

media reform
article

Media Reform, 2008's Presidential Election, and the Sportification of Politics

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I was supposed to read these two pieces before America's historic election on November 4, 2008. However, I didn't get to the essays (or this response) until almost a week after the result had been decided. In a (probably futile) attempt to turn vice into would-be virtue, I want to use the outcome of that historic election to idiosyncratically reframe the political stakes/implications of these two poignant and thought-provoking articles. Many analysts have written about the so-called "browning of the America," the relative shrinking of this country's white population as a function of demographic shifts linked to immigration and differential birth rates among racial/ethnic groups. President-elect Barack Obama ran his "post-racial" campaign with full appreciation of how such demographic shifts have changed the makeup of the electorate. He actively attempted to register more people of color, and he tried to make sure that they went to the polls. Obama told them that this was their America, too. He was very careful not to overemphasize race in his public speeches and interviews, but his campaign mobilized America's multi-racial realities (in terms of its highly praised "ground game" during the lead up to election day) in a way that catapulted the Chicago senator into office.

In contrast, every decision Senator John McCain seemed to make this campaign season reflected a profound under-appreciation of America's diverse body politic, almost a denial of it — something bordering on nostalgia for myths about American racial homogeneity. For instance, he chose a charismatic vice presidential running mate, Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, who did nothing to demonstrate any explicit recognition of America's changing ethno-racial composition. She performed a fantastic job energizing "the base." But for those who didn't already unequivocally consider themselves to be part of that Republican base, she also gave the (false?) impression that such a base was constituted by the intransigent sameness of race, by a euphemized commitment to whiteness.

Even the campaign's late-game deployment of "Joe the Plumber" seemed to traffic in the same denials about America's changing demographic makeup. Joe the Plumber was supposed to stand in for all average Americans, but he probably just ended up further alienating many of the new black and brown

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voters who saw his support of McCain (and his discussion of Obama's "socialism") as another attempt to play a white version of "the race card" without explicitly invoking race at all.

This isn't to say that McCain should have pandered to black and brown voters by finding, say, a Mexican version of Joe. But he was silently making a statement (whether he wanted to or not) about his definition of America by trucking Joe out as his quintessential example of ordinary America. It was a definition that came off as decidedly less inclusive and eclectic than Obama's. And that was the beginning of the end for McCain. He relegated himself to being "the white candidate" even as Obama tried to transcend his designation as simply the black one. That was one of the biggest ironies this election season. Obama has the Kenyan father. He is the one who spent all of those years in an "Afrocentric" church. He was the student celebrated for being the first "black" editor of Harvard's Law Review, a first that served to push him onto the national stage even before he finished law school. But McCain lost this election, because he was able to turn *himself* into the racial candidate. Moreover, by casting his candidacy as a newfangled social movement, Obama rewrote electoral politics (probably forever), harnessing the coalitional possibilities opened up by new media technologies while concomitantly reconfiguring the tone and tenor of election campaign rhetoric. The latter was about more than just "staying on message." It was a performance of politics-as-usual that claimed to change the cultural assumptions of political campaigning writ large and small.

These two provocative articles — Daniel Berger's "Defining Democracy: Coalition Politics and the Struggle for Media Reform" and C. Riley Snorton's "New Beginnings: Racing Histories, Democracy and Media Reform" — take different approaches to the task of challenging fundamental assumptions about so-called "media reform" today, the cultural assumptions of media analysis that often go under-theorized in mainstream debates. Their arguments question critical communication studies (i) for trafficking in the same silent and implicit whitenesses that McCain's campaign demonstrated and (ii) for underestimating the inescapable and mutually constitutive relationship between policy and cultural politics, between the mechanical workings of a system (be that system a social movement, a media industry or an election campaign) and the unfurling of cultural logics that predetermine the narratives told by, about, and through such systemic channels.

Berger's piece cautions activists and scholars against the tempting form of critical reductionism that would exclusively thematize policy issues (especially media consolidation) at the expense of more substantive engagements with the everyday institutional practices and cultural frameworks of media makers. Snorton's essay highlights the implicit biases that constitute historical blind spots for critical communication scholars who otherwise offer powerful counter narratives of mass media's past as a way to explain the possibility (even necessity) of media reform in the contemporary moment. The essays are thoughtful responses to the productive interpellations constituted by the work of some important media analysts.

Both authors seem to be responding — most directly — to the analytical call-to-arms tendered by eminent contemporary scholars in Communication Studies. According to Berger, these scholars sometimes seem to imagine a media movement that begins and ends with questions about mass mediation's institutional configurations, its structural links to global capital. Clearly this is important, Berger concedes,

but it is only half the battle. The remainder of the media reform fight must take place on the terrain of discursive formations, flagging “the routines and commonsense notions that both uphold the media system and tether it to systems of injustice.” Without serious engagement on this second front, big-tent media reform coalitions might “still uphold conservative politics.” That is, the medium’s commodified macro-structure is not the message — at least, it doesn’t complete all the work necessary to understand what is wrong with the messages themselves.

Berger makes the distinction between just “fighting for air” and “fighting over air quality,” a point on which, say, sociologist Eric Klinenberg would certainly agree. There are important organizations linking media reform to specific normative claims about social justice, and Berger highlights their localized beginnings and hints at their innovate deployments of what might be described as the deterritorialized potential of new media technologies.

Snorton emphasizes Appadurai’s deployment of disjunctures as a potentially useful counterpoint to McChesney’s notion of critical junctures. Snorton wants to talk about “critical ‘disjunctures’ between ethnic studies and communication, racial justice and media reform.” And he sees older incarnations of the Black Press functioning as a kind of diasporic counter narrative to the orthodoxies of time and space that usually constitute mainstream disciplinary constructions of media history. According to Snorton, the potential shortcomings of the media reform movement aren’t simply about a too-easy privileging of policy over practice. It also has to do with how scholars of American media conceptualize history itself. Robert McChesney’s historical claims (about when and why “critical junctures” open up space for new media possibilities) become a case in point. Snorton takes McChesney’s historical narrative to task for its silence on questions of race (and on important alternate histories of racial activism in the United States). Of course, McChesney is offering his schematic rendition of American/media history as a way to vouchsafe progressive contemporary critical responses to mainstream media practice and theory. Snorton might even sympathize with McChesney’s general point here. However, he asks about the kinds of symbolic violences and mass mediated silences that get reproduced by way of periodizations that would seem to remove all vestiges of racial history from their temporal topographies. Snorton wants to write race back into a critical historiography of media reform so that the movement doesn’t inadvertently reproduce potent forms of reactionary reasoning at its otherwise seemingly progressive core.

A slightly different (but related) *strange bedfellowing* is one of my own pet peeves these days, and it stems from the fact that the political left and the political right seem to get horribly caricatured in their contemporary media manifestation as “the talk show pundit.” I’m particularly impatient with the idea of seeing pundits support their particular political party the way rabid fans root for sports franchises — or even worse, the way players themselves sometimes engage in such sporting events, with a kind of ruthless amorality. Truth and falsehood don’t matter. Only the bottom line. The win.

Cotinuing with the sport metaphor, this is a mentality that seems to plague many of our athletes, even if the stakes are usually much lower than deciding the future of our mass mediated world. Think of those scrappy basketball players who inadvertently knock loose balls out of bounds and instinctively — misleadingly — blame nearby opponents for the infraction. Anything to get the ball back. Anything for the victory.

To go back to the place where I started (the recent presidential campaign), let me end by complaining about the ways in which Democratic and Republican talking points exemplified this sensibility during the 2008 campaign season: Victory at all costs, even if the price is the truth, or when it comes at the expense of an even-handed reading of contemporary political debates. To hear the Republicans tell it, Sarah Palin had all the "experience" she needed to be vice president, more "executive experience" than Barack Obama, and it was simply partisan politicking (or bald sexism) to question her readiness — even in an age defined by global challenges that demand a rigorous handle on world affairs. Did circling the red wagons around a wild-card pick from Alaska (so that your party could "energize the base" and go after disaffected Clinton backers) really mean "Country First"?

According to Democrats, Obama instantiates "change," and an African American president in 2009 embodies a massive change for America. But just because he gives good speech, which is pretty clearly the case, doesn't mean that Obama's recent election will necessarily and singlehandedly transform "the political" in Washington. An Obama *presidency is change*, especially symbolically, which is important in and of itself, but it will probably translate into far less than the transformational sea change that the Democrats overconfidently sold.

Of course, deciding the next iteration of the Supreme Court is incredibly serious business. And the two candidates deployed radically different litmus tests for prospective judges. But does the end game of stocking that court with "liberal" or "conservative" judges justify ramping up partisan spin-doctoring on all every issue of the day? Do we have to insult people's intelligence with blatant double standards on how we read our candidates pluses and minuses vs. the other party's ticket: the one with soft shoes, the other with steel-toed boots? We've turned American society into a collegiate forensics society where we all argue for the side of the debate that we've been deputized to offer — regardless of what truth and fairness might actually entail.

Does the political end justify the rhetorical means, even if the latter include too-easily institutionalized attempts to trick voters into giving one partisan team the electoral ball even when it knows it has done something — maybe inadvertently — that it would never allow its opponent to get away with? Is there any possible way to reverse our longstanding ability to trap our Constitution into the straitjacket of hyperpartisan politics, a fervent partisanship that our founding document isn't necessarily equipped to mitigate — or even address?

Reforming the media (at this critical dis/juncture) should have real implications, I think, for the kinds of polemical punditry that overdetermines our contemporary political debates. And that need not be reduced to the specter of state censorship. Berger and Snorton both make powerful cases for how we might more holistically operationalize such potential reform, adding a few more significant variables to an ongoing conversation that other communication scholars have also tried to thoughtfully engage.



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