

## Invisible, Mysterious, and Inconsequential: The Absence of Women in 2004 Presidential Campaign Coverage

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### **Abstract**

Discussions of leadership and its inherent qualities surface in the United States most visibly every four years during the presidential election. In defining the terms, tone, and parameters, the news media set the public's agenda in these discussions as they do most other issues and events of salience. Mainstream U.S. newspaper coverage during the latter stages of the 2004 presidential election modeled the campaign machismo of the two major political candidates, Republican incumbent George W. Bush and Democratic challenger John F. Kerry.

The national electorate was nearly evenly divided between the two candidates, lending importance to states that could "swing" the election either way, in particular, the state of Ohio. A close examination of two Ohio newspapers that were in step with the dominant framing of the national discussion on leadership reveals a marked absence of women. From depicting the essential qualification of leadership as masculinity to translating women's issues to fit a male-defined agenda, the news excluded women from meaningful discussion of leadership.

### **Introduction**

U.S. newspapers defined qualities of national leadership as they helped readers, a.k.a. potential voters, sort through the issues of a contentious presidential election in the fall of 2004. The political season featured presidential debates, but only between the top contenders of the two major political parties, effectively squelching voices of third-party opposition. This two-party dominance was reflected in the news framing of the campaign as a two-man debate, effectively silencing women's voices. Yet, with the polls showing an evenly divided electorate, the two campaigns were targeting key blocs of voters, including women.

Nowhere was coverage of the national election more important than in the Midwestern state of Ohio. The populous state's ability to pivot, or "swing," an election held the nation's focus, including that of the Republican and Democratic campaigns. The candidates repeatedly visited the state, which kept election coverage on Ohio's front pages. Late-term issues that arose in Ohio, particularly with regard to new voter

registration and voter challenges, took on prominence in light of their potential impact on the national process.

Paying particular attention to the portrayal of women in the unfolding election story, this analysis investigates how the latter stages of the national campaigns were framed in newspaper coverage for readers in Northeast Ohio, a region of heavy newspaper penetration and home to over one-third of Ohio's voters. The question this analysis sought to answer was, With regard to women's roles and representation, how was national leadership framed?

### **A Review of the Literature**

The literature of framing scholarship points to the fact that *how* media cover stories is as important as *what* stories they cover. Journalists construct the representations that news consumers use to make sense of events and issues. Robert Entman noted that a framing process was inherent in the selection and emphasis of some aspects over others,<sup>1</sup> which are the practices journalists routinely employ to express the newsworthiness of events and the salience of issues.

One manner through which news media bring credibility to their portrayal of events is by including opinion of expert sources in their stories. A study of the coverage of the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., that compared print and broadcast news found a consistency among how the newspapers framed the events. Yet that study also found that the newspapers used more diverse sources in their stories than

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<sup>1</sup> Robert M. Entman, "Framing toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993).

did broadcast media in the coverage of the national crises.<sup>2</sup> Another examination of expert sources found a preponderance of male sources in news stories. It also found that having a female reporter in a byline was a predictor of finding female sources in the story.<sup>3</sup> Recent research in cognitive processing has explored how the use of sources in news stories can cue gender stereotyping in readers.<sup>4</sup> In another study, Kathleen Endres found a close connection between a newspaper trade magazine and the values of the industry it covered, particularly in its reliance on “the close knit – primarily male -- newspaper community. In the few instances where another perspective was offered, the comments and/or perspectives of women (outsiders to the industry) were trivialized and used as evidence to delegitimize”<sup>5</sup> the issue of Civil Rights.

Contemporary studies have built on the early feminist observations of Gaye Tuchman to develop a body of research that discusses how women and women’s issues are framed in news coverage.<sup>6</sup> Karen Ross, in furthering her research on women, politics, and media, suggested that the practice of neutrality that news media use to frame female politicians and women’s views is the newsroom rendition of society’s patriarchal practice, replicating the hierarchy of power in much the same manner as the larger

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<sup>2</sup> Xigen Li and Ralph Izard, "9/11 Attack Coverage Reveals Similarities, Differences," *Newspaper Research Journal* 24, no. 1 (2003).

<sup>3</sup> Cory L. Armstrong, "The Influence of Reporter Gender on Source Selection in Newspaper Stories," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (2004).

<sup>4</sup> Cory L. Armstrong and Michelle R. Nelson, "How Newspaper Sources Trigger Gender Stereotypes," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 82, no. 4 (2005).

<sup>5</sup> Kathleen L. Endres, "'Help-Wanted Female': Editor & Publisher Frames a Civil Rights Issue," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (2004).

<sup>6</sup> Gaye Tuchman, Arlene K. Daniels, and James Benet, eds., *Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). See, for example, Julie Andsager, "Framing Women’s Health with a Sense-Making Approach: Magazine Coverage of Breast Cancer and Implants," *Health Communication*, 13, no. 2 (2001); Andsager, "How Interest Groups Attempt to Shape Public Opinion with Competing News Frames," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 77, no. 1 (2000).

culture.<sup>7</sup> Ongoing research has examined working journalists, with Marie Hardin and Stacie Shain uncovering a symbolic annihilation of female sports writers.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, in a 30-year overview, Carolyn Byerly observed that women – through their work in the news industry, feminist movements, and alternative media – have brought change to the newsroom.<sup>9</sup>

Lana F. Rakow and Kimberlie Kranich argued that since women were so seldom covered in news, their rare appearance functioned as a “sign” for “woman,” and that the meaning of the sign carried an assumption of whiteness.<sup>10</sup> When women are covered in mainstream news, it is often as victims. In a narrative analysis of how news stories covered domestic violence, Marian Meyers found that the male aggressor was portrayed as a victim – of society or his own instincts – and that the coverage represented the actual victim, by virtue of her gender, as deserving of the violence.<sup>11</sup> “Women, Men and Media” studies gauged women’s representation on the front pages of U.S. newspapers through bylines, photographs, and story references in the final decade of the twentieth century. The studies did not find that women’s front-page representation met parity with women in the culture or kept pace with women’s increased presence in the newsroom. Spurred by these findings, the researchers established a watchdog group to monitor

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<sup>7</sup> Karen Ross, “Women Framed: The Gendered Turn in Mediated Politics,” in *Women and Media: International Perspectives*, ed. Karen Ross and Carolyn M. Byerly (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004). In a larger context, recent decades have seen the development of a body of research that, although not necessarily employing framing theory, examines women in political communication and the representation of women in media, including works such as Pippa Norris, ed., *Women, Media & Politics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Marie Hardin and Stacie Shain, “Strength in Numbers? The Experiences and Attitudes of Women in Sports Media Careers,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 82, no.4 (2005).

<sup>9</sup> Carolyn M. Byerly, “Feminist Interventions in Newsrooms,” in *Women and Media: International Perspectives*, ed. Karen Ross and Carolyn M. Byerly (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Lana F. Rakow and Kimberlie Kranich, “Women as Sign in Television News,” *Journal of Communication* 41, no. 1 (1991).

<sup>11</sup> Marian Meyers, “News of Battering,” in *Social Meanings of News: A Text-Reader*, ed. Dan Berkowitz (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997).

progress and encouraged other researchers to get involved<sup>12</sup> An international assessment of similar studies prompted Margaret Gallagher to observe that, given the embedded nature of news, to have expected a leap in the percentage of women would have been “naïve.”<sup>13</sup> Such observations have encouraged researchers to go “beyond the body count.”<sup>14</sup>

Cynthia Carter and Linda Steiner noted that feminist research has often relied on the concept of hegemony developed by Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci to explain how the elite build compliance among those holding less power in order to maintain the status quo, and that media are complicit in this maintenance. They determined that, with women’s alternative media recasting the representation of women, the reproduction of inequality through narrow definitions of femininity in the mainstream media called for constant renegotiation in order to maintain male dominance.<sup>15</sup>

Alternative news sources, such as the one founded by Rita Henley Jensen, *Women’s eNews*, provide feminist media benchmarking for mainstream newspaper coverage. According to its mission statement, *Women’s eNews* is an independent news service founded in 2000 “to bridge the gender gap in media coverage of issues of particular concern to women.” Evidence of such a gender gap can still be charted across mainstream news media coverage. Well in advance of the fall 2004 election, popular

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<sup>12</sup> Nancy J. Woodhull and Betty Friedan, "Women, Men and Media: Next Steps for Journalism & Mass Communication Educators," (1989).

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Gallagher, "The Impact of Monitoring Media Images of Women," in *Critical Readings: Media and Gender*, ed. Cynthia Carter and Linda Steiner, *Issues in Cultural and Media Studies* (Maidenhead, England: Open University Press, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> See Marjan de Bruin and Karen Ross, eds., *Gender and Newsroom Cultures: Identities at Work, Women, Culture and Mass Communication* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc., 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Cynthia Carter and Linda Steiner, "Introduction to *Critical Readings: Media and Gender*," in *Critical Readings: Media and Gender*, ed. Cynthia Carter and Linda Steiner, *Issues in Cultural and Mediastudies* (Maidenhead, England: Open University Press, 2004). See also their chapter, "Mapping the Contested Terrain of Media and Gender Research."

literature was already establishing frames for the interpretation of that race. Of particular interest is a cover story that ran in the mass-circulation news magazine, *Time*, the previous year, which announced that the so-called soccer mom was said to have “morphed” into the security mom.<sup>16</sup>

To locate the site of its analysis, the current study draws on research that charted the representation of women on the front pages of the two major Northeast Ohio newspapers during the 2004 presidential debate season. Relying on methodology derived from the “Women, Men and Media” studies, the 2005 study noted the presence of women in front-page national election news in bylines, photos, and story references for the weekdays of October 2004, the calendar month prior to the November presidential election. The study found that the majority of the front-page election stories carried male bylines, election photos prominently depicted men, and the election articles relied on male sources. Women reporting stories was not found to be a predictor for the use of female sources in these stories.<sup>17</sup> The research question this current analysis sought to answer was, With regard to women’s roles and representation, how was national leadership framed?

### **First Impressions and Page Turners**

Campaign coverage in the fall of 2004 was driven by the actions and utterances of the two primary contenders for the presidency, George W. Bush and John F. Kerry, both white males. During their campaigns, these candidates were paying particular attention to Ohio because of that state’s ability to “swing” the national vote. As the election

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<sup>16</sup> Karen Tumulty and Viveca Novak, "Goodbye, Soccer Mom. Hello, Security Mom," *Time*, June 2 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Therese L. Lueck, "A Woman's Place in 2004 Election Coverage: Stereotypes and Feminist Inroads," in *Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication* (San Antonio, TX: 2005).

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approached, Republican incumbent Bush and Democratic nominee Kerry made a number of visits to the populous Northeast region of Ohio. These came in addition to an area visit by former first lady Barbara Bush, a stop by Democratic vice-presidential candidate John Edwards, and the vice-presidential debate taking place in the Northeast Ohio metropolis of Cleveland.

The numerous visits to Ohio made by the leading candidates and their supporters provided local news staffers with photo and reporting opportunities that had the potential to engage local readers/voters in the national debate on leadership. Northeast Ohio's two major cities, Cleveland and Akron, are each home to a major daily newspaper. At Cleveland's *Plain Dealer*, owned by Advance Publications, several women staffers wrote election articles, primarily local reaction features. Akron's Knight Ridder newspaper, the *Beacon Journal* assigned a woman to cover local angles on the national election, and the paper used other women reporters to supplement that political coverage. Both of these papers, the dominant newspapers in Northeast Ohio, also published syndicated stories, such as articles generated by the *New York Times*, to supplement their own election coverage, particularly when events originated outside the state. Presidential debates and eleventh-hour whistle-stop campaigning competed for headlines in these papers with the war in Iraq. A number of other issues vied with the national campaigns for newsworthiness, from sport and economic news to medical and celebrity news. Since Cleveland's professional teams were not playing well, however, sports news was not allotted its usual front-page dominance. Competing news also included that of other elections, from local Ohio races to the election in Afghanistan and planned voting in Iraq.

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In addition to the decision for president, the November ballot would include nominees for state and local races, as well as state and local issues. Coverage of state-wide issues, in particular the push for a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage, helped establish a normative culture for pre-election discussions. State-driven concerns relevant to national politics, such as an anticipated high turnout of voters and a number of voting-rights challenges, gained newsworthiness during the latter stages of the campaign. Overworked, underpaid poll workers became the typical framing of the large voter turnout stories, while legal challenges to balloting in Ohio provided news and features that supplemented the candidate-driven election coverage. A state law was resurrected from 1953 that would allow people to be appointed as “challengers,” or those who sit at the polling sites during the voting process in order to challenge another person’s right to vote.

Unethical canvassers made the news with their tactics to sign-up new voters, such as the person who obtained voter signatures in exchange for illegal drugs. As roster checks of newly registered voters began turning up all-too familiar names, the *Plain Dealer* made light of people using fake names by running mug shots of some of the most blatant examples of fraudulent voter registration – sports superstars Michael Jordan and George Foreman, cartoon character Dick Tracy, and a photo of actor Julie Andrews over the cutline “Poppins,” the name of the nanny the actor is famous for portraying in a children’s film. Although the wives and daughters in the candidates’ lives occasionally made it into the news by virtue of their relationship to the candidate, and generic women

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were captured in crowd shots at campaign rallies, Mary Poppins was the only female to make into the election-coverage photos on the Cleveland front page that day.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to big, bold headlines, photographs are what draw a reader's eye to a newspaper page, and the papers were saturated with photos of the two presidential fore-runners, often pictured during their campaign stops in Ohio. As the campaigning contextualized a nation that was involved in conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan as a "nation at war," the visual and rhetorical representations of war-related pasts and present-day posturing increasingly captured coverage. For example, newspapers across the nation carried front-page photos of Kerry on a hunting trip in Ohio. The candidate who had volunteered for combat duty in his youth was now photographed with a gun in order to provide visual assurance that he could protect the citizens in this time of war. Front-page photos depicted Kerry, not taking aim but toting the gun, which was not a combat weapon but a shotgun. He carried the gun in a safe and responsible manner, broken down and slung over his arm as he walked. But the spectacle of a limp gun may not have been the message Democrats had intended to convey. Instead, the photo opportunity provided a foil for the masculine posturing of the Republicans, with the immediacy of a photograph defining the challenger as non-leader. Feminine-identified characteristics could be used to build this dichotomy, when women themselves were out of the picture.

Recognizing that such depictions departed "not only from reality, but also from common sense," young people tended to dismiss the gender stereotyping in which "leadership equals strength and strength is identified with the tough guy; the Rambo

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<sup>18</sup> *The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer*, October 19 2004.

patriot.”<sup>19</sup> Acknowledging that everyone, including the candidates, conceded that leadership in contemporary global society was more sophisticated than brute strength, a *Women’s eNews* article noted, “Being at war only partly explains this campaign season’s appeal to hyper-masculine stereotypes” and hypothesized that these stereotypes held power because most people “still harbor at least the residues of belief that even in a democracy, strong, manly men are the best ones to be in charge.” Locked out of leadership itself “women are either almost totally absent (Kerry), or pandered to in saccharine sideshows created to complement the macho dramas on center stage (Bush’s ‘W is for Women’ effort). Again and again, gender stereotypes in this campaign have crowded out the opinions of real women and men” while the “political scene unearths gender-related fears and anxieties,” which were carried over into the mainstream press.<sup>20</sup> Ohio hunting photos on front pages across the nation showed Kerry as impotent against protecting the womenfolk against terrorism in their own backyard. The *Akron Beacon Journal* ran a photo of Kerry, gun tucked under his arm, bending down to pet the retriever as a member of the hunting party, dead goose in hand, looked on.<sup>21</sup> Uncritical visual depiction was consistent with the accompanying texts, which indicated that Kerry was someone who did not have the strength to frame the debate. The photos did nevertheless accord him power because of his sex; however he chose to use it, a leader had a gun, which metaphorically excluded women from leadership consideration.

No women in camouflage traipsed across the front pages in the hunting party.

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<sup>19</sup> Mary S. Hartman, *Rambo-Style Campaigns Crack up the Young* (Women's eNews, 2004 [cited October 27 2004]).

<sup>20</sup> Hartman, “Rambo-Style Campaigns.”

<sup>21</sup> *Akron Beacon Journal*, October 22 2004.

But beside its photo of Kerry with a gun, the *New York Times* ran a picture of Bush campaigning with his daughter, Barbara. The photo captured a view from stage left that showed Bush standing with his legs spread, his face turned away from his daughter at the front of the stage and toward the back of the stage, as if he were responding to a jocular aside. Meanwhile, his daughter stood at the ready, facing front and smiling, her hands on the podium. She was not looking back toward her father; but neither was she facing the newspaper's reading audience. The podium was at the left edge of the photo, and the photo was placed in the upper-left corner of the front page. Barbara faced out of the photo, off the page, smiling into the void of the margin, poised to address an audience of white space.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to appearing in occasional photos by virtue of being members of the family, such as daughter Barbara, women typically made it into the campaign photos as faces in a crowd. In Northeast Ohio, females in the camera's focus were not much less anonymous than those faces in the crowd, and they were most often under voting age. For example, the *Akron Beacon Journal* identified two girls at a speech only as "future voters." The photograph depicted the younger girl gleefully showing a photo on her camera to the other one, and providing readers with the more fan- than substance-based message that the girl had just captured an image of vice-presidential hopeful John Edwards.<sup>23</sup> About a week before the election, a *Beacon Journal* front page was dominated by a huge photograph of a cute, blonde-haired toddler holding a "Bush Cheney '04" bumper sticker above her head. Identified only as a "young supporter," her first name could be surmised from the name on her sweatshirt, "Danielle." The text of the

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<sup>22</sup> *The New York Times*, October 22 2004.

<sup>23</sup> *Akron Beacon Journal*, October 21 2004.

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election article, however, focused on a more serious local story: Area residents were bringing forward legal action in order to counter challenges that had been made to their voting rights. The Ohio Republican Party had bought challenges against approximately 35,000 voters across the state, in an attempt to block their right to vote.<sup>24</sup>

Women as voters were largely absent from prominent photo coverage in Northeast Ohio prior to the election. Although a large *Plain Dealer* photo depicted a group of young female “voters” in mid-October, their enthusiasm was for an American-Idol type of competition, not the federal election. Even though it did not rival such trivializing representations in terms of its size, a notable break in the dominant first-impression framing was the inclusion of women in the *Plain Dealer*’s photo coverage of the vice-presidential debate, which took place in Cleveland. In the photograph, women in white lab coats led a group of demonstrators. The caption, which identified the women by name and by their status as second-year medical students, noted that these students at Case Western Reserve University, the site of the vice-presidential debate, were rallying “in favor of health-care reform.” These medical students used the opportunity, or “hoopla,” as the article’s text described it, to showcase their concerns, and the newspaper obliged with a front-page visual. However, the accompanying story, written by a female staffer, contrasted with the serious nature of the professional women’s demonstration in the photo; the feature’s emphasis was on “spectacle.” After describing the “carnival-like” atmosphere and noting the “humorous bent” of the gathering outside the debate site, the writer did choose a female focus, but it was that of sorority sisters hosting a dart throw at political targets.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Lisa A. Abraham, “Most Challenges Halted,” *Akron Beacon Journal*, October 28 2004.

<sup>25</sup> Kaye Spector, “Meanwhile, Hundreds Enjoy Spectacle,” *The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer*, October 6 2004..

Leading up to the November election, another notable break with the typical representation of women in the political coverage surfaced. Both Bush and Kerry were continuing their Ohio appearances, but just days prior to the election the *Akron Beacon Journal* pictured two older, white women with a problem. Their serious countenance dominated the *Beacon Journal's* front page, as the woman whose long-time voter registration had been challenged waived a handful of paperwork attesting to the validity of her residency. She was one of nearly one thousand local voters whose registration had been challenged.<sup>26</sup>

Below that photo and its story, an election article by a male staffer detailed the other type of “challenge” prevalent in Ohio at that time, reporting on a lawsuit brought forward in an attempt to bar challengers from sitting at polling sites. With such challenges having the potential to disenfranchise thousands of voters, primarily Democrats, coverage of these local issues took precedence in Northeast Ohio news, pushing to the bottom of the front page news of Kerry’s and Bush’s travels across the state, even though the campaign events were highlighted by a performance by musician Bruce Springsteen and a gathering of high-ranking military personnel.

### **The Mystery of the New Voter**

A month ahead of the presidential election, a *New York Times* feature on newly registered voters emphasized that the surge of new voters could tax the polling resources of the swing states,<sup>27</sup> a frame that was widely adopted in stories about new voters. As the

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<sup>26</sup> Lisa A Abraham, “Summit Board Rejects 976 Voter Challenges,” *Akron Beacon Journal*, October 29 2004.

<sup>27</sup> Kate Zernike and Ford Feddenden, “As Deadlines Hit, Rolls of Voters Show Big Surge,” *The New York Times*, October 4 2004.

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election neared, stories about new voters and other targeted blocs of voters shifted from a gender focus to a racial focus in the feature coverage that kept the election in front of voters in the absence of breaking campaign news. For example, a *Plain Dealer* story focused on what it labeled “urban voters,” constructing a context from the in-process count of voter registrations by stating that the tabulations showed that over half of Ohio’s new voters resided in eight “urban counties.” To support this construction, the writers, two women, used the Cleveland president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, George Forbes, as an expert source saying that these “fresh registrants” could determine the outcome of Ohio’s vote. The writers established the importance of their interpretation by noting that “signs of a heavy surge of new urban voters could add up to immense pull for Democratic-leaning central cities on Election Day.”<sup>28</sup>

As the election drew closer, the *New York Times* featured the efforts of Kerry and former vice president Albert Gore, Jr., in appeals to a traditional Democratic Party base, African-American voters. A front-page story ran with a photo of Gore standing in the foreground, his back toward rows of black girls and boys in various postures of non-attention. That same day, more in keeping with feminist coverage in the alternative media, a woman was the subject of a story on undecided voters. The male writer wrote about a mother who worked as a nurse and who voiced concern about the high cost of health care, in order to personify the five- to six-percent of voters who had not yet made up their minds. The former vice president, however, commanded precedence as a news judgment, even though Gore’s photo was run at the bottom of the front page. While the

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<sup>28</sup> Julie Carr Smyth and Diane Solov, “New Voters in Cities May Tip Election,” *The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer*, October 8 2004.

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undecided voter of the feature story was not pictured, three photos of other voters ran with the story's jump, or the portion of the story that continued on the inside pages of the newspaper. One picture of a white male ran with a caption that stated that he and his wife were concerned about security. The other two photos were of white women, and they ran over a shared caption that labeled them as undecided voters.<sup>29</sup>

*Women's eNews* framed the country's new-voter phenomenon by showcasing the female electorate as a majority. An expert source, the president of the National Organization for Women, Kim Gandy, observed that women constitute 54 percent of the U.S. population, 55 percent of the registered voters, and 60 percent of the electorate. Relying on Gandy, the article noted that "women as a group tend to make their decisions late in the game and are therefore a high percentage – about two-thirds – of swing voters."<sup>30</sup> With a pollster cautioning that single women were "the most unpredictable" population in the upcoming election, *Women's eNews* had earlier reported that women under the age of 50 were vacillating heavily in their presidential choice, favoring Kerry on domestic issues but favoring Bush on security. One source commented, "Organizers say neither candidate stirs these women on the issues that top their concerns: child care, equal pay and healthcare." The *Women's eNews* correspondent reminded readers of "the voting power of women – who represent over half of the U.S. electorate and have voted at higher rates than men since 1980." The story disparaged that mainstream media were depicting women voters as a mystery, particularly young women. To help explain these mysterious misgivings, the article offered pollsters' concerns that many young women

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<sup>29</sup> Jim Dwyer, "It's Still Gray for the Undecided, a Pivotal Few among Voters," *The New York Times*, October 25 2004.

<sup>30</sup> Allison Stevens, *Intense Efforts Underway to Mobilize Female Voters* (Women's eNews, 2004 [cited October 8 2004]).

were missed in polls because they used cell phones, which were not incorporated into random-dialing surveys.<sup>31</sup> The female electorate was said to be targeted, but women remained a mystery in the dominant coverage, where a myth of the security mom held sway.

A key population of male voters had been defined as “NASCAR dads,” whose interests were said not to be being addressed in the national discussion. Much as the sport of NASCAR had expanded beyond its regional Southern origins, this labeling repositioned the car-racing enthusiasts less geographically and more generally as white, rural, conservative males. The normative cultural emphasis now suggested their counterpart, “security moms.” Suburbia’s soccer mom had “morphed” into the security mom, a myth with particular pull on the popular psyche since having appeared in *Time* magazine the previous year. That article gave credit to “Republican pollster David Winston” as “one of the first to identify the shift from Soccer Mom to Security Mom.”<sup>32</sup> In October 2004, *Women’s eNews* took the myth to task, “Anna Greenberg, vice president of Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, wrote in a Sept. 23 memo on the company’s Web site that the whole idea of the ‘security mom’ is a myth that ‘profoundly misrepresent(s) who women are and what they worry about politically.’

“‘Women are diverse,’ she added, ‘and trying to characterize them as a monolithic group with unified set of political views misses the mark.’”<sup>33</sup>

In the 2003 article, *Time*’s poll showed that the majority of women with children under 18 years old were more worried about national security after the attacks of 9/11,

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<sup>31</sup> Robin Hindery, *Women’s Vote in 2004 Remains Great Unknown* (Women’s eNews, 2004 [cited October 14 2004]).

<sup>32</sup> Tumulty and Novak, “Goodbye, Soccer Mom.”

<sup>33</sup> Hindery, “Women’s Vote.”

and many of them felt that strengthening homeland security against domestic terrorism was extremely important. The security with which these moms identified was that of the home front, which could be easily retro-fitted into the gender stereotyping of hearth, home, and the vulnerability of women and children. The *Time* article concluded, “For their own security, both parties are scrambling to listen – and respond – to women like [the security mom].” While 67 percent said they were convinced that the president could handle terrorism, in the response to -- “Do you think the war with Iraq has made terrorist attacks in the U.S. more likely or less likely, or hasn’t it made any difference?” -- 47 percent of the moms responded that the war had made domestic terrorist attacks “more likely,” a response more than 15 percentage points higher than that of males or female non-mom respondents. The *Time* article did not pursue discussion of this domestic versus foreign distinction.

The myth of the security mom would take hold, despite occasional mainstream attempts to debunk it, such as reporting that while “these white married women with children have been recast as ‘security moms’ -- a voting group that some analysts broadly predict will exert unique influence in this year's presidential election ... there is little if any hard evidence that security moms will have a distinctive impact in this election -- or that they even exist as a distinct group.”<sup>34</sup> The myth served to fix the place of women, while at the same time perpetuate an ambiguity between domestic security and global terrorism that would provide a fulcrum on which to tilt the discussion away from a woman-defined agenda toward the posturing of war.

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<sup>34</sup> Richard Morin and Dan Balz, "Security Mom' Bloc Proves Hard to Find -- the Phenomenon May Be a Myth," *The Washington Post*, October 1 2004.

### **Reframing the Domestic Agenda in a Social Construction of Leadership**

Despite a few well publicized appeals to women, the candidates pursued an agenda that increasingly defined security in terms of the ongoing American-led conflict in Iraq. And newspaper coverage modeled the candidates' male-dominant framing of the security issue. The reframing of the domestic agenda was evident in coverage of the first presidential debate. Male-bylined *New York Times* coverage of the debate, "Both Men Link U.S. Security to the War," led off with the fact that the two candidates "clashed over national security" but that they quickly turned their attention from domestic terrorism to the war against terrorism being waged abroad.<sup>35</sup> The *Plain Dealer* carried a version of this *New York Times* coverage as its lead story. In packaging its coverage of the initial debate for the Cleveland area, the *Plain Dealer* ran a quote from each of the two candidates in large type on the front page. Kerry's quote distinguished homeland security from a global war on terror: "We also have to be smart ... and smart means not diverting our attention from the war on terror and taking it off to Iraq," demonstrating his awareness of the Republican attempt to reposition domestic concerns to serve the war effort. Bush's quote denigrated Kerry as not having the qualities necessary for leadership: "I don't think you can lead if you say wrong war, wrong time, wrong place. What message does that send to our troops?" The prominent pairing of these quotes at the start of the debate season revealed a futility in Kerry's attempt to keep the home front relevant, as well as indications that, for Bush, the domestic agenda was "old news." Operating from the position that the debate had already shifted, Bush summoned a patriotic spirit in order to chastise Kerry. Unencumbered by domestic matters and dismissive of such a

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<sup>35</sup> Richard W. Stevenson, "Both Men Link U.S. Security to the War," *The New York Times*, October 1 2004.

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willingly “domesticated” challenger, Bush led the party’s attack against Kerry, symbolically demonstrating his prowess against an enemy and daring the press to keep up with him.

Following the third and final debate, which was purported to have been about domestic issues, the *Plain Dealer* reported that “the president jettisoned all talk of domestic affairs” in favor of honing attacks against Kerry. The piece, syndicated from the *Washington Post* and carrying a female in the byline, noted that Kerry fell into step with the strategic shift, blasting Bush on his mismanagement of Iraq, and that Kerry’s departure “overshadowed his planned focus on health care.”<sup>36</sup> Women had been left at the hearth, holding their domestic agenda. With the shift in the framing nearly complete, it was time to bring out the wives in order to encourage women voters to stand by their man. The last debate’s intended focus on domestic issues provided an appropriate entrée for women, and the wives provided a patina of credibility for the candidates’ approach, albeit short-lived, to domestic issues. The women were constructed as wartime wives standing unquestioningly by their men, making an appearing in order to claim their home front issues, which were being discreetly relegated to an unseen domestic sphere.

Coverage of the final presidential debate provided telling narrative of national politics, power, and leadership. The two candidates stood, each at the island of his podium, on a vast sea of red carpet that dominated the front page of the *New York Times*. The article, with a double byline featuring a woman as the first writer, contextualized the reportorial summary of the debate with a patriotic imperative, “But even in a debate intended to be focused on domestic policy, the nation’s security still loomed large.” The

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<sup>36</sup> Dana Milbank, Lois Romano (The Washington Post), “Bush, Kerry Sizzle on War,” *The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer*, October 19 2004.

debate was seen to abandon the domestic emphasis from the onset. “With the first question of the debate, Mr. Bush and Mr. Kerry turned” and, breaking the sentence in this manner, the paper hoped readers would also turn to the inside of the paper, where they would find that the coverage had shifted with the debate itself “back to the issues of terrorism and the war on Iraq, which dominated their first” debate.<sup>37</sup>

The *Plain Dealer* picked up a similar *New York Times* article for the Cleveland coverage of the final debate, the second reporter’s androgynous name “Robin” providing the only female presence in the male-dominated front-page coverage.<sup>38</sup> On the inside pages of the Cleveland newspaper, a photograph of the candidates’ wives that was shot as they were about to embrace each other was published with an Associated Press feature, “Candidates praise women in their lives.”<sup>39</sup> In this inside story, the women were not depicted as representing themselves but instead as characterizing the private side of their husbands. Equating the personal with the domestic, which had been moved from the focus of the debate to a footnote, the story constituted a sidebar, signaling that, with the main story returned to a masculine dialogue on war, the domestic agenda had been shunted aside, to be held in abeyance by two women forever about to hug. The photo froze the two women, their arms outstretched as if encircling an invisible barrel, perpetually poised to discreetly heft the domestic baggage offstage.

In contrast to the symbolic annihilation of females in Cleveland’s *Plain Dealer* that day, the *Akron Beacon Journal* represented the gendered division of labor on its front

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<sup>37</sup> Robin Toner and Douglas Jehl, "Jobs, Health Spur Sharp Clash for Last Debate," *The New York Times*, October 14 2004.

<sup>38</sup> Adam Nagourney, Robin Toner, and (The New York Times), "High Stakes, Hot Words," *The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer*, October 14 2004. This article ran in the final home edition of the newspaper; although the paper kept the same headline, the earlier edition had carried the Toner and Jehl “Jobs, Health” version of the story.

<sup>39</sup> The Associated Press, "Candidates Praise Women in Their Lives," *The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer*, October 14 2004.

page. A color photo of the about-to-embrace wives, with their absently-shaking-hands husbands in the background ran below two large photographs of the candidates in partial profile. Next to the over-sized head shots of the candidates the *Beacon Journal* ran as its lead story a Knight Ridder article by two male reporters. After a lead in to show how aggressive and “well versed in numbers and details of domestic programs” each candidate was, the reporters noted that toward the end of the debate “each man talked gently about his love for his wife and daughters.”<sup>40</sup> A male-bylined debate analysis from the *New York Times* beneath the candidates’ photos noted that since Bush’s previous demeanor had “done little to attract independent voters – and particularly women,” in this debate, he had sported a smile.<sup>41</sup>

### **News Narrative for Northeast Ohio**

Mainstream news media maintain the status quo by representing the interests of the powerful; this is particularly in evidence when the press accords influence to a presidential incumbent by carrying his agenda. Feminist criticism reveals that the news media still tell stories from the dominant male perspective, and political coverage in a campaign for the presidency provides occasion for normative narration. Much like in the crimes-against-women coverage, the blame shifted to women, the actual victims of a silencing in the political process. In this construction of difference, women asked to be silenced by their biological difference from men. The scant coverage of women through a narrowly constructed reproduction of femininity worked with the construction of

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<sup>40</sup> Steven Thomma, James Kuhnenn (Knight Ridder), "Bush, Kerry Get Aggressive in Final Clash before Nov. 2," *Akron Beacon Journal*, October 14 2004.

<sup>41</sup> James Bennet (The New York Times), "Bush Gentler; Kerry Consistent," *Akron Beacon Journal*, October 14 2004.

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leadership as domineering masculinity to silence the women. Women were severed from the political process at the very time of their decision-making. Constructed as a mystery, women held the threat of the unknown over an election too close to call. The press threw its hands up at the notion of deciphering what women wanted, leaving itself open to uncritically adopting cultural myths, burying the data, and dismissing women's participation in the election process. What is a mystery is that women vote at all. The representation of women in election news in this key geographical area revealed that, to maintain the good of the order, or at least the order, women had to be symbolically eliminated.

Renegotiation of gender roles and power was necessary in order to re-establish male dominance. Through coverage that reproduced the reassertion of male dominance, the news media were complicit in completing the compact, leader = male. Having removed women from the equation, the news covered the two parties as contrasts, imbuing the Democratic candidate with feminine values and covering his inevitable demise. In reportage that accurately portrayed the political shift through its reconstruction of gender, the mainstream narrative foreshadowed women's exclusion and perhaps even a winner. The news media demonstrated naïve complicity in its traditional portrayal of the campaign as a horse race, lending credibility to the ritual, ensuring women's issues would be shoved off the table, and perhaps helping to fix the race. The particularly masculine and divisive nature of the national dialogue adopted in Northeast Ohio election coverage signaled a disengagement of women from the political process.

New women voters may have been seen as a key to winning the presidential election, but not on their own terms. Their concerns had to first be framed in terms of the

male-driven agenda. For one of the most populous “swing vote” regions of the country, the mainstream newspapers reframed women’s issues to fit male political tradition and press reportage. In this renegotiation of masculinity, women were stripped of any real power and excluded from the consideration of leadership. Despite local staffing and local angles on election coverage, the newspapers displayed an uncanny accuracy, falling into stride with the male-based national process they covered. Despite the fact that the profiles of women voters neatly fit the very audience that newspapers have been struggling for decades to regain, this episode of mainstream coverage proved little better at demystifying the female voter than did the campaign rhetoric of the candidates themselves. Framing the coverage to fit the prevailing myth of the “security mom” and outsourcing the domestic agenda to the global war on terror satisfied the short-term goals of deadline coverage. But in adhering to male-dominant framing the newspapers may have squandered one of their last opportunities to re-establish a loyalty among women readers by not performing their basic civic duty of engaging and informing the majority of the electorate.

The dominant news narrative of the 2004 election was the story of two men engaging in combat, one-on-one. Through features that broke frame, readers were able to catch occasional glimpses of women, which could be handily dismissed as anomalies. For example, a *New York Times* feature that used a woman to personify undecided voters made progress toward demystifying this group of the female electorate.<sup>42</sup> But absent an interpretive context that reinforces the importance of women voters and lays bare attempts to marginalize them, lone features cannot sustain credibility in the mainstream. The readership was a highly polarized electorate, the vast majority of whom already

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<sup>42</sup> Jim Dwyer, “It’s Still Gray.”

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staunchly supported one candidate over the other. Absent a salient context, the subject takes on the trivial trappings of the frivolous woman who can't make up her mind, and as such she becomes inessential, if not detrimental, to the election and its news. Alternatively, *Women's eNews* created a sustainable context throughout its election coverage by relying on survey data and breaking news to remind readers that women constituted the majority of the electorate.

As the new voter focus of Northeast Ohio coverage shifted to race, African Americans were used in features to fill in between the hard news of the campaign stories and visually depicted as fidgeting children. Coverage of the new voter phenomenon as “urban” (read: African-American), played racial diversity against gender diversity, demonstrating the typical handling of diversity as a zero-sum game that pitted gender against race. Reliance on simplistic framing makes the story easier to cover; writing the beginning of the story in this manner creates predictability for covering the unpredictable end of the news story. Coming into the November election, coverage of new voters in Northeast Ohio was framed as an urban-voter issue, and then post-election results of the conservative Republican win were reported in terms of a split of the voting population as urban vs. NASCAR dads, and the women remained invisible.

Moments before the election, female voters resurfaced in the *Akron Beacon Journal* as two angry women. These older, white women were speaking out because they had a problem. Their voice was about to be silenced, and through this front-page photo, they represented thousands of Democrats in Northeast Ohio and across the state who found themselves in the same situation. Future studies might look at such gender representation in terms adapted from Clint Wilson and Felix Gutierrez's stages of news

incorporation, which show that minority populations gained coverage when they were perceived as problems, or threats to the existing social order.<sup>43</sup>

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The main research question this analysis sought to answer was: “With regard to women’s roles and representation, how was national leadership framed?” Today, women are in the newsroom, women write for the front page, and in the fall of 2004, women helped cover the campaign for the presidency. Yet male dominance was reestablished by marginalizing and then symbolically annihilating women and their issues. Traditions and socialization practices of an established social institution are slow to change. Yet the mainstream news media continue to adopt the political agenda, including its masculine attributes, at the expense of their own survival. Through their complicity in the construction of leadership as masculine, it would seem that newspapers would rather die than incorporate women’s voices, and in particular feminist voices. Through its collusion in playing the feminized fall guy to the Republican Party’s symbolic leadership, the Democratic Party would seemingly forego the 2004 presidency in order to avoid putting into place mechanisms that might facilitate the feminist who is a presumptive 2008 nominee. Feminist media researchers may want to examine more closely how Senator Hillary Clinton is already being closed out of the discourse on leadership while the Republican Party enlists the mainstream media in its effort to groom acceptance of Condoleezza Rice through selective sound bites of her far-flung missions as Secretary of State.

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<sup>43</sup> Clint Wilson, II, Felix Gutierrez, and Lena M. Chao, *Racism, Sexism, and the Media*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003).

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The presidential debates were organized to exclude third-party voices; following much the same pattern, news narrative excluded women's voices. Coverage of the "potentially pivotal" final debate severed women from the national discussion of leadership. With the elimination of female distraction and uncertainty, the business of selecting a leader could begin in earnest. With women out of the equation, the Republican Party could attribute to Kerry feminine characteristics, along with their connotation of subservient status. The news media absorbed this gender dynamic in its construction of the news. On the occasions that there was no breaking national campaign news, the newspapers used feature stories to keep the election at the top of the public's agenda. But as the election grew closer, these features relied less on issues of importance to women. Meanwhile, *Women's eNews* kept women's issues alive with coverage of breast cancer (especially with October being Breast Cancer Awareness month), welfare, and the candidates' positions on issues such as reproductive rights. *Women's eNews* consistently emphasized that women constituted the majority of the electorate, that they dominated the "swing vote" and that those voters tended to make up their minds late in the race. This type of coverage reminded its audience with regularity of the importance of women voters and pointed to the logic of engaging women during the latter stages of the campaign coverage. While in the mainstream, women only appeared important as the presumed audience for appeals to abandon the domestic agenda.

Mainstream newspapers that do not engage more fully with the alternative voices of the Internet era may leave themselves vulnerable to manipulation and be doomed to not only lose more women readers but drive away potential employees, female and male, who are intent on covering the whole story for the whole of society. Alternatives are

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already exerting an appeal, even among women in prominent mainstream news positions. Elizabeth Mehren, New England bureau chief of the Los Angeles Times, contributed to *Women's eNews*, and columnist Ellen Goodman would begin writing for the alternative news service by the time of the election. In an Internet-driven information era, newspapers must make online alternative sourcing integral to their routines of newsgathering in order to guard against those who would count on the predictability of traditional news routines. Both male and female reporters covered the political shift away from the domestic discussion. The *New York Times* feature about the undecided female voter was written by a male. Such occurrences indicate that decades of feminist activism has had some intervention in the industry. While females in bylines were no predictor of seeing female sources in stories, the effect was visible on an individual basis. For example, *New York Times* reporter Abby Goodnough regularly used women sources high enough in her stories that they got front-page play. And *Plain Dealer* columnist Connie Schultz actively pursued discussion of women's issues for the Cleveland audience.

This analysis showed newspaper framing of the election mirroring the Republican framing of the issues, with the writing of individual reporters often resembling Kerry's unsuccessful attempts to control – or perhaps even enter -- the debate. This study and other research point to the power of the media to frame important issues and events for contemporary audiences, as well as the responsibility inherent in framing these stories. As the second term of George W. Bush foregrounds speculation on how history will remember this president, feminist media researchers may want to explore the impact that journalistic framing of events has had on the historical record, especially the reproduction and renegotiation of gender during discussions of national leadership.

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