

BIAS, PUNDITRY, AND THE PRESS

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

“He who tells the stories rules the world.”
—Native American saying

A Report from
The White House Project
The Women’s Media Center
and
The Maynard Institute for Journalism Education

written by Deborah Siegel, PhD



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I. Power of the Press

Our media industry bears a tremendous responsibility. It holds the power not only to report and reflect but at times to foment public opinion. In general, those who produce and report the news hold themselves to high standards of veracity and reliability. But there are times when, like so many of us, members of the media prove fallible.

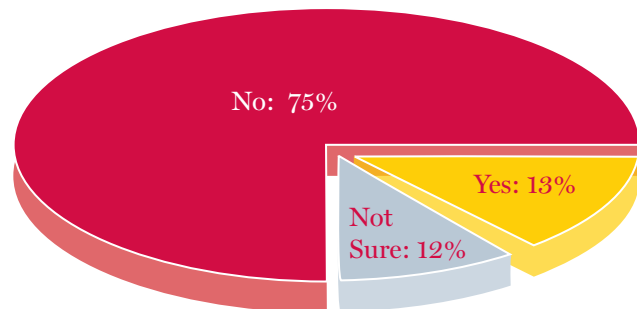
Whether under a tight deadline or the pressure to be provocative, newsmakers can often fall back on stereotypes, ignorance, and coded language when talking about candidates in a highly contested political election. When such a remark appears in print or on the air, it is not merely the integrity of our media that is diminished. What is reported is often repeated—without reflection. Hence the tenor of popular debate suffers, too.

The 2008 primaries have provided us with a unique moment to examine ourselves as a nation—and the media we consume. Says Carol Jenkins, a journalist for 30 years and President of The Women’s Media Center,

As a result, in part, of the media’s coverage of our candidates, the fracturing of our identities into gender, race, class, and age has been so thorough that the main task we have as a nation now is pulling ourselves together into a whole. If we’re lucky, this new nation will be an improvement on what we had. If we don’t exert every effort at reconciliation, these historic breakthroughs in political participation will be for naught. Media’s involvement in our division—and its responsibility in the healing—cannot be underestimated.

Jenkins is hardly alone in these beliefs.

Q: Do you think the media industry is diverse enough or culturally competent enough to accurately report on the issues of race, gender, class, and age?

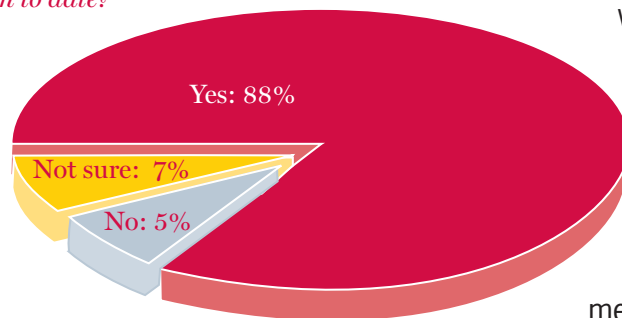


At a recently convened forum at The Paley Center for Media in New York City called “From Soundbites to Solutions: Bias, Punditry and the Press in the 2008 Election,” a full seventy-five percent of audience members reported a belief that the U.S. media industry lacks the diversity and cultural competency to accurately report on issues concerning candidates’ race, gender, class, and age.¹ When reporters, editors, and producers lack the skills to report accurately in the face of difference, coverage can suffer from implicit, and often unconscious, bias. Since the primaries, there has been little recognition by members of the press or even the campaigns that any kind of bias exists. If you don’t see it, how can you address it? Such is the conundrum addressed by this report.

Bias, Punditry, and the Press originated from the aforementioned public forum. On June 17, 2008, three organizations who study media and its role in democracy convened an open gathering in New York City to discuss the recent press treatment of candidates’ gender, race, class, and age, and the political landscape which allowed for biased representation as the primary campaigns ensued. The conveners had been working on these issues from multiple

angles, including the inclusion side (Women’s Media Center), the candidate supply side (White House Project), and the newsroom side (Maynard Institute for Journalism Education). They invited members of the mainstream media—White House correspondents, foreign correspondents, magazine columnists, newspaper reporters, television hosts, radio commentators—to exchange thoughts with prominent pollsters, journalism professors, and leaders of national think tanks; they also canvassed the audience of over 200 influence makers across a range of sectors to collect their opinions. The findings were surprising and profound.

Q: Do you think that journalists have overstepped the line between reporting and opinion in the coverage of the campaign to date?



Among attendees at the forum, 88 percent felt that journalists had overstepped the line between reporting and opinion in campaign coverage to date. Panelists debated whether the media’s election coverage reported on, reflected, or actually *created* bias. Many felt that peers in the media had inappropriately embedded themselves as pundits in the so-called war room of the primaries, serving up judgment instead of reporting facts. Panelists and audience members alike felt that television newscasters in particular were out of touch with the kind of coverage American voters needed and deserved, though print venues were guilty of perpetuating inaccuracy and blunders too.

Skepticism about reporters cuts across income, race, gender, age, and political party. A Gallup poll conducted in May 2008 found over half (52%) of Americans disapprove of the job the news media are doing in covering the election.ⁱⁱ According to a June 6, 2008 Rasmussen Reports national telephone survey, only 17 percent of voters nationwide believe that most reporters try to offer unbiased coverage of election campaigns while *four times as many* (68 percent) believe most reporters try to help the candidate that they want to win. The perception that reporters are advocates rather than observers is held by 82 percent of Republicans, 56 percent of Democrats, and 69 percent of voters not affiliated with either major party. Looking ahead to the fall campaign, only 24 percent of voters believe that most reporters will try to offer unbiased coverage.ⁱⁱⁱ

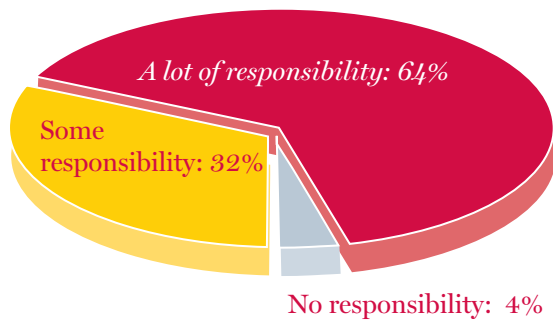
Young people, in particular, are wary of spin. According to a recent report about college student political engagement, students argue that they cannot be adequately informed about public issues because “the news media is biased and untrustworthy.”^{iv}

An independent press is essential for a strong and sustainable democracy. Yet we have clearly come to a place where stereotypes and opinions masquerading as fact have broken the public’s trust of the media. This report represents a first step in attempting to heal that rift by offering real solutions—for those of us inside and outside the media—that can combat the issues of bias that continue to vex us.

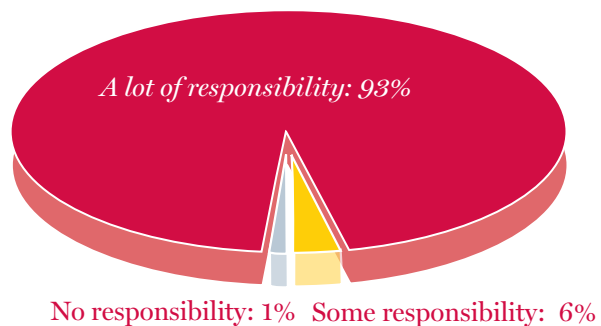
Who Is Responsible ?

Candidates, campaigns, and political parties can help keep the media focused on accurate and intelligent representation, for the benefit and betterment of all. A majority of the attendees at the “Soundbites to Solutions” conference believed the candidates themselves bear “a lot of responsibility” to speak out against coverage or behavior that is racist, sexist, or ageist, and that political parties and party leadership bear even more.

Q: How much responsibility do candidates have to speak out against coverage or behavior that is racist, sexist or ageist?



Q: How much responsibility do political parties or party leadership have to speak out against coverage or behavior that is racist, sexist or ageist?



Clearly, candidates need to take responsibility for their surrogates, as what these individuals say and do reflects directly upon them. Additionally, candidates and party leadership need to pay better attention to media watch groups (see Appendix B), and respond to their campaigns for action around media bias by contacting producers, editors, and CEOs directly or by proxy.

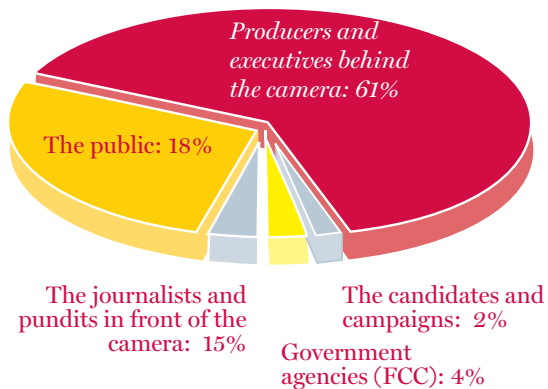
“Many of us—even those of us who are influential day to day with candidates or parties or the media—don’t feel like we have a lot of influence on this... How can we set up institutions—watch dog groups or whatever—to make institutions, parties, candidates, who pay a lot of attention to political press or to political pressure, pay more of a price for this kind of coverage?”

*– Celinda Lake, President,
Lake Research Partners*

According to many gathered at the “Soundbites to Solutions” conference, however, it is the producers and executives behind the cameras who bear primary responsibility for ensuring accurate, unbiased coverage. Notes New York Daily News columnist Juan Gonzalez:

“[T]he producers and executives are mainly responsible because we have a private media system in America... therefore the owners and the people who run the private media system have primary responsibility for what kind of news and information they produce.”

Q: Who carries the primary responsibility for ensuring accurate, unbiased coverage?



Producers, executives, journalists, and pundits owe it to the voters to do better going forward. And media consumers owe it to themselves to speak out against biased coverage.

Bias, Punditry, and the Press offers a look at how this season's reportage on our presidential candidates has revealed a lingering diversity gap in the press and points out a systemic pattern of bias on issues of race, gender, class, and age. It offers a synthesis of the best thinking from the June 17 forum, along with additional analysis of the latest coverage and national polls. And it focuses on solutions—concrete ways to bring about the kind of balance in coverage so many of us crave.

In this report, you will find:

- 8 steps members of the press can take RIGHT NOW to educate themselves about unconscious bias, coded language, and diversifying both staff and coverage
- 5 things media consumers can do RIGHT NOW to report bias when they see it and hold those with the power to enforce better standards accountable for media content created on their watch

There is power in unity. The nonpartisan coalition behind this publication is united in our commitment to protect voters' rights to media coverage free of racism, sexism or ageism. As Pat Mitchell, President of The Paley Center for Media, aptly notes, "None of those 'isms' is a good thing for democracy." Indeed, none of these 'isms' is good for an electorate that counts on its press to be, like our nation, diverse, independent, and free.

We hope you will join us in making your voice heard.

II. *Bias Goes Primetime, Primary Edition*

BI-AS NOUN:

1. An inclination to something: bent, cast, disposition, leaning, partiality, penchant, predilection, predisposition, proclivity, proneness, propensity, squint, tendency, trend, turn.
2. An inclination for or against that inhibits impartial judgment: one-sidedness, partiality, partisanship, prejudice, prepossession, tendentiousness.

VERB:

1. To cause to have a prejudiced view: jaundice, prejudice, prepossess, warp.
2. To direct (material) to the interests of a particular group: skew, slant.

By the Numbers

Women polled by Lifetime were nearly twice as likely to say that John McCain has been hurt instead of helped by attention to his age (36% to 19%).^v

A Rasmussen Reports survey found that 43% of voters said Clinton received the worst treatment from the media.^{vi}

It's been an extraordinary, unprecedented election. An unparalleled 5.7 million people under the age of 30 voted in the 2008 primaries, a 109% increase from the last presidential election.^{vii} And for the first time in U.S. history, top contenders for our nation's top job have included a Mormon, a Latino, an African American, a woman, and a septuagenarian, at age 71. In certain ways, these candidacies caught many in the media industry unawares and unprepared.

During the 2008 primary season, we witnessed numerous moments of bias aired on mainstream and cable news networks, over radio and in print. For those who've had trouble spotting it—and for those who've been diligently keeping track—we offer below a brief timeline of bias in reporting across genres, from January to June 2008. While many of the instances of bias documented in this report come from those

in the most visible media trenches—columnists, television hosts, and the like—news writers and beat journalists are not immune. When a behind-the-scenes writer for Fox News creates a headline labeling a candidate's wife a “baby mama,” or when political reporters recycle non-substantive descriptors like “elite” or “strident” or “old,” that's bias proliferating, too.

Primary Coverage: A Timeline of Bias*

Jan. 9	:	Jan. 9
<i>MSNBC's Hardball</i>	:	<i>The New York Times</i>
Host Chris Matthews attributes Hillary's success to Bill messing around.	:	Maureen Dowd asks, “Can Hillary Cry Her Way Back Into the White House?”
Jan. 19	:	
<i>FOX's Fox & Friends</i>	:	
Host Steve Doocy highlights a false report that Obama attended an Islamic “madrassa” school as a 6-year-old child and fails to correct the false claim that the candidate is Muslim.	:	
	:	Jan. 23
	:	<i>MSNBC's Morning Joe</i>
	:	Mike Barnicle berates Hillary as sounding like a first wife standing outside divorce court.

Feb. 17
New York Post
 An otherwise thoughtful article runs under the sensational, catfight headline “Lipstick Jungle: Why Young Women Are Voting for Obama – and Leaving Older Hillary Supporters Fuming”

March 13
ABC News
 Network leads news broadcast with inflammatory headline “Obama’s Pastor: ‘God Damn America.’”

March 24
Countdown with Keith Olbermann
 Keith Olbermann refers to John McCain’s foreign policy gaffe, in which the candidate confused Sunnis and Shiites and also the relationship between Iran and Al Qaeda, as a possible “senior moment.”

April 10
Hardball
 Pat Buchanan says McCain “past his prime.”

March 2
The Washington Post
 Charlotte Allen claims Clinton—and all women for that matter—are plain stupid.

March 22
Air America affiliate event
 Randi Rhodes slurs both Hillary Clinton and Geraldine Ferraro.

March 24
Countdown with Keith Olbermann
 Keith Olbermann says McCain should buy Depends

April 10
Your World with Neil Cavuto
 Marc Rudov says Hillary acts like a “B-word.”

April 23
Countdown with Keith Olbermann
 Keith Olbermann insinuates violence against Clinton.

April 28
CNN.com
 Jack Cafferty imagines Obama wanting to run Clinton over with a truck.

May 30
Good Morning America
 Glenn Beck complains that Clinton sounds like his wife.

June 14
Fox News Watch
 Cal Thomas declares all black women are angry.

April 27
CNN’s Sunday Morning
 Ken Rudin compares Clinton to the Glenn Close character from *Fatal Attraction*.

May 30
The Rush Limbaugh Show
 Rush Limbaugh spreads false rumor that a tape exists of Michelle Obama using the word “Whitey” from the pulpit of Trinity United Church of Christ.

June 11
Fox News
 Fox News labels Michelle “Obama’s baby mama.” (Note: Fox later says the offending graphic showed poor judgment on the part of a producer.)

June 18
ABC News
 Gary Langer pits McCain’s wife versus Obama’s wife.

* Many of these media moments are chronicled in *The Women’s Media Center video Sexism Sells, But We’re Not Buying It!* (http://www.womensmediacenter.com/sexism_sells.html) and NOW’s online Media Hall of Shame (http://www.now.org/issues/media/hall_of_shame/)

While the examples above are drawn from primary season, coverage during the months leading up to the primaries was often similarly skewed. In July 2007, *Washington Post* reporter Robin Givhan caused a stir about Hillary Clinton's cleavage. That September, the *New York Times* ran an entire article analyzing Clinton's laugh, characterizing it as witch-like, and so-called "news" stories about the infamous "cackle" proliferated across the wires. In December 2007, Matt Drudge posted an unflattering photograph of the female candidate above the tagline "The Toll of the Campaign," which was picked up by Rush Limbaugh, whose thoughts appeared under the heading "Does Our Looks-Obsessed Culture Want to Stare at an Aging Woman?" Meanwhile, Michelle Malkin chimed in on Fox News' *Big Story* saying, "If that's the face of experience, I think it's going to scare away a lot of those independent voters that are on the fence."

It's not just Senator Clinton who's been at the receiving end of this kind of treatment. The *New York Times*' Maureen Dowd began pummeling Obama's masculinity as early as June of 2007 when she bestowed upon him the feminizing moniker "Obambi." And as recently as July of 2008, John McLaughlin could be heard posing this question on his Sunday morning talk show, *The McLaughlin Group*: "Does it frost... Jesse Jackson, that someone like Obama, who fits the stereotype blacks once labeled as an Oreo – a black on the outside, a white on the inside – should be the beneficiary of the long civil rights struggle which Jesse Jackson spent his lifetime fighting for?"

The beat goes on. Now that Clinton has left the race, Cindy McCain and Michelle Obama have become focal points for media sexism, while subtle and not so subtle negative comments about Barack Obama's class and

race and John McCain's age continue to riddle columns and air waves alike. There are some who seem surprised by the systemic pile on of discriminatory and bigoted remarks. Those who understand the deep roots of bias in this country—including those of us at The Women's Media Center, The White House Project, and the Maynard Institute—are less so. Still, the type and degree of stereotyping that circulated this election season is a wake up call. Says Geneva Overholser, Director of the School of Journalism at the University of Southern California,

"Fools that we were, we didn't really think we were going to see sexism and racism [like this] when this campaign started. What we're dealing with now is recurrences of attitudes that have existed in our country for ages. And we shouldn't be shocked."

A Selection of Quotes From the Conference

"No matter how little or how much you have watched, read [or] listened to the reports from this year's presidential primary campaigns, you could not escape the fact that the media across all sectors, from newspapers to networks to cable channels and the Internet, is full of examples of the kinds of stereotyping about women that we had all hoped and even assumed had largely disappeared. I think the same can be said about race."

–Pat Mitchell, President, The Paley Center for Media

“[I]t is so insulting, it is so unacceptable. And to think that in this country, which claims to be the bastion of democracy and freedom and tries to take this around the world, that there is no accountability for dissing a woman.”

—Christiane Amanpour, Chief International Correspondent, CNN

“While a reporter would think twice about writing anything about Born Again Christians, they would not think twice about how they cover women candidates. Why not? Why can’t we get that changed?”

—Celinda Lake, President, Lake Research Partners

“Social scientists continue to point out that people have an unconscious thing about gender stereotypes. This too has been said about race, but particularly when pointed out to those people who foment these kinds of stereotypes. They’ll say, ‘What are you talking about?’ Because these are such common kinds of language.”

—Callie Crossley, National Television and Radio Commentator

“I do think women are splintered, but I don’t necessarily see that as a bad thing. I mean women are 53% of the population— we’re hardly going to all think alike.”

—Susan Carroll, Senior Scholar, Center for American Women and Politics

“[O]ur daughters are still learning these degrading and discouraging lessons - most recently through the media coverage of the 2008 election. No one - not even Clinton herself - is saying that she lost the race for President because of sexism in cable news or the blogosphere, and the degree to which sexist coverage played a part is debatable. Yet we lost something for our nation’s daughters who were sent a strong message about fairness during the primary season - you can play, but it won’t be a fair fight.”

—Marie Wilson, President, The White House Project ^{viii}

“Reverend Wright became a hallmark of sort of the racial dimensions of the Obama campaign. [It became] a very interesting sort of game. Here you had CNN, MSNBC and some of the other cable channels say, ‘Oh, well Fox did it, but we’ll play it a thousand times! And we’ll make sure that you get it, because this is really very newsy stuff and we’ve got to do it too.’”

—Ron Walters, Professor of Government and Politics, University of Maryland

“I think Barack Obama faces a very different kind of risk, which is that one of the ways of demeaning anybody who is a minority is to put in question their sexuality. Not in the sense of homosexuality but in the sense that ‘he’s too womanish.’ They’ve already said that he’s the first woman candidate. It was the front page of Newsweek some weeks ago,

—Patricia Williams, Columnist, The Nation and Professor of Law, Columbia University

III. Findings and Analysis

Reporting Across Fault Lines

“When we hold our tongue as we’re often encouraged to do about the dangers of sexism - because we might get labeled a partisan for one candidate or another - or when we get sucked into a debate over which is more [prevalent] or which is more dangerous, racism or sexism, we are discounting and denigrating the very foundation of this democracy.”

-Pat Mitchell

“[W]hile there’s been a lot of discussion of race in this campaign there’s been little discussion about how the nature of racial conflict in America has changed... [T]here’s been no attempt by the media to try to understand why it is that so many Latinos gravitated in large numbers to the Hillary Clinton campaign versus the Barack Obama campaign, and what this is going to mean in the general election.”

-Juan Gonzalez, Columnist, New York Daily News

“I think that there has been this impression, particularly now with the nomination of Barack Obama, that we’ve overcome race, that it’s no longer an issue, that gender is the highest and hardest glass ceiling. And I, being both African American and being female, I would say that both of those areas still have a long way to go.”

- Pamela Newkirk, Associate Professor of Journalism, New York University

To be sure, the divisions of race, class, gender, generation and geography form some of the most powerful prisms through which we see ourselves, each other, and events around us.^{ix} But at any one time, and in any one person, more than one of these prisms is generally at work. Says Dori J. Maynard of the Maynard Institute for Journalism Education, “[W]e’ve heard a great deal about race and class in this election, often in ways that pitted the two against each other,

and that isn’t helpful. It isn’t one or the other; it’s both and more. Age and class are the undercurrents running through our national debate.” Dr. Ron Walters, Professor of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland, agrees. “You’re dealing with different perspectives. Whether it’s gender, whether it’s race, what you have is this tremendous mixing bowl where these perspectives really are clashing. To privilege one over the other is exactly what the media is doing; they’re saying there’s only one.”

Journalists with an international perspective have been quick to identify this tendency to reduce human complexity to terms of either/or as particularly “American.” Says CNN international correspondent Christiane Amanpour, “[A] part of the narrative in this country over the primary election was the permanent narrative in the [American] press which is: you must have a devil and a hero. We have it in wars, Good/Evil, Black/White; the nuance is lost.”

But more than just nuance was lost when the media conversation during the primaries devolved into a debate over who had it worse as a candidate seeking the Presidency, an African American man or a white woman—in other words, whether sexism or racism was worse.



The graphic accompanying an article in The Boston Globe from February 17, 2008, titled “Black Man vs. White Woman”

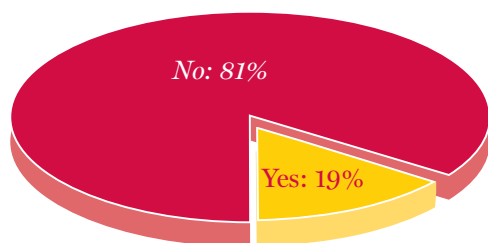
The question of whether sexism or racism might prove a greater stumbling block to the nation's top job is an interesting one, but headlines pitting sexism against racism neither informed nor advanced our understanding of the candidates' political differences and positions. The prospect of a media conversation fixated on racism vs. ageism feels equally immaterial.

Social identities are situational. How and whether race, gender, class, or age—or other markers of identity, like religion or sexual orientation—is important depends largely on context. In a country where white men run against each other for the Presidency century after century, voters during previous election cycles would have balked at a headline fixating on the candidates' race and gender alone: "White Man vs. White Man." And yet suddenly, with a

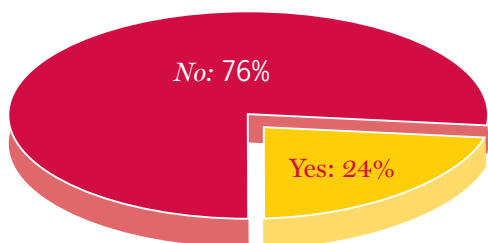
woman and an African American in the race, identity politics dominated the news no matter what the candidates said, stood for, or did.

Instead of looking at factors like race and gender as a case of either/or, we strongly urge a different approach. The "Fault Lines framework" offers a method for understanding that bigotry and other forms of abuse and oppression based on race/ethnicity, gender, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, age, or class do not act independently of one another. Rather, forms of oppression interact, intersect, and interrelate.

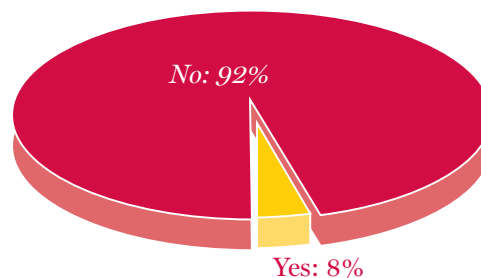
*Q: Looking back on the election coverage to date, did the media demonstrate an ability to accurately report and inform across the fault lines of **race**?*



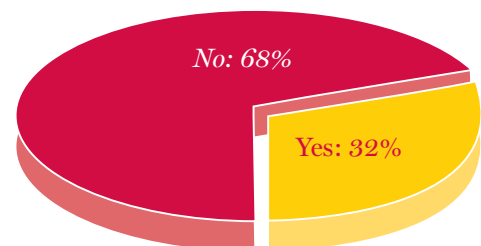
*Q: Looking back on the election coverage to date, did the media demonstrate an ability to accurately report and inform across the fault lines of **class**?*



*Q: Looking back on the election coverage to date, did the media demonstrate an ability to accurately report and inform across the fault lines of **gender**?*



*Q: Looking back on the election coverage to date, did the media demonstrate an ability to accurately report and inform across the fault lines of **age**?*



Racism and sexism, for example, often function in tandem. Take the case of Michelle Obama, who as a woman of color quickly became a target for both racist and sexist remarks (aka, the smear “angry black woman”—a characterization which relies for its efficacy on a stereotype of all black women as aggressive and loud). Note, too, that describing the leadership style of an African American male candidate as “feminine,” as a number of commentators did, played into a long racist tradition in this country of emasculating minority men. Says critical race scholar and legal theorist Patricia Williams, “It was a black/white divide and it was a male/female divide, but race was gendered and gender was raced.”

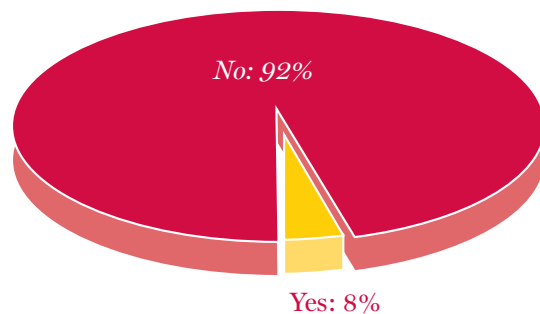
Ultimately, what’s missed in the “sexism vs. racism vs. ageism” debate is that Barack Obama, too, has a gender, or that Hillary Clinton and John McCain have a race, and that at any one time their social contexts may privilege one aspect of identity over another. In other words, identities themselves are ever-shifting. Says Williams,

“I think we need to start imagining all the ways we can be women, all the ways we can be so-called black, all the ways we have let whiteness make invisible who our true ancestors are, and what origins they suppress in becoming white. Let’s really start appreciating all the richly varied ways we can become American.”

In a country with an increasingly multicultural national electorate, new demographics demand that we widen the lens through which our national life is portrayed. Those of us in the media now have a great opportunity to educate ourselves, diversify, and follow suit.

A Lack of Diversity

Q: Do you think the media has done a good job in their coverage of the election to-date of reflecting people who think like you?



From the reporter’s desk to the executive suite, the makeup of our press corps still does not accurately reflect our national diversity. White men are overwhelmingly the ones making the decision about what we see and hear through the press. As both The Women’s Media Center and the Maynard Institute for Journalism Education were founded to address, this dearth of women and people of color impacts everything from story selection to hiring practices. Without diverse decision makers in the newsroom, important stories go untold, and our view of the world as shaped by the media remains incomplete.

Newsrooms are diversifying all too slowly. Over the past five years, the number of minority news directors at local television broadcasting stations has increased, but from a mere 6.4% to 10.9%. At newspapers, not much has changed. The number of minority reporters at the nation’s papers has increased just slightly between 2003 and 2008, from 12.53% to 13.52%.^x

For women of all colors, the statistics are equally grim. Women hold only 3% of what are considered to be “clout” positions in media, publishing, and entertainment. Female news directors manage only a quarter of TV

newsrooms. Only 10-15% of radio programmers and managers are women. And the number of female reporters across genres has either stayed the same—or gone down.

DIVERSITY IN THE MEDIA ^{xii}		
Newspaper industry	% Minority	% Women
2008		
Supervisors	11.4	35.2
Copy layout editors	12.2	41.8
Reporters	14.6	39.1
Photographers	16.9	27.1
2003		
Supervisors	9.9	33.4
Copy layout editors	11.3	41
Reporters	13.6	39.5
Photographers/ Artist/ Videographers	15.9	25.9
Broadcasting	% Minority	% Women
2007		
Local news directors	10.9	26.3
Managers	6.4	14.8
2003		
Local news directors	6.6	26.5
Managers	NA	13.9
*Statistics Courtesy of ASNE.org		

Numbers matter. Counts performed by The White House Project and documented in their widely circulated *Who's Talking?* report show that men grossly outnumber women and women of color as guests on five different Sunday morning talk shows, including *Meet the Press*.^{xii} Notes Marie Wilson, "Granted, when it came to political guests, Tim Russert and the rest had to take whoever the political sphere sent, but open slots still remained, and women were outnumbered in all the shows by nine-to-one in guest appearances." Even when those in the media industry are aware of this imbalance, very often "the usual suspects" continue to get booked, and the discrepancy persists.

Yet there are now multiple outlets that producers and bookers can employ to end that discrepancy. **SheSource.org** (a partnership between The White House Project and Fenton Communications) is an online braintrust of female experts on diverse topics designed to serve journalists, producers and bookers who need female guests and sources. It was born in 2005 to help close the gender gap in news coverage by making it easy for journalists to connect with women experts on topics of interest. **The Progressive Women's Voices Program** at The Women's Media Center trains spokeswomen from a variety of backgrounds, representing demographic and ethnic diversity as well as expertise in areas ranging from security, the economy and politics to law, peacekeeping and humanitarian crisis, and then connects them to the media.

Initiatives like SheSource and Progressive Women's Voices have an impact. Slowly, we are seeing a more diverse array of faces in the news. And with the 2008 election, particularly in television news, we have likely seen more faces of color and more women as commentators giving analysis and reporting the news than ever before.

However, it is not enough to simply hire and book more women and people of color. Says Juan Gonzalez, columnist at the *New York Daily News*, “The networks and CNN and others [are] beginning to see a dramatic change in the kinds of folks they were choosing to cover these events. But on the other hand I’ve been extremely disappointed by the shallowness of the approaches to all of these issues.” The problem goes deeper than representation alone. Ensuring that race, gender, class and age-based diversity makes its way into our hiring practices is critical—but so is making sure that a diversity (and depth) of thought on how these issues play out is both present and heard by the powers that be.

Accurate reporting requires a level of “cultural competence” that cannot be simply assumed. “Culturally competent” individuals are those who possess knowledge of cultures and cultural mores beyond their own; an understanding of the history of race, an awareness of gender profiling, and a consciousness about the contours of ageism are just a few of the elements that make a media professional broadly informed enough to truthfully report the news.

Media institutions that value this kind of truth in reporting hire appropriately. When stations, networks, and publications hire and retain enough professionals with experience viewing the world outside of the prism of (white, male) privilege, the quality of coverage on issues of race, gender, class, and age genuinely and lastingly improves. For when women and people of color are hired in enough numbers, they are freed from the professionally hazardous role of “token” and can bring their own perspectives

to the table and effectively help shape their news organization’s approach to coverage. Yet changing the culture of a news organization can by no means be the job of women and minorities alone.

“There have been a number of studies done by The Freedom Forum and other organizations that looked at ‘the revolving door’ of journalists of color because you’re always fighting, and you’re usually in such a small minority. So after a while you become stigmatized in the newsroom, and people avoid you. There’s this problem of musical chairs where you’re not really growing in number because you’re advocating so much.”

–Pamela Newkirk

So what, specifically, can be done to change things?

IV. *Recommendations*

At a Glance: Tips For Those In The Media Industry

Following you will find a set of 8 recommendations those of us in the media can begin implementing **today** to help usher in a new era of truly balanced reporting—one that reflects the increasing diversity our nation today. Many of these recommendations are not new, but the problems we continue to face in accurately representing the multiplicity of American voices and perspectives indicates that they bear repeating. This election, in particular, has reminded us of the urgent need to put them into practice.

1. Diversify the Newsroom. And the Production Booth. And the Editorial Board.

Long-term goals include changing the hierarchy of who is in the media, and who is calling the shots by defining what counts as news.

2. Staff Up with Intention. Listen.

Intentionally hire those who will take on issues of diversity in news coverage (and in newsrooms) in a more institutional way. Hire reporters, editors, and producers who are capable of reporting accurately across the fault lines of difference, hire them in sufficient numbers, and make sure their voices are heard.

3. Rethink “Embedded” Punditry.

News organizations should rethink the place of punditry in reporting news. Professional journalists must be elevated once again as primary sources of information. Give the viewers what they want and need: more coverage of issues, less opinion disguised as fact.

4. Speak Out in the Newsroom. See Something? Say Something.

You do not have to be a woman or a person of color to speak out about imbalanced reporting at your paper or network.

5. Get Beyond Reporting in Black and White.

In their day-to-day reporting, journalists must come to recognize how race, class, gender and generation interrelate.

6. Know the Code—and Avoid Coded Language.

Just as good journalists examine their words for correct spelling, punctuation, grammar, usage, and style, so too will they want to check for biased language that could unfairly represent their subjects.

7. Diversify the Guest List.

SheSource.org, the online braintrust of female experts on diverse topics explicitly designed to serve journalists, producers and bookers who seek female guests and sources, and the Progressive Women’s Voices Program should become go-to stops for every booker in the industry.

8. Establish Standards and Accountability Mechanisms.

News organizations must make clear to their employees what it means to be sexist or racist or ageist in their coverage and make sure that their organization’s standards are widely known.

1. Diversify the Newsroom. And the Production Booth. And the Editorial Board.

Long-term goals include changing the hierarchy of who is in the media, and who is calling the shots by defining what counts as news. Without a diverse roster of reporters, writers, anchors, producers, editors and sources, important stories go untold, and our media-shaped view of the world is skewed. For example, a recent New York Times story on the shifting African American political landscape quotes three sources, none of whom are African American.^{xiv} Presumably, speaking to at least one member of the community being discussed in the article might have lent a different perspective to the reporting, as would assigning the story to a reporter (or having it edited by an editor) whose level of cultural competence allowed him or her to see the limitations of sourcing the story in this way.

There are a number of advocacy organizations working on these issues; make sure to get on their email lists and use them as resources and allies. (For a list of organizations that work on this issue, see Appendix B.)

“Jesse Jackson’s campaign opened the door for a lot of black journalists, but I don’t see that in this campaign. In large part it has a lot to do with the state of our industry right now. There’s a lot of downsizing going on in a lot of companies in newspaper and in television, and that has paid a price on diversity. ...As many as three hundred journalists of color have left the industry through layoffs and downsizing, so the pipeline is narrow. I am one of, I think, four or five black reporters out of the 200-300 covering the White House. It makes a difference, because you need to

have people who can help the discussion and promote the discussion.”

–William Douglas, White House Correspondent, McClatchy Washington Bureau

2. Staff up with Intention. Listen.

News organizations must make it their goal to hire numbers of individuals who bring diversity in its many forms to their newsrooms. They must also be savvy and sensitive enough to hire individuals who bring a diversity of outlooks and perspectives to these issues and to *make sure that their voices are heard*. Intentionally hire those who will take on issues of diversity in news coverage (and in newsrooms) in a more institutional way. Hire reporters, editors, and producers who are capable of reporting accurately across the fault lines of difference, hire them in sufficient numbers, and listen to what they are saying.

“On CNN we have a huge and newly diverse roster of anchors and reporters, a lot of Latinos, a lot of African Americans, women— but it’s a lot of panels as well... not reporting about African American history, not reporting about the history of women in this country, not actually going to the people and asking them [about their experiences].”

–Christiane Amanpour

“When you have to produce more in less time, on a lower budget, with less staff support [and] less editorial scrutiny in the process, there is not time for reflection. And the idea that somebody might staff up in order to address the problem, in an environment in which everything is staffing down, means that that’s not the [only] way we’re going to get a solution here.”

–Kathleen Hall Jamieson,

Director, Annenberg Public Policy Center

3. Rethink “Embedded” Punditry.

In the words of Carol Jenkins of The Women’s Media Center, the mainstream media—particularly the 24-hour cable outlets—too often “embedded” pundits to offer their own opinions on the candidates and their campaigns. This resulted in persistent stories of John McCain’s primary campaign having no chance; insistent calls for Hillary Clinton to drop out after Iowa; and daily speculation that Rev. Jeremiah Wright’s speeches would doom Barack Obama’s candidacy.

The excessive use of pundits blurs the line between opinion and fact. The result is a public that increasingly thinks *all* media are creating the news instead of reporting it. News organizations should rethink punditry: it has overwhelmed reporting as the source of information. Professional journalists must be elevated once again as primary sources of the news. Give the viewers what they want and need: more coverage of issues, less opinion.

“[T]he sad thing about our profession... is that I think we’re out of touch with the people. Because despite the reporting, or the reporting that we’re critical of, it didn’t seem to make a difference in the voting trends. People still went out and cast votes, and they cast votes for Barack Obama and for Hillary Clinton, right to the very end when the whole entire press was basically saying, ‘She should bow out.’ The people who actually had the power to vote [were] not listening. And I think that is something that we should really be taking into account because I just want to know who we’re serving, and what we’re doing.”

–Christiane Amanpour

“[T]here is a 24-hour news cycle. Pay attention to the first twelve, ignore the last twelve.... [T]he last half, the evening-time news shows, I don’t consider it necessarily ‘news.’ I think that’s where you get ‘info-tainment and opinion.”

–William Douglas

“[W]e must continue to push for a deeper, more authentic conversation overall. We must let the mainstream media know that we don’t want to debate ‘reject’ or ‘denounce’ for 24 hours or go on witch hunts for Geraldine Ferraro or Samantha Power. We want to understand what these women were trying to say. We want to explore the real issues” –Courtney Martin, Author and Columnist, American Prospect Online

4. Speak Out in the Newsroom. See Something? Say Something.

You do not have to be a woman or a person of color to speak out about imbalanced reporting at your paper or network. In fact, this effort should be collaborative, not a lonely battle for those who are most affected. Form diverse alliances in the newsroom so that it’s not just Latinos who are addressing problems in the Latino community, or African Americans alone on issues that pertain to the African American community. That way, no one is stereotyped and we all have an opportunity to learn about each other’s communities.

“Newsrooms are no different than boardrooms or offices or assembly lines in that you have different people from different backgrounds working

together. Just like in those rooms where we sometimes are reluctant to talk about things we think won't be well received, I think it's incumbent upon us to get over that. That's an important first step."

-William Douglas

"I think it's incumbent upon all good people—you don't have to be a woman, and you don't have to be of color—to point out something that is wrong. You should not need to be in a minority group to feel the sting of injustice."

-Pamela Newkirk

5. Get Beyond Reporting in Black and White.

The **Fault Lines framework** is an innovative diagnostic tool from the Maynard Institute for Journalism Education that encourages journalists to be aware of the fault lines of race, class, gender, generation and geography in their day-to-day reporting. It provides journalists with a more nuanced method of looking at people and their lives by reminding us that we are each a combination of all of our fault lines, rather than one or the other. Visit www.mjie.org to learn more.

6. Know the Code—and Avoid Coded Language.

Often, reporters use language that bears loaded, fraught, and hidden meaning around issues of gender, race, class, and age. For example, when Fox News ran a graphic on June 11 calling Michelle Obama "Obama's Baby Mama," they were using coded language that evoked stereotypes related to race and class. There are many resources available to help reporters and others in the industry learn to recognize—and

avoid—these linguistic codes. One of them, The Women's Media Center's **Unspinning the Spin: The Women's Media Center Guide to Fair and Accurate Language** will be published in 2009, with an introduction by Robin Morgan and Gloria Steinem.^{xv}

"I hear this a lot about Barack Obama: If you took away his race, if you took away his pretty words, then what would you have? You'd have George Bush... But there's a subtext to the pull to take away-- it's the Wizard of Oz in reverse: 'If only he didn't have a brain. If only he were the kind of black person we could really hate. If only he weren't so confusing.' It's in the language of neutrality but it's really a way of enabling [a] kind of cipher for him-- the substitution for him by, for example, Reverend Wright, who is somebody voters could safely hate. It's very complex at that level and I don't think people see themselves as being racist when they do that. They see themselves as being neutral or post-race."

-Patricia Williams

7. Diversify the Guest List.

Those responsible for selecting and booking guests on television news shows can contact **SheSource.org** or the **Progressive Women's Voices Program**. Both book spokeswomen and academicians from a variety of backgrounds, representing demographic and ethnic diversity as well as expertise in areas ranging from security, the economy, and politics to law, peacekeeping, humanitarian crisis, and more. Both these resources should become go-to stops for every booker in the industry.

“We will never have normalcy across these issues until we have numbers.”

–Marie Wilson

“The media said, ‘Well, you know, we don’t know why Barack Obama’s winning all of these white states and why he has trouble in South.’ Well there’s an entire literature which explains that, except the people who could explain it were nowhere around.”

– Ron Walters

“There’s a lot of expertise in academia on the role of gender and race, on the concept of intersectionality, and on how these identities come together. Rarely do you see any of the people who have great expertise on these issues on any of those Sunday morning talk shows. It’s basically a lot of reporters talking to a lot of reporters, or reporters talking to politicians and rarely to people who could help us understand some of the behind-the-scene dynamics that are going on.”

–Susan Carroll

8. Establish Standards and Accountability Mechanisms.

While journalists worry about how they cover religion, do they pay the same care to the way they cover women, race, class, or age? News organizations must make clear to their employees what it means to be sexist or racist or ageist in their coverage and make sure that their organization’s standards are widely known.

“The reason the BBC is good is because there are rules that govern it. There are industry standards and rules that govern it, and that’s just a fact. And there used to be [standards] in this country, and then they were thrown aside, and the result is some of the slapdash stuff that we see today.”

–Christiane Amanpour

“[T]here have been enormous battles throughout American history over media policy - government policy toward the media, the structure of our media system - but [they have] largely been unreported, these public battles over what kind of a media system a modern democracy needs. And I think we’re at this stage right now—[for example] the discussions we’re having about the Internet and the failures of the commercial media—we’re at the stage where the early newspapers were in the 1830’s, where radio was in the early 1900’s, where the technology has totally destabilized the existing system and a new form of mass communication is developing. There are huge policy issues that are being debated that our...existing media system doesn’t bother to cover because it’s not in their interest for the American people to understand media policy. And so the old media system continues to dampen and leave out information about how a better media system could be constructed.”

–Juan Gonzalez

At a Glance: Tips for Media Consumers - 5 Things You Can Do Right Now

1. Exercise the Power of Your Purse.

Don't like it? Don't buy it.

2. Email the Advertisers.

If it's on the public airwaves, find out who the advertisers are and write them a note.

3. Call the Television or Radio Newsroom.

Tell those in charge what you really think. What the public demands can make a difference.

4. Write the Newspaper or Magazine Editor.

See something you don't like? Let the editor know.

5. Create and Participate in Alternative Media.

Digital media and the rise of citizen journalism offer myriad opportunities to democratize the news. Dive in.

1. Exercise the Power of Your Purse.

Don't like it? Don't buy it.

“We must take our roles as media consumers dead seriously, calling television executives and newspaper editors on their misguided choices and celebrating them when they get it right. In an increasingly corporatized media landscape, it is your dollar, not your disgust, that will most readily get big-wig attention. Don't buy sexist magazines, don't tune into to racist radio, and don't watch reductive, recycled infotainment being pawned off as news.”

- Courtney Martin

2. Email the Advertisers.

Get them where it hurts. If it's on the public airwaves, find out who the advertisers are and write them a note.

3. Call the Television or Radio Newsroom.

Viewers have an impact, as newsrooms worry about their perception and their relationship with the public. Tell those in charge what you really think. What the public demands can make a difference.

“I think it takes the participation of viewers to write and say, ‘You know what, not only didn't I like that, but I [did] like that. I liked that you had more women on your news show, I liked that you had more people of color speaking about these issues.’”

-Pamela Newkirk

4. Write the Newspaper or Magazine Editor.

See something you don't like? Let the editor know. Email and snail mail addresses for the editors are often listed on websites and in hard copy publications too.

“We wouldn't say things about Evangelical Christians [now, but] when I was ombudsman at The Washington Post people acted as if Evangelical Christians were Martians and said all the stupid kinds of things we're now saying about women. And the Evangelical Christians complained. It made a difference.”

- Geneva Overholser

5. Create and Participate in Alternative Media

Digital media and the rise of citizen journalism offer myriad opportunities to democratize the news. Dive in.

“New models of media are emerging all the time; we have citizens committing journalism themselves and we have digital media which are very interesting opportunities for us to democratize and to make a difference in ways that really we couldn't in the past, when we in old media were gatekeepers.”

- Geneva Overholser

V. *Conclusion*

We leave you with the following thoughts:

We cannot have a democracy without a fully participatory media – until women and minorities are at the table informing coverage and choices, the discussion is incomplete.

When you see a problem, speak up – behind the scenes, through contacts within the industry, or through campaigns that hold the media publicly accountable.

Please join us. Share our recommendations. Post them on your website, your Facebook page, your blog. Forward this report. Get involved in our organizations. You can learn more about current initiatives in Appendix B.

Together, we can change the way the media represents our candidates, and our world.

Appendix A

Endnotes

- ⁱ *Soundbites to Solutions Instant Poll*, The White House Project, The Women’s Media Center, Maynard Institute for Journalism Education, June 17, 2008.
- ⁱⁱ Gallup Panel survey conducted May 19-21.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Rasmussen Reports national telephone survey conducted June 6, 2008.
- ^{iv} Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, *Millenials Talk Politics: A Study of College Student Political Engagement*.
- ^v Lifetime Networks’ *Every Woman Counts* Poll conducted April 2-7, 2008.
- ^{vi} Rasmussen Reports national telephone survey conducted June 6, 2008.
- ^{vii} Cited on PBS Newshour (http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/politics/jan-june08/youthvote_05-26.html)
- ^{viii} <http://blog.thewhitehouseproject.org/2008/06/16/giving-the-daughter-test-to-mainstream-media/>
- ^{ix} Dori Maynard, “Fault Lines” framework”, <http://www.maynardije.org/programs/faultlines/>
- ^x Maynard Institute for Journalism Education
- ^{xi} ASNE.org, Newsroom Employment Census, Table A
- ^{xii} All data from <http://www.asne.org>
- ^{xiii} Check The White House Project website for an update with the latest figures by the end of 2008
- ^{xiv} Patrick Healy, “Jackson Barks, But Does He Still Have Bite?” (The New York Times, 7/11/08)
- ^{xv} The book will be published in 2009. Visit www.womensmediacenter.com for a preview.

Appendix B

Partnering Organizations

The White House Project, a national, nonpartisan, not-for-profit organization, 501(c)(3), aims to advance women's leadership in all communities and sectors, up to the U.S. presidency. By filling the leadership pipeline with a richly diverse, critical mass of women, we make American institutions, businesses and government truly representative. Through multi-platform programs, The White House Project creates a culture where America's most valuable untapped resource—women—can succeed in all realms. To advance this mission, The White House Project strives to support women and the issues that allow them to lead in their own lives and in the world. When women leaders bring their voices, vision and leadership to the table alongside men, the debate is more robust, the policy more inclusive and sustainable. For more information visit www.thewhitehouseproject.org

The Women's Media Center strives to make women visible and powerful in the media. From our founding in 2005 by some of the best minds in the feminist movement and the media industry to our advocacy and media relations work today, we are part of a strong feminist tradition that seeks to hold the media accountable for presenting the world as we know it. Our mission is to assure that women and women's experiences are reflected in the media just as women are present everywhere in the real world; that women are represented as local, national, and global sources for and subjects of the media; and that women media professionals have equal opportunities for employment and advancement. For more information visit www.womensmediacenter.com

Robert C. Maynard Institute for Journalism Education helps the nation's news media reflect America's diversity in staffing, content and business operations. Through its professional development programs, the Institute prepares managers for careers in both business- and news-sides of the journalism industry. The Institute has a history of training and placing more nonwhite journalists than any other single institution in the country. Through the 1970s and 1980s, more than 200 were trained and placed through the Institute's flagship, Summer Program for Minority Journalists, held at the University of California, Berkeley. Since 1980, almost 200 journalists of color trained for advancement to editing desks at the six-week Editing Program, which was relocated in 2000 to the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California, Berkeley. For more information visit www.mjie.org

Coalition Partners

Asian American Journalists Association
Center for Integration and Improvement of Journalism
Demos: A Network for Ideas & Action
Every Woman Counts & Lifetime Networks
National Association of Black Journalists
National Association of Hispanic Journalists
National Coalition on Black Civic Participation
National Council for Research on Women
Native American Journalist Association
Third Wave Foundation
Womensenews.org
Women's Coalition for Dignity & Diversity

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