series on Kennedy as a philanderer, and anchorwoman Jessica Savitch began the January 27 edition of "The NBC Nightly News" with "Kennedy's campaign has been in trouble almost from the beginning" — Tom Shales weighed in again, this time with even more bite. In a piece titled "Petty for Teddy," Shales fingered a definite anti-Kennedy bias in the media. "For the past three months the network news

departments have had a field day playing Get Teddy," he wrote. "They have turned the election process into the Wide World of Politics and portrayed Kennedy as the creamed skier feasting on the agony of defeat." And he quoted an unnamed newsman who admitted of his colleagues, "They forced Teddy to declare for the nomination, and then the minute he declared, they started saying, 'What good is he?'" Another told Shales, "It's really been savage against Kennedy. I've been shocked by it, absolutely astounded by the coverage. And the double-standard is incredible. Carter is full of 'steely resolve' but Kennedy is 'hustling votes.'"

And to what did Shales attribute this hostility? In part, he said, it was the fear that the press, having been regarded as going too easy on the Kennedys in the past, seized an opportunity to prove their manhood. And he quotes former Lyndon Johnson press secretary and public television host Bill Moyers that once one reporter takes on Kennedy, they all do: "A kind of group radar takes over." The early campaign stumbles provided reporters that opportunity. Moyers added that since reporters are literally covering campaigning and not issues, they judge candidates on how well they campaign and found Kennedy wanting, which helped cause the stampede.[55] The early coverage was so negative compared to his pre-candidacy coverage that as early as November 16, with Kennedy's campaign scarcely a week old, *Washington Post* ombudsman Charles Seib was asking if "the press [is] leaning over backward to the point where it is now unfair to the man it was accused of favoring."[56] Haynes Johnson, also writing in the *Post* in early November remarked how reporters covering Robert Kennedy's 1968 campaign had become close to him and how reporters now seemed determined to distance themselves from Ted Kennedy. "Younger journalists, schooled in the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate era of hard-nosed and hard-eyed reporting and questioning are already picking him apart," Johnson wrote. "Older ones, aware of the past and anxious to demonstrate their journalistic independence and integrity, are also coming on hard," which made Kennedy the victim of his brothers yet again.[57] Myra MacPherson, in a 5600-word piece in the *Post* chronicling Kennedy's "bleak fortune," came to the same conclusion: that young reporters' obvious belligerence to Kennedy is a form of payback

for earlier reporters' love of JFK and RFK. "What I hear from the kids now reporting," MacPherson quoted a veteran journalist, "is a built-up antipathy toward Teddy based on how they *perceive* we covered Jack and Bobby. These young guys who never saw Jack or Bobby feel they have to be macho press and that we weren't."[58]

It wasn't only that younger reporters were at pains to demonstrate that they operated by a different and less chummy standard than their predecessors. It was, as a *Newsweek* article analyzing the press's relationship to Kennedy pointed out, that they didn't subscribe to the Kennedy aura at all. "The mostly youthful reporters assigned to cover his campaign," *Newsweek* observed, "cared nothing for his inheritance and remembered little of his brothers — including the fact that their campaigns had been as chaotic and disorganized as his." Why? It quoted political columnist Richard Reeves: "The people who chewed him up were kids in grammar school when John Kennedy ran."[59]

Reeves may very well have been correct that Kennedy was partly a victim of changing journalism demographics. According to one study, the number of journalists had risen dramatically throughout the 1970s, by 69%, but the proportion of northeastern reporters who might have been more sympathetic to Kennedy had dropped while the proportion increased in the south and west, areas less favorable to him. As Reeves observed, journalists were more likely to be younger in 1980 than in 1970; 56.6% were between 20 and 34 as compared to 44.6% a decade earlier. In 1982, the median age of a journalist was 32, so it was likely that they had no direct knowledge of the two older Kennedy brothers. Perhaps most significant, the percentage of reporters who had described themselves as "pretty far to the left" or a "little to the left" had dropped from 38% in 1970 to 22.1% in 1982-3. At prominent news organizations, the sort most likely to cover Kennedy, the drop on the left was even steeper: from 52.8% in 1971 to 33.4%.[60] This last led to another popular campaign meme: that the country had turned right while Kennedy remained left. "[T]hese are 'illiberal times,'" as one reporter put it. "It is not fashionable for either a reporter or a candidate to have liberal thoughts."[61]

And so Kennedy's campaign might have sunk into the muck never to be seen again had another tendency of the press not surfaced. As Robinson and Sheehan put it, "When media cover the campaign's fatalities Shakespeare's dictum is reversed: the good these men did lives after them, and the evil is oft interred with their political bones." Or put another way, "Frontrunners get worse press than challengers while the challengers survive. And as challengers drop off, *their* press improves even more."[62] That is precisely what happened to Edward Kennedy. Battered into defeat in Iowa and, soon after, in New Hampshire as well, he was suddenly resurrected.

One could see this as early as the reaction to his speech at Georgetown University on January 29 in which he sought to re-launch his campaign with a liberal broadside against the more centrist Carter. Even observers who had been attacking Kennedy as hopelessly out of touch suddenly rallied to him. William Safire, the conservative columnist in the *New York Times*, began his column by exulting, "What a pleasure it is to see an overconfident top-heavy favorite get knocked on his ear. What an even greater pleasure it is to see the chastened man shake his head clear, get up off the floor, and — by dint of the intellectual and emotional effort of a powerful speech — give his political life meaning." He even went so far as to say that it "revived the art of the political speech."[63]

This did not by any means dispel the negative coverage. The media still seemed fixated on Kennedy's problems. "Tries, Tries, Tries Again" [February 11], "Sinking Feeling in Camelot" [February 18], "Last Chance for Kennedy" [March 10] wrote *Newsweek*. "He Wasn't in Touch" was how *Time* headed a savagely negative piece on Kennedy's falling poll numbers in its February 25 issue that questioned his "intellectual honesty," called him "pathetic" and again remarked on his "lack of conviction" and "inarticulateness."[64] The *New York Times* went psychoanalytical to determine the cause of Kennedy's wobbly campaign. It ran a long magazine piece that dutifully referenced rumors of Kennedy's drinking, womanizing, even his reckless driving and asked, "Could they all be an elaborate, unconscious way of saying: Let this cup pass from me?"[65] And the paper ran another piece the title of which said it all: "Kennedy Problems:

At Top and Afield."[66] Indeed, talking about Kennedy's scramble for money and the disorganization of his staff had become almost a media obsession. The *Times* alone ran four stories in February on his campaign woes.

Still, if Kennedy had been, as Safire wrote, chastened by defeat, the press seems to have been chastened by those defeats too. The most cynical interpretation may have been that if Kennedy exited the race, the press would have had nothing to write about, which, according to this analysis, terrified them. "There is a sort of institutional bias to keep candidacies alive," Larry Pryor, the former press secretary for another Democratic presidential candidate, Jerry Brown, told *Newsweek.* He went on to say that when candidates flag, "a subliminal mother instinct comes to the fore to keep them alive so there will continue to be an element of political debate and conflict that makes for a better story."[67]

But there was another possibility besides maintaining the conflict narrative of the campaign. In fact, Kennedy introduced a new variation on the "praise the defeated challenger" plot that many reporters seemed to embrace even before Kennedy made a comeback with his victory in the New York primary in late March. It was an attractive plot too. The way the media now began to see it, Kennedy wasn't just any loser trudging solemnly and depressingly onward to oblivion. He was a *happy* loser, an *intrepid* loser, an *uncomplaining* loser, a *self-deprecating* loser. More, he was reversing the typical election meme of a quiet, dignified withdrawal. He insisted that he was in for the duration unless Carter agreed to debate him, which Carter vehemently refused to do. Now that he was virtually out of the running to win the nomination, Kennedy was a far looser, far more articulate, far more energetic campaigner, reported the press — in short, a far better candidate as an almost hopeless underdog than he had been as a frontrunner and then as a sinking challenger. As the *Times'* B. Drummond Ayres put it as early as February 6, "Kennedy Smiles Despite Disaster."

The changing tide was unmistakable. Reporters and columnists were respecting Kennedy's perseverance and high spirits in the face of disaster. "Edward Kennedy is uncomplaining," wrote Anthony Lewis in his *Times'* column on March 17. "He exhibits

none of the petulance of a George Bush, the resentment of a Eugene McCarthy. To the contrary, he is good-humored, patient, never irritable with the press or unfriendly members of the public. He is not fooling himself about his situation. But he seems to have internalized it."[68] And reporters seemed to respect the fact that he was no longer just campaigning for the presidency. He was now campaigning for an idea: "More and more, he seems to see his challenge to President Carter as a crusade," Ayres wrote on March 21. T.R. Reid, writing in the *Washington Post*, was smitten by the new Kennedy. "After three months of stammering, tongue-tied, uncertain performances across the country, candidate Kennedy has finally gotten his act together. These days he delivers, most of the time, clear, lively speeches that receive, most of the time, warm responses from his audiences…" And Reid even dared hint that Kennedy could still win the nomination, though this was an outlying opinion.[69] In general, reporters seemed to like Kennedy much better as a smiling Don Quixote than as a legitimate presidential threat.

And as he slogged on through March, April and May, a candidate without a prayer, the coverage got even better for him. Of the 84 stories that the *Times* ran on Kennedy in March, only five concerned his campaign problems — a small number for a basically hopeless contender — while seven, including one Anthony Lewis and one Tom Wicker column, were generally favorable. In April the numbers were 53 pieces with none favorable or unfavorable. In May, there were 55 pieces with one favorable and one unfavorable. The *Washington Post* ran five favorable articles on him out of 48 in March with none unfavorable; three favorable and two unfavorable out of 32 in April with one of the unfavorable an Evans-Novak syndicated column; and one favorable, no unfavorable out of 27 in May. Even the *Chicago Tribune* had stopped its carping. It ran only two negative pieces over the three months compared to 14 in November, December and January.

Some of this positivity was no doubt because the Iranian hostage situation, which had boosted Jimmy Carter's prospects in November, December and January, had begun to dampen them as it dragged on without resolution. And some of it no doubt was the media behaving true to form in elevating the down candidate and lowering the

up one. Part of it, too, may have been guilt for the unabashedly awful way they had treated Kennedy, especially when he proved to harbor no ill will toward them despite that treatment. (Many of the accounts certainly read that way.) But as the campaign wore on, the biggest part may not have been his amiability or even his admirable sense of mission. It wasn't even the victories he began racking up in primaries and caucuses: New York, Connecticut, Michigan, Pennsylvania, California and New Jersey among them. It seemed to be that, as *Newsweek* put it, "Kennedy Soldiers On."[70]

The media were clearly taken by this idea of a lonely trouper who would not stop despite the overwhelming odds. It was a great *story* that played off the old Kennedy invincibility as surely as the early Kennedy stories reviling him had, only this time, Kennedy was a noble figure precisely because he had been brought low. ABC on May 7 ran a story on "Why Ted Fights On" and determined it was so that he could continue to raise issues. *Time* asked the same question: "What Makes Teddy Run?" and concluded it was his "liberal conviction and a refusal to admit defeat."[71] Even CBS, whose Phil Jones had been so snarky about Kennedy when the campaign began, had by June conceded that there was something honorable about his fight. As Robinson and Sheehan wrote of a Jed Duvall report, "In June, Kennedy was portrayed as a brave determined campaigner, with footage taken from his April campaign. But in April there had been no such report, nor any piece commending him for his political style with the folks. The film clip [of a coatless Kennedy greeting workers in Michigan] apparently proved more appropriate after Kennedy had lost in June."[72]

As the fight dragged on through June, July and into the convention month of August, Kennedy's coverage settled in. There were reports of his speeches, of his strategizing to pry delegates from Carter, of his continual challenges to Carter to debate him and of his promise to wage a platform fight. The coverage obviously trailed off significantly since there were no more primaries to contest and since Carter had effectively wrapped up the nomination. There were also no negative pieces in the *Times* on Kennedy in those last three months and only three in the *Post*, all from conservative

columnists. Otherwise there was no harping on Chappaquiddick, or on gaffes, or on his being out of touch, or on the disarray of his campaign.

By the time he delivered his prime time speech at the convention, Kennedy had practically been canonized by the media. "Wasn't that the best speech you've ever heard Edward Kennedy give in his life?" David Brinkley asked his co-anchor John Chancellor on NBC after the speech concluded. *Newsweek* concurred: "In one night, with one superb speech that was by turns graceful, rousing, poetic and defiant, Kennedy transformed what was supposed to have been a tearful last hurrah into a triumphant call to arms, and he emerged as a more potent political figure than at any point in his frustrated pursuit of the nomination. His failed campaign now seemed to some to have been a shakedown cruise."[73] Columnist Mark Shields, who had earlier ridiculed Kennedy's campaign, wrote, "In a convention overflowing with the non-negotiable demands of single-interest lobbies — very few of which had been discouraged by the senator — Kennedy reminded the Democrats of their party's history and of their obligations 'to speak for those who have no voice and to remember those who are forgotten.'" And he gave him a media bouquet without admitting that Shields himself and his fellow journalists had been the ones to help destroy Kennedy's campaign in the first place: "He had salvaged a failed campaign in an hour."[74]

In a campaign post-mortem, B. Drummond Ayres of the *Times* recapitulated not so much the campaign itself as the entire media narrative of the Kennedy campaign. First the exhilaration: "The Senator entered the race a 2-to-1 favorite in the polls." Then the missteps: "But in the end, because he was perceived as flawed in character, because foreign crises in Iran and Afghanistan overshadowed and submerged his campaign at crucial points, because political ideology and style had changed in the years since the deaths of his brothers, because luck and the breaks were not with him, and because he was not as good at campaigning as the public had thought and the President was better — because of all this, the applause and the clamor and the yearning for Edward Kennedy faded." Of course, Ayres did not discuss the media's contribution to this scenario.

Then the upswing after Kennedy had been down: "Still, the Senator's campaign had its moments of glory, hope and high expectations," Ayres wrote, citing Kennedy's late primary victories. And then Kennedy's own personal redemption: "While his character in adversity, particularly his conduct in the 1969 Chappaquiddick incident, was one of the issues in the campaign, almost certainly the major issue, his conduct in the campaign itself was notable for reasoned calm, boundless good humor and graceful acceptance of defeat after defeat. To many people [and certainly to the press, Ayres might have added], Edward Kennedy seemed a more contented man at the end of the campaign than at the beginning." And finally Kennedy's convention triumph: "He ended his race talking more about a 'cause' than about his delegate count, the cause being unstinting defense of the social and economic programs that had been Democratic mainstays for decades…."[75] Thus the media celebrated Kennedy's happy ending.

Palm Beach 1991. Once Edward Kennedy renounced a presidential candidacy for 1984, the amount of his press coverage began to slip. When he returned to the press, it wasn't quite the way he would have liked. As the story went — and it would be told endlessly and in many variations over the following eight months — Kennedy was spending Easter vacation with his 23-year-old son, Patrick, and his sister Jean Smith's son, William Kennedy Smith, who was a 30-year-old fourth-year medical student at Georgetown University. At roughly 11:30 PM on Good Friday, according to Kennedy's own account, he was feeling restless and rousted his son and nephew to see if they might want to go drinking. The three wound up at a popular Palm Beach nightspot named Au Bar where they drank into the early hours of the morning. Everyone agreed that Patrick met a young woman, later named as Michele Cassone, on the dance floor, and Willy, as Smith was known, bumped into another young woman, a 29-year-old single mother later named as Patricia Bowman. Cassone said she joined Patrick at the Senator's table. At closing time, 3 AM, the three of them left for the Kennedy mansion. Willy and Bowman returned to the mansion later that evening, took a stroll on the beach and then, as Bowman testified, Smith took a dip in the ocean, emerged from the water, tackled her

and raped her. She retreated into the house, and called friends from the house phone to pick her up, which they did.

It was a sign of the story's initial relative lack of interest that the first report in the *New York Times*, on April 3, with the headline "Woman Says She Was Raped at Kennedy Estate," appeared on page A12 and the first in the *Washington Post* on page A6 with the headline, "Women Alleges Sex Assault at Kennedy Estate." This seems to have been not so much evidence of the papers' growing indifference to Edward Kennedy, who had always been a good hook, as to the papers' own reticence in trading on a salacious and unsubstantiated story. The proof is that the tabloids had no such reticence. The *New York Post* put the story on its front page on April 2 with a bold block headline: KENNEDY MANSION SEX PROBE. It followed up with another front-page story the next day: BACHELORS PARTY. And another the next day: 'I WANT JUSTICE' [a quote from the alleged victim]. And the next: TEDDY'S SEXY ROMP (Says Half-Nude Senator Chased Her Around Mansion.) And the next: WHERE WAS TEDDY? [when the alleged rape occurred].

The television networks exercised more restraint. The initial report was only the third story on ABC on April 5, the seventh story on CBS and the fifth story on NBC, though the last fully anticipated the implications. "If it were just Palm Beach and a possible sexual assault," intoned anchor Tom Brokaw, "the whole thing may not have come to this. But if you add the name 'Kennedy,' and not just one Kennedy but three Kennedys, a real press frenzy is created." In the report that followed, Keith Morrison said, "In New York, the tabloids are screaming — full page headlines, innuendo rampant, unsubstantiated allegations, guesses of who might be guilty, accusations of a cover-up." The *New York Times* followed suit on April 6 with a story headlined, "Of Sex, a Senator and a Press Circus," which also fastened on the tabloid wars over the story.[76] In short, the respectable media had turned the story into a meta-story — the story of the overheated coverage.

But it didn't take long for them to get sucked in to the same frenzy they seemed to disdain. Over the next few weeks, to the end of April, as the investigation continued,

the *Times* ran 31 articles on Palm Beach, the *Post* 20. And many of them were of the tabloid variety: "Kennedy's Nephew Is Identified as Rape Suspect"; "Kennedy Nephew Refusing Questions in Rape Inquiry"; "Kennedy Nephew Gives Blood to Police"; "New Detail and New Questions in Kennedy Case," to cite just the *Times.* The television networks were actually less exercised by the story. ABC ran only three reports in April; CBS two; and NBC three. None was longer than 3:10.

But if this was, as Tom Brokaw had suggested, a national story only because it involved the Kennedys, and especially the family's paterfamilias, Edward Kennedy, it was soon sucked not only into the narrative frenzy — as in Chappaquiddick the operative word here was "questions" so neatly expressed in *Newsweek*'s Palm Beach report titled "Unanswered Questions"[77] — but also into the larger Kennedy narrative or, rather, narratives. There was the longtime "tragedy narrative" — the idea of a Kennedy curse that was constantly visiting misfortune on the family. And there was the "recklessness narrative" — the idea of an almost genetic predisposition within the family to get into trouble. Edward Kennedy was, in truth, only tangentially involved in the alleged rape episode. He was not accused of any wrongdoing, though newspapers leapt eagerly on the report that he had not made himself available to police the day after the incident when they came to question him at the home. (Kennedy claimed that he didn't know there were allegations of "rape" and that he wasn't aware the police wanted to speak to him.) But whether liable in any way or not, the media cast Palm Beach as not just a Kennedy story but as an Edward Kennedy story and, more, as an Edward Kennedy metaphor.

This had been the main line of attack by the tabloids who had little interest in Willy Smith but a major interest in his uncle. For the *New York Post*, the incident was further evidence of Edward Kennedy's licentiousness, even if that meant fabricating information that had not been and would never be substantiated. One article, the one elaborating upon "Teddy's Sexy Romp," had a woman, presumably Michele Cassone, saying that the Senator was "chasing me around" in "just a T-shirt."[78] The next day, Cassone, who had also given interviews to a tabloid television show, claimed that

Kennedy had disappeared for 20 minutes and then reappeared "with a really weird look on his face," almost intimating that Kennedy himself had gone off and done something wrong.[79]

And while the *New York Post*'s reporters were casting Kennedy as a lech and possible rapist, the paper's columnists were flogging the "recklessness narrative" and convicting him of larger moral transgressions. In Mike McAlary's version of the events on Good Friday, Kennedy sat with his son and Cassone and "talked into the night about principles and values. [There is absolutely no basis for this.] No one seemed to notice a version of the Manson family going on all around him." [That is, lest one miss it, that Kennedy drinking with his son and nephew is equal to the savage slaughter of innocent victims.] And: "The father takes the kids out for a night of boozy silliness. And that's what bothers everybody, that you have a father — forget that he's also a United States Senator — a father out on the make with his kids. [There is absolutely no basis for saying that Kennedy was "on the make."] At last, the father gets back to the mansion and finds girls all over the place. [There were two girls and Kennedy didn't see one of them.]"[80] On the same page, another columnist, Amy Pagnozzi, wrote of the alleged victim, "[S]he expected more than Uncle Teddy running bare-legged and boozy 'round the famous compound…."[81] There would be many more such pieces.

But the narrative also picked up steam in the respectable press. On April 7, E.J. Dionne, writing in the *Washington Post*, noted, "Yet again, a Kennedy, or perhaps more than one Kennedy is in a scrape involving alcohol and women," and went on to dissect the fierce Kennedy myth that seemed to place them at both the center of American idealism and of an American fascination with celebrity.[82] The *New York Times* ran a similar story by Robin Toner on the front page on April 17, "For Kennedy, No Escaping Dark Cloud," which, like Dionne's piece, placed Kennedy between the two outsized narratives. Describing a Kennedy speech at American University to commemorate the anniversary of a speech JFK had delivered there, Toner wrote, "It was one more scene in the familiar morality play that has played out in Washington in recent days on the two

images of Edward Kennedy: the powerful Senator who is caretaker of the family legacy and the hard-drinking roué."[83]

Even generally sympathetic and thoughtful commentators saw Palm Beach as a Waterloo for Kennedy that made his halves irreconcilable. Writing in *Time*, in a piece titled, "The Trouble With Teddy," Lance Morrow observed that "Kennedy's face sometimes looks flushed and mottled, with the classic alcoholic signs of burst capillaries, puffiness and gin-roses of the drunk. Sometimes he simply looks like hell — fat, dissolute, aging, fuddled." And he attributed the dissolution to what he called a "crack" in Kennedy's life after the deaths of his brothers. But Morrow believed that the "fracture set a pattern of sharp contradiction: the 'brief shining moment' would give way to long, sordid aftermaths. Greek tragedy ('the curse of the Kennedys') would degenerate into sleazy checkout-counter revelations ('Jack and Bobby and Marilyn'). The serious lawmaker in Ted Kennedy would turn now and then into a drunken, overage, frat-house boor, the statesman into a party animal, the romance of the Kennedys into a smelly, toxic mess. The family patriarch, the oldest surviving Kennedy male, would revert to a fat, sloppy baby."[84]

Though Kennedy gradually disappeared from the stories about Palm Beach and the investigation while the press focused on his nephew — in the two months from May 1 to the end of June, Kennedy was mentioned in conjunction with the Palm Beach episode only 10 times on all three broadcast networks[85] — when he *was* cited it was largely as a symbol of his moral dissolution. In the *Times* William Safire, picking up the false *New York Post* story, described him as running around in a T-shirt and then invoked Chappaquiddick — the touchstone of the recklessness narrative. "In getting the full-court tabloid press," Safire wrote, "the Senator is serving his unsentenced sentence for slipping past the law on another night 22 years ago. But let's not confuse poetic justice with real justice: Ted Kennedy is being made to squirm for what he did not face then, not for what he did now."[86] Richard Cohen made a similar argument in the *Post*, linking Chappaquddick to Palm Beach: "Well, you only get to leave the scene once in a public career," even though Kennedy had done absolutely nothing at Palm Beach

remotely comparable to his behavior at Chappaquiddick. Cohen's brutal conclusion: "Teddy may well be good for nothing."[87]

Others were just as scathing. Mike Barnicle in the *Boston Globe* yoked the recklessness narrative to the idea of privilege. "Surrounded by sycophants, Edward Kennedy thinks his name and title are license to do whatever he wants," he wrote, "and apparently the only voice he hears in that dark lonely time before danger calls is the drink saying, 'Go ahead, you can get away with anything.'" Barnicle added that Ted is politically dead. Ellen Goodman in a syndicated column in the *Post* seemed to think that going out for a drink with the boys was a mortal sin. She wrote, "In the news the questions are about legal behavior, but across breakfast tables people are discussing unseemly behavior." She called that behavior "a picture of conduct unbecoming — a senator, a father, an elder." And then she lowered the boom by demonstrating that the press, which had vacillated between the two Kennedy primary narratives, had at long last come down decisively on one side: "What is breaking down in the Palm Beach aftershock is the careful cardboard barrier erected between the senator at work and Teddy at play. He must have believed he could partition life forever. It's the illusion of being in control."[88] Of course, it was the press that had erected the partition even more than Kennedy, and it was the press's illusion and confusion as much as it was Kennedy's.

In a way, the columnists' moralism was stunning; it was even more condemnatory than their response to Kennedy's behavior at Chappaquiddick, and it raised a media issue that seldom gets aired: the extent to which columnists provide the evaluative edge to the narratives. Typically, media scholars direct their attention to reporters and how the reports accrete to establish a narrative — eg., in 1979 and 1980, Kennedy the Prohibitive Favorite, then Kennedy the Stumblebum, then Kennedy the Happy Warrior, then Kennedy the Intrepid, and, finally, at the convention, Kennedy the Redeemed. But what Palm Beach demonstrates is that the reporters are not always the ones who create the narrative, certainly not the only ones. Reporters seldom wrote or talked about Kennedy's moral dereliction in Palm Beach, except in passing. They were

more interested in the investigation of an alleged crime and in pumping its mysteries. That was *their* narrative. The moral dereliction narrative, which was a subset of the recklessness narrative, was essentially the columnists' invention. And what is equally interesting is that just as the reporters typically coalesce around one story — say, Kennedy's campaign errors in 1979 — columnists often coalesce around one story too. Safire, Barnicle, Goodman, Cohen, Mark Shields, who wrote Kennedy's political obituary after Palm Beach, were all retailing the same moral dereliction tale.

But what may have been most damning of all were not the scolding columnists but the needling humorists, who also don't often warrant scholarly attention in the formation of political narratives. Chappaquiddick had made Kennedy the butt of dark jokes about his driving. Palm Beach had made him an object of ridicule about his out-of-control behavior. "How many other 59-year-old men still go to Florida for spring break?" quipped Jay Leno on "The Tonight Show."[89] How is a social eclipse like nightfall? Leno asked rhetorically on another program. The answer: "The temperature drops, the stars appear, flowers close up. And Ted Kennedy takes his pants off."[90] Three weeks after the Palm Beach incident, David Letterman read a Top Ten List on the "Top Ten Good Things About Ted Kennedy," which included "Not the kind of person who snobbishly insists on wearing pants," "Still waiting to hear from the Palm Beach police," and "Holds high score on the Pac-Man machine at Au Bar."[91] These gibes launched what would become a tradition of late-night Kennedy jokes — about his drinking, his alleged promiscuity, and his reckless behavior that would continue long after he had curbed his drinking, married his second wife Vicki and become something of a model citizen. Until his last years, he would be a funny, drunken lout — a laughingstock. This may have been the most effective and devastating narrative of all.

As the Palm Beach incident moved from the spring to the summer and wended its way from the investigation, to the indictment of Smith, to trial preparation and leaks (the Palm Beach prosecutor released depositions from three women accusing William Kennedy Smith of having sexually assaulted them), Edward Kennedy receded from the mystery and legal narratives — from June through October he was mentioned in only 21

stories in the *Times*, 22 in the *Post*, and 8 on the networks combined — but he could not entirely escape the dissolution narrative. On June 5, Bryant Gumbel on "The Today Show" asked him point blank if he were an alcoholic — an embarrassing question at which Kennedy visibly bristled. (This excerpt was shown on the evening news broadcast as well.) There were also comments in the press that Kennedy's behavior had silenced him at the Supreme Court hearings for the nomination of Clarence Thomas in August and September, even as conservative senators attacked Anita Hill, the law professor who had accused Thomas of sexual harassment. A front-page piece in the *Washington Post* by E.J. Dionne directly linked Palm Beach to Kennedy's muted performance in the Thomas hearings and pondered what impact his behavior would have on his political future.[92]

On October 25, Kennedy at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government addressed the issue of his recklessness by apologizing and vowing henceforth to police his own conduct. Kennedy did not specify what he had done. The media did that for him. CBS's coverage of the speech that night spoke of "tales of his drinking, his womanizing, his reckless personal life." These sorts of rumors had haunted Kennedy for years; they had led to speculation that he was taking Mary Jo Kopechne for a moonlight tryst and/or that he was drunk when his car soared over the bridge. But there was one giant journalistic problem about these mentions. No reputable newspaper, no respectable broadcast network, no acceptable magazine had EVER given documentation either about Kennedy's drinking or about his womanizing. Not one of these top-drawer publications or networks had EVER given a detailed, eyewitness, on-the-record account of Kennedy's drunkenness or named any of the women with whom he was allegedly having affairs. Not one had EVER published a photograph of Kennedy in a compromising position with a woman. It was what one might call "sorta know journalism." You really didn't have to prove it because you "sorta know" it is true.

In Kennedy's case, "sorta know" journalism didn't arise out of thin air. The New York City tabloids, the ferociously anti-Kennedy *Boston Herald*, the supermarket tabloids and *Women's Wear Daily* had all been pushing the story for years. It was supposedly common knowledge in Washington that Kennedy drank heavily and womanized

profligately. As early as Chappaquiddick, a long *Time* piece referenced a photo of Kennedy "in the company" of a blonde on the yacht of Aristotle Onassis, though without showing the picture.[93] To say that the stories originated in downmarket publications isn't to say that Kennedy wasn't a drunk or a womanizer. It is only to say that "sorta knowing" those things does not rise to the level of journalistic credibility. There is a reason why tabloids are not given the same respect or credence as serious newspapers. This is it.

But it was hard for respectable publications to hold the line, especially in the era of celebrity when private matters had become public property. In December 1979, during Kennedy's presidential race, Suzannah Lessard published a piece in *Washington Monthly* titled "Kennedy's Women Problem, Women's Kennedy Problem." The piece began with the assumption that Kennedy was a philanderer and moved from that to the idea that his philandering reflected an attitude toward women that, in spite of his championing of women's rights, should disqualify him for their support.[94] Lessard had originally written the piece for *The New Republic*, but the magazine had rejected it because, as *Chicago Tribune* reporter Jon Margolis would write, "Like other accounts of Kennedy and women, this one offered no specifics but proceeded on the assumption that the rumors are correct, specifically rumors of 'a series of short involvements...lunch and a dalliance...'"[95]

It would be 10 years later that another journalist tried once and for all to pin the tail on Teddy. Michael Kelly was a neo-conservative who was virtually unknown when he decided to take on Kennedy in *GQ* magazine. His profile, "Ted Kennedy on the Rocks," which was published in the February 1990 issue, seemed to provide the smoking gun that would confirm what Kennedy haters and just plain Kennedy watchers had "sorta known" for years.

Kelly had the goods — or at least that is the way it must have seemed — which made his article the linchpin between the high press and the low. It is only when you read the article carefully that you realize it is just a more exalted form of "sorta know" journalism. To wit: "In Washington, it sometimes seems as if *everyone* knows someone

who has slept with Kennedy, been invited to sleep with Kennedy, seen Kennedy drunk, been insulted by Kennedy," and he then goes on to cite a "fellow customer" of Kennedy's at a private Georgetown club, a former Congressional page, a "former mid-level Kennedy staffer," an "East Coast playboy" for testimony. In recounting the details of a Kennedy bacchanal at the Brasserie restaurant in Washington, Kelly uses the testimony of a waitress named Carla Gaviglio, but admits that Gaviglio wouldn't talk to him for his story of how Kennedy allegedly grabbed her and threw her down on a table to grope her. Instead, he says, she told him that an account she had given to *Penthouse* magazine the previous year was "full and accurate." The only other witness he cites is a woman named Betty Loh who served Kennedy and his dinner companion, Sen. Christopher Dodd, that night. Loh said she entered the room and saw Kennedy over Gaviglio but that he was "sort of leaning" on her so "it was like he might have accidentally fallen," though Kelly's interpretation is not so charitable. Kelly goes on to describe another Kennedy encounter at the same restaurant that a waitress named Frauke Morgan allegedly told to another waitress who was his source because Morgan refused to be interviewed by him or to comment on the episode. In this one, Kennedy was supposedly in flagrante with a blonde lobbyist, whom Kelly doesn't name, on the floor of the restaurant. When Kennedy's press secretary, Paul Donovan, declined to comment, Kelly wrote, "There is not, really, much else that Donovan can say," as if this were proof of the validity of the charges. In later describing Kennedy's sense of entitlement and his narcissism, Kelly cites, of all people, Suzannah Lessard, who had no evidence against Kennedy whatsoever in her own article!

One could go line by line through Kelly's article in which the only witnesses to Kennedy's misbehavior cited by name are two gossip columnists; a lobbyist, whom, by the man's own admission, Kennedy once tried to get fired and whose date once ran off with Kennedy;[96] a *Boston Herald* columnist who is notorious for hating Kennedy; a *Roll Call* columnist who says he thinks Kennedy is "mad … and has no compunctions whatsoever"; and the right-wing commentator John Podhortez who claims to have seen Kennedy pounding down a bottle of wine in record time. Hardly a list of disinterested

and unimpeachable witnesses. But, again, the object here isn't to say that Kennedy didn't commit transgressions. The object is to say that if he did, then Kelly certainly needed much better documentation to prove it than anonymous sources and a handful of Kennedy-haters, especially when his sole objective was to discredit Kennedy. Indeed, there is no other reason for the piece. Kelly claimed to have interviewed 70 people for the article. Where are their stories? From his history as an attack dog, one might surmise that Kelly wasn't some intrepid journalist dutifully following wherever the truth might have led. He was a Kennedy hater who told the story he wanted to tell, and to do so he used one of the oldest tricks in the journalistic book: He selected those witnesses who would tell it.

Nevertheless, for all its poor sourcing and intemperance, Kelly's article not only fed the reckless and dissolute narratives; it was practically their Rosetta Stone, though it was also, to change metaphors, their Patient X, the primary source to which the narratives in the mainstream media could be traced. Nothing in the history of Ted Kennedy coverage, save the Roger Mudd interview, may have been more influential. Kelly's piece was explicitly cited in 14 articles internationally, according to Lexis-Nexis, including the London *Sunday Times*, but one can guess that it was implicitly cited in many, many more in light of the Palm Beach episode, after which reporters seemed duty bound to purvey the reckless and dissolute narratives. In effect, Kelly gave license to respectable news outlets, those that didn't want to dignify tabloids and gossip magazines, to write about Kennedy's womanizing and drinking because *GQ* wasn't downscale. We will never know how many reporters who included allusions to Kennedy's womanizing and drinking in their stories defended those inclusions to editors by invoking Kelly. But it doesn't stretch credulity to say that he gave them cover.[*]

What we do have is one glaring example of the unquestioning embrace of Kelly's story by the mainstream media. On the night of Kennedy's Harvard mea culpa, ABC

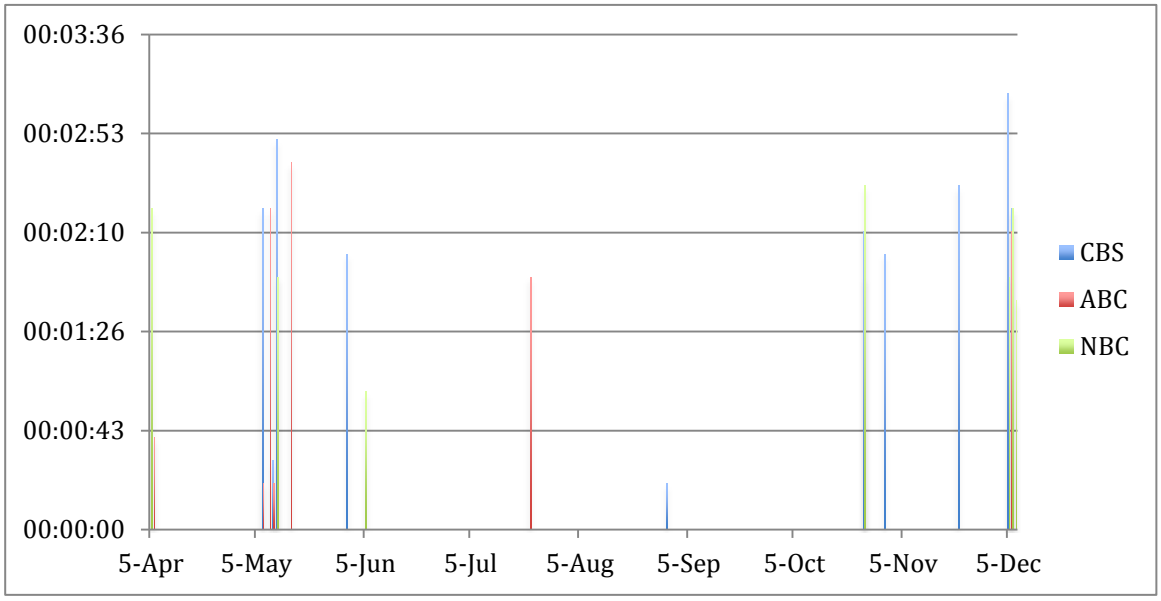
[*] This story warrants a postscript. Kelly died in 2003 while covering the Iraq war for which he had cheerled. He was based in Massachusetts at the time, and it was Ted Kennedy who phoned his widow, offered assistance, and cut the red tape to bring Kelly's body home. [*Sunday Times*, August 30, 2009]

devoted its "Nightline" program to a discussion of Kennedy. Jeff Greenfield introduces the piece by citing "accusations of excessive drinking and womanizing" and chiding "his personal private behavior." But who had made these accusations? Why, Michael Kelly, who appears in a filmed interview not to provide evidence — he provided none — but to shill the charges *he* had made. And lest anyone doubt Kelly's lack of objectivity, he provides this analysis of Kennedy: "He has epitomized the framing of the dialogue in a good versus bad moral framework. Someone who does that and who has a semi-public life that strikes many people as immoral comes to represent, I think, — and he has come to represent — a kind of rank hypocrisy." Seemingly persuaded by Kelly's idea that, apparently, Kennedy's support of civil rights, health care reform, immigration reform, and AIDS assistance, among more than a hundred other initiatives, is negated by his alleged drinking and womanizing, Greenfield turns again to Kelly to put his gloss on Kennedy's reserve during the Clarence Thomas hearings. "[W]hat a lot of political observers have come to realize in the past decade, perhaps," opines Kelly, "is that Ted Kennedy has a real problem serving as a public moral voice, because this is his role. If he cannot do this, then what can he do?"

In the end, these narratives of recklessness and dissolution overpowered the Palm Beach story itself. The story got a fair amount of attention in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*: 86 mentions of Kennedy in conjunction with the story in the former, 69 in the latter, though a number of these, perhaps most, are appositions in which William Kennedy Smith is described as the nephew of Edward Kennedy. As far as the tenor of the coverage goes, seven stories in the *Times* were negative to Kennedy, none favorable, and eight negative in the *Post,* none favorable. Only two of these stories made the front page in the *Times*, only seven in the *Post*. This compares to 1274 total mentions of Edward or Ted Kennedy in the *Times*, from April 2 through the end of the coverage of Smith's trial for rape on December 14, in the ProQuest database, and 859 total mentions in the *Post*. During much of this same period, Kennedy was engaged in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1991 and the Clarence Thomas hearings, along with an AIDS bill, immigration reform, student loans and various health care initiatives.

Similarly, [**Fig. 15**], Kennedy got very little mention on the network news broadcast reports on Palm Beach. Those in which he was mentioned totaled, from April 5 through December 7, 20:10 minutes on CBS, 13:30 on NBC, and 12:10 on ABC, and that is the sum of the reports on Palm Beach that simply *alluded* to Kennedy, not those that significantly featured him. Kennedy is centralized only in the reports of his testimony at his nephew's trial in December — an appearance generally treated sympathetically in the mainstream press but that occasioned another flagellation by the *New York Post*'s Amy Pagnozzi, who also excoriated the prosecutor for going easy in "grilling a witness [Kennedy] who is notorious for going to bars, getting drunk and womanizing…."[97]

Fig. 15: Coverage of Palm Beach Incident Including Mention of Kennedy on Network News Broadcasts
Source: Vanderbilt Television News Archives



What one takes away from Palm Beach is the image of pantsless Kennedy, bleary-eyed and out of control. It would take him a decade to shake it, if he ever did. And what this demonstrates about the media itself is how powerful the gravitational pull of the tabloids had become, and how less likely the mainstream press was to resist it than they had been, to the point where first NBC and then the *New York Times* both reported the name of William Kennedy Smith's alleged rape victim on the grounds that

an English tabloid had already done so.[98] During Chappaquiddick, the prevailing narrative was the mystery narrative: What really happened? The reckless and dissolute narratives played a decidedly subsidiary role. Twenty-two years later, at Palm Beach, those narratives competed with and eventually superseded the mystery narrative.

The mainstream media weren't oblivious to what had happened to their media culture. *Newsweek* editor Richard M. Smith told the *Washington Post*'s Howard Kurtz, "We look down our noses at these publications [tabloids], but we *shouldn't* have selective standards about what we retail from their coverage. Too often that's the reaction. You hear something delicious, you can't confirm it yourself, and in some quarters of the press there's an attitude of just hoping that someone else will make the first move so you can get on the bandwagon."[99] Smith was confirming the gravitational pull of the tabloids. The irony was that surveys indicated the public said it wasn't interested in this sort of personal reporting about public figures. One *Wall Street Journal* survey found that respondents specifically felt the Palm Beach story was over-reported.[100]

As it retailed sordid stories of Edward Kennedy, Palm Beach helped kick in another Kennedy narrative — this one having as much to do with William Kennedy Smith as with Edward Kennedy, though it certainly roped in the latter. This was what one might call the "dissolute legacy" narrative, which promoted the idea that the third generation of Kennedys had inherited their uncle's proclivities for errant behavior. There were many grim chapters in this story, from Robert Kennedy Jr.'s confession of heroin addiction; to Joseph Kennedy III's Nantucket jeep accident in which a passenger was paralyzed; to David Kennedy's death by a drug overdose; to Michael Kennedy's affair with an underage babysitter; to the addictions of both of Edward Kennedy's sons, Edward Kennedy Jr. and Patrick Kennedy, the latter of whom was "outed" during the investigation of the Palm Beach affair in a front-page article in the *National Enquirer* for an earlier stint in drug rehabilitation. (TEDDY'S SON BATTLES BOOZE, the *New York Post* boomed on its front page when Patrick checked into rehab.)[101]

In the tragedy narrative, Edward Kennedy had been very much the beneficiary of his brothers. One imputed to him their mythic status, which, of course, was one of the burdens he had to bear during the 1980 campaign. In the dissolute legacy narrative the process worked backwards. Kennedy was imputed with the sins of the next generation. Once the heir to a proud dynasty, he was now regarded in the press as the leader of a crumbling one. It was a note the *Washington Post* sounded near the beginning of the Palm Beach story when it flatly stated, "It was the senator's presence" that set off an "avalanche" of coverage in "the decline of an American dynasty."[102] And Kennedy was implicated. "Considering how screwed up the situation at home was for the Smith children and that Teddy Kennedy, one of the most visible drunks and womanizers in America, was the only role model for the children," a Kennedy "friend" was quoted in *People* in the magazine's coverage of Palm Beach, "I think I can safely say that [the Kennedy family] is deeply troubled."[103]

Kennedy as Falstaffian overlord, the third generation as dope fiends, miscreants and narcissists — over the next decade this would become the dominant narrative. "A Dynasty in Decline" opined *Newsweek* in a 3600-word piece in 1997 that chronicled the litany of problems.[104] Just six months later the magazine followed that with another story, "The Camelot Curse," this one 3300 words, on the dysfunction of the third generation of Kennedys, occasioned by Michael Kennedy's freakish death in a game of "ski football."[105] The dissolute legacy narrative only diminished slightly with the tragic death of John F. Kennedy Jr., in July 1998 and the effusions of grief and tribute that came after. In many ways, the narrative became the real curse — a final media malediction on the Kennedy family just as their earlier coverage had been a benediction.

Conclusions

We began this study with certain assumptions about the how the press operated. Some of these seemed to be confirmed. There most definitely was a "herd mentality" to the coverage of Kennedy. The coverage all bunched in terms of quantity, as one might expect since events are events, but also in the storylines of the coverage. In the 1962

campaign, Chappaquiddick, the 1980 campaign and Palm Beach nearly everyone told the same story; there was very little variation. In 1962, he was a bold if somewhat callow young man. In Chappaquiddick, he was first a tragic figure and then a less-than-truthful one. In 1980, there was the unspooling narrative from invulnerable to incompetent to intrepid to indispensible after the convention speech. In Palm Beach he was a drunken satyr. It is remarkable when one examines the amount of coverage as we did, that so few reporters diverged from the main plotlines. They were virtually inviolate.

If there was a herd instinct, it conspired in the service of a "drama syndrome," a desire by the press to give events the contour of a dramatic story. As Thomas Patterson quoted then–NBC News president Reuven Frank from a 1963 directive, "Every news story should, without any sacrifice of probity or responsibility, display the attributes of fiction, of drama."[106] In elections, Patterson found, this manifested itself in what he called the "game schema" — turning the election into a contest with changing ebbs and flows of winners and losers. One could certainly see this in the coverage of the 1980 Kennedy campaign where the narrative trajectory looked like a roller coaster. But one could see this too in events that conformed less easily to drama than an election. In both Chappaquiddick and Palm Beach the press seemed determined to turn these episodes into real-life mysteries, which did, Reuven Frank notwithstanding, sacrifice both probity and responsibility. The assumption in this particular form of "assumption journalism" was that Kennedy wasn't really telling the truth — that he wasn't "coming clean" with the authorities or the public. Remarkably, there was not a single article or report on Chappaquiddick that attempted to prove that Kennedy's own story could be plausible. There were only reports dedicated to disproving it. That the media had a profound stake in the idea that Kennedy had to be lying is a form of self-criticism to which the media refused to subject themselves. They preferred playing Agatha Christie to A.J. Liebling.

It is difficult to determine from our data and analysis whether the coverage of personality began to overtake the coverage of politics and policy — what we had called the "gossip instinct." Over time personal issues like Palm Beach certainly became more salient; they got more intensive coverage than, say, Kennedy's simultaneous fight for the

Civil Rights Act of 1991. If there is growth over time, it is not so much in relationship to the number of stories about policy and politics, which still predominate, as it is to the previous number of stories about personality and character. These issues were not covered when Kennedy entered the Senate. Even his cheating scandal wasn't framed as a character issue but as a youthful indiscretion that might affect the game schema. The sheer quantity of coverage on personal issues was significantly less overall on a day-to-day basis than that of political and policy issues. Even in 1991, coverage of the Thomas hearings, which were themselves salacious, and of the Civil Rights Act negotiations exceeded that of the Palm Beach coverage numerically speaking both in the newspapers and on the television news.

But personal issues don't arise every day the way legislative issues typically do. When they come, they tend to come big. The fact that Kennedy had been embroiled in big personal scandals that were likely to draw coverage and that would get better placement and be more *intensely* covered in papers and on television news than the legislative campaigns he conducted only underscores the media's affinity for these sorts of stories. Not surprisingly, the data show that the peaks in Kennedy's coverage correspond to these events: Chappaquiddick, the 1980 campaign, and, to a slightly lesser extent, Palm Beach. No surprise here: The media love political warfare and scandal a whole lot more than they love policy.

It is also difficult to say whether the tone of Kennedy's coverage was more evaluative as time went on, what we attributed to "post-Vietnam, post-Watergate cynicism," in part because while one may code the difference between neutral and evaluative, one cannot so easily code the difference between something that is mildly negative or positive and something that is more aggressively negative or positive. In any case, the vast majority of coverage, as Robinson and Sheehan found in their analysis of the 1980 election, is neutral. Having said that, the media did seem to be far more critical of Kennedy in his 1980 presidential campaign than they had been in his 1962 senatorial campaign, where the coverage was practically sedate, and far more aggressively critical of him in 1991 during the Palm Beach affair than they had been of him in 1969 during

Chappaquiddick, even though, as mentioned earlier, his behavior at Chappaquiddick was far more questionable than his behavior in Palm Beach. This may be less a function of criticism than of the tendency of the press to "pile on," which isn't only a phenomenon of campaign coverage but of *any* coverage. Once one reporter starts burying a subject, others all seem to relish jumping in. It may also be a function of the press not wanting to seem as if it is "flacking" for a candidate or subject. The jury, however, is out.

We had also hypothesized that Kennedy as an outspoken liberal might have been victimized by a growing conservatism — what we called the "*zeitgeist* effect." The press itself repeatedly referred to this idea among voters — that they would be less receptive to Kennedy in 1980 than they had been earlier because they had been moving rightward. Again, it is impossible to determine whether the hostile coverage Kennedy received particularly in the early phase of his 1980 presidential campaign might have been influenced by the dawning sense among reporters that he was an anachronism. We cannot get inside the reporters' heads. We only know that the issue was on their minds. We did find, albeit with scant data, that conservative media outlets were more antagonistic to Kennedy than neutral or liberal media outlets. The *Chicago Tribune* was very critical of his 1980 campaign, though this criticism was expressed almost exclusively in editorials and columns and only lightly in reports that emphasized his campaign problems. The *New York Post*, insofar as Palm Beach was concerned, was hostile to the point of belligerence and beyond belligerence to the point of fabrication. This isn't surprising either.

What did emerge were some other features of journalistic practice that we hadn't anticipated when we began. First, we discovered that while the coverage of electoral campaigns may have dramatic contours that go from positive to negative and often back again, as Kennedy's did in 1980, the coverage of an entire life, at least in Kennedy's case, operates a bit differently. As we observed earlier from Fig. 10, for a life there seems to be one grand narrative where the negative and the positive go hand-in-hand with little divergence. This may be another example of the "herd instinct" which agglomerates

even more when the amount of data increases thanks to both a larger data base and the time frame of a whole life, but it may also be a function of the fact that while the narrative of any given episode, like an election, may ultimately resolve itself into simple plotlines, a life is not just a skein of plotlines; a life narrative is a more nuanced and complex tangle of plotlines, almost novelistic in its dimensions, which may be why Kennedy's larger life narrative contains simultaneously both the positive and the negative moving in tandem. The graph also suggests that reporting is event-driven rather than subject-driven, or, in movie terms, the plot is more important than who happens to be starring in it, though there is obviously the possibility that the plots interested the press *because* Kennedy happened to be starring in them and that the press preferred some combination of the two to either one separately. In sum, Kennedy may get more coverage than most other political figures, but he gets most of his coverage when there is some major occurrence — a campaign or scandal.

We also discovered what we had earlier called "assumption journalism," in which unstated assumptions underlie the coverage and effectively guide it. All four of our major examples were products of assumption journalism: 1962, where the press assumed that Kennedy was the beneficiary of the Kennedy style, the Kennedy charisma and the Kennedy machine; Chappaquiddick where the press came to assume that Kennedy was not telling the truth in virtually any part of his story, which made each part subject to skeptical scrutiny; 1980, where the assumption rapidly turned from Kennedy's superiority as a candidate to the assumption of his inferiority; and Palm Beach where the press assumed Kennedy was the caricature that Michael Kelly had made him out to be. It is not an exaggeration to say that these assumptions were never challenged by the press. They just seeped their way unnoticed into the various Kennedy narratives. And it bears repeating that those who promoted the most positive and negative features of the narratives were not the reporters acting alone but the reporters acting in conjunction with the columnists, who served the function toward these political stories that film and drama critics serve toward movies and plays. They told the audience what to think.

We also discovered what we have called "sorta know" journalism which is closely allied to assumption journalism. Assumption journalism is the epistemological father of "sorta know" journalism in that the latter is an operational application of the former. Almost everything we know about Edward Kennedy's personal behavior is a product of "sorta know" journalism. More, it is now more likely to be practiced by the better publications than the lesser ones because it is a way of not having to source material that is extremely difficult and even unseemly to source while tabloids can just make things up or find less-than-reliable sources. Still, the better media feel the competitive need to include these kinds of stories. In short, "sorta know" journalism allows them to get their pages dirty without getting their hands dirty. This is a widespread practice in journalism, but it is not one that has been much talked about. For Kennedy, it was especially harmful.

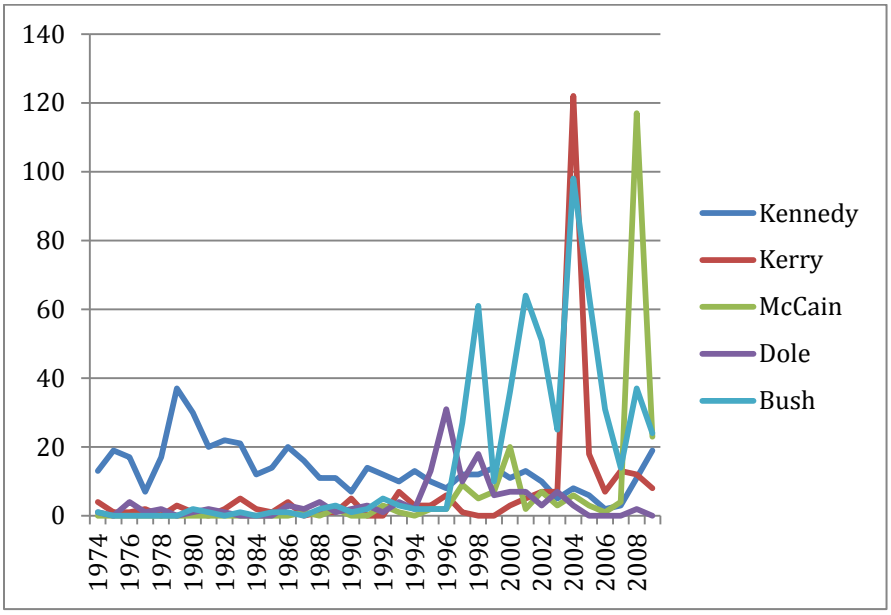
Finally, there is the issue of gravitational pull. We had hypothesized that there was a vast distance in tone, sourcing and direction between papers like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, on the one hand, and the *New York Post* and the *National Enquirer* or *Women's Wear Daily*, on the other. Common sense tells us there is, but we have too little data from the tabloids — the *Enquirer* was not easily available — to prove our case, and it would take a much larger content analysis to do so. We also had hypothesized that the newsmagazines and television news broadcasts would be situated somewhere between the respectable papers and the tabloids. Again, it would require a far more extensive and nuanced content analysis than the one we were able to conduct to detect the striations among these media tiers. But there is little question, if one compares the coverage of Chappaquiddick to that of Palm Beach, that the upper tier had gradually been pulled downward in the 22 years between the two events. The mystery narrative was absolutely dominant in the coverage of Chappaquiddick, and few papers, news broadcasts or magazines (*Time* was one) used "sorta know" to speculate about Kennedy's personal life in 1969. In the coverage of Palm Beach, the mystery narrative competed in all the media with the "recklessness" and the "dissolution" narratives, which are personal narratives of the sort that are *de rigueur* in the tabloids. Kennedy was

treated not as a political figure but as a celebrity who was fair game for media voyeurism.[2]

One can see this development in the coverage of Kennedy in *People* magazine. [**Fig. 16**] *People* is actually not a glossy tabloid trading in "sorta know"; it is a celebrity magazine that purports to take its readers behind the scenes of celebrity lives. Not many politicians are admitted to its pages. Kennedy's 485 hits compares to 237 for John McCain, 283 for John Kerry, 152 for Bob Dole, and 592 for George W. Bush. Many of the hits for all these politicians are incidental, and there is a lot of "noise" in the data because of the insensitivity of the *People* search engine, so it probably understates the proportion of real articles to hits with Kennedy, given the interest in his personal life, and overstates the rest, especially Bush's. The point, however, is that Kennedy had a lot and when you look at them, they read very much like those of any other celebrity melodrama. There are no fewer than seven full-length articles in *People* on the various crises and comebacks in Joan Kennedy's life, and there are three inspirational articles on how Ted, Jr., survived cancer and the amputation of his leg. Of all these 485 articles only one, a piece on Kennedy's preparations for his presidential run, is in any sense political. Kennedy had crossed over. But so had the media.

[2] Less than a year later the wall between the respectable news outlets and the disreputable ones would crumble entirely when virtually every paper and news broadcast picked up the story of Democratic candidate Bill Clinton's affair with singer Gennifer Flowers – a story that had originated in the *National Star* supermarket tabloid. This was a landmark event in media culture.

Fig. 16: Mentions of Kennedy and Other Political Figures in *People*
Source: *People* Online Archive



And that may be the biggest thing that Kennedy's press coverage says about the general direction of the American media, political and otherwise. The media culture had changed since Kennedy first entered office. It had become increasingly informal, increasingly unbridled, increasingly critical (if only incrementally so), increasingly impertinent (Would anyone have asked FDR or Eisenhower or even Russell Long, who did have a drinking problem, whether he was an alcoholic?), increasingly dramatic and even melodramatic, increasingly personal, and increasingly intimate — in short, increasingly all the things that the old respectable press had prided itself on not being. It had sidled away from "just the facts" and gotten closer to shaping those facts. And in this new media world, Kennedy, like all politicians, was a Prometheus, bound by journalistic narratives he was largely powerless to affect, eaten away by rumor, gossip and innuendo that often weren't true, and left to hope that the journalistic gods might rescue him, which sometimes they deigned to do.

Endnotes

[1] Kenneth Auchincloss, "Family Ties that Bind," *Newsweek,* December 13,1982, p. 39
[2] Stephen Hess, "Being Newsworthy," *Society*, January/February 1987, p. 46.
[3] Stephen Hess, *The Ultimate Insiders: U.S. Senators and the National Media*. (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1986), p. 14.
[4] *Ibid.*, 118-142.
[5] "Little Brother Wins," *NYT,* September 19, 1962, p. 38.
[6] "A Man Who Knew Ted Kennedy," *WP*, September 17, 1962, p. B20.
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