

**WORDS AS WEAPONS:
The metaphorical attack of Michelle Obama in US Print headlines**

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1 Introduction

It has been suggested that media coverage of Michelle Obama during the months leading up to the November 2008 US Presidential election in which her husband Barack Obama was a candidate, was at times unfair and biased, occasionally negative and in bad taste, and a few times arguably racist, stereotypic, and attacking in nature (The Capital Times, June 21, 2008).

Those who express these ideas often cite systemic American racism and racial ideology as the cause of such press, citing as examples the July 21, 2008 cover of *The New Yorker* (in which Michelle and Barack Obama are featured in stereotypically charged images) and Fox News Channel's use of the racially-loaded phrase "Baby Mama" to refer to Ms. Obama (June 11, 2008). Others suggest Michelle Obama herself is the cause of such negative press, referring to her February 2008 Wisconsin stump speech (a speech which raised questions about her "pride" in America), her active participation in her husband's campaign, and her off-the-cuff remarks in interviews describing her husband's personal habits. Still others posit that when wives of political candidates take an active role in their husbands' campaigns, they are "fair game" for negative critique and scrutiny (USA Today, May 20, 2008).

Perhaps all three factors played a role in the media's attempt to shape, construct and engage the national discourse around Michelle Obama and the possibility of her becoming First Lady of the United States of America. This paper sets out to examine some of the discourse in US newspapers during the last 10 months of the 2008 US Presidential election to determine whether coverage was indeed biased, negative and attacking, as some have suggested.

2 Background

The 2008 US Presidential campaign marked a series of firsts for US politics. It was the first time a woman (and former First Lady) was a viable candidate for a party's Presidential nomination, an African American was successful in securing the Presidential

nomination, a female was selected as the Republican vice-presidential running mate, and an African American woman was poised to hold the position of First Lady.

Though not an elected position with official duties, the role of First Lady is highly symbolic. It is a role based on deeply held, and quite often subconscious, beliefs that reside in the hearts and minds of many Americans. Traditionally, First Ladies are expected to engage in fundraising activities, be present on the campaign trail, and occasionally speak to special interest groups on behalf of their husbands. In addition, they are expected not to call attention to themselves, but to garner attention in support of their husbands. The manner in which a would-be First Lady goes about these duties is critical to her establishing legitimacy, and in particular *rhetorical legitimacy*, as a potential First Lady.

2.1 Rhetorical Legitimacy

The concept of rhetorical legitimacy is taken from management theories on organizational legitimacy (Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975) and applied by Quesinberry Stokes (2005) to the institution of the First Lady. Legitimacy refers to the manner in which “...an organization demonstrates to the public that it is acceptable and has their best interests in mind” (Quesinberry Stokes, 2005, p. 169). However, any entity which falls outside of societal expectations or the perceived “commitment to societal values” must “...demonstrate that its values are congruent with the larger system of which it is a part” by either *adapting* to the traditional values, *altering* the public’s view of what is valued, or *aligning* itself to a symbolic value or institution with a strong social base of legitimacy (Quesinberry Stokes, 2005; citing Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975, p. 170).

Rhetorical legitimacy, then, relates to the ability to perform, inspire and encourage discourse that aligns oneself with those values and expectations associated with the established institution—in this case, that of First Lady of the United States of America. Thus, rhetorical legitimacy is a major goal for a would-be First Lady, especially given that more than half of all Americans consider a candidate’s wife when deciding for whom to cast their vote in a presidential election (Quesinberry Stokes, 2005, p. 167).

However, not all potential First Ladies are able to successfully navigate the pitfalls of a role some would consider out of step with current ideologies regarding the ways in which women construct themselves as wives and mothers. This difficulty was cited by Quesinberry Stokes as part of the campaign trail challenge for Hillary Clinton and Teresa Heinz Kerry, in the Presidential elections in which their husbands were candidates. Clinton (1992, 1996) and Heinz Kerry (2004) were pitted against Barbara Bush, Elizabeth Dole, and Laura Bush respectively, three spouses who conformed to more traditional expectations of First Ladies. Though each of these five women engaged in traditional would-be First Lady activities,—such as stumping for their husbands, making speeches, and hosting fundraising dinners—Clinton and Heinz Kerry were viewed as power hungry and outspoken, traits not associated with a First Lady and ones often carrying negative associations for women in general.

For Michelle Obama, the struggle for rhetorical legitimacy appeared to be without incident during the early months of the campaign. Like the wives of many Presidential hopefuls before her, Ms. Obama was active in her husband’s campaign. She made appearances and performed political speeches on his behalf. In fact, on the campaign trail and in the media she was referred to as “The Closer,” a reference to the campaign’s hope

that she would secure the African American vote for her husband. However, a couple of interviews and media events—including an interview in which Ms. Obama described her husband as “snore-y and stinky” (*Glamour*, October 2007) —garnered negative reactions. In addition, references were made in the media about her perceived outspokenness and directness. Then on February 20, 2008 at a political rally in Wisconsin she made a comment that fueled questions about her patriotism and possible anti-American sentiments: *“For the first time in my adult life, I am proud of my country [because it feels like hope is finally making a comeback.]”* This issue, combined with the unearthing of her undergraduate thesis “Princeton Educated Blacks and the Black Community” and false internet rumors in which she was reported to have used a racial slur, raised questions about Ms. Obama’s ability to truly be First Lady of the people.

In contrast, Cindy McCain, wife of the 2007 Republican nominee, John McCain, seemed to navigate the issue of rhetorical legitimacy with a bit less difficulty. Articles frequently referred to her as supportive, unabashedly patriotic, and operating quietly out of the limelight while her husband took center stage—a “real first lady” (*Lowell Sun*, June 29, 2008). Still, Ms. McCain was not without controversy, finding herself the subject of numerous news stories, from her wealth and family business to plagiarized recipes.

2.2 Rhetorical Legitimacy and Media Discourse

Rhetorical legitimacy is heavily influenced by the media discourse surrounding a would-be First Lady. The saying that news is “created” frequently refers to the fact that events are “framed”—that is, aspects of an event are communicated in a way that makes them more salient for the reader (Entman, 1993, p. 52). These frames prime the prevailing ideologies—beliefs, fears, attitudes and assumptions held about society and its social members—believed to be held in the mind of the reader (Entman, 2007). Thus, the way in which a story is framed has the potential to profoundly bias the way a news story is understood and evaluated, as journalists manipulate “...what aspects of an event to cover, how much attention to give it, what facets should be emphasized, and what angle to take in covering the story.” (Scharrer and Bissell, 2000, p. 59).

The effect of media framing on the portrayal of First Ladies in news stories was studied by Scharrer and Bissell (2000), who found that media frames of First Ladies as politically active (engaged in “matters of policy and politics”) versus nonpolitically active (host, escort, “relegated to ‘soft’ issues”) influenced the way in which these women were subsequently covered by the media (Scharrer and Bissell, 2000, p. 57). These First Ladies were covered more negatively if they were politically active and moved beyond traditional First Lady activities. The study suggests the presence of a prevailing ideology that results in a bias towards more traditional First Ladies. Furthermore, any would-be First Lady who operates outside of this ideology could have her legitimacy questioned through negative and attacking news stories.

3 Methodology

3.1 Theoretical Framework

Given the goal to examine the discourse surrounding Ms. Obama, in order to determine whether coverage was biased, negative and attacking, a critical discourse analysis (CDA) was conducted on US newspapers during the last 10 months of the

2008 Presidential election. As a point of comparison, an analysis of newspaper discourse surrounding Cindy McCain was also analyzed during the same period.

For the purposes of this investigation, the CDA approach adopted was the socio-cultural approach used by Teun van Dijk. This approach operates under the belief that the media is quite intentional in the way in which it controls and shapes public discourse, utilizing language that taps into the socio-cognitive dimension—those attitudes, stereotypes, preconceived notions people hold—to reinforce ideological messages (van Dijk, 2000, p. 36). This control, van Dijk argues, is exercised partly through the discourse of headlines, taken together with the lead sentence, and the rhetorical and syntactic strategies they employ.

Although CDA typically focuses on discourse beyond the sentence level, the framework can lend itself to a headline-only analysis. Headlines alone can “do ideological work”—that is, they can be carefully crafted and designed to be used in highly intentional ways to draw the readers’ attention (Talbot, Atkinson & Atkinson, 2003, p. 39). Of course, publications rely on more than just headlines to attract readers; they rely on photo placement, lead sentences, and the text itself (Philo, 2007). However, headlines can work in a “stand alone” way that shows the highly ideological nature behind their crafting. Thus, an analysis of the headlines alone should be sufficient as a starting point for identifying any existing ideologies in the print media.

Consideration of the rhetorical strategies used in the headlines will also be a part of the analysis. Rhetorical strategies, which include lexical considerations and use of tropes, can result in language that generates strong associations and images for the reader. These are strategies under the direct control of the paper and thus represent a set of linguistic and discursive *choices* on the part of the publication. Fowler (1991) calls these “gifts” from society in that they can be socially relevant, reflecting ideologies shared by the journalist, the publication, and the reader. This shared ideology is expressed through the use of code words, such as “*Welfare Mothers*” and “*urban*,” whose significance is readily understood by society, and through tropes such as hyperbole and metaphor.

Finally, the analysis will consider the syntactic structure of the headlines to see if patterns unfold that provide insight into the ideological nature of the text. Studies have shown that in the media, out-groups—typically minorities, foreigners, and individuals with limited power and influence in a society—frequently occupy the position of passive recipients of actions in sentences, that their negative actions are described in abstract, personalizing tones, and their positive actions are described with concrete, impersonal language (Van Dijk, 2000, p. 40). Likewise, nominalized verbs are often used to obscure or minimizing the agency of one group acting against another (Fowler, 1991). Van Dijk argues that racist discourse is used in this way to maintain the interests of the group in power.

3.2 Data collection

Headlines of local and national US newspapers for January – October 2008 were obtained through the electronic information database Lexis-Nexis. Headlines were accessed by a general search of the names “Michelle Obama” and “Cindy McCain” with the inclusion of the search terms “wife” and “Michelle” / “Cindy.” The terms “wife” and

“Michelle” / “Cindy” were included in the search to capture headlines that only referred to Ms. Obama or Ms. McCain as “Obama’s Wife” or “McCain’s Wife.”

The total number of headlines retrieved (the search results) were reviewed individually, and only those headlines directly referencing the object of the search (Michelle Obama or Cindy McCain), were included in the analysis. Occurrences of “*The Obamas*” | “*The McCains*” were not included in calculations, nor were headlines referencing “*Obama | McCain*,” where clarification of which Obama or McCain could only be made by reading the article (and not from the headline). Finally, the headlines were analyzed for content (topic covered) and rhetorical strategies used in the framing of the headlines.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Content

Of the 4900 search results, 331 (7%) directly referenced Michelle Obama in the headlines and 99 (2%) directly referenced Cindy McCain in the headlines. This ratio corresponds to the general public sentiment that Michelle Obama received much more press than Cindy McCain.

(1) THE NUMBER: 3-TO-1 SHINES BRIGHTER ON MICHELLE OBAMA THAN CINDY MCCAIN. *Deseret Morning News*, May 29, 2008

Of the 331 headlines directly referencing Michelle Obama, 168 (51%) reported on the range of traditional campaign activities expected of would-be First Ladies—attendance at political rallies, dinners, and fundraisers, interviews about the candidate and life with the candidate, and the occasional stump speech.

As controversy surrounding Michelle Obama increased, so did the critical coverage, with 55 headlines (17%) directly referencing controversy surrounding Ms. Obama. As a percentage of total monthly coverage, the highest percentages of critical coverage are found in July (42%), May (38%), March (36%), February (22%) and June (20%). These months correspond to the following events respectively: The New Yorker Cover, The Tennessee GOP attack video, the surfacing of the Princeton thesis, the “Proud” remark, and false accusation of the use of a racial slur. It should be noted that, although the percentage of negative coverage ranges between 36%-42%, the number of total headlines for these months varies. The total number of headlines directly referencing Michelle Obama during July (19 tokens), May (16 tokens) and March (11 tokens) was significantly lower than the total number of relevant headlines for February (65 tokens) and June (59 tokens).

As a counter to such headlines, 75 (23%) headlines featured “symbolic” references to Ms. Obama. 11 (15%) headlines referenced her uniquely American experience as an African-American woman growing up in a working class family, attending Princeton, becoming a lawyer, marrying and having two children—in essence, achieving the “American Dream.” 33 (44%) headlines focused on Ms. Obama’s fashion, style and “star” power (USA today, August 26, 2008), and in particular, her ability to draw crowds for political rallies held in support of her husband. These same headlines also made attempts to draw parallels between Ms. Obama, Jackie Kennedy and “Camelot.” The

majority of these headlines ran in June (13 tokens) and in August, the month of the Democratic National Convention (10 tokens).

These symbolic headlines were accompanied by headlines referencing Ms. Obama's "softer side." In fact, during the last 5 months of the campaign, 25 (33%) headlines were dedicated to this theme. A number of these headlines characterized this softer side as a change from the Michelle Obama originally presented—posing such questions as "Will the real Michelle Obama stand up?" (The Boston Globe, August 31, 2008). One writer refers to Michelle Obama's Democratic Convention speech as "...a forced diminishment of an accomplished person." (Op-Ed, C9).

(2) MICHELLE OBAMA'S SOFTER SIDE COMES THROUGH AT CONVENTION Contra Costa Times (California), August 26, 2008

Of the 99 headlines that directly referenced Cindy McCain, 94 (95%) occurred in the 7 months leading up to the November election. (Even in February 2008, the month in which Cindy McCain publicly responded to Michelle Obama's "proud" remark, only 4 (4%) headlines directly referenced Ms. McCain, which includes references to "McCain's wife" or "Cindy"). 52 (53%) headlines commented on Ms. McCain's avoidance of the spotlight, her "quiet strength," her dutiful performance of traditional First Lady activities (such as making public appearances to rally voters in support of her husband), and her comparison to "a real First Lady."

(3) CINDY MCCAIN, A REAL FIRST LADY
Lowell Sun (Massachusetts), June 29, 2008

Cindy McCain was not without critical representation in the media. 47 (47%) critical headlines were found—28 (60%) referenced her wealth (and the access this wealth provided John McCain through use of her private jet, as well as attempts by the McCains to shield this wealth from the public by not releasing Ms. McCain's tax returns) and 5 (11%) focused on her ties to the beer industry. Surprisingly, only 2 (4%) headlines referenced her former addiction to prescription drugs and 1 (2%) directly referenced her participation in the controversy over plagiarized recipes posted on her husband's political website (even though the recipes are attributed to Cindy McCain, most references to this incident were tied to John McCain and the "McCain Family Recipes.")

4.2 Rhetorical Strategy and Syntactic Structure

In terms of the framing of the headlines, a reoccurring rhetorical device was found in 23 (6%) of the 430 headlines that directly referenced Michelle Obama (19 tokens) and Cindy McCain (4 tokens) combined. This rhetorical device featured the metaphorical use of verbs of aggression, violence, and attack (AVA). These verbs used metaphorically include such words as *bash*, *tackle*, *fair game*, *grilled*, *clobber*, *slam*, *take aim*, and nine others. In addition to being used metaphorically, many of these verbs tend toward the use of hyperbole, such that instead of "criticizing" an agent is "taking jabs" or "pickin' on."

(4) OBAMA WARNS CRITICS AGAINST TAKING JABS AT HIS WIFE, FAMILY. The Boston Globe, May 20, 2008

Of the total AVA metaphors found in the headlines, 19 (83%) directly referenced Michelle Obama (representing 6% of 331 headlines for Michelle Obama). Of these 19 tokens, 3 used the metaphors as an opportunity to make a play on words and 3 used metaphors to describe Michelle Obama as “fair game.”

(5) MICHELLE'S O-BOMBA HITS CLINTON

Daily News (New York), February 5, 2008

(6) MICHELLE OBAMA IS FAIR GAME

The Boston Globe, May 25, 2008

In terms of specific syntactic structures, 2 headlines referenced an *Animate Agent* (not always named) + *AVA verb* + *Possessive Object* in which the object of the action in both cases is “Obama’s wife’s comments,” 6 headlines featured an *Animate Agent* + *AVA verb* + *Candidate’s Wife*, and 3 headlines featured a *Nominalized AVA verb* + *Candidate’s Wife*.

(7) CONSERVATIVE BLOGGERS BASH OBAMA’S WIFE’S COMMENTS

Contra Costa Times (California), February 21, 2008

(8) OPPOSITION WORKING TO MINCE UP MICHELLE

San Gabriel Valley Tribune, June 14, 2008

(9) THE TRASHING OF MICHELLE

The Capital Times (Madison, Wisconsin), June 21, 2008

Of the remaining 4 AVA metaphors found, each directly referencing Cindy McCain (representing 4% of the total 99 headlines for Cindy McCain), 2 headlines feature the construction *Inanimate Agent* + *AVA verb* + *Candidate’s Wife*, 1 headline features the construction *Animate Agent* + *AVA verb* + *Possessive Object*, and 1 headline features the construction *Animate Agent* + *AVA verb* + *Candidate’s Wife*.

(10) LETTER TOOK CHEAP SHOT AT CINDY MCCAIN

Wisconsin State Journal, July 30, 2008

(11) DIVE BATTERS BARACK, CLOBBERS CINDY

Daily News (New York), October 14, 2008 (“Dive” referring to The Dow Jones)

This language, though traditionally associated with tabloid papers, appeared in prestige national publications, such as USA Today and The New York Times, as well as regional / city publications such as The Philadelphia Inquirer, Contra Costa Times (California), and The Chattanooga Times Free Press. 3 tokens appeared in the tabloid press, The Daily News (New York) and the Boston Globe.

5 INTERPRETATION

5.1 *Adapt, Attack, Align*

Adherence to the traditional First Lady framework was clearly important in the representations of Michelle Obama and Cindy McCain during the 2008 Presidential election. More than half of all headlines directly referencing these women centered on their involvement in the traditional framework of would-be First Lady activities—attendance at political rallies, fundraising dinners, and other campaign events. Nonetheless, the number of headlines dedicated to controversial or critical representations of each woman suggests rhetorical legitimacy is something for which both women had to struggle, though for different reasons.

Much of the criticism aimed at Michelle Obama during this 10 month period revolved around the “pride” remark made at a Wisconsin rally in February 2008. This remark, taken by some as unpatriotic, lead the way for journalists and opponents to raise questions not only about her level of patriotism, but also about a related question lying beneath the surface—what role would race play in her (and by extension, her husband’s) ability to represent the country? In the five months following the remark, several stories appeared whose headlines were framed in relation to this issue—the uncovering of Ms. Obama’s Princeton thesis, an article suggesting the family’s attendance at the Reverend Wright church was a marital compromise to Ms. Obama, and an internet rumor that Ms. Obama used a racial slur in a speech given at the church (a rumor which later proved to be untrue). The culmination of such framing is represented in *The New Yorker* Cover in which Ms. Obama is represented as a 1960’s, anti-establishment militant wearing an Afro and carrying an automatic weapon.

More than half of the controversy surrounding Cindy McCain centered on her wealth (and the McCains’ attempts to shield this wealth from the public), her husband’s access to this wealth (using her private jet in campaign activities), and the link between this wealth to the beer industry. Surprising few headlines (2 tokens) mentioned Ms. McCain’s prior addiction to prescription pain medicine and subsequent controversies related to this addiction. In the end, neither woman was immune to headlines framed to address the issue of their suitability as First Lady of the United States, and by extension, to suggest, imply, and question outright each woman’s legitimacy as a potential First Lady. The potential for bias in framing the headlines for both women is readily apparent.

In addition to bias, a negative and attacking tone could be read from the headlines. The use of hyperbolic metaphors in the headlines, such as “bash,” “mince up,” “take jabs,” “tackle,” “clobber,” would be salient in a society that recognizes “words can cut like a knife,” that one can “hurl insults,” and that language can “cut to the quick.” Such metaphors tap into a shared understanding of WORDS AS WEAPONS. This concept of “words as weapons” is “embodied” in American language, allowing for immediate recognition that when this language is employed in writing, the recipient of the action is being attacked.

However, not only is such language metaphorical, it is ideological. According to van Dijk, the use of such harsh, emotionally charged language is ideological in that it reflects hidden opinions, attitudes, and values of a society. In the case of Michelle Obama and Cindy McCain, one must ask if the ideology reflected in these metaphorical verbs is related only to the expectations of the “ideal First Lady,” or reflective of a deeper ideology about the treatment of women who step outside the societal expectations for women – that to do so will result in retribution through negative, biased and attacking language. As

suggested by Scharrer and Bissell (2000), such language is charged with keeping political women in line with the values the country and the political elite have established.

With the differences in language use and controversy surrounding Michelle Obama and Cindy McCain, one has to consider the possibility that Ms. Obama's race played a role in the framing of her criticism. Unlike the metaphorical verbs of attack used with Cindy McCain (metaphorical verbs featured in sentence structures indirectly referencing Ms. McCain), the metaphorical verbs of attack used with Michelle Obama were more direct, often featuring an animate agent directly acting upon Ms. Obama, or featuring Ms. Obama as the object in nominalized structures. Van Dijk (1988, 2000) suggests that more direct language is used to emphasize "the responsible agency of the subject" (p. 41) and Fowler (1991) suggests that while nominalization is used to obscure the agency of the actor, it has the effect of playing up the victim role. Given the legacy of slavery and abuse that has existed in the United States, combined with metaphorical verbs that indirectly index this historical past, the metaphorical headlines related to Michelle Obama potentially appear more personally attacking and overtly negative than the metaphorical headlines featuring Cindy McCain.

Given the number of critical headlines for both women, the maintenance of rhetorical legitimacy is crucial for both women, particularly during the months leading up to the election. For Ms. McCain, this included taking a more visible role in engaging in traditional would-be First Lady activities; and indeed, the number of campaign-related public appearances Cindy McCain made increased in the months leading up to the election. However, this task was particularly critical for Michelle Obama who needed to establish rhetorical legitimacy in the media to combat critiques of her patriotism and ability to be First Lady for *all* Americans. Thus, in the five months leading up to the election, 23% of headlines reported on campaign activities aligning Ms. Obama with iconic representations of America that would resonant with Americans across race and class—the "All-American," the "American Dream," and "American Royalty"—Jackie Kennedy Onassis. Such representations were often made through framing of Ms. Obama's life in relation to her working class upbringing, her education at Princeton, and direct and indirect comparisons to "Camelot" through her dress, style and "star" status.

6 CONCLUSION

Based on the newspaper headlines analyzed, there does appear to be a basis for the claim that media coverage of Michelle Obama during the months leading up to the 2008 Presidential election of her husband Barack Obama was biased, negative, and attacking, particularly given the syntactic structure of the metaphorical verbs of attack, violence and aggression used in 6% of headlines directly referencing Ms. Obama. A similar claim, however, could be argued for Cindy McCain, who received her share of critical coverage and metaphorical verbs of attack (4%). Still, the type of criticism (the themes and the language used) levied against each woman was quite different, and thus the challenge to each woman's ability to establish rhetorical legitimacy as a potential First Lady, was different.

Given the methodological constraints of using only headlines in the analysis, the conclusions drawn from this study are tentative. Without a full analysis of the discourse within the articles it is not possible to obtain a complete picture of the language and ideology at work in these articles. In addition, as encouraged by Philo (2007), the layout,

type and use of photographs, should also be considered for an accurate reflection of the full range of ideology and ideological messages that accompany these headlines. Furthermore, one would have to look at the full scope of media beyond newspaper, to other print mediums, television (particularly cable) and radio.

Finally, it would be interesting to compare the type of language that appeared with other would-be First Ladies over the past several years. This would give us some insight into how the rhetorical styles and media framing of each was received and projected by the media. In particular, comparisons between Hillary Clinton, Theresa Heinz Kerry and Michelle Obama would be insightful to address the impact of race in content and rhetorical uses of language in the way media deals with issues of legitimacy with would-be First Ladies.

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