

INFLUENCE | FILM CLUB

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Weiner Discussion Guide

Directors: Josh Kriegman & Elyse Steinberg

Year: 2016

Time: 96 min

You might know this director from:

This is the first full-length feature from these directors.

FILM SUMMARY

Like the great campaign trail films that came before it, *Weiner* brilliantly captures the audacity and verve it requires to take on the political sphere and attempt to make a difference in the world. Yet it's subject, former New York Congressman Anthony Weiner, is deeply flawed. After having valiantly winning seven terms in Congress and dutifully serving over twelve years, Weiner accidentally posted a sexually explicit photograph of himself on his public Twitter account, instantaneously causing public outrage and media hysteria. He attempted to deny his involvement, but after several days of being hounded by the media, he admitted not only to posting the photo, but to exchanging "messages and photos of an explicit nature with about six women over the last three years." A week or so later, another photo was leaked to the news and Weiner subsequently announced his resignation from Congress.

But unlike most men bearing the weight of such public humiliation, Weiner did not bury his head in the sand and give up on his political dreams. Two years later, with the support of his remarkably loyal wife Huma Abedin, he decided to run for mayor of New York City, announcing his candidacy via YouTube. This is where *WEINER* begins, back on the campaign trail, begging for a second chance, and willing to prove his worth in the political arena amidst crowds ready to ring his neck for being so bold in the wake of his previous scandal. Regardless, the camera rolls on, taking in the good with the bad, and the bad gets really bad, really quick.

Drenched in the resilience of charisma and riding a juicy tale of PR meltdown with access galore, *WEINER* above all will be remembered for its astoundingly entertaining, always surprising personal depiction of a career in self-destruct mode. Examining what it means to be a politician in today's age of gossip-obsessed media, *WEINER* captures the supreme arrogance of a man who truly believed he could have his cake and eat it too.

FILM THEMES

Even after he was forced to resign from his position as New York Congressman in the wake of his first scandal, Anthony Weiner's thirst for public approval, political power, and online sex managed to send him further down the rabbit hole of international embarrassment.

A RARE BREED OF HUBRIS

With remarkably thick skin and an incredible lack of humility, Weiner seems to lack normal social filters and moral boundaries. What makes the man such a brilliant politician—his unyielding drive, his whip-smart tongue, his fearlessness in the face of conflict—seem to be the very characteristics that blind him in moments of morally questionable sexual desire. And even in the face of a PR meltdown, he faces the facts and puts his feet to pavement, shaking hands with those willing and shouting back in the faces of those who come bearing insults.

SCANDALS IN THE AGE OF TECHNOLOGY

There has always been an occasional sex scandal in American politics, but just a decade ago the sort of cellphone-enabled Twitter sex scandal Weiner got himself tied up in would have been essentially unimaginable. The prominence of social media and the ease of sharing one's personal information has exponentially increased the likelihood of accidentally revealing something unflattering or incriminating, especially for those trying to keep the attention of an adoring public.

PR AND THE MEDIA CIRCUS

Immediately after news hit that Weiner had accidentally posted a sexually explicit photograph of himself to his official Twitter account, the media had a field day, his political career went into freefall, and his PR team went into crisis mode: damage control. While countless political issues of much more circumstance were overlooked by the media, a seemingly infinite amount of time was given to Weiner's personal misstep, landing a devastating blow to his professional image despite the fact that the issues up for debate had little to do with his career as a politician and much more to do with his ethical choices as a man and husband.

PRIVACY FOR PUBLIC FIGURES, OR A LACK THEREOF

When taking on any career that lies under the microscope of media and public opinion one should expect to sacrifice a certain level of privacy. But just how much privacy should one expect to lose? Should one's sex life be up for public debate? In Weiner's case, the question becomes a bit more convoluted when the details are posted in a public forum directly by the person in question. By agreeing to participate in this documentary, Weiner gives up even more of his privacy, leading to moments that feel almost exploitative in their depiction of humiliation, especially in regards to the public concessions made by his wife Huma Abedin, who supports him through it all and appears in the film despite her obvious onscreen apprehension. Where the boundary lies between public and private for public figures and those close to them becomes increasingly unclear in today's 24-hour news and social media cycle.

“It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it.”

Warren Buffet

“Dreams of innocence are just that; they usually depend on a denial of reality that can be its own form of hubris.”

Michael Pollan

“What kills a skunk is the publicity it gives itself.”

Abraham Lincoln

FILM FACTS:

- The film premiered in January 2016 at the Sundance Film Festival, winning not only the U.S. Grand Jury Prize for best documentary, but also near universal acclaim among critics. It subsequently won the David Carr Award for Truth in Non-Fiction Filmmaking at the Montclair Film Festival and Prix du jury prize at the Champs-Élysées Film Festival.
- Prior to his first sex scandal, Anthony Weiner served as a member of the New York City Council from 1992 through 1998, and subsequently as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from 1999 until he was forced to resign on June 21, 2011.
- Prior to becoming a documentarian, Josh Kriegman worked as Anthony Weiner's chief of staff for a couple of years while he was in Congress. He stopped working in politics to pursue a career in filmmaking.
- It came out during his mayoral campaign that Anthony Weiner was using the alias "Carlos Danger" to partake in his online sexual exploits.
- On September 10, 2013, two months after the second sex scandal broke in the midst of his campaign, Weiner lost the mayoral primary with less than 5% of the vote.
- Anthony Weiner's sex scandal may have been the most publicized, but it isn't the only one in recent memory. Eric Massa, Mark Souder, Chris Lee, Scott DesJarlais, David Wu, and Vance McAllister have all been caught up in federal sex scandals between 2010-2015.
- Weiner's wife, Huma Abedin, is a long-time personal aide to Hillary Clinton. She was married to Anthony, prior to the political fallout of the scandals, back in July 2010, with former President Bill Clinton officiating. In August 2016, Abedin announced that she would be leaving Weiner.
- Co-director Elyse Steinberg logged her sole acting credit back in 1991, when she played a little girl in Todd Hayne's Sundance Grand Jury Prize winner, *Poison*.
- In 2013, a production called *The Weiner Monologues*, based on media coverage of Weiner's sexting scandal, premiered at the Access Theater on Broadway in New York.
- After leaving politics in 2011, Weiner immediately set up a consulting firm, Woolf-Weiner Associates, to fill his professional void, but he still seems to be attracted to the limelight, appearing in the 2015 sci-fi B-movie "*Sharknado 3: Oh Hell No!*" as the Director of NASA.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Share** the film. Invite your friends, pop some popcorn, kick back, and host your friends for a private home screening.
2. **Register** to vote. Casting your vote is the easiest way to get involved in the political process. Nowadays, most people can register online or by mail, depending on their location.
3. **Read and watch** the news. But rather than relying solely on traditional media outlets that are forced to fill 24-hour media cycles with substanceless gossip, keep up with current events via alternative, independent sources like Democracy Now!, The Intercept, or The Young Turks.
4. **Use** social media with care. Be very careful of what kind of information is being shared via social media, as you never know what will come back to bite you.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.