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**LANGUAGE AND GENDER:
THE MASS MEDIA'S PORTRAYAL OF TWO U.S. PRESIDENTIAL
CANDIDATES**

"I will feel equality has arrived when we can elect to office women who are as incompetent as some of the men who are already there." – Maureen Reagan

INTRODUCTION:

The presence of Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin during the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign raised new questions about bias and sexism in the media's portrayal of the candidates. The recent commemorative inaugural edition of *Newsweek* noted that "Clinton's campaign for the presidency showed us how far we've come on women's rights – and how far we haven't come" (109). While Obama and Clinton were vying for the Democratic nomination, the March 17, 2008 *Newsweek* issue featured a picture of Hillary Clinton and the title "Hear Her Roar: Gender, Class, and Hillary Clinton". Two online media sources at the time asked if "media outlets [were] biased against Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton due to her gender" (www.capitolhillblue.com) and if "Hillary Clinton's campaign [was] the victim of sexism" (www.redblueamerica.com). As Talbot (2007) notes in Media Discourse: Representation and Interaction, "[in] modern democracies the media serve a vital function as a public forum" (3). Considering the media's effects on the nation and the public's ideas, it is essential to analyze the language and discourse of the media during critical moments in national histories such as presidential campaigns.

The research discussed here sought to identify qualitative similarities and differences in the mass media's portrayal of the two Democratic front-runners during the 2008 election

season, focusing on language usage and its potential connections to each candidate's gender.

The research focused primarily on the following research questions:

1. What differences are there in the ways that Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama are discussed and evaluated in the mass media? What specific linguistic features, such as adjectives, nouns, verbs, and subject matter, are used in these sources?
2. Can any of these differences in the language used to portray the two candidates be attributed to gender?
3. Increasingly, commentary on the election process states that it is sexist. Is there evidence for this in language, not only in the content of what is said but how things are said, how much they are said, what is said about 1 candidate but not the other, etc.?
4. Is there evidence to support the idea that Hillary Clinton is expected to exhibit more emotion, but is then criticized for showing emotion?

The research presented here was based on an analysis of approximately fifty mass-media articles and online sources mainly from the months of January - March 2008 and taken from: *Time* (6), *Newsweek* (8), *Daily Bruin* (9), *CityBeat* (1), online sources (approximately 25), and a television show (2). I attempted to include a number of different kinds of sources, including both opinion and fact-based pieces, in order to provide a range of perspectives. From these fifty articles, I chose some examples that focused on both candidates and others that focused on one or the other. The analysis focuses on the choice of adjectives, nouns, and verbs used to describe both candidates and highlights fundamental similarities and differences between the representations of each. These sources reflect some changes over time in terms of the depictions of each candidate.

Through a detailed analysis of these articles and online sources, it was found that five main themes emerged: fighting and competition, emotions, personality and temperament, being “real” and independence, and guilt. Though frequently one can find evidence for descriptions of both candidates to be related to the same themes and/or domains, the word choice (e.g., adjectives, nouns, verbs) used within these domains frequently differed in subtle ways and could be attributed to gender. There was also evidence that Hillary Clinton was held to a different and higher standard than Barack Obama. Clinton needed to be competent, show just enough emotion, be “real”, and be independent, while Obama needed only to be competent and be “real”, or down-to-earth, with others’ assistance.

LANGUAGE, GENDER, POWER, AND POLITICS:

Robin Lakoff, in her seminal work entitled “Language and Women’s Place,” discussed a number of female-specific linguistic features such as hedges (e.g., “I think”); tag questions (e.g., “isn’t it?”); and “empty” adjectives (e.g., “divine”, “charming”). In addition, there have been a number of studies highlighting differences between the ways that men and women speak, focusing on minimal responses, questions, and commands (e.g., Coates 1989, Fishman 1980, Goodwin 1998), in addition to lexicon, intonation, and other linguistic features. Suleiman and O’Connell (2007), using data of interviews with Bill and Hillary Clinton, discussed the various ways that gender “makes a difference in the ways politicians speak and are spoken to in public” (Suleiman and O’Connell 2007: 33).

All of the above-referenced studies have focused on how women and men speak or are spoken to. Alternatively, this study focuses on the differences between how a male and a female are written or spoken *about* in the mass media. Previous research has shown that there are significant differences between the depictions of men and women in the media. For example, Smith (1985) noted that “hundreds of examples that have been culled from the

pages of the British press...betray pervasive and systematic asymmetries in the portrayal of women and men in the mass media. Undoubtedly, many different kinds of asymmetries can be discovered..." (Smith 1985: 32).

Other studies have focused on gender and leadership, and some have considered these issues as related to language. For example, in "From Spouses to Candidates: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Elizabeth Dole, and the Gendered Office of U.S. President," Anderson "underscores the fact that although women are making strides in other realms of public governance, the U.S. presidency remains a bastion of masculinity" (105). In addition, Jamieson (1995) highlights the "double bind" for women in leadership positions. Anderson (2002) notes that "Jamieson has documented the ways in which conflicts between role expectations trap women in double binds that curtail their options and circumscribe their power. For example, women's role as mothers and caregivers historically has been cast in opposition to men's role as rational thinkers; thus 'women have been identified as bodies not minds, wombs not brains.' Women also have experienced disjunction between the demands of femininity and social definitions of competence and leadership". Coates (2004) has noted that "...Women in the workplace are linguistically in a Catch 22 situation. They are expected to adopt the more adversarial, information-focused style characteristic of all-male talk, and typical of talk in the public domain, but if they do...they run the risk of being perceived as aggressive and confrontational, as un-feminine. In other words, there is a clash between what is expected of a woman and what is expected of a person with high status in the public sphere." (201).

All of the above-mentioned issues are relevant in considering themes in the media discourse focused on each of the two Democratic presidential candidates.

ANALYSIS OF FOCAL THEMES:

In considering all of the sources mentioned above, it was found that in many cases the differences between the portrayal of the two candidates were quite subtle. It was rare that an attack on Hillary Clinton would overtly focus on gender. Instead, the differences in descriptions and depictions were more tacit. I will now discuss some example of the recurrent themes in the candidates' depictions in the media: fighting and competition, emotions, personality and temperament, and being "real" and independence.

FIGHTING AND COMPETITION:

Though fighting is traditionally considered to be a more masculine activity, in these texts both Clinton and Obama were described with words associated with fighting and competition. In fact, Carroll and Fox (2006) have noted that "the language of war and sports, two of the most traditionally masculine domains in American society, is so prevalent in our political discourse that it is even used by those who wish to increase women's political involvement" (3). The following are some examples of language usage related to fighting and competition.

- A March 2, 2008 *New York Times* article headline reads: "Spending Heavily, Obama Attempts **Knockout Blow**" (www.nytimes.com/2008/03/02/us/politics/02primary.html)
- In the March 17, 2008 issue of *Time* magazine, Joe Klein describes Obama's actions during some of the debates: "...Tiny fissures were beginning to appear in Obama's **shining armor**. I thought he won the Texas and Ohio debates with his **elegant counterpunching** and cool demeanor, but I was wrong..."
- In the same *Time* magazine issue, Michael Duffy and Nancy Gibbs liken Obama's campaign to a basketball game. They state that he is "**tougher** than he looks" and that "the **fierce competitor** with the calm demeanor needs to up his game".
- *Time's* title on its March 17, 2008 front page was: "The Fighter" and included a picture of Hillary Clinton. Inside, in the description of this cover story, they ask "The Price of Victory: Is Hillary's **slashing** campaign **bruising** the Democratic Party?".

- One of the articles in the February 25, 2008 issue of *Time* was entitled “Losing Streak”, and its description was the following: “This is not the race that Hillary Clinton expected to be running. How Clinton is retooling her campaign for **trench warfare** and gambling everything on Texas and Ohio” (*Time*, February 25, 2008: 24).

Though in both of these cases Clinton and Obama are described with words associated with the metaphor of fighting and competition, there are fundamental differences between the words used. The phrase “knockout blow,” used to describe Obama’s financial practices in the campaign, alludes to boxing. Boxing seems to be alluded to again in the second example, with the phrase “elegant counterpunching”. Boxing is a setting in which fighting is both allowed and encouraged. These phrases refer to calculated and directed violence. In addition, Obama is described as “the fierce competitor with the calm demeanor” as his campaign is likened to a sports game. Lastly, Klein describes Obama’s “shining armor,” a reference to a knight coming to rescue people in distress. In all of these cases, fighting and competition are accepted and encouraged as positive attributes.

On the other hand, the words “slashing” and “bruising” are used in reference to Hillary’s campaign. Both of these actions are intentional acts of harm, neither of which refer to settings in which fighting is encouraged. In fact, “slashing” is frequently used to express actions (such as murder) that demonstrate senseless violence and aggression. In addition, “trench warfare” refers to a “slow wearing down of the opposing forces and piecemeal gains at heavy cost” (www.dictionary.com). With the use of this term, the author is emphasizing the fact that Clinton has no regard for the costs of (metaphorical) fighting and violence.

As one can see, words associated with fighting and competitions are used to describe both Obama and Clinton. Differences between the depictions seem to reflect the notion that Obama’s aggressive actions are acceptable while Clinton’s are questionable. The underlying

notion that men are allowed to be aggressive while for women it is less accepted may be related to the next theme, that of emotion.

EMOTION:

Drew Western, author of The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation states that the Democratic primary season “is really as textbook a case of how and why emotion matters in presidential politics as we’ve ever seen” (www.ajc.com). Lakoff (2003) notes that “while both women and men are subject to constraint in the emotions that they may express, the constraint on both seems designed to intensify the pre-existing power imbalance between the sexes. Until very recently, men were not supposed to cry or express sadness, women were not permitted to express anger, including the use of swear words. But the expression of sorrow is an expression of powerlessness and helplessness; anger, of potency. So although these rules may seem to equalize the sexes, in fact they intensify male power and female powerlessness” (163). For example, in 1972, the press reported that presidential candidate Edmund Muskie broke down and cried during an emotional defense of his wife; soon after Muskie withdrew from the race (www.wikipedia.org). In contrast, many asserted that Clinton’s crying in January 2008 was a positive thing for her campaign. An online source noted that both campaign teams acknowledged that her response “humanized a woman who is perceived as cold and plastic” (www.thestar.com). Other media sources attacked Clinton for faking tears in an attempt to gain sympathy. Clinton’s expression of emotionality was met either positively or with suspicion; if Lakoff’s assertions are correct, Clinton’s expression of emotionality may actually have kept her in a more powerless position.

In media representations of both candidates, it became evident that for Clinton, *her* emotions were highlighted whereas for Obama it was the emotions he was able to evoke in

others that was the focus. The following example, from Joe Klein's article "The Race Goes On" (*Time*, March 17, 2008) attempts to highlight some of the emotional aspects of each candidate's representations (bold added).

But there were more prosaic, political things working to Clinton's advantage as well. Tiny fissures were beginning to appear in Obama's shining armor. I thought he won the Texas and Ohio debates with his elegant counterpunching and **cool demeanor**, but I was wrong: Clinton's policy details – her specificity and **passion** on health insurance during the 16-min. volley with Obama that was later, foolishly, derided by the media – apparently conveyed a degree of **caring** and preparation that seemed more reliable than her opponent's shiny intellect and rhetoric. On the ground in Texas and Ohio, she began to seem more real than he did.

Outside the debates, there were the first sprigs of evidence that Obama was a politician like any other...There was another issue bubbling, which I hesitate to raise because it is largely scurrilous. It has to do with Obama's patriotism. There is a segment of the American populace that just can't get past his name...It seemed clear on primary night that Obama was aware of this potential problem, as patriotism replaced hope as a theme of his concession speech.

...national security expertise speaks directly to the question of strength and authority, which is central to the presidency. And this has been the fundamental mistake at the heart of the Clinton campaign: a stifling literalism, which leads to caution and an overweening sense of calculation: the absence of art and creativity. It seemed, for a few days before the New Hampshire primary back in January, that Clinton had belatedly discovered the importance of openness and humanity...Finally, with nothing left to lose, the actual Hillary Clinton came back, in a **dizzying array of moods and aspects** that seemed to confuse the press...And she was a tough-minded, gritty, independent woman throughout, a woman on her own, as so many working women find themselves these days, cleaning up the messes that their feckless men have made...

In fairness, Obama did raise his game in recent weeks. His pitch was more down-to-earth, substantive and specific in Texas and Ohio...He badly needs to get down, get gritty, sweat a little, show that he is willing to scuff his shoes in pursuit of the nomination.

But the victories gave Clinton so much more. Even if she fails to win the nomination, as seems likely, she has finally defined herself as a public figure, and an attractive one at that, with a personality independent of her husband's. She isn't as clever as he is, but she's just as tenacious...and, in an odd way, more vulnerable and more real. Her **flashes of anger and sarcasm, her occasional emotional overflows**, her willingness to just *go on* about health insurance – these are all recognizable human qualities that, in the strangest turnabout of this campaign, have made her seem more accessible than her opponent.

In this example, the only phrase related to emotion that are used to describe Obama is "cool demeanor," which highlights his ability to remain calm and unemotional during the

debates. On the other hand, words used to describe Clinton include “passion”, “a dizzying array of moods and aspects”, “flashes of anger and sarcasm”, and “her occasional emotional overflows”. Though for the author Clinton’s increased emotionality is a positive thing, he uses words with connotations of unpredictability, including “dizzying”, “flashes”, and “overflows”. The unpredictability of women’s emotions due to their menstrual cycle is something that is frequently discussed. In addition, the word “flashes” seems to connote “hot flashes,” a common issue for menopausal women. Lastly, the author also mentions “anger”, an emotion that Lakoff described as acceptable for men but not for women. One can see then that even when emotionality is considered to be a positive thing, language used to describe it can still be gendered.

There is evidence that emotion is used to describe Obama as well. Many believe that the emotion he is able to evoke was a strength in his campaign. For example, Western stated that Obama has struck an “emotional chord” and that he has “the raw emotional and political intelligence that predicts success at the ballot box” ([www. Aac.com](http://www.Aac.com)). On March 18, 2008, insidebayarea.com noted that Obama’s speech on race “evokes emotions”. In numerous articles, Obama was depicted as someone who is able to evoke strong emotions in others. In a few other cases, he was shown to be someone who can balance emotion and substance.

Though emotions were discussed in relation to both candidates, different aspects of emotion were highlighted for each. In order for Clinton to have been considered a viable candidate, she needed to be more human, as evidenced by her expression of emotions (this will be discussed in greater detail in a later section). The media also expressed a tacit understanding that she must balance her emotions so as not to seem too unpredictable. For Obama to have been a viable candidate, however, he needed to evoke emotions in others. In

the case of Hillary Clinton, *her* emotions were highlighted, whereas for Obama it was the emotions he was able to evoke in *others* that was the focus.

PERSONALITY AND TEMPERAMENT:

Closely related to the issue of emotion in this election is that of the candidates' personalities. Though there are of course some personality characteristics that are desirable in any president, there do seem to be certain aspects that were emphasized for each candidate but not the other.

On January 18, 2007, Pulitzer-Prize winning historian Garry Willis stated this belief that Obama "will ultimately garner more votes because of his personality": "They talk about 'judicial temperament,' somebody who's able to weigh things fairly, I think he probably has that, perhaps more than she does...She has a reputation anyway, of having very strong emotional reactions to people" (cbs2chicago.com). This quote underlines some of the more important aspects of a president's personality, including mild temperament and lack of emotion. The following example is the same as that analyzed in the above section, however here words highlighting personality and temperament are in bold.

But there were more prosaic, political things working to Clinton's advantage as well. Tiny fissures were beginning to appear in Obama's shining armor. I thought he won the Texas and Ohio debates with his elegant counterpunching and **cool demeanor**, but I was wrong: Clinton's policy details – her **specificity and passion** on health insurance during the 16-min. volley with Obama that was later, foolishly, derided by the media – apparently conveyed a degree of **caring and preparation** that seemed **more reliable** than her opponent's **shiny intellect and rhetoric**. On the ground in Texas and Ohio, she began to seem **more real** than he did.

Outside the debates, there were the first sprigs of evidence that Obama was a politician like any other...There was another issue bubbling, which I hesitate to raise because it is largely scurrilous. It has to do with Obama's patriotism. There is a segment of the American populace that just can't get past his name...It seemed clear on primary night that Obama was aware of this potential problem, as patriotism replaced hope as a theme of his concession speech.

...national security expertise speaks directly to the question of strength and authority, which is central to the presidency. And this has been the fundamental mistake at the heart of the

Clinton campaign: a **stifling literalism**, which leads to **caution** and an **overweening sense of calculation: the absence of art and creativity**. It seemed, for a few days before the New Hampshire primary back in January, that Clinton had belatedly discovered the importance of **openness** and **humanity**...Finally, with nothing left to lose, the actual Hillary Clinton came back, in a dizzying array of moods and aspects that seemed to confuse the press...And she was a **tough-minded, gritty, independent woman** throughout, a woman on her own, as so many working women find themselves these days, cleaning up the messes that their feckless men have made...

In fairness, Obama did raise his game in recent weeks. His pitch was more **down-to-earth, substantive and specific** in Texas and Ohio...He badly needs to **get down, get gritty, sweat a little**, show that he is willing to **scuff his shoes** in pursuit of the nomination.

But the victories gave Clinton so much more. Even if she fails to win the nomination, as seems likely, she has finally defined herself as a public figure, and an attractive one at that, with a **personality independent of her husband's**. She isn't as **clever** as he is, but she's just as **tenacious**...and, in an odd way, **more vulnerable** and **more real**. Her **flashes of anger and sarcasm, her occasional emotional overflows**, her willingness to just *go on* about health insurance – these are all **recognizable human qualities** that, in the strangest turnabout of this campaign, have made her seem **more accessible** than her opponent.

Two words are used to describe both Obama and Clinton: specific/specificity and get gritty/gritty. The use of the words specific and specificity seem to be quite similar in both cases. Specificity is a positive attribute for all presidential candidates. However, there are slight differences between the uses of get gritty and gritty. “Get gritty” means to get dirty, which is used to describe Obama. The use of the word “gritty” in relation to Clinton in this context, on the other hand, means that she is “resolute and courageous” (www.dictionary.com).

The fact that “get gritty” is used to describe what Obama needs to do seems to be connected to the notion that men must get dirty and sweat in order to demonstrate that they are really working. As shown above, Klein also noted that Obama “badly needs to get down, get gritty, sweat a little, show that he is willing to scuff his shoes”. This was in contrast to his then current state of “*shining* armor” and “*shiny* intellect and rhetoric”. Bradley (1989) highlights the fact that “men’s work is stereotypically associated with the outdoors, with strength, and with highly technical skills that involve mechanical or scientific knowledge. It is

heavy, dirty, and dangerous and requires creativity, intelligence, responsibility, authority, and power. Women's work is stereotypically indoor, lighter, cleaner, safer, repetitive; it calls for dexterity rather than skill, has domestic associations, is tied to a certain work station, and often requires physical attractiveness and charm" (Bradley 1989: 9 cited in McElhinny 1992). Here, then, one can see that advice to Obama involves doing more *masculine* work during his campaign.

On the other hand, Clinton was lauded for becoming more "charming", "self-deprecating", passionate, and "caring". As mentioned above, women's work stereotypically requires charm. It is also interesting to note that for a woman being self-deprecating is a positive characteristic. It seems that Clinton will not be as popular if she is confident and asserts her qualifications and expertise. In addition, both passion and caring are coupled with other words that refer to her competence: specificity and preparation. This is evidence for the balance between emotion and rationality that seems to be required of presidential candidates.

A segment on Tucker Carlson's February 27, 2008 television program also seems to highlight the importance for Clinton of being charming and likable. Chris Kofinis, a former Edwards advisor, stated on this show that the Clinton campaign strategy should not have focused on her experience. Instead, they should have focused on "her likability, her humanness, her compassion, and her real warmth" (www.newsbusters.org). Carlson then asked, "Wouldn't she have to be warm in order to, to sell that?". Shoshana Zuboff, in a March 18, 2008 viewpoint article in *BusinessWeek*, seems to echo these sentiments. The article's title, "Hillary: The New Queen of Mean?", foregrounds Hillary's personality characteristics and the importance of being both nice and likable (www.businessweek.com).

These few examples begin to demonstrate a difference in the standards by which Obama and Clinton were measured. It seems that Obama would be successful because of a calm and rational temperament, and a personality that would allow him to do difficult, hands-on, masculine work. On the other hand, Clinton would be successful if she were able to balance caring, likability, emotion, preparation but not calculation, and specificity.

BEING “REAL” AND INDEPENDENCE:

Much of the description in the March 17, 2008 *Time* article is connected to both candidates needing to be “real”. As mentioned above, Klein suggests that Obama get dirty and sweat a little; this would make him “more down-to-earth” and real. The author then applauds Clinton for being “more vulnerable”, “more real”, and “more accessible”, showing “openness”, “humanity”, and “recognizable human qualities”. All presidential candidates seem to be caught in the difficult position of being real and accessible *and* being a leader.

However, there is a fundamental difference in the ways that Obama and Clinton would demonstrate their “real”ness. In this article, the author celebrates Clinton’s independence from her husband, highlighting the fact that she has become a “tough-minded, gritty, independent woman throughout, a woman on her own, as so many working women find themselves these days, cleaning up the messes that their feckless have made” (*Time*, March 17, 2008: 27). The author seems to be saying that as she has become more independent, she has also become more real and accessible.

On the other hand, there is evidence that Obama needs help in order to remain “real”. The February 25, 2008 *Newsweek* cover story had a picture of Michelle Obama and said “He Calls Her His ‘Rock.’ The Real Michelle Obama”. Inside the magazine, the title was “**Keeping Barack Real**” and after that was written: “Ambitious but idealistic, a Harvard-educated lawyer with a plain-spoken style, Michelle Obama has made it her job to see that

her husband, living inside the campaign bubble, doesn't lose sight of what's **normal**". The first page of the article (page 26) read "Barack's Rock": "**She's the one who keeps him real**, the one who makes sure running for leader of the free world doesn't go to his head. Michelle's story".

It seems to be more desirable for a woman to become increasingly independent in her efforts to become more "real" and like everyone else. However, a man needs a woman to make sure that he does not let his power make him overly confident and pompous. This seems to imply that a man would normally be confident and that he would be unable to be humble on his own. Interestingly, as noted above, Clinton was lauded for being "self-deprecating", which would imply that her being too confident was regarded negatively. However, there was no mention of Bill Clinton's role in helping her to become less confident.

CONCLUSIONS:

As the above themes and examples demonstrate, there are fundamental differences between the ways that Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama were depicted in the mass media. Though frequently one can find evidence for descriptions to be related to the same themes and/or domains, the word choice (e.g., adjectives, nouns, verbs) used within these domains frequently differed. In many cases, these linguistic and discourse differences could be attributed to gender.

In addition, there is evidence (especially within the domains of emotion, personality and temperament, and being "real" and independence) that Hillary Clinton was held to a different and higher standard than Barack Obama. In order to be a viable candidate, it seemed that she would have needed to be competent, show just enough emotion, be "real", and be independent. On the other hand, Obama needed to be competent and be "real" with

dependence on others. Though the differences in linguistic usage in the media may be subtle at times, their effects can be far-reaching as the public has made crucial decisions about this nation's future. It will be fascinating to consider media representations of both of these individuals with Obama now serving as our president and Hillary Clinton as Obama's secretary of state.

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