

# Review Article

## Simulacrobama: The Mediated Election of 2008

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The simulacrum is true.

Baudrillard<sup>1</sup>

Scholars and progressives outside the academy alike are watching with fascination to see what meaning the Obama presidency will acquire as the theatrical phase of the election yields to the terrestrial act of governing. There is no denying the tangible impact an Obama presidency can have upon the United States and the world. Yet both the election and the presidency emerge from a combination of acts and their representation. With a nation and a world taking an interest in these events, most of the several billion people who “experienced” the election campaign did so, necessarily, across the bridge and the barrier of the media that connect individuals to meta-events. Those media, old and new, shaped the election in complex ways that are now yielding to a simplified portrayal of the triumph of American exceptionalism over its darkest past, with Obama fulfilling what Abraham Lincoln allegedly began. Obama himself may be the most active participant in the media’s formulation of that story.

Jean Baudrillard tells us that postmodern societies are marked by simulacra or representations that precede reality, artificially producing a mediated world masquerading as authenticity. This may be a useful concept for making sense of the election of 2008: we have witnessed the “precession of simulacra.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1. Baudrillard playfully ascribes the quotation to Ecclesiastes. Scholars have sometimes fallen for the joke by attributing the phrase to “Ecclesiastes, cited in Baudrillard” – to the theorist’s delight. Jean Baudrillard, *Fragments: Conversations with François L’Yvonnet*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Routledge, 2004), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, 1. Baudrillard took his ideas to their logical conclusion when he seemed to celebrate the destruction of the World Trade Center, arguing that globalization was to blame for the attacks. He wrote of the “prodigious jubilation at watching this global superpower destroyed” and claimed that “we have dreamed of this event ... it was they who did it, but we who wanted it.” Baudrillard, “L’Esprit du terrorisme,” *Le Monde*,

The *simulacrobama* is a mediated spectacle whose message is that the United States is now a post-racial, or post-racist, society, even though such a representation clearly precedes a reality that may never arrive. The meaning of the election is further complicated by the challenge to the corporate media monopoly<sup>3</sup> by less centralized new media that enable distinct forms of popular political participation. This review essay argues that despite efforts to contain the election within a triumphalist American narrative, the spectacle has been partially democratized through individual participation in the construction of its meaning.

Since few people have direct access to politicians, election campaigns are efforts to persuade that take place at a remove from the voters and observers, transmitted via various strands of media. Media workers shape perception by framing the issues, creating narratives, and selecting information and images. This power has traditionally given the corporate mass media the role of anointers and gatekeepers: they declare front-runners, ridicule long-shot challengers, and block third-party candidates from news programs and formal debates. This year, the system broke down. Many now regret having uttered such formulations as “the nomination of Hillary Clinton as the Democrats’ standard-bearer in 2008 is inevitable.”<sup>4</sup> Barack Obama, a junior senator in his first term, burst on the national scene in 2006 and rocketed to the position of Clinton’s major challenger. His appeal derived from the intersection of his remarkable talents – intelligence, oratorical skill, political sensitivity – and a personal biography that could be read as confirmation of Americans’ favorite national myths of boundless opportunity in a land of equality and justice for all. Obama had said as much in his first moment in the national spotlight as the keynote speaker at the Democratic Convention that nominated John Kerry in 2004: “I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story ... in no other country on Earth is my story even possible.”<sup>5</sup>

In this fashion, Obama, whose memoirs show that he holds no illusions about the actually existing class- and race-based obstacles to opportunity in the United States,<sup>6</sup> deliberately participated in helping to erode the distinction between reality and representation. Personifying the possibility of national redemption with his gentle talk of overcoming racial division and rhetorical formulas drawing on patriotic and Christian imagery, Obama captured the imagination of not a few jaded journalists by reminding them of the youthful idealism that brought many of them to their calling during or after the social upheaval of the 1960s. Yet the story of the media’s role in the 2008 election goes beyond this dynamic between the candidate and the old

11 Nov. 2001. Reality still mattered to the people killed in that explosion, even if the images carried, in some ways, a greater power with consequences that led to even more innocent deaths. Representations matter, but reality does too. (Baudrillard later defended himself: “I have glorified nothing, accused nobody, justified nothing.” See the discussion in William Merrin, *Baudrillard and the Media* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 103–13.)

<sup>3</sup> Ben H. Bagdikian, *The New Media Monopoly* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Hugh Hewitt, *Painting the Map Red: The Fight to Create a Permanent Republican Majority* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2006), 164.

<sup>5</sup> “Transcript: Illinois Senate Candidate Barack Obama,” *Washington Post*, 27 July 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2004); *idem*, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006).

media, because this was the election in which the new media played a more important role than ever before in American history.

## DECLINE OF THE GATEKEEPERS

The first, more modest change is the technology that broke the information oligopoly and is now endangering the old models.<sup>7</sup> Venerable newspapers like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* were suddenly too slow and insufficiently focused on electoral politics to satisfy the millions of readers who switched over to the most popular political news sites, such as politico.com and huffingtonpost.com (whose founder, Arianna Huffington, declared the winner of the 2008 elections to be “the Internet.”<sup>8</sup>) The hundred-year-old *Christian Science Monitor* dropped its daily print version entirely. The *Times*, which has not lost its agenda-setting function for corporate media outlets but has yet to find a new revenue model to replace the classified advertising decimated by Craigslist.org, was rescued by an emergency loan from Mexico’s richest man, telecommunications mogul Carlos Slim. Television news, whose comparative advantage used to be its combination of speed and image, now must work to keep up with websites that combine those attributes with searchability.

The more significant change is that the spread of Internet access and wireless technology now provides a mechanism for the parallel distribution of information across networks that are not unidirectional. The old model delivered selected information to passive recipients, which fit well with the American model of passive citizenship that favors biennial voting for preselected candidates from a highly restricted set of parties, rather than active engagement in all aspects of governance and political debate. The transformation from nineteenth-century asynchronous textual transmission (printed words) and twentieth-century asynchronous audiovisual transmission (radio and television) to synchronous multimedia communication (over the Internet) has, in theory, enabled a move away from the monologue toward the dialogue and what Net-idealists hope will become a demologue, one that might even reconfigure the communicative foundations of democratic societies in a Habermasian sense.<sup>9</sup> Once the Internet was in place, developments in software and hardware enabled the flourishing of new mediatic genres collectively known as Web 2.0, whose hallmark is their interactivity and true mass communication, from blogs to chatrooms to social networking sites. Here was a powerful tool waiting to be deployed. Who would pick it up?

The answer came, initially, from two directions: on the one hand, a mass movement of Americans horrified by the Iraq war and corporate media complicity in it,

<sup>7</sup> Steven Livingston and W. Lance Bennett, “Gatekeeping, Indexing, and Live-Event News: Is Technology Altering the Construction of News?” *Political Communication* 20 (2003), 363–80.

<sup>8</sup> Arianna Huffington, “I’m Ready to Declare a Winner in the 2008 Race,” 3 Nov. 2008, www.huffingtonpost.com/arianna-huffington/im-ready-to-declare-a-win\_b\_140625.html, accessed 17 Feb. 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Henry Jenkins and David Thorburn, eds., *Democracy and New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003); Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997).

and, on the other, an ambitious former community organizer who had written that “the only way for communities to build long-term power is by organizing people and money around a common vision” with a “broadly based indigenous leadership – and not one or two charismatic leaders.”<sup>10</sup> Obama’s rise to national prominence depended, then, not only on the corporate media’s incremental embrace of the myth that the country had overcome its racism – the narrative I call the simulacrobama – but on his own organizing theory that allowed him to draw upon and further develop grassroots networks. Obama’s October 2002 speech against the plan to invade Iraq, delivered while he was a member of the Illinois legislature, stood in sharp contrast to the position of his major rivals in the presidential primary. Both Hillary Clinton and John Edwards were US senators then, and both voted in favor of the resolution endorsing the use of force against Iraq. Edwards apologized, Clinton fudged, and the corporate media claimed that there had been consensus on the war among American politicians; meanwhile, the anti-war movement powered by the Internet – especially through sites such as MoveOn.org, backed by liberal financier George Soros; Dailykos.com, founded by Markos Moulitsas Zuniga, a veteran of the 1991 Gulf War; and others collectively dubbed the “netroots” – coalesced behind Obama’s candidacy at an early stage.

Add to those elements the hip sensibility of Obama’s campaign managers versus the old-school consultants around the Clinton machine and it becomes clear why the leading Democratic campaigns were sometimes compared to the clash between Apple and Microsoft. Obama was the Mac, of course: youthful, creative, nimble, forward-looking, and sleekly stylish; Clinton was the PC – massive, corporate, sitting atop a huge pile of capital and a legacy of brand recognition and market share that favored a conventional, risk-averse strategy struggling to patch over the basic flaws in its original design.

John McCain, though, was an IBM Selectric. We learned during the race that the Republican senator from Arizona had never sent an e-mail. His website went for long stretches without an update. Republicans dominate talk radio on the AM band, a technology that has been around for a century, but they do not seem to comprehend the significance of what George W. Bush called “the Internets” and former Alaska senator Ted Stevens described as “a series of tubes.” Cyrus Krohn, the Republican Internet guru who once worked at Microsoft and Yahoo!, often seemed a lonely voice in his party.<sup>11</sup> This mediatic handicap was devastating in a year when 46 percent of Americans used the Internet to get political news or post opinions about the campaign,<sup>12</sup> outstripping newspapers as the second most influential news

<sup>10</sup> Barack Obama, “Why Organize? Problems and Promise in the Inner City,” in Peg Knoepfle, ed., *After Alinsky: Community Organizing in Illinois* (Springfield, IL: Sangamon State University, 1990), 35–40.

<sup>11</sup> Jose Antonio Vargas, “Right Click: The GOP’s Cyrus Krohn Has His Sites Set on Updating the Party’s Internet Connection,” *Washington Post*, 23 July 2008, C01.

<sup>12</sup> Aaron Smith and Lee Rainie, “The Internet and the 2008 Election,” Pew Internet and American Life Project, 15 June 2008, [www.pewInternet.org/PPF/r/252/report\\_display.asp](http://www.pewInternet.org/PPF/r/252/report_display.asp), accessed 10 Feb. 2009.

medium after television.<sup>13</sup> The deficiency carried over beyond the presidential level to state races and helped broaden Obama's virtual coattails to sweep Republicans out of office around the country despite their past prowess at direct mail and mobilizing churchgoers. "We were outflanked by new media and social networking sites," admitted Congressman Adam Putnam of Florida, chairman of the House Republican Policy Committee.<sup>14</sup> At least for the time being, Republicans and traditional Democrats still seemed to be trapped in the old thinking described by Joe Trippi, campaign manager for 2004 primary candidate and 2008 Democratic Party chairman Howard Dean, as seeing the Internet only as a way to disseminate information, not to build relationships.<sup>15</sup> The partisan divide was especially pronounced among the generation most likely to use the new media. Ian Rowe, an election expert at MTV, asked young people what three brands they associated with the major candidates. For Obama, they picked Apple, Nike, and Coca-Cola. For McCain, they chose Exxon Mobil, Tommy Hilfiger, and Bengay, the arthritis medication.<sup>16</sup> Obama would win the youth vote by 34 percent, the largest margin in any age cohort for any presidential candidate in recent times.<sup>17</sup>

## CAMPAIGN 2.0

Obama's campaign understood the zeitgeist and acted accordingly. It had ninety staffers on its Internet team: they widened the trail blazed by Howard Dean in 2004 to create a kind of perpetual money machine that raked in more than half a billion dollars over twenty-one months mostly from small donors, with 92 percent of the donations under a hundred dollars. They amassed thirteen million e-mail addresses and sent more than a billion e-mails ranging from appeals for money to talking points and neighborhood organizing arrangements. The Obama campaign also broke into "me-media" by cultivating a presence on personal and unofficial homepages and assiduously courting individuals via text messages delivered to their mobile phones. Two million people created profiles on MyBarackObama.com, Obama's own social networking site, where they planned 200,000 offline events and spoke out via 400,000 blog posts. The campaign signed him up as a user on fifteen online communities, ranging from BlackPlanet to MySpace; more than five million

<sup>13</sup> Rob Garner, "How Americans Are Searching for Election 2008 Information," *Search Insider: The Inside Line on Search Marketing*, 23 April 2008, [www.mediapost.com/publications/?fa=Articles.showArticle&art\\_aid=81224](http://www.mediapost.com/publications/?fa=Articles.showArticle&art_aid=81224), accessed 10 Feb. 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Putnam interviewed on NPR's *Morning Edition*, 10 Feb. 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Joe Trippi, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: Democracy, the Internet, and the Overthrow of Everything*, revised edn (New York: Harper, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> "The Campaign and the Media, 2," MIT Communications Forum, 13 Nov. 2008, [web.mit.edu/comm-forum/forums/campaign\\_media2.html#abstract](http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/forums/campaign_media2.html#abstract), accessed 10 Feb. 2009.

<sup>17</sup> The previous biggest margins among young voters were 19 points for Bill Clinton in 1996 and 19 points for Ronald Reagan in 1984. Gary Langer, "The Numbers," ABC News Polling Unit, 5 Nov. 2008, [blogs.abcnews.com/thenumbers/favorites/index.html](http://blogs.abcnews.com/thenumbers/favorites/index.html), accessed 15 Feb. 2009.

Facebook users sent messages to their friends after voting on Election Day to urge them to do likewise.<sup>18</sup>

With that kind of savvy, Obama's camp dominated the new media qualitatively and quantitatively. "Obama supporters outpace both Clinton and McCain supporters in their usage of online video, social networking sites and other online campaign activities," confirmed a Pew Research Center study.<sup>19</sup> Out of that vast pool of talent came some landmark contributions from volunteers. A videographer working on his own time, Phil de Vellis, created an unauthorized campaign promotion by mashing up Apple's "1984" Superbowl advertisement with Hillary Clinton's Orwellian visage on a giant screen shattered by an athletic dissident hurling a sledgehammer. Four hundred thousand people watched the video online before it was shown on CNN.<sup>20</sup> A young advertising executive named Ben Relles made a hit music video with Amber Lee Ettinger, AKA "Obama Girl," singing a love song dedicated to Obama that was viewed an estimated ten million times on YouTube. Rapper and producer Will.i.am made his own viral video setting the text of an Obama speech to music. Shepard Fairey, a street artist in Los Angeles, designed a Warhol-esque poster of a colorized and polarized Obama, an act of "popaganda" that soon appeared in shop windows and dorm rooms across the country.<sup>21</sup> (The original now hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC.) Once representations of the candidate were no longer left exclusively to the corporate media, the Obama brand took on its own momentum. It was a self-reinforcing dynamic of cool: no one made a pop-art poster for Clinton or McCain.

Clinton did inspire many women who hoped she would break through the glass ceiling that has kept the presidency an all-male club for more than two centuries. (Her supporters put eighteen million cracks in it with their votes.) The argument among progressives over whether it was symbolically and substantively more important to see a black or a female President sometimes echoed the nineteenth-century debate between Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Frederick Douglass over who should be enfranchised first, white women or male ex-slaves. And it could be as bitter, especially once it became mathematically clear that Clinton could not win the nomination. Her supporters charged that she had been thwarted by sexism, an accusation directed not so much at the Obama campaign as at McCain's supporters (including one who asked him, "How are we going to beat the bitch?") and at the members of the media who made fun of her laugh or questioned her mettle.<sup>22</sup> It did not help that for all of her sensible policy positions, most of which were quite similar to Obama's, her campaign resembled the Titanic – overconfident,

<sup>18</sup> Figures from Jose Antonio Vargas, "Obama Raised Half a Billion Online," *Washington Post*, 20 Nov. 2008; and *idem*, "Politics Is No Longer Local. It's Viral," *Washington Post*, 28 Dec. 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Smith and Rainie.

<sup>20</sup> Vargas, "Politics Is No Longer Local."

<sup>21</sup> Kaelan Smith, "Popaganda: The Obama HOPE Poster," [www.flatmancrooked.com/archives/938](http://www.flatmancrooked.com/archives/938), accessed 7 Feb. 2009. In a sign of friction between old rules and new media, a three-way legal battle erupted between Fairey, the Associated Press, and an AP photographer, each of them claiming the rights to the image.

<sup>22</sup> Dee Dee Myers, "The Free-Pass Sexism of the Hillary-Hate Brigade," *Vanity Fair*, 5 Feb. 2008.

overpriced, underplanned, hard to maneuver, and with frantic rearranging of deck chairs as the iceberg loomed.

To be sure, moving campaign events and messages onto YouTube and mass e-mail distribution lists merely changed the venue rather than the nature of one-way communication, even if it seemed to make it more intimate. (“Dear Max,” began the daily e-mails I received from the Obama campaign last year, signed “Barack” or “Michelle.”) Money and strategy still counted, both of them enabling Obama to outpace Clinton in the “ground game” of setting up campaign headquarters all over the country; he was “opening offices faster than Starbucks” while Clinton focussed on big-name Democratic endorsements, and that helped him accumulate victories in the numerous caucus states where voters must appear at a meeting in person.<sup>23</sup> But Web 2.0 allowed a more substantial change in mass electoral politics. Obama the community organizer did not believe in passive citizenship or top-down campaigns. Social networking sites became organizing tools that could be deployed by people unaffiliated with the campaign itself – and undisciplined by its managers. Legions of volunteers found one another on Facebook or MySpace and then met in person to canvass door-to-door. They traveled together and stayed in one another’s homes. These virtual networks linked up people who could be very effective in their own neighborhoods – a key Obama strategy – but they could also talk back. When Obama invited a fundamentalist, anti-gay pastor to give the invocation at his inaugural ceremony, the “No Rick Warren at Obama Inauguration” Facebook site acquired thirteen thousand members in a matter of days. The inbox of Parag Mehta, Obama’s liaison to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community, was flooded with electronic protests. This grassroots firestorm did not lead Obama to jettison Warren, but it did produce another landmark, as he quickly altered the inaugural program to give Bishop Gene Robinson, a vocal and openly gay Episcopalian minister, the unprecedented honor of reading the opening prayer at the Lincoln Memorial ceremony kicking off inauguration week. (The cable channel HBO cut Robinson out of its transmission of the ceremony, so supporters watched his prayer on YouTube.)

Some of the momentum that carried Obama from underdog challenger to victory over Clinton and McCain was produced by non-traditional members of traditional media, like talk-show host Oprah Winfrey, who until the arrival of Michelle Obama in the White House was widely regarded as the most powerful African American woman in America. Her endorsement of Obama, analysts estimated, won him a million additional votes.<sup>24</sup> McCain’s vice-presidential pick, Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, lost much of her initial popularity through a combination of bloggers rumormongering that she had faked a pregnancy or uncovering her unimpressive record in office, and her own incoherence in an interview with CBS’s news anchor Katie Couric, and finally an eerily accurate parody by Tina Fey on NBC’s comedy show *Saturday Night Live*. While network news programs watched their audience

<sup>23</sup> Justin M. Sizemore, “How Obama Did It,” *Crystal Ball ’09*, University of Virginia Center for Politics, 5 June 2008, [www.centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/article.php?id=JMS2008060501](http://www.centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/article.php?id=JMS2008060501), accessed 15 Feb. 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Joselyn Noveck, “Pop Culture Moments that Defined Election ’08,” Associated Press, 6 Nov. 2008.



share erode, Americans tired of establishment journalism turned not only to the Internet but even to comedy programs focussed on politics and foreign affairs that seemed more informative than the sanitized mainstream broadcasts. Surveys have shown that more young people get their news from Jon Stewart's satiric *The Daily Show* than from traditional news sources; interestingly, his audience is also more knowledgeable about current events than those who read newspapers or watch CNN, NBC, ABC, or FOX News.<sup>25</sup> Thus could a simulated news program become more reliable than a "real" news program.

Whenever Obama's star rose and McCain's dimmed, one could hear conservatives issue their familiar cry against the "liberal media" (often referred to on right-wing websites as "MSM" – the mainstream media). Even setting aside Rupert Murdoch's FOX network, it is not only unlikely that the corporate owners of the major broadcast and cable television channels – General Electric (NBC), Westinghouse (CBS), Disney (ABC), and Time Warner (CNN) would deploy their substantial influence against corporate power, military spending, or tax preferences for the wealthy; it has also been disproved through research. For example, Republican presidential candidates have received more newspaper endorsements than their Democratic rivals in fifteen out of the nineteen elections since 1932.<sup>26</sup> Republican members of Congress outnumber Democrats on television news shows no matter which party is in power.<sup>27</sup> During the preparations for the war against Iraq in 2003, of 840 current or former officials interviewed on leading American news programs, the number holding anti-war opinions was exactly four – about one-half of one percent of the total, which hardly suggests a leftist bias.<sup>28</sup> During the election campaign, Republicans protested long and loud that the media favored Obama. Journalists parried that they followed the news, not their political beliefs, and that Obama was "newsier" than McCain; when the McCain campaign stole Obama's thunder right after his nomination by announcing as his vice-presidential running mate the feisty, photogenic and little-known female governor of Alaska, the media oxygen around the Obama campaign temporarily evaporated. National Public Radio's ombudsperson, Alicia Shepard, calculated that McCain received at least two hours more airtime than Obama on her network that fall, because "the news covers what is new, and Sarah Palin was new."<sup>29</sup> Increasing coverage does not necessarily lead to increasingly positive coverage, however. A Pew Research Center report

<sup>25</sup> Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, "Key News Audiences Now Blend Online and Traditional Sources," Survey Report, 17 Aug. 2008, [people-press.org/report/?pageid1356](http://people-press.org/report/?pageid1356), accessed 15 Feb. 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Nelson W. Polsby, et al., *Presidential Elections* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 77.

<sup>27</sup> Gabriel Voiles, "Old Habits Die Hard on GOP TV," 30 Jan. 2009, [www.fair.org/blog/2009/01/30/old-habits-die-hard-on-gop-tv/](http://www.fair.org/blog/2009/01/30/old-habits-die-hard-on-gop-tv/), accessed 22 Feb. 2009.

<sup>28</sup> Steve Rendall and Tara Broughel, "Amplifying Officials, Squelching Dissent," *Extra*, May/June 2003, [www.fair.org/index.php?page=1145](http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=1145), accessed 7 Feb. 2009. See also Steve Rendall and Anne Kosseff, "I'm Not a Leftist, But I Play One on TV," *Extra*, Sept./Oct. 2004, [www.fair.org/index.php?page=1969](http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=1969).

<sup>29</sup> Shepard interviewed on KQED-FM, 25 Nov. 2008. She also tallied up the complaints from listeners, finding 282 e-mails claiming NPR favored Obama and 254 claiming the network favored McCain.



found that unfavorable stories about McCain outnumbered those about Obama by more than three to one during the six-week period following the conventions. Was this the bias of swooning liberal journalists? Not in the opinion of the Pew researchers: “Much of the increased attention for McCain derived from actions by the senator himself, actions that, in the end, generated mostly negative assessments,” they put it politely, citing his overly sanguine reaction to the stock market dive and jarring policy swings thereafter.<sup>30</sup> Sometimes even straightforward reporting could produce uncomfortable moments without the help of editorial comment. During an early primary debate among ten Republican contenders, the moderator asked who on the podium did not believe in evolution. Three raised their hands. That was not reassuring to a public that had grown weary of the Bush administration’s apparent governing philosophy of faith over reason.

Television, in any case, has always been kinder to some candidates than to others. The textbook example is the first televised election debate between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon in 1960. People who heard the debate on the radio pronounced Nixon the winner, because after eight years as vice president he was well-informed on the issues, and his deep voice conveyed a sense of presidential gravitas. The television audience picked Kennedy. The camera loved the tall, attractive younger man, and it was merciless to Nixon, with his stubborn five-o’clock shadow and his tendency to sweat profusely under the klieg lights. A parallel can be drawn to the contrast between the young, handsome, and physically graceful Obama and the awkward McCain (whose grin seems forced, and whose war injuries left him stiff and unable to raise his arms above his shoulders), but the comparison is incomplete because it ignores the latent racial discrimination inherent in television production standards. Television lighting conventions were developed for light-skinned subjects at a time when the medium admitted few minorities. When no adjustment is made for people with darker skin tone, standard lighting produces a washed-out appearance that suggests an unhealthy pallor.<sup>31</sup> This worked to Obama’s detriment during several appearances, turning him a sickly greenish-gray, but his advance team apparently figured out what to tell the technicians and the episodes did not occur so frequently as to become an obstacle to the transmission of overwhelmingly positive images.

As for radio, if the FM band is the province of NPR’s well-heeled, highly educated audience, AM belongs to an array of conservative talk-radio hosts, such as Bill Cunningham, whose nationally syndicated *The Big Show* won him the honor of introducing McCain at a rally in Cincinnati. Cunningham proceeded to refer sneeringly to “Barack Hussein Obama” three times, violating a McCain stricture against playing to the fable then believed by more than a quarter of whites that Obama is a Muslim. The king of talk radio remains Rush Limbaugh, who, with his fourteen million weekly listeners, worked steadily to push McCain to the right. Conventional wisdom holds that Democrats run to the left in the primaries to appeal to their party’s base, then shift to the center during the general election to appeal to apolitical voters. Republicans likewise run to the right in their primaries and offer centrist

<sup>30</sup> Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, “Winning the Media Campaign,” 22 Oct. 2008, [www.journalism.org/node/13307](http://www.journalism.org/node/13307), accessed 10 Feb. 2009.

<sup>31</sup> Terry Byrne, *Production Design for Television* (Boston: Focal Press, 1993), 51–52.

platitudes – like George W. Bush’s “compassionate conservatism” – during the general election before reverting to type after the election is over. But after shedding his reformist credentials during the primary to lurch right on Republican hobby-horses like illegal immigration, McCain then moved even further right during the general campaign, rattling his saber at Russia, branding Obama a “socialist,” and outdoing Herbert Hoover by calling for a total freeze on government spending in the midst of the worst economic decline since the 1930s. This can be attributed in part to his impetuosity, and in part to the intense pressure coming from a Republican right that never knows when to quit. To be fair, Republicans would have faced an uphill climb with any candidate using any strategy, and Obama had an enormous built-in advantage: Americans’ exasperation with Bush’s legacy, from the destruction of Iraq to the devastation of New Orleans, from the decline of the country’s reputation to the depletion of the value of their homes, savings, and investments, would probably have assured a Democratic victory no matter who was the standard-bearer. But that does not explain the outcome in the primary election, or the character of the Obama campaign.

Given the strong feelings on both sides and the erosion of the gatekeeper function of the “respectable” media, one might have expected more of the kind of salacious stories that feed Americans’ appetite for scandal. National interest in adultery by political leaders had been around long before Republicans in 1884 taunted presidential candidate Grover Cleveland, who fathered a child out of wedlock, with the refrain “Ma, Ma, where’s my Pa? Gone to the White House, ha, ha, ha.” Perhaps there was a lack of fuel for that fire this year. The *New York Times* tried to spark one, running a front-page story with unusual levels of innuendo (for the *Times*, anyway) suggesting that McCain had an affair with a lobbyist, but the story was so poorly sourced it hurt the paper more than it did the candidate.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, compared to historical precedent, most mainstream media outlets were unusually respectful in tone. Gone was the nineteenth-century convention of unreserved partisanship and ad hominem attacks that could be seen, for example, in the way the *Charleston Mercury* greeted the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860: “A horrid looking wretch he is, sooty and scoundrelly in aspect ... a lank-sided Yankee of the uncomeliest visage, and of the dirtiest complexion. Faugh! After him what decent white man would be President?”<sup>33</sup> In the campaign of 1824, newspapers accused Henry Clay of being a drunk and Andrew Jackson of being a murderer. Four years later Jackson reportedly wept when he opened a newspaper to read that “General Jackson’s mother was a COMMON PROSTITUTE, brought to this country by the British soldiers. She afterward married a MULATTO MAN, with whom she had several children, of which number General JACKSON IS ONE!!!”<sup>34</sup> The toxic cocktail of sexuality and race might have been expected to be deployed against Obama, given more recent practices, yet the factor of race in the campaign was far more complex.

<sup>32</sup> Jim Rutenberg et al., “For McCain, Self-Confidence on Ethics Poses Its Own Risk,” *New York Times*, 21 Feb. 2008, A1.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Paul F. Boller, *Presidential Campaigns: From George Washington to George W. Bush*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 107.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

## RACE IN THE RACE: FROM PHILADELPHIA TO PHILADELPHIA

The role of white racism in sustaining the Republican Party's fortunes in modern times has been evident ever since Democratic President Lyndon Johnson famously remarked that passing the Civil Rights Act of 1964 meant his party had "lost the South for a generation." When Nixon then pursued his "Southern strategy" of stoking white fears of black crime, it helped to shift white southerners from their historical support of the Democratic Party. Ronald Reagan continued the trend when he launched his 1980 campaign with an appeal to "states' rights" in a speech in Philadelphia, Mississippi, a town distinguished only as the site of the 1964 murder of civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner. In 1988, Republican operative Lee Atwater, working for George H. W. Bush, torpedoed Democrat Michael Dukakis with the Willie Horton advertisements that implied that the Massachusetts governor issued "weekend passes" to black prisoners who then raped white women.

Republicans even used the strategy against their own. George W. Bush fought off a primary challenge from John McCain in 2000 partly with the help of a phony poll suggesting that John McCain "had fathered an illegitimate black child" (a twisted reference to McCain's adopted Bangladeshi daughter, Bridget).<sup>35</sup> Perhaps because of that experience, or following his own ethical code, McCain initially instructed his campaign to refrain from racist attacks on Obama, and the corporate media generally followed suit. That left the dirty work to the new media. Habermasian theory holds that increasing the numbers of participants in the public sphere is not sufficient to ensure a functioning democracy; their discourse must also be rational and representative. But for a medium that largely dispenses with censors and editors, rationality can sometimes prove too much to ask. Bloggers and conspiracy buffs reported, ominously, that Obama was educated in a *madrassa* (it was an elementary school in Indonesia, and the word means "school" in Arabic, but Americans associate it with terrorism). Some even claimed that he was a Muslim Manchurian candidate who would turn the White House over to al Qaeda. Or that he and his wife Michelle were anti-American, refusing to salute the flag. The Obama team created a response site, *fightthesmears.com*, posting video and other evidence with headlines ranging from "Barack Obama was born in America. Shadowy claims that he has no birth certificate are completely false" to "A recent email smear falsely claims Michelle ordered room service, but she never even stayed at the hotel."<sup>36</sup> This helped to improve the mainstream coverage of such controversies, but of course made little headway with the kind of blogger inclined to post such rants as "Obama Will Die, KKK Forever," or to suggest that it was time to "bring back lynchings."<sup>37</sup> The seamy side of media democratization reminds us that the medium is not necessarily the message, but provides yet another venue for political struggles.

<sup>35</sup> Ann Banks, "Dirty Tricks, South Carolina and John McCain," *The Nation*, 14 Jan. 2008.

<sup>36</sup> *www.fightthesmears.com*, accessed 10 Feb. 2009.

<sup>37</sup> Mark Potok, "Racist Attacks on Obama Growing More Heated," Southern Poverty Law Center's *Hatewatch*, 20 Feb. 2008, *www.splcenter.org/blog/2008/02/20/*, accessed 15 Feb. 2009.

Race was inevitably going to be the subtext of the campaign of the first truly viable African American candidate for President. Initially, Obama was criticized for not being black enough, then for being too black. The first criticism came from within the African American community. Stalwarts of the civil rights movement worried aloud that he was insufficiently grounded in their struggle. Some of the skeptics came up with a nickname for Obama that emphasized his mother's white-bread Kansas origins and his Ivy League education: "Snobama."<sup>38</sup> Those concerns faded as Obama's viability increased and some of Clinton's most prominent supporters, including her husband, made remarks interpreted as hostile to the candidate on racial grounds. But if some African Americans were not certain Obama was sufficiently black, white Americans were never in doubt on that score, and some congratulated themselves on how far they had come by supporting him. Obama cultivated their support, among other ways, by deliberately appealing to white ideas about black pathology. After Obama, addressing an African American audience, gave a speech about personal responsibility that might have come from Daniel Patrick Moynihan's paternalistic 1960s-era report on the problems of the ghetto,<sup>39</sup> the Rev. Jesse Jackson was so offended he said he wanted to "cut his nuts out."<sup>40</sup> But the strategy worked as intended, helping to make Obama seem safe to nervous whites. (It did not hurt that he also promised to reduce their taxes.)

Throughout the 2008 campaign, mainstream journalists used a confusing euphemism to avoid employing the word "racism," a term apparently too accusatory for their audiences. Instead, they spoke of "the issue of race," a more neutral (not to say toothless) formulation that made it possible to suggest that Obama might be the one to "play the race card" by accusing his opponents of racism, or by introducing race into a campaign that was allegedly blissfully free of it. Mainstream media commentators often could not bring themselves to state the most self-evident of facts about race in the race, such as that Clinton's lead was strongest among poorly educated whites who dislike blacks, or the observation made three months after the election was over that "McCain won his largest shares of the white vote in the five states of the Deep South that most fiercely opposed the civil rights movement – Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, and South Carolina."<sup>41</sup> Instead, euphemism generally ruled the day.

But the eggshell-stepping turned into a stampede when negative, race-laden stories migrated from the new media to the old. In March 2008, Obama's carefully scripted campaign emphasizing civility and a positive, non-threatening presentation of himself to a white audience was blindsided by the eruption of the more familiar trope of the angry black man. ABC News broadcast clips of Obama's pastor, Jeremiah Wright, condemning America for its racism and violence. The excerpts

<sup>38</sup> Gwen Ifill, *The Breakthrough: Politics and Race in the Age of Obama* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 169–71.

<sup>39</sup> Moynihan, then assistant secretary of labor and later Democratic senator from New York, decried a "tangle of pathology" in his 1965 report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. See, for example, James T. Patterson, *America's Struggle against Poverty in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 99–102.

<sup>40</sup> Charles Hurt, "Jesse's a 'Nut' Job," *New York Post*, 10 July 2008, 10.

<sup>41</sup> Robert S. McElvaine, "The Red, the Blue and the Gray," *Washington Post*, 8 Feb. 2009, B2.

were not representative of that part of Wright's preaching that had led Obama to join his church and title his second book after one of Wright's sermons, "The Audacity of Hope." Nonetheless, they threatened to constitute through sheer repetition a Barthesian sedimentation of images completely at odds with the one Obama cultivated.<sup>42</sup> In the storm of criticism that followed, the candidate disregarded the warnings of his advisers that discussing race directly was too risky. Instead, he traveled to Philadelphia (the one in Pennsylvania) to deliver an electrifying speech called "A More Perfect Union," based on some of the most thoughtful passages of his memoirs. He seemed, suddenly, to be the only person on television capable of speaking forthrightly and sensitively about race and racism, to acknowledge the sources of black anger and white anger, and to place current conflicts in their historical context. The *New York Times* called the speech a "profile in courage," invoking John Kennedy and crediting Obama for raising the discussion on race "to a higher plane."<sup>43</sup> It was a remarkable moment that endured as more than seven million people clicked on the video posted on YouTube. Along with his steady response to the economic crisis and his refusal to pander to calls for suspending the gasoline tax, the speech was a key moment when many Americans decided that Obama's seriousness of character gave him the authority to lead. But it was hardly the end of the issue. Reverend Wright returned from vacation to give a series of intemperate speeches that led Obama to renounce him for good. And as the general election approached, McCain eased the internal ban on hardball tactics, allowing his supporters and Palin to claim that Obama was close to a veteran of the 1960s-era radical group the Weather Underground. As Palin accused Obama of "palling around with terrorists," the crowds at her rallies grew more frenzied, and the Secret Service told the Obama campaign that there was a sharp increase in threats to his life.<sup>44</sup>

Racial politics can be treacherous ground even for Americans accustomed to discussing what W. E. B. Du Bois called "the problem of the twentieth century ... the problem of the color line."<sup>45</sup> The twenty-first century has made it no easier to negotiate, and that is also true for foreign commentators. The German newspaper *tageszeitung*, known as the "*taz*," made headlines in America with this caption over a photo of the White House: "Uncle Barack's Cabin."<sup>46</sup> Was this a racist slur against Obama the Uncle Tom? wondered American bloggers. The question lost in translation was whether, on the one hand, the *taz* did not realize that whereas *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was an anti-slavery book in the nineteenth century, "Uncle Tom" is now a racist slur, or, on the other hand, whether American readers did not realize that the *taz* is the most progressive mainstream newspaper in Germany with a long history of standing up against racism and xenophobia and an equally long-standing affinity for

<sup>42</sup> Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (London: Cape, 1967), 28.

<sup>43</sup> "Mr. Obama's Profile in Courage," *New York Times*, 19 March 2008. The editorial also compared his speech to inaugural addresses by Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

<sup>44</sup> "Hackers and Spending Sprees," *Newsweek*, 5 Nov. 2008, [www.newsweek.com/id/167581/page/2](http://www.newsweek.com/id/167581/page/2), accessed 9 Feb. 2009.

<sup>45</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Freedmen's Bureau," *Atlantic Monthly*, 87 (1901), 354–65.

<sup>46</sup> "Onkel Baracks Hütte," *tageszeitung*, 5 June 2008, 1.

cheeky, satirical headlines – in a city where a subway stop is named for Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel. The caption was sufficiently ambiguous to imply that when the humble cabin is replaced by the White House, we may be leaving the era of racial abjection – a claim firmly in line with the simulacrobama – while the *taş* simultaneously undermined that redemptive claim through the weight of its irony.

When Obama spoke in Berlin that summer, there was no doubting where Germans stood. For this writer, it was extraordinary after seven years of well-deserved Bush-bashing to stand in the midst of two hundred thousand Europeans waving American flags and cheering an American leader. There was no counter-demonstration, probably the first time a highly visible American official has not faced one on a visit to Berlin since 1966. The crowd applauded his words about restoring morality to American policy. They were silent when Obama asked for more support in Afghanistan.

That was a hint that the hunger abroad for an end to the Bush era was tempered by the understanding that even Obama’s freshness cannot cover a stale whiff of American exceptionalism emanating from the election of 2008. When it finally ended on 4 November, “the world wept with joy,” wrote the *Guardian*’s Simon Jenkins, while warning that “the greater the expectation of this man, the more furious will be the backlash if he proves a disappointment.”<sup>47</sup> Predictions of real change in US foreign policy were held in check. Renowned Italian journalist Barbara Spinelli invoked the Christian realism of Reinhold Niebuhr in warning that Obama should avoid at all costs the peculiar American combination of arrogance and narcissism.<sup>48</sup> *Le Monde diplomatique* thought that Obama’s promises of a twenty-first-century military “on the offensive from Djibouti to Kandahar” meant only that “imperialism will be softer, more capable, more concerted, and, who knows, perhaps a bit less murderous.”<sup>49</sup> The Mexican writer and diplomat José María Pérez Gay remarked wistfully how much better it would be if “el primer presidente afroestadunidense” could begin his mandate with a cancellation of history, of the destructive wars of empire and the military–industrial complex that now bind him to the past.<sup>50</sup> Americans might have elected “a leader who can restore hope to the country and to the world,” but the world did not relinquish its skepticism.<sup>51</sup>

## INAUGURATION DAY

Are the new media moving us into a new age, one that will come closer to the Habermasian ideal of a genuinely participatory citizenry connected in the public sphere, with no assurance of the civic rationality Habermas prizes? Or are we witnessing the proliferation of media filters that stand between people and tangible events, replacing ever more of their experiences with representations? Even before the Obama phenomenon, there were modest signs that the new media could alter

<sup>47</sup> Simon Jenkins, “All the Clichés about Colour Obscure the Real Challenges Awaiting Obama: The World Must Get Over Its Hysteria,” *The Guardian*, 7 Nov. 2008, 43.

<sup>48</sup> Barbara Spinelli, “Tramonta l’impero dei consumi,” *La Stampa*, 9 Nov. 2008, 1.

<sup>49</sup> Serge Halimi, “Barack Obama,” *Le Monde diplomatique*, Aug. 2008, 1.

<sup>50</sup> José María Pérez Gay, “El imperio en los tiempos de Obama,” *La Jornada*, 7 Dec. 2008.

<sup>51</sup> “Un líder para gobernar el mundo,” *Cinco Dias*, 8 Nov. 2008, 2.



the way power is wielded in society. The democratization of moving images has brought us two decades of legal proceedings after videotaped incidents of police brutality, a limited measure of accountability that never would have happened without the pictures of the victims being beaten, from Rodney King in 1991 to Donovan Jackson in 2002 and Stanley Miller in 2004 in Los Angeles alone. Mobile phone videos led to prosecutions for the assault on Hemy Hamisa Abu Hassan Saari by a prison guard in Kuala Lumpur in 2005,<sup>52</sup> and for the shooting of Oscar Grant by a transit policeman in Oakland on New Year's Day, 2009.<sup>53</sup> On a larger scale, mobile-phone footage was practically the only source of international news about mass protests by Buddhist monks against the Burmese government in the Saffron Revolution of 2007. At the US-run prison at Abu Ghraib, unauthorized photos taken by guards using their personal digital cameras showed them torturing Iraqi prisoners. The images circulated among friends and family by e-mail until they landed in the in-box of *New Yorker* reporter Seymour Hersh, whose story on Abu Ghraib caused a global scandal and helped turn the American public against the war the world had always opposed – thereby giving Barack Obama his signature issue that carried him from the launching of his candidacy to nomination by his party.

For 1.8 million people, a comfortable sofa in front of the television was the wrong place to watch the inauguration of this most unlikely new President. Feeder streams of humanity poured out of the Washington subway stations and spilled past police barricades down into the flood that washed over the Mall, the vast, grassy expanse at the center of the capital, stretching from the halls of Congress to the Lincoln Memorial. Never before in American history had so many people demonstrated *in favor* of the government.<sup>54</sup>

In some ways, this was the orchestrated climax of a narrative about the United States overcoming its racist past and fulfilling its founding ideals, becoming that more perfect union Obama promised. Certainly that was the tone of the commentary in the mass media, lost in celebratory self-congratulation, as a race that had allegedly been about anything but race turned overnight into the triumph of a country that had proved its exceptionality by electing its first black President. Old and new media were awash with this image of the simulacrobama, until this version became practically hegemonic.

And yet the mediated election story suffusing the airwaves to saturation point that day intersected with the coherent narratives of the past that Americans construct in part out of their own individual lived experience. When that experience involved a personal journey through endless instances of racial discrimination and humiliation, from the serious to the mundane (and no less serious for being mundane), no amount of mediated myth-making could overshadow the sheer power of watching an African American man stepping forward to lead the nation. As the multitudes stood in the freezing winds on the Mall, some wearing buttons reading “Emancipation Day, January 20, 2009,” they watched their new President swear an oath to

<sup>52</sup> Mary Jordan, “Amateur Videos Are Putting Official Abuse in New Light,” *Washington Post*, 15 Nov. 2006, A1.

<sup>53</sup> Matthew B. Stannard and Demian Bulwa, “BART Shooting Captured on Video,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 7 Jan. 2009, A1.

<sup>54</sup> Michael Kazin, “A Liberal Revival of Americanism,” *Washington Post*, 8 Feb. 2009, B1.



defend a Constitution that, when originally written, would have counted him as three-fifths of a person. A few had stood on the same ground forty-five years before, listening to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. speak of his unfulfilled dream. Many more had traveled great distances, slept on the floors of train and bus stations, and dragged their children out into the cold before dawn, so they could watch Obama's image on a Jumbotron screen while filming it through their mobile phones. They were recording a representation, but they were crying real tears.