Preface

Desiree Cooper

To quantify the "Obama Effect" is an exercise perhaps as grand and hopeful as the presidential candidacy of Barack Obama itself. The campaign is well over, and we know how it ended: He is the forty-fourth president of the United States. But what effect his rise to power will have and has already had upon history, upon America, and upon the world is anyone's guess.

When scholars converged upon the University of Minnesota in the fall of 2008, it was far from a certainty that the senator from Illinois would become president. But one thing was already certain: America's attitude toward race had shifted in both seismic and subtle ways—ways that needed to be captured and understood before the moment was recast by the hindsight of history.

Traditionally, the mass media have been instrumental in helping us understand life's watersheds, even as we are living them. The media have often been our reflectors and inquisitors, or expositors and agitators. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how the end of the Vietnam War, the success of the civil rights movement, or Nixon's resignation over Watergate would have happened if not for the power of the mass media. "To the press alone," James Madison once said, "the world is indebted for all the triumphs which have been gained by reason and humanity over error and oppression." But when it came to documenting racism in America, African-American journalist Ida B. Wells argued that the press was neither reasonable nor humane. In the late 1890s, she began a one-woman crusade against the lynching of blacks in the South. And while she had once referred to the media as "the great educator," in matters of race she was less charitable: "Somebody must show that the Afro-American race is more sinned against than sinning," she said, "and it seems to have fallen upon me to do so." From publishing runaway slave advertisements, to promulgating dehumanizing images of blacks during the Jim Crow Era, to the contemporary media's invention of the black welfare queen, the media have been key participants in the perpetuation of racist ideology in America.

One effect that the Obama candidacy has had upon the sociopolitical landscape is to subvert the role of the mass media in the national conversation about race. Obama was not just the nation's first biracial candidate, he was the nation's first "new media" candidate. His campaign inspired a genuine melting

pot of art and social networking, setting the blogosphere on fire. New media danced on the cusp between reportage and participation. Obama raised a staggering $660 million online, and engaged millions of voters directly through Facebook, YouTube, and text messages.

When Obama easily ran away with the January 26, 2008, South Carolina primary, print and broadcast journalists offered a simple explanation: The black majority had gone to the voting booth in record numbers and voted along racial lines. Obama offered a different explanation. Coming out of South Carolina, he said that his candidacy was not about black versus white, but the past versus the future. Just a year before, that would have been a profoundly cynical statement. But the proof was in the early primaries as Obama swept states like Nebraska, Utah, and Iowa—states that were not only redder than red, but whiter than white. These victories lent credence to the argument that something else was afoot, something that the mainstream media were not registering.

Instead, they were stuck in a snow globe of racialized rhetoric that was sorely out of step with segments of the American public. For example, in early August 2008, candidate Obama was in the Twin Cities for a fundraiser and had stopped by a local café for a three-dollar stack of pancakes. On August 7, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* Web site said, "Guess who's coming for breakfast?"—an allusion to the 1967 film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?*, where African-American actor Sidney Poitier was a white family's surprise dinner guest. Forty years ago, that was groundbreaking. For a newspaper in 2008, it was sadly unimaginative. It spoke to the dearth of positive representations of black men, and to the lack of a progressive racial consciousness in the mainstream media. *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich made a more insightful comparison: "Our political and news media establishments," he wrote on the eve of the election, "have their own conspicuous racial myopia with its own set of stereotypes and clichés. They consistently underestimated Obama's candidacy because they often saw him as a stand-in for the two-dimensional character Poitier had to shoulder."

Obama took the institutional media's racial blunders in stride. At the October 16, 2008, Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner, he remarked that his opponent, Arizona Senator John McCain, had accused him "of being the wed father of two girls." Silence enveloped the room for a tense heartbeat before the audience caught up with the joke. So invested has the media been in the iconography of the black man with countless illegitimate children, it took a while for the audience to realize Obama had said "wed" rather than the expected "unwed." Obama was not just running against his opponents, but against racist media imagery. How qualified was such an institution to cover a political campaign where race was not the subtext, but the story itself? Indeed, it was ill-equipped. The way the media engaged the race question during the campaign was a kindergarten-like tit-for-tat over who was racist and who was not. It openly fumbled the gift that Obama had given us: A chance to talk about race like adults.

There were exceptions. *Chicago Tribune* columnist Dawn Turner Trice began a Web project in the spring of 2008. It became a place where people could ask "dumb" questions about race and explore ideas. For her, one major effect of the Obama candidacy was to create a positive opportunity to engage the questions of race. "This is the first time in modern memory—perhaps ever—that race is the story when we're not in the middle of a negative racial crisis," she said. "There's no riot, no lynching or other hate crime, no travesty of justice.… Instead, we are dealing with race in the context of a person doing what Americans do: Run for president."

How, then, should the racially anorexic media have begun to capture the explosive and paradoxically quiet transformations that Americans were experiencing during 2008? Perhaps by looking at race within their own ranks. Although African Americans comprise 13 percent of the U.S. population, they made up only 5 percent of reporters of America's daily newspapers in 2007. They own no daily newspapers, less than 1 percent of full-power television stations, and 3 percent of radio stations. For a moment, there was hope that one collateral effect of an Obama candidacy would be more journalists of color. But the 2008 campaign coincided with both an economy in free fall and, perhaps more important, a pious mentality on the part of the mainstream press that journalists of color are not a prerequisite for producing objective reporting about race. Instead, there was a general redeployment of the media's few black faces.

What difference does having more diverse staff make when reporting the news? "Well, it certainly changes the questions that are asked and the observations that are made," said the Maynard Institute's Richard Prince on National Public Radio in February 2009. "We saw in the campaign, for example, a lot of cultural miscues because there weren't enough black reporters and editors fostering a dialogue." A case in point: The July 21, 2008, cover of the *New Yorker* depicted then–presidential candidate Obama dressed in traditional Muslim garb. Michelle Obama, the darker and therefore more dangerous half of the duo, was transformed into a version of the blaxpoitation Amazon "Cleopatra Jones," complete with Afro, ammunition, and rifle. A portrait of Osama bin Laden hung over the mantel. In the fireplace burned an American flag.

This image was published at a time when 13 percent of Americans believed that Obama was Muslim and 12 percent were convinced that he had "used a Koran for swearing in to the U.S. Senate," according to a *Newsweek* poll. Had an African American, a Muslim, or an Arab American been in the room when the decision was being made to run the cartoon, hard questions likely would have been raised about the wisdom of satirizing widely held prejudices about blacks, Arabs, and Islam. Perhaps the cover would not have been run at all. At the very least, editor David Remnick would have had a more thoughtful response to the public outrage than what he told the *Huffington Post*: "I ran the cover because I thought it had something to say."

Similarly, could diverse management have prevented Fox News from referring to the future First Lady as "Obama's Baby Mama?" And where was the internal racism radar when the *New York Post* ran a postelection cartoon characterizing the Obama administration as a slaughtered chimpanzee? In response the outcries of racism, the *Post* defended the cartoon as a commentary on the economic stimulus package. In a statement posted on its Web site, the *Post* objected that the cartoon had been "taken as something else—as a depiction of President Obama, as a thinly veiled expression of racism. This was most certainly not its intent; to those who were offended by this image, we apologize." This is a common backhanded apology from media institutions: "We are sorry that communities of color are humorless and hypersensitive." This reveals the appalling ignorance the mainstream media has for the ubiquity of racist iconography, and a stunning unawareness of their complicity in creating and perpetrating those images.

Unfortunately, the media industry will have little time to come to grips with its own culpability in the nation's failure to transcend race. Within six months of President Obama's election, several newspapers—including the 146-year-old *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*—had completely disappeared, while the *Chicago Tribune* and the *L.A. Times* were in bankruptcy. According to the Associated Press, a hundred newspapers in thirty-two states had stopped publishing a print version at least one day per week, including the *Christian Science Monitor*. Meanwhile, almost 75 million Americans were reading their news online, with 3.7 billion page views in January 2009, according to Nielson Online. In the wake of such precipitous decline, Obama has exhibited a stunning ability to expand his new media efforts while controlling his message in the increasingly irrelevant mass media. As Michael Wolff pointed out in the July 2009 issue of *Vanity Fair*, the Obama Administration "created an audience that it could reach through its own distribution prowess," and yet, in the face of the "dwindling life of the establishment media," continues to "talk to the dinosaurs."

Ironically, Obama has utilized—arguably even needed—the mainstream media's intense focus on celebrity news to help recast outdated notions of race. He has been able to use the media effectively to paint himself as cerebral but cool, the First Lady as brilliant, stylish, and motherly, and his daughters as darlings. It will be interesting to see how well these new media images will begin to "normalize" the entire black experience.

The ultimate effect that the Obama presidency will have on enduring, media-fueled, racist archetypes about black men, black families, and black power remains to be seen. That may depend largely on which survives the longest—the Obama presidency or the American press.