Uncovering Race in 2008: Media, Politics and the Reporter's Eye

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"Although the media might have gotten bogged down on race, voters rose above it and they looked at the issues that were important to them and that's how they cast their votes. Voters got around the media because there are so many avenues open now."

Without a doubt, the 2008 presidential election provided a reporting experience like no other for journalists. Whether hailing from mainstream or niche media, and from traditional to new media, journalists found themselves scrambling to meet the challenge of providing news and information to fit the times. More than any other national election in recorded history, the 2008 political contest placed race front and center of sustained media attention. Does this saturation signal a profound change in the usual business of journalism, or is it an anomaly completely unrelated to past traditions and future possibilities?

This article explores the ways in which race has been reflected in traditional news reporting frameworks, drawing upon insights from unpublished interviews with reporters and journalists. These, in turn, may illustrate patterns that influence the way we read the news and the way in which we view race.

I. FOUNDATIONS: STEREOTYPING IN NEWS COVERAGE

Future interpretations of contemporary society rest upon the recorded data of the present. Too often, however, the cultural record of our diverse lives often seems obscured by absence or misinterpretation.
At its founding, the U.S. Constitution embodied the First Amendment that offered its broadest protections for freedom of the press, among other essential rights. This sweeping privilege was predicated on the press using its special status to help sustain and preserve democracy through information exchanges unfettered by the State. For journalists, there is likely not a more important legal charge inspiring their work than the latitude the Constitution affords. However, while laws structure an optimal level of informational access for journalists, other factors affect the profession's ability to deliver information that may fully explore multiple points of view and to reflect those views with little or no bias.

In the twentieth century, two major advisory commissions – the Hutchins and the Kerner Committees – both explored the role of journalism in society nearly forty years apart. While the focus of the 1947 Hutchins commission sought a renewed perspective on democracy and modern society, the Kerner Report was born out of civil unrest; however, both sounded similar concerns about the role of the press in society.2 Put simply, the media’s role in providing the broadest and most useful information for its constituents was crucial in sustaining a healthy democracy. Yet, at least one study linked growing public cynicism about government and elected political officials with journalism’s emphasis on winners and losers.3 Here, scholars argue that in their quest for more provocative reporting styles garnering the highest ratings and the greatest profits, media organizations have over-emphasized negative traits and, as a result, fed a public cynicism that has not only diminished the respect for government, but lessened it for the media as well.4 That this pattern of negative reporting feeds into a more conservative presentation of politics in the media gets support from Robert Entman’s analysis of media bias observing that “corporate advertisers and owners” wield strong influence on what the media produce.5

Journalists and reporters in all media, especially since the 1967 Kerner Commission-era, have grappled with the challenge of race reporting as a function of their professional and social responsibility to our communities. Marked by a series of explosive racial confrontations, the Kerner

4 See id.
Commission members warned against the imminent fracture of the American society into two unequal nations – one black, one white.\textsuperscript{6} It was a dichotomy that, unfortunately, reduced the complexity of diversity into stark and opposing symbols – notably, black versus white – which has arguably influenced journalism’s race reporting ever since.

That the majority press followed an unstated policy for decades of omitting coverage of minorities, especially African Americans, from its news pages was an industry-wide practice that transcended prejudices within individual reporters. The print media were not alone. Defining the operation of stereotypes in mass media contexts, Wilson and Gutierrez delineated how differently they were projected for different ethnic groups of color, distinguishing these patterns as “negative stereotyping”\textsuperscript{7} operating outside the bounds of effective shorthand communication. Even with the Kerner Report’s chiding of the media on racial failings, studies have continued to show the dogged presence of stereotyping\textsuperscript{8} practices. Socially constructed realities, with their inherent mutability, highlight the difficulty faced by reporters who are trained to report facts in light of such a nebulous “reality” as race. Yet, when it comes to studies about political reporting, Robert M. Entman notes that when media are examined as a whole, studies are not conclusive in proving a consistent pattern of journalistic bias for Republicans over Democrats, or conservatives over liberals.\textsuperscript{9} However, looking at the individual performances of reporters who grapple with race, bias and politics can reveal much about the foundational processes in operation, as the news is built one story at a time. All news, in the end, is

\textsuperscript{6} OTTO KERNER, REPORT OF THE NATIONAL ADVISORY COMMISSION ON CIVIL DISORDERS, SUMMARY OF REPORT I (U.S. Gov’t Printing Office, 1968), available at http://eisenhowerfoundation.org/docs/kerner.pdf (“This is our basic conclusion: Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate but unequal.”).

\textsuperscript{7} See CLINT C. WILSON II & FELIX GUTIERREZ, RACE, MULTICULTURALISM, AND THE MEDIA 61 (1995) (noting stereotyping can be a useful tool when used without prejudice).


\textsuperscript{9} Entman, supra note 5, at 164 (noting that content bias does exist in media coverage of minorities).
narrative and journalists are the individual authors who perform the daily craft of interviewing, interpreting and writing about the world we inhabit.

II. JOURNALISM AND THE PROFESSIONAL LANGUAGE OF FACT

Journalism’s trajectory as a modern profession exploded exponentially when, around 1455, the German printer Johannes Gutenberg adapted the Chinese invention of text printing into moveable type with Roman letters. The explosion of books, newspapers, magazines and other periodicals created the foundations of later electronic forms of mass media. As journalism’s professional standing crystallized in the nineteenth century and expanded into the twentieth century, the reportorial voice defined itself in practice and training to take on an authoritative and “objective” stance.

How this “objective” reportorial voice tackled the socially constructed, often “subjective” topic of race is the focus of this extended study. While historical biases in news coverage of ethnicity and race have been documented, what is missing is an “insider” account of the challenges inherent in capturing the news as it occurs in contemporaneous times and settings. The method used to explore this study centered upon the essential formula of conducting journalism, centering upon the reporting paradigm known as the “5Ws and an H.” While formulaic, the 5Ws and an H remind reporters to construct a complete story by seeking the who, what where, when, why and how of a situation in order to understand its meaning.

Students of both rhetoric and law may recognize similarities between this construct and the classical rhetorical concept of stasis, which very generally posits essential questions as the basis of forensic or legal reasoning about an issue. In her astute analysis of how scientific information became translated for public audiences, Fahnestock uses stasis theory to explain how its four essential ordering questions help shape articles targeted for different audiences. She identifies the following as essential to stasis theory:

- What exactly happened and who did it?

• What was the nature of, or definition of, the act?
• What were the mitigating or aggravating circumstances of the act?
• Who has jurisdiction and what action is called for?13

Fahnestock's analysis provides a useful model for connecting classical argument theory to contemporary media practice.14 Applied to journalistic protocols, stasis theory offered a way of assessing a starting point for inquiry, and these core questions informed the design of this study on race and journalists' perceptions. Questions posed in this initial study, extrapolated to make a comparison with the "5Ws and an H" journalistic paradigm, centered around the following essential topics:

• What is race and what story topics are racial topics?
• Who are the best sources to interview for stories involving race and who are the best subjects?
• When is race timely?
• Where are the best locations and topics for uncovering stories about race?
• Why is the inclusion of racial information important to your audience and do you explain the reasons?
• How does race become written into your story?

Each journalist interviewed responded to the same fourteen specific, but open-ended, questions generated from the six general topics identified above. At the end of each interview, participants also had the opportunity to add new comments, or clarify any earlier answers. In these ways, the journalists themselves defined the issues concerning race and journalism using their own terms, sensibilities and experiences. The fourteen open-ended questions generated, as expected, a wide range of answers. None of the participants had any prior knowledge of the specific questions, only the general topic, so the answers were fairly spontaneous. Also, as anticipated, when confronted with questions that clearly had many possible answers, the respondents often initially answered by saying, "It depends," until they created contexts through their personal examples and experiences which framed their responses. This article focuses on a portion of their responses,

14 See id. at 290 (explaining that stasis theory is a neglected component of classical rhetorical invention).
limited to how journalists who cover politics today saw race constructed within such stories.

III. SETTING THE AGENDA FOR RACE: PRESIDENT CLINTON’S “ONE AMERICA” INITIATIVE AND 2008 POLITICS

Ten years ago, President Clinton prompted the media to focus on race. As he delivered the commencement address at the University of San Diego on June 14, 1997, then-President Bill Clinton announced his plans to launch a national race initiative that would invite the people to “learn together, talk together and act together” around issues of race with the goal of moving toward a more united country reflective of the looming twenty-first century diversities. After a series of town hall meetings, speeches, announcements and locally based activities, this “One America” initiative formally concluded its work on September 18, 1998 with the presentation of final recommendations from the advisory panel’s seven members. Among the report’s considerations were policy recommendations, models for engaging communities in ongoing dialogues, a survey of best practices, and suggestions for recruiting new leadership for the future. But in the context of its times, the efforts of the Commission at its most positive juncture, by holding hearings across the country “in search of solutions” to racial division, was a catalyst for probing tough social policy issues such as Affirmative Action. It also helped validate subsequent institutional forums for race, such as Mississippi’s William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation, established in 1999 on the university campus of Ole Miss that previously resisted racial integration with violence and high-profile political opposition.

While President Clinton gave voice to this effort from the highest national office, the call for a dialogue on race came from the influence of ordinary men who gathered in October 1995 in Washington, D.C. for what would later be known as the “Million Man March.” In the immediate

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15 President Bill Clinton, Remarks by the President at University of California at San Diego Commencement (June 14, 1997), available at http://www.ed.gov/PressReleases/06-1997/970614.html.
18 R.L. Cole & K.S. Adams, Mississippi: An Emerging Democracy Creating a Culture of Civic Participation Among Formerly Oppressed People, 4 NEBULA 333, 334 (2007) (noting that, despite progress made, there is still a long way to go in Mississippi race relations).
aftermath of a march that drew hundreds of thousands of men, mostly African-American, to a march and rally in the nation's capital, six lawmakers from diverse backgrounds first publicly raised the idea of a commission to study race, evoking the memory and influence of the 1968 Kerner Commission as exemplar.19

Ironically, President Clinton could not have envisioned how much this discourse about race would envelop the national and international political dialogue in 2008, and invade his own private/public life as he faced accusations of playing politics with race during his wife's own fierce competition for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination.20 Nevertheless, in 2008 – some ten years after Clinton's national call for conversation – how has the sensibility about race shifted during the intervening years and affected our views of its role in media communication? In-depth interviews of journalists working in 1997 provide important benchmark insights into their thoughts, motives and actions as they have covered race and diversity within the political sphere. As a collective discourse, these earlier interviews give insight into how journalists' perceptions about covering race were constructed, reflecting some of the strategies and motives they employ in the coverage of race and politics. Then, in 2008, some commentaries from journalists garnered during and after the election21 give hints as to how the presidential race affected, in their view, the coverage of race as a social topic.

What media readers and audiences following political coverage themselves must have noticed were the controversial flashpoints of the 2008 elections – those occasions when heavily reported stories focusing on controversies, mistakes and gaffes have captured our attention. Indeed, the flashpoints of race and politics in the 2008 presidential political season seemed to saturate daily reportage and commentary in ways that were unavoidable to us. Consider these examples:

- Headlines seized upon racially-tinged statements by Geraldine Ferraro, a supporter of Sen. Hillary Clinton's bid for the Democratic presidential nomination, when she implied that

21 As part of an extended project, a new series of planned 2008-09 interviews with journalists were begun as this article was being prepared.
Barack Obama’s race, instead of his qualifications, contributed to his success;\(^2\)
- Opinion polls, such as one sponsored by the Associated Press, repeatedly surveyed potential voters about the effect of race on their political thinking;\(^2\) and
- Art meant as satire, as in the July 21, 2008 *New Yorker* magazine cover’s use of the power of visual rhetoric to make a picture speak volumes about racial fears.\(^2\)

Still, in a political season highly tinged with racial topics, some journalists questioned the content and the context of most coverage. Blogger Jeff Chang responded to the plethora of media-sponsored “race polls,” bemoaning the fact that the majority media consistently ignored signs of new demographic realignments around race in the face of their own poll-generated evidence pointing “solidly to a new majority.”\(^2\)

Responding to Sen. Obama’s March 18, 2008 speech on race, another cyber-reporter, Chris Weigant of the *Huffington Post*, argued that Obama’s campaign marked a juncture where the future of the country rested upon a recognition that it was “heading away from seeing race as a black/white, one dimensional scale.”\(^2\)

**IV. BENCHMARKS: HOW JOURNALISTS REPORTED ON THEMSELVES AND DEMOGRAPHICS**

Ten years ago, such mediated comments were rare if existent at all. Certainly a comparison of Lexis-Nexis figures show that the subject of race and politics barely even surfaced during the Bill Clinton political season as compared to the Barack Obama season. In a search of all major media references to politics and race from November 10, 1996 to November 10, 1996.
1998, there were 362 results; during that same two-year time period from November 10, 2006 to November 10, 2008, there were 1,000 results.

Under the auspices of Poynter, a training resource for media professionals, I compiled a stratified mailing list of 138 journalists from past participants in Poynter workshops within a two-year time frame and from other referrals. The pool of potential respondents included journalists from all nine regions of the United States as defined by the U.S. Census bureau: New England, Middle Atlantic, East North Central, West North Central, South Atlantic, East South Central, West South Central, Mountain, and Pacific. Participants were interviewed at scheduled intervals from October 3 to November 24, 1997 in sessions that lasted from ten to forty minutes. All told, the responses of sixty interviewees generated more than 300 pages of single-spaced transcripts. Responses were classified according to the frequency with which they appeared from all interviewees, and were then grouped accordingly. Fifty-five percent of the participants were women and forty-five percent were men. The greatest number of respondents came from the South Atlantic (twenty-five percent), followed by the Middle Atlantic (seventeen percent). Overall, journalists of color were well represented, comprising thirty-five percent of the respondents. All journalists worked for newspapers, with one respondent specifically identifying himself as a website editor. Finally, the participating journalists had a broad span of working experience, from reporters newly entering the newsroom, to those with over thirty years in the field.

V. TAKING AN INTERIOR VIEW: WRITING RACE, WRITING JOURNALISM

April M. Washington, a political reporter, with the Rocky Mountain News, covered the 2008 presidential election as part of her responsibilities and was in Chicago when President-elect Barack Obama made his acceptance speech. An African American, she also participated in the 1997 study of journalists and race. In a second interview inviting her to consider similar questions posed in the original study, Washington offered new insights. While her responses alone cannot be generalized as research, her comments give an insightful comparison to journalists’ comments on race given a decade ago. Clearly seeing a change in the way race became a topic of media coverage, Washington explained the key difference between now and then:
Well it was the fact that you had a black man running. It’s as simple as that. In our longstanding history we’ve never addressed race head-on or honestly in our country. Barack Obama was an extraordinary candidate with an incredible story. He came seemingly out of nowhere. He threw his hat in the ring and continued until it became clear that he was going to become the Democratic nominee. And you knew that there were going to be certain voters in the South who weren’t going to vote for him because of his race, according to the pundits and even according to Hillary Clinton herself. So there was no way race was not going to emerge as one of the key issues in the campaign. He did a beautiful job trying to downplay the role of race so it did not dictate the outcome of the presidential race. Sure there were other racial issues that could have been discussed before now: blacks being perceived as a monolithic vote for the Democrats, or how the Republicans were going after the black and Hispanic vote, or issues in certain urban areas that were not being addressed by the politicians running for office. These were the undercurrents. In the past, Jesse Jackson and Alan Keyes ran, but they were never considered serious candidates. But things could change now.28

Although race exploded as a key issue in the 2008 political season, reporters had a longstanding recognition, even unstated, that politics and race were intertwined subjects. When asked their opinions about which story topics were “racial topics,” journalists ranked “politics” near the top: the greatest number of responses cited “education” (twenty-three percent) and “government” at all levels (eighteen percent) as racial topics. Next, in fifteen percent of the responses, reporters contended that “every topic” could be racial if developed that way.29 One white male reporter, a staff writer for a mid-size Middle Atlantic newspaper, expressed how race and journalism typically merged in the daily work of these journalists: “In terms of what I write, most stories that have to do with politics and government are in a way racial stories because they deal with who gets affected by what.”30 When scholar Henry Louis Gates identified the myriad ways in which our society uses the term race, he argued that the word was more meaningful as a symbolic term designed to mark perceived differences than as a term measuring observable facts.31 Similarly, Nobel

28 Interview with April M. Washington (Nov. 14, 2008), supra note 1.
30 Interview with anonymous white, male reporter for Mid-Atlantic newspaper (Nov. 17, 1997) (on file with author; author’s interview #89MN.
31 HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR., “RACE,” WRITING, AND DIFFERENCE 4-5 (1986) (explaining that race is the ultimate expression of difference because of the arbitrary nature of its application, particularly among differences between cultures, linguistic groups and adherents of specific belief systems).
Prize winner Toni Morrison sees the American literary story of race as a juxtaposition of some of our defining ideas of blackness and whiteness.\textsuperscript{32} Furthermore, Christopher Campbell places the activity of reporting about racial matters within the framework of the media's role in creating and sustaining "cultural myths." Such myths are not like the grandiose stories of bygone eras, but rather are the small stories that represent ways in which modern society attempts to explain, in reductionist fashion, its own contradictions and complexities.\textsuperscript{33} Campbell warns that the media — which pride themselves on reporting on matters of "common sense" — fail to relate that which is either common to a multicultural society or sensible when diverse views are excluded.

Question three in the survey asked the reporters simply to "define race." Sixty percent defined race in a singular phrase, sentence or idea, although not all in this group picked the same one. Forty percent, however, gave multiple definitions for race, indicating that they saw it more as a variable, rather than a fixed quality. Thus, the following answers illustrate the frequency with which certain answers appeared, noting that forty percent of the respondents gave answers from more than one of the following categories. Forty percent of the responses defined race as "skin color" or some other parameter involving distinguishing physical characteristics; twenty-eight percent defined it as "ethnicity;" and thirteen percent of responses included some aspect where they considered race as either a "social or political" construction. Similarly, twelve percent identified race as a concept whose role was to point out "differences" between people; and seven percent saw race as simply a "problem" or a "conflict."

VI. GOING TO THE SOURCE AND GOING AWAY FROM IT

In a convergence of ideas about how journalists defined race and how race became an element in their news stories — especially those about politics — these reporters revealed a great deal about their decision-making. Patterns emerged reflecting what I call the traditional racial triggers for news and politics. These include five recurring initiating circumstances journalists used to integrate the role of race in their work. Wary of appearing to force the racial angle into their individual work, journalists

\textsuperscript{32} Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination 6-8 (1992) (indicating that Morrison uses the term "Africanism" as a connotative and denotative term for the blackness that African people have come to signify).

\textsuperscript{33} Christopher P. Campbell, Race, Myth, and the News 15 (1995) (describing the author's own view of modern cultural myth as a society's powerful system of belief, though it may not accurately reflect all of that society's constituencies).
seized upon strategies where they used five external factors to write about race: an issue/event, a media-created racial topic, a provocative quote from subject or source, a source initiative, and the reporting of authentic experiences. The first two instances result from social cues or social contexts; the last three come directly from reporters’ interaction with persons who are either the subjects of stories or with people to whom journalists go to for information. Some excerpts from selected interviews give insight into how these journalists defined their progression through race and reporting in their own words.

A stasis-defined view of journalists’ work would anticipate that these reporters would begin their investigation with an operationalized definition of “race” as a topic. One of the complexities facing these writers of objective fact was how they attempted to grapple with the shifting, sometimes nebulous terrain of race and identity. For instance, one African-American reporter who worked for a Southwestern daily newspaper said, “Race, to me, means different ethnic groups or a certain ethnic group, and the culture surrounding that ethnic group — [including] their lifestyles and their hereditary backgrounds.”

Echoing the cultural connotations of identity, a Latina reporter for another daily newspaper in the Southwest saw race as “a cultural definition, as well as a scientific one, or biological one.” Finally, an Anglo female reporter who worked in the suburban office of a large daily newspaper on the East Coast eschewed cultural definitions in lieu of ones that could be classified: “I guess race is separate from ethnic origins because you can have several ethnic groups under one race, so I kind of think of it along the main lines of white, black, Asian, Native American. If you were asking me to decide who is of a different race, I think of it very demographically.”

In 2008, political reporter April M. Washington operated in a similar, broadly constructed context of race, one that tried to acknowledge commonly held scientific beliefs about race, yet is also sensitive to the social nuances of that that the concept of race implies: “My definition of race would be the particular ethnic group according to scholars . . . there’s Negroid, Caucasoid, Mongoloid which is Asian . . . but in the context of politics and social, race is defined by our own societal ways of looking at

34 Interview with anonymous African-American reporter for Southwestern newspaper (Oct. 3, 1997) (on file with author; author’s interview #01FN).
35 Interview with anonymous Latina reporter for Southwestern newspaper (Oct. 6, 1997) (on file with author; author’s interview #03FN).
36 Interview with anonymous Anglo female reporter (Nov. 17, 1997) (on file with author; author’s interview #08FN).
UNCOVERING RACE IN 2008

Given the variability of race, when these journalists were asked, “What story topics are racial topics?,” some of the most popular answers clearly reflected issues that were current, either nationally or locally, at the time of their interviews. Some familiar topics where journalists immediately recognized the potential racial content included Affirmative Action (twelve percent), Health (six percent) and Crime (five percent). However, the highest percentages of respondents cited Education (twenty-three percent) and Government at all levels (eighteen percent) as inherently racial topics. In fifteen percent of the responses, reporters contended that “every topic” could be a racial one if developed that way. Interestingly, eleven percent considered “problems” or “conflict” as racial topics, indicating how strongly reporting on race, for some, was linked to contentious relationships.

Once journalists know the subject of their reporting, they earnestly work to develop substance around their initial ideas. No aspect is more significant to this process than the pursuit and use of sources. When it comes to most topics – such as science, education, medicine, and religion – the expert sources seem obvious. But when it comes to race and ethnicity, the “experts” are not as clear-cut. When asked, “Who makes the best sources for stories about race?,” the highest number of responses, thirty-four percent, rated people of color, or minorities, followed by “anyone, regardless of race (twenty percent).” The next highest categories were “experts” and “the actual subjects of the story,” both responses which ranked equally (eighteen percent), followed by “official spokespersons” (six percent). Sources impel the construction of news stories, and when race is an element, journalists rely upon their sources to not only raise the issue of race, but to interpret it.

For one Anglo male assistant editor who worked for a major daily newspaper on the East Coast, the best sources for stories about race were “people from a variety of racial backgrounds,” although he noted that an exception to this would be “academics.”38 In Arizona, an Anglo female reporter, whose beat included urban affairs, believed that facts combined with the “experts” who shared the same background as the subjects of her story represented the best formula: “I would say that people who are of the group that you are writing about [are the best sources] . . . and sometimes

37 Interview with April M. Washington (Nov. 14, 2008), supra note 1.
38 Interview with anonymous Anglo male assistant editor based on the East Coast (Oct. 31, 1997) (on file with author; author’s interview #60MN).
statistics help out as well.”39 In Houston, a Latino reporter sought experts from the public through “community organizations,” explaining further that “[a] lot tend to be political leaders, primarily because they have a much better understanding and use of public relations techniques.”40 In these examples, journalists underscored the prevailing practice that gave deference to either the subjects of their stories or official experts, such as academics, to introduce racial topics. But, when government and politically-related topics rank as the second most likely category for racial stories, why did these journalists routinely go to the subjects and experts without questioning government officials directly? One Anglo female reporter in Florida put it bluntly:

Sometimes it’s not easy to get government officials or police or people like that to say this is a racial issue. You have to try and sometimes get that in there. Sometimes the best way is just to have victims or the everyday people that you write about say that they believe it was. Because I do believe those in authority are hesitant to brand anything a racial issue.41

VII. WAITING FOR RELEASE: POLITICAL TRIGGERS IN ACTION

The five triggers seen a decade ago – issue/event, media-created racial topic, provocative quote, source initiative, and authentic experiences – were still visible in 2008 coverage. The difference was that they were not used to force the issue into the news, but used to frame the way race became the news. When, as in the first trigger, an issue or event erupts, race becomes unavoidable: “Sometimes racial issues are raised during any political campaign. So, then it’s just set right there before you.”42 In the 2008 election cycle, officials and journalists may have wanted to steer clear of racial issues, but, as Washington said, Obama’s dominant presence in the electoral process forced the issue into the mainstream.43 As another reporter put it, the media follow others more than they would like to admit: “I think that’s a shortcoming in some ways, but usually there’s a news event that happens that sparks it. And as much as newspapers like to say

39 Interview with anonymous female Anglo reporter from Arizona (Nov. 12, 1997) (on file with author; author’s interview #61MN).
40 Interview with anonymous Latino reporter from Houston (Oct. 13, 1997) (on file with author; author’s interview #74MN).
41 Interview with anonymous Anglo female reporter from Florida (Oct. 31, 1997) (on file with author; author’s interview #19MN).
42 Interview with anonymous interviewee (Oct. 31, 1997) (on file with author; author’s interview #19FN).
43 Interview with April M. Washington (Nov. 14, 2008), supra note 1.
they’re leading, usually they’re following somebody else who has decided to do something.”

A second political trigger, the media-created trigger, results when journalists find ways to create a story around a topic by generating or creating an angle, and then finding the information to back it up. This results from the perception that a sensitive topic like race needs to be addressed while waiting for direction from official sources. Reporters, like one female Anglo reporter who worked in Memphis, knew that race was often the silent, unexpressed topic on everyone’s horizon: “[I]f you look at the way race is covered in newspapers across the South even ten years ago, much less twenty or thirty or longer than that, it would be pretty embarrassing . . . [R]ace may not be in black and white in print in the story, but it’s in the editors’ minds, it’s in the reporters’ minds, [and] it’s in the sources’ minds.”

During the 2008 political campaigns, media enhanced their coverage of race by sponsoring opinion polls, creating special forums through interviews and public meetings where racial opinions could be canvassed, and incorporating commentaries and panel discussions on race as part of routine coverage. By showcasing these media initiatives, journalists cushioned their own latent curiosity about the racial dynamics in the 2008 election season by cloaking a sensitive topic with studies, statistics and experts. Such forums also made it easier to engage otherwise reticent politicians and other officials in these discussions by creating a racialized topic against which they could react.

When a controversial comment or statement breaks in the news, it symbolizes an example of the third political trigger that sparks racial content in news coverage. Although unpredictable, seasoned reporters know that such gaffes are inevitable in the political arena, as one African-American male reporting from Atlanta noted: “I cover politics and frankly you have a lot of people who make this stuff [an] issue. They say stupid things and so suddenly it becomes an issue where you have someone with influence in the community saying something dumb. And so you can get

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44 Interview with anonymous reporter (Nov. 3, 1997) (on file with author; author’s interview #143MN).
45 Interview with anonymous female Anglo reporter from Memphis (Nov. 10, 1997) (on file with author; author’s interview #17N).
46 See News & Notes: Understanding Racial Perceptions (NPR broadcast Nov. 21, 2008); see, e.g., CNN Presents: Black in America (CNN broadcast July 11, 2008); see Discussing Race in U.S. Politics (PBS broadcast May 7, 2008); see also Community Forums: Moving Beyond Race in the Presidential Election presented by National Underground Railroad Freedom Center (Sept. 2, 2008), http://freedomcenter.org/freedom-forum/index.php/2008/08/the-presidential-election-race-dialogue-or-divide/.
In the 2008 election, the campaign trail seemed rife with gaffes by notable figures, and the media attention on the racial complexities of the national campaigns seemed heightened. Whereas in previous political seasons such comments would serve to sensationalize the racial dimension of a story without much depth or follow-up, the 2008 election campaign offered a context where racially tinged remarks could not be seen as simply the product of aberrant accidents. Thus, then-candidate Senator Obama used the occasion of a flurry of coverage about remarks made by his former pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, to make a major campaign speech about race. Still, in Washington’s view, reporters were not always as discerning as they could have been in their interpretations of such remarks:

I think the media blew the Jesse Jackson comment way out of proportion. What the media did [not] get were the generational politics at play... [T]here was some envy there and some generational politics there and I think it was overplayed. But you also saw that the minute Barack Obama was elected, Jesse transcended any bitter feelings he might have had because he was crying like the rest of America. And he was part of the tradition and part of the struggle to get Barack Obama there.

As the subject of much coverage about race, Senator Obama was rarely the source of racial comments, walking what Washington called “a thin line” during his campaign in order to defuse potential backlash. However, the fourth political trigger, source initiative, operated in both previous political coverage, as well as the 2008 election season, when those interviewed would introduce the topic. Unlike the “gotcha” accidental slips represented in the third trigger, this source-initiated interjection of racial comments represented a planned or intentional introduction of the subject. The city editor of a major Florida-based newspaper said, “[T]he racial element would be in most cases introduced by the players in the story.”

Much like the experts whom journalists said they relied upon, these “players” most often were observers, analysts and/or commentators, whose introduction of racial information had credibility as a result of their position, training or data.

In contrast, the final trigger to be discussed – authentic experience –

47 Interview with anonymous African-American male reporter (Nov. 1, 1997) (on file with author; author’s interview #28MN).
48 Interview with April M. Washington (Nov. 14, 2008), supra note 1.
49 Interview with anonymous city editor of a major Florida-based newspaper (Oct. 31, 1997) (on file with author; author’s interview #111MN).
becomes a part of news coverage because these sources offer one singular justification for their views: their life memories. Traditionally, in the dichotomy between “hard” news that is immediate and “soft” news that evokes different time periods, the role of authentic experiences have traditionally relegated to the occasional historical or retrospective stories. Despite these restrictions, one Boston-based editor, an Anglo male, argued that life stories had more of a role in everyday news coverage than had been the custom:

I am contending that race, class and ethnicity are crucial subjects to cover, even if they don’t fit the traditional definitions of news. Because... the story of America is a story of all these various groups being thrown in together, competing for jobs, competing for status, competing for safety and security, for education. Competing for a chance. And we have had as a result of this some of the most extraordinary tragedies and some of the most wonderful success stories at the same time. That’s the ongoing story in America.50

However, according to Washington, in the 2008 election season, such authentic experiences played an intrinsically valuable role, one that became a recurring addition to the presidential coverage as candidate Obama’s election became realized:

Sometimes your best sources... are people who have lived through it. Sometimes you need the authentic voices to say why this is so important. Like Obama’s election. Why was it so important to Black America? Why did you see people crying on television? He is walking on the shoulders of all the people who came before him, who didn’t get the right to sit next to someone in a decent school, who died for the right to vote. He’s walking on all of those shoulders. So for someone who grew up in the South, and who lived through Jim Crow, who never thought they would see this in his or her lifetime, and who probably was even prevented from voting... well, this election was a miracle to them and you’re not going to get that from me, or a scholar who studies race relations. You’re only going to get that from someone who lived through it and says “this is a miracle to me” and says why. It makes powerful journalism.51

50 Interview with anonymous Boston-based, Anglo male editor (Oct. 15, 1997) (on file with author; author’s interview # 140MN).
51 Interview with April M. Washington (Nov. 14, 2008), supra note 1.
VIII. NEW JOURNALISM FOR A NEW DEMOGRAPHIC

Is the United States moving to a post-racial stage, or an era when race functions as an irrelevant factor in the distribution of power, privilege and opportunity in society? Social observers and media commentators will continue to debate whether or not the effect of the Obama candidacy and subsequent election has single-handedly ushered us into a new age of racial consciousness. More interviews with journalists who worked in all aspects of the media during the 2008 presidential election season will be revealing. Breaking open the parameters under which journalists typically view race can free the individual reporter, editor and photographer to use news judgment much more creatively when it comes to all stories in and out of the political season. This kind of active engagement can have a real impact on the daily enterprise of journalism, as reporters consider what it really means to go beyond the surface of the story.52

52 One of the best illustrations of how journalists have put new engagement strategies with racial topics to work in the daily practice of journalism can be found in The Authentic Voice: The Best Reporting on Race and Ethnicity. See THE AUTHENTIC VOICE: THE BEST REPORTING ON RACE AND ETHNICITY (Arlene Notoro Morgan, Alice Irene Pifer & Keith Woods eds., 2006).