Visually Assessing the First Lady in a Digital Age: A Study of Michelle Obama as Portrayed by Journalists and the White House

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Visually Assessing the First Lady in a Digital Age: A Study of Michelle Obama as Portrayed by Journalists and the White House

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In a digital age in which the First Lady's image is captured and disseminated by many different outlets, this article proposes the development of a coding instrument using Goffman's (1979) gender displays as a new method for exploring the visual frames of the First Lady. Given the manner in which photographs are disseminated via the Internet by both official and journalistic sources, this new coding instrument takes into consideration the different vantage points that these image capturers have. Until recently, visual gender display frames of the First Lady from differing outlets have not been easily studied separately, given the fact that images disseminated by the White House had to go through the journalistic gate prior to dispersion. Ultimately, the study of photos of the First Lady as she appears in the "media" was mixed and confounded journalistic and official framing. The Internet has changed all of this and opens opportunities to study these framing sources separately. As a test of a new coding instrument to study these different framing sources, this article assesses Michelle Obama in her gender portrayal from two different framing sources: journalists and the White House. This visual content analysis demonstrates and supports the use of a new context-independent coding instrument, borrowing from Goffman's gender displays as a method for visually studying the First Lady.

KEYWORDS   First Lady, framing, image handlers, journalistic norms, Michelle Obama, visual framing

INTRODUCTION

The prominence of the Internet as a mode for visual communication calls for a reconsideration of the way that framing studies for the gender portrayal of the First Lady are executed. In framing studies, researchers study "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual" (Gitlin 1980, 7). The term "symbol handlers" can refer to the official sources that take and release the photographs of the First Lady or the journalists and editors who select, emphasize, and present these photos to the world. Given the myriad different sources that are now able to capture and disseminate images of prominent people via Internet sites, such as Flickr, a new coding scheme is needed that accounts for differences in the vantage points of these different sources, whether amateurs, journalists, editors, or public relations practitioners. The Internet, with these portals for direct distribution, "defies the whole notion of a 'gate' and challenges the idea that journalists (or anyone else) can or should limit what passes through it" (Singer 2006, 265) and requires a reconsideration of visual framing studies. Specifically, studying the First Lady in her portrayal as "traditional" or less traditional, as is frequently the case (e.g., Gardetto 1997; Shoop 2010; Winfield 1997), requires that researchers look at images that can be taken by any source and use any mode of distribution. In the past, scholars have undertaken the study of the media's portrayal of first ladies as they appear in news publications, which had potentially and likely come from the White House's official image handlers and therefore contain numerous layers of framing by symbol handlers (e.g., Abraham 2004; Burns 2004; Scharrer and Bissell 2000). These studies have thus looked at photos of the First Lady through the lens of two sets of professional photographers: those who work for the White House and those who work for newspapers. With the popularity of user-generated content outlets such as the image-sharing site, Flickr, official image makers, including the White House, have the opportunity to distribute limitless official photographs for public view. While journalists are losing gatekeeping control, others—in this case, the White House—are gaining control in influencing audience perceptions through visuals. It is time for scholars to consider these new modes of distribution in the design of coding schemes for framing studies for gender portrayals.

Michelle Obama, one of the first presidential wives to be able to mold and disseminate her image via social media without journalistic intervention, provides a unique opportunity to study the ways in which journalists and official White House image handlers frame images of her differently. Visual comparison studies are rare, despite the importance of images in politics (Coleman and Banning 2006; Edelman 1995), and they present a special challenge in that previous coding schemes do not discern between the different framing capabilities of journalists and the White House. In quite practical

terms, White House image handlers have access to the First Lady in her most domestic, intimate moments, while journalists and other photographers very rarely have these photo opportunities and instead have to capture her in public. In an age when each group can shape and disseminate her image separately from one another, a new visual framing scheme for the portrayal of the First Lady is needed that takes into consideration these very differing photo opportunities but that also allows for an equal comparison of the differing portrayals. This article seeks to test such a coding scheme for use in this study and future studies of the First Lady. Relying on Goffman's (1979) measures of traditional gender portrayals of women in the media, subtle, context-independent codes are proposed. Rather than measuring portrayals based on environmental context (e.g., working on domestic chores, cooking, and the like), Goffman relies on body language and relations to others to measure traditional visual portrayals of women in the media. This framing mechanism allows for comparisons of the First Lady as created by different media framers, including journalists, the White House, and other content creators. A study of the visual portrayal of First Lady Michelle Obama is presented as an explanatory application of this visual coding scheme.

Journalistic Framing

Frames are the "central organizing idea or storyline that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events ... The frames suggest what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue" (Gamson and Modigliani 1987, 143). These frames may be drawn by many influences but generally stem from at least two main contributors: journalists and "official" sources, such as corporate and political officials. While many things happen in the world during a news cycle, only a selection is discussed by the news media (Gans 1979; Tuchman 1978). Journalistic news is an outcome of gatekeeping, the process whereby all potential news items are "winnowed, shaped, and prodded" into the news that is disseminated to the public (Shoemaker et al. 2001, 233). In considering which of the myriad of available happenings will be published, journalists rely on a set of news values (Gans 1979; Harrower 2010). Ultimately, items that are presented in the news tend to contain an element of the unusual. For example, happenings that include important people and those that include conflict or oddity are much more likely to be considered newsworthy (Yopp, McAdams, and Thornburg 2010). These criteria for newsworthiness are directly related to *deviance*—happenings that deviate from societal norms, including events or people who are new, rare, unusual, pathological, or important (Shoemaker, Chang, and Brendlinger 1987). Those who stray from this social norm are given more coverage but also less favorable coverage (Shoemaker, Chang, and Brenlinger 1987). By showing viewers what is abnormal, the media teach them what is normal and confirm the status quo (Schudson 2003). Photographs of the First Lady, therefore, are

more likely to be published in a newspaper if they show her deviating from normal, traditional behavior.

Journalists cannot organize and report the entirety of the unpredictable malaise of happenings in the world. To cope, they tend to work within predictable and stable patterns to find "how, why, and where to gather the news" (Schudson 2003, 34). Journalists live "by the clock" (Schudson 2003, 2) and need convenient and scheduled events to meet their tight deadlines, which often means they rely on easily accessible sources—official spokespersons, government workers, experts, elites, press releases, wire services, press conferences, and other prescheduled events (Deuze 2008; Gans 1979; Schudson 2003). The beat system in which journalists write about a particular news niche is another method to ensure the predictable and efficient creation of news. The "event" is a routine useful for organization because it has a beginning and end (Shoemaker and Reese 1991). Reliance on relatively homogenous and powerful sources as well as molding news stories based on the news values can lead to a homogenous news mix.

White House Framing of the First Lady

The White House is not oblivious to the fact that the First Lady's portrayal has an impact on public approval, and her image is managed heavily (Gould 1983; Mandziuk 2008). By understanding journalists' need for timely, prominent, and impactful information in a predictable setting, public relations practitioners, such as those who work for the White House, can provide this material (Boorstin 2012) and do so in a way that portrays the First Lady in a more positive light (Gould 1983; Mandziuk 2008). Happenings for the presidency are inherently deviant from the norm and therefore newsworthy. The presidency possesses a great deal of power in staging news events and receiving coverage from journalists. For example, public relations institutions can create "pseudoevents" such as press conferences and arranged events with photo opportunities, feeding the journalistic need for scheduled and newsworthy content while allowing the source to maintain primary control over its image (Boorstin 2012). A presidential candidate's wife has become an important asset to a presidential campaign, and her portrayal in the media therefore has high stakes (Shoop 2010). Because more traditional gender portrayals of the First Lady are associated with higher approval ratings (St. Clair 2009), White House image handlers tend to portray her in a more traditional light. In an attempt to balance the traditional First Lady roles with the nontraditional appearance of Hillary Clinton, the White House had a strategy for a "visual of the day" whereby a staff photographer sent out hundreds of official photographs to the media portraying her as a good mother and wife (Mandziuk 2008; Winfield 1997). Parry-Giles (2000) similarly noted that Hillary Clinton's image handlers were instrumental in transforming her from "a strong, independent feminist to a good mother and sympathetic

wife/victim" after the media accused her of being a failure in image making that lacked traditional femininity (207). First ladies have had a personal press secretary to help with their public image since Jacqueline Kennedy (Gutin 2000). Those who have had journalism training or knowledge and understood the news process, such as Eleanor Roosevelt, Jacqueline Kennedy, and Lady Bird Johnson, have maintained high public opinion ratings (Caroli 1987).

Traditional Portrayals of the First Lady in the Media

The First Lady is judged harshly based on societal expectations of what an American wife (and woman) *should* look like (Gardetto 1997; Watson 1997). This normative judgment has been established through the precedents set by previous first ladies, all the way back to Martha Washington (Burns 2005; Caroli 2003; Copeland 2002; Shoop 2010; Wertheimer 2005; Winfield 1997; Winfield and Friedman 2003). The media's constant comparison between current and previous first ladies has resulted in a view of even contemporary first ladies as needing to conform to traditional feminine roles and stereotypes (Caroli 2003). Women in politics in general—but first ladies in particular—are subjects of sexist comments and criticism; viewed as unfit mothers or uncommitted wives when in the political spotlight; or being condemned as too feminine, too masculine, or too sexual (Witt, Paget, and Matthews 1994).

Many early first ladies—and still some contemporary first ladies—have taken roles as subordinate supporters of their husbands (Bruni 2000; Clift 2000), acting as entertainers for social occasions, holding teas, answering calls, accompanying their husbands on trips, and acting as protector and even caretaker for their husbands, as was the case with Helen Taft (Caroli 2010). Even those early first ladies who insisted on taking a more active role in the White House, such as Abigail Adams, Sarah Polk, and Florence Harding, did so in a capacity to assist their husbands rather than to pursue their own desires (Caroli 2010; Watson 1997). Most first ladies did not even have their own "pet projects" until the early 1900s when Helen Taft took a role in housing reform (Caroli 2010). Later first ladies, including Eleanor Roosevelt, have taken on partnership roles with their husbands, but even Roosevelt was considered daring when she disagreed with him on such controversial issues as civil rights (Wiesen Cook 1992).

Based on the extent to which she adheres to her precedents or deviates from the established norm, the First Lady tends to be bracketed into traditional or less traditional roles in her media portrayals, the former associated with more positive coverage. The public and the mass media admire strong women but criticize the First Lady when she shows any kind of real influence, such as when Nancy Reagan was referred to as the "Dragon Lady" for her perceived influence in the Reagan administration (Watson 2000, 34) and when Rosalynn Carter was referred to as a "Steel Magnolia" for her feminist

ambitions (Beasley 2005). Betty Ford, after making controversial comments about marijuana usage and birth control, received thousands of critical letters (Beasley 2005; Borrelli 2001). Coverture under a husband is still evidently preferable, as evidenced when both Hillary Clinton and Marilyn Quayle adopted their husband's names after having entered the political arena (Witt, Paget, and Matthews 1994). Those potential first ladies who have extensive political experience may be labeled as outspoken, tough, or combative, and her husband may be criticized as "henpecked" or weak (Gardetto 1997; Schmidt 2000; Watson 2000, 35). Eleanor Roosevelt invited criticism for her busy speaking agenda, her women's rights activism, including women's-only press conferences and a weekly syndicated news column, and her overall refusal to subscribe to the traditional role to which she had seen her Aunt Edith Roosevelt adhere (Wiesen Cook 1992; 1999). Hillary Clinton, by stepping outside of previously defined roles of the First Lady and taking and heading the Task Force on National Health Care Reform, traveling more than any other First Lady, and speaking out against practices that abused women around the world, received a great deal of media criticism and was often portrayed as selfish and cold (Burrell 2001; Bystrom, McKinnon, and Chaney 1999; Gardetto 1997).

Winfield (1997) established four major frames that journalists tend to apply to first ladies, which have been used to study their traditional or less traditional portrayals and to compare their portrayals with approval ratings: an escort who accompanies her spouse; a style setter who leads society in social events; as noblesse oblige, doing charitable and good works; and a policymaker, who takes a politically active role. The former three of the codes represent more traditional roles and tend to be associated with more positive approval ratings. Studies by Winfield and Friedman (2003), Gardetto (1997), and Shoop (2010) have tested this coding mechanism. Most recently, Shoop (2010), for example, found that in the 2008 presidential campaign, the media most often portrayed Michelle Obama as a campaign surrogate and a style icon. Scharrer and Bissell (2000), in a visual study, found that although frames of first ladies had become less stereotypical by less frequently representing the "escort or host" frame, "venturing into political territory"—a more deviant role—was also associated with negatively toned stories (81). The more traditional activity of her accompanying the president, other men or women, kids or pets, or acting as an escort or host was associated with more positively toned stories. In a content analysis of Barbara Bush, Hillary Clinton, and Laura Bush, Abraham (2004) found that Barbara Bush, who consistently stuck with this traditional "First Housewife" role, had higher approval ratings than Hillary Clinton, who was characterized as a less traditional "Co-President" in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post.* Sulfaro (2006) similarly observed that the public had warmer feelings toward the more traditionally framed Laura Bush and cooler feelings toward the unconventional, pantsuit-wearing Hillary Clinton.

Potential Visual Framing of Michelle Obama

The differences between Michelle Obama and her predecessors are abundant. She is highly-educated, culturally in-tune, takes fashion "risks" (StyleList 2011), and is of course deviant from her precedents because she is the first Black First Lady. She struck controversy when she made a comment about her husband's success, stating: "for the first time in my adult life I am really proud of my country" (Tapper 2008). Reaction to the comment soon turned to racial politics (McGinley 2009) when she was labeled as a stereotypically "angry, sassy" Black woman and "militant" (Graham 2008; Williams 2009, 834). Her campaign opponents characterized her as "an unpatriotic angry Black woman nursing racial grievances despite her successful life story" (as cited in Puente 2008). Talk show radio host Tammy Bruce invoked racial logic when she referred to Michelle Obama as "trash," while reacting to a recording of Michelle Obama, who, while speaking in an African American dialect, recounted being teased for talking like a white person (McAlister 2009). Still, for many, Mrs. Obama's "American" identity is more important than her racial identity because of her shared values and domesticity (Madison 2009). Her social class and her beauty, according to Madison (2009) made her Blackness acceptable for many, and a source of pride for Black people. She sparks interests in both her fashion and her perfectly pressed hair (Desmond-Harris 2009). Her sleeveless tops, tall stature, and education in two Ivy League schools position her as more than a traditional mother and wife (Spillers 2009). She has been called a "hybrid model" of First Lady: neither "mold-shattering" nor a complete feminist as Hillary Clinton was (Cottle 2008). In the time leading up to the election, she granted many interviews in which she discussed what she thought her approach to the position of First Lady would be, claiming that her top priority was to be "mom-in-chief" to her daughters (Marcus 2008). She stated that she is "not the policy person" and was most concerned with issues surrounding work, family, and finding a balance between the two (Mulkern 2008; Roberts 2008). Still, she claimed that although she was most concerned with her own family and national issues for family life, she was not one to sit silent next to her husband without letting him know what she liked or disliked about what he was doing (Roberts 2008). The image she wants to exude seems to revolve around healthy living and fighting obesity. She gets the message out by working with young students to plant gardens, learn about healthy foods, and even by dancing with students to Beyoncé's "Move Your Body" (Kennedy 2011). Media frequently banter and criticize her workout regime, physique, and healthy lifestyle (e.g., Hutchinson 2009; Lynch 2011; Skiba 2010). She has taken on traditional roles by opening the White House to locals for evenings of mentoring children and has visited more than 50 schools and community centers. She has also, however, taken on some more political roles, including taking on the issue of supporting military families (Samuels

2009). Some members of the mainstream media were quick to criticize Mrs. Obama for some of her nontraditional traits. Maureen Dowd of the *New York Times* said her edgy distinction is "emasculating" Barack (as cited in Cottle 2008, 208). Spillers (2009) writes that image handlers have softened Michelle into a more traditional routine following her powerful speech during the Iowa caucuses. Mrs. Obama has certainly not been silent or reserved, having appeared on magazine covers, *Oprah,* and petitioning (unsuccessfully) for Chicago's hosting the 2016 Olympics (Henry 2009; Samuels 2009). Her image is not yet fully established as either fitting or shattering any certain mold.

Visually Assessing First Ladies in a Digital Age

Without a defined role, the First Lady has been evaluated by the degree to which she adheres to her predecessors—ultimately, by how "traditional" she behaves in her gender roles. Framing studies about first ladies have often studied them in terms of these traditional or less traditional roles (e.g., Gardetto 1997; Scharrer and Bissell 2000; Shoop 2010; Sulfaro 2007). However, very few visual studies of the First Lady have been undertaken (e.g., Scharrer and Bissell 2000) for her traditional portrayals by the media, and no studies have compared her portrayal as molded by the White House versus by journalists, a feat that is now feasible and relevant with the onset of social media outlets.

The visual aspect of politics is an important area of study. Grabe and Bucy (2009) went as far as to say that, "contemporary elections are built on a visual foundation" (85). MacLeod and Webb (2009) assert that imagery is the "arbiter of political success" (2). Visuals help viewers to "translate the news: the competent, exceptional leader; evil or good groups of people; the efficient, tough, general; the welfare cheat; the soldier or worker who wants and needs leadership; the designing woman; the corrupt politician; and so on" (Edelman 1995, 11). Late-deciding voters may be more influenced by visuals than any other communicative form (Coleman and Banning 2006, 313).

Of the visual studies of the First Lady that do exist, the objects of examination are those photos that are disseminated through mainstream journalistic outlets that likely contain many official photographs (Colbert 1995), and thus the findings cannot be attributed exclusively to either White House or journalistic framing. Because user-generated media outlets have given official sources such as the White House an opportunity to display any and all of the photos it chooses without going through the journalistic gate (Singer 1997), the study of journalistic and public relations frames is now feasible. Visual comparisons present a special challenge to researchers because two content creators do not necessarily have the same access to photo opportunities whereby the First Lady could be coded, for example, as making policy,

leading society in social events, an escort, a noblesse oblige, or in many other contextual roles. A new visual coding mechanism is needed that takes into consideration subtle cues of traditional femininity but bypasses the issue of *access*. For example, journalists do not necessarily have the ability to take photographs of the First Lady when she is tucking her children in to bed. The White House does. Rather than measuring portrayals based on environmental context (e.g., working on domestic chores, cooking, and the like), Goffman (1979) relies on body language and relations to others to measure traditional visual portrayals of women in the media. This study proposes the use of Goffman's subtle visual cues as a new method for studying a different facet of traditional gender portrayals of the First Lady.

Goffman's Framing Theory and Gender

Erving Goffman's seminal piece, *Frame Analysis* (1974), asserts that when an individual or the media recognizes an event, he or she uses schemata of interpretation derived from personal experiences and agreed-upon social norms. Social situations, including media, are settings where "learned and patterned" rituals take place and affirm social arrangements (Goffman 1974, 3). His piece on gender framing (1979) specifically addresses women's framing by the media. Gender displays in the media teach women how they should, or ought to be; this helps to maintain societal order. Goffman (1974) describes this media framing as "editorial violence" (14). The media ultimately frame women as traditional, or conventionally behaved. Goffman uses the term "gender displays" to refer to the media's traditional portrayals of women. Women are often "displayed," for example, in a traditional, feminine manner through the way they are displayed in relation to men, the way they seek shelter from others, or even the subtle ways they hold their hands. The display Goffman labels "function ranking" refers to the fact that when a man and a woman are shown in the media collaborating face-to-face, the man is likely to be shown performing the executive or instructing role, while the woman receives the instruction or occupies a mere accompanying role. Elevation, too, seems to be used in the media to portray women in a lower place. Traditionally, women in the media are shown in lower physical places, while men tend to be up higher, sometimes on a stage or at a podium, for instance. Elevation does not necessarily refer to height per se, but to the arrangement of men and women when displayed in the media. Women are also traditionally photographed as lowered in deference or respect and in physical subordination toward another person, what Goffman (1979) calls "The ritualization of subordination." In addition, a male pictured with a female in the media often is shown holding her shoulder or arm, which in Western societies signifies that she accepts constraint or male protection. Goffman's (1979) ritualization of "licensed withdrawal" asserts that women in Western society are often shown in the media removing themselves psychologically

from the situation, presumably dependent on the protection of other men who might help. As such, they are frequently shown in the media concealing themselves by turning away from others, covering their faces, averting their gazes, shyly touching their fingers together, or hiding behind another person or trinket such as a purse. Women may also be stereotypically pictured displaying the "feminine touch" (Goffman 1979), using their fingers and hands to trace the outlines of an object or to touch the face or body of themselves or others.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

Using this coding scheme as a way to more accurately code First Lady Michelle Obama as being either traditionally or nontraditionally visually portrayed by the White House and journalists, the following research questions are asked:

> RQ1: In what ways and to what extent do journalists visually portray Michelle Obama as traditional?
>
> RQ2: In what ways and to what extent does the White House visually portray Michelle Obama as traditional?

Both the White House and journalists engage in differing framing techniques when disseminating images of the First Lady. The literature suggests that photographic portrayals of the First Lady are important because of their influence on public opinion and media tone. The White House is aware of these perceptions and thus may try to maintain a more favorable, traditional image of the First Lady. Journalists, on the other hand, are more influenced in their photographic selections by newsroom routines and norms. Given differing motivations and reasons for disseminating images of the First Lady, the hypothesis is posed:

> Hypothesis: There will be statistically significant differences in the extent to which the White House and journalists portray Michelle Obama as traditional.

METHOD

To answer the first research question, a content analysis of photographs of Michelle Obama from the online version of *Time* magazine was undertaken. *Time* is a magazine with an online version that had 49 percent growth in 2008 and an average of 7.7 million unique visitors to the Web site per month (Sasseen, Matsa, and Mitchell 2013). *Time* magazine is an appropriate population from which to draw the sample, because it has been used

in content analyses of Hillary Clinton, Barbara Bush, and Nancy Reagan (Scharrer and Bissell 2000, 68). This online magazine also includes a large volume of photographs. To answer the second research question, photos from the White House's Flickr *photostream* were content analyzed. Flickr is a photo-sharing social networking site on which anybody or any organization can upload photos. A *photostream* is a collection of photographs uploaded by an individual or a group onto the social networking site. In this case, the White House photostream contains only photographs uploaded by the White House. By isolating a group of photos that were released directly from the White House and have not been filtered through the journalistic gate, image handler frames can be identified. To test the hypothesis that White House frames are significantly more traditional than journalistic frames, the two samples from research questions one and two are compared.

Sample Selection

The sample of *Time* photographs begins in June 2008 and it continues until March 27, 2010, the date the sample was taken. This time frame was chosen because of the high media coverage of the Obamas late in the campaign and early in the presidency. From the *Time* homepage, "photos" was selected, followed by a selection of "photoessays," and a search for the term "Obama." The researcher looked through every resulting photoessay to choose photographs that contained Michelle Obama. The only photographs that clearly showed Michelle Obama were selected. In all, 139 photographs were acquired.

To select a sample of White House-disseminated photos, the White House's photostream on Flickr was accessed (www.flickr.com/photos/whitehouse). From the Flickr homepage, the White House's official photostream was accessed via search. A census of the population within the same time frame yielded a similar number of photos as the *Time* sample. The final number of images analyzed in this study is 295: 139 from *Time* and 156 from the White House Flickr photostream.

Variables

The independent variables in this study include journalistic photos of Michelle Obama from *Time* and White House photos of Michelle Obama from Flickr. The dependent variables are traditional and nontraditional portrayals within the photographs, as defined by Goffman (1979). Goffman's variables were chosen for several reasons. First, past literature about the gender framing of first ladies has most often been textual rather than visual in nature, citing variables such as mentions of political or domestic activity;

thus, most coding categories based on past framing literature are not useful for this study. Second, visual analysis requires that the researcher can assess the portrayal of Michelle Obama regardless of her location. Because of practical reasons, journalistic photographs are frequently shown during campaign speeches or other photo opportunities, while White House photos may be taken in a more domestic setting. Goffman's measures allow for an assessment of traditional portrayals without regard to context, by instead relying on body gestures, postures, and position relative to others. This type of visual analysis has been undertaken by other researchers of politicians (e.g., Coleman and Banning 2006).

Goffman (1979) refers to portrayals of women in the media as "gender displays," often citing them as stereotypical or conventional. For this analysis, the word "traditional" will be used to describe these stereotypical or conventional displays. "Nontraditional" will be used to refer to nonstereotypical or nonconventional displays. The following Goffman (1979) coding schemes were used in the study:

1. "**The Feminine Touch**." Photographs were coded as traditional when Michelle Obama is pictured caressing, cradling, or embracing an object or another person or herself. She was not coded as traditional if she was holding an object because of utility.
2. "**Licensed Withdrawal**." Photographs were coded as a traditional portrayal of licensed withdrawal that:
   - Show Michelle Obama with her hands covering some of her mouth or face lightly with her hands, hand, or fingers, such as when she is biting her nails. Her emotion may appear bashful, shy, embarrassed, charmed, scared, appalled, surprised, or in laughter. She was not coded as traditional if she was touching her face out of utility, such as when she was eating or putting on sunglasses.
   - Averting her gaze from someone as though to withdraw from the current situation. Gaze aversion means lowering one's head and withdrawing from attention in wonder, thought, of bashfulness, leading to a symbolization of submissiveness. Michelle Obama was not coded a traditional if she was simply looking at something.
   - Seeking shielding from another person or object. This category, called "participation shield," was coded when Michelle Obama was leaning into and/or lightly behind someone, intentionally covering herself. Intention was important in the coding of this category. The photograph was not coded as traditional if Michelle Obama was behind something or someone out of mere coincidence of utility, such as standing behind a podium.

- Displaying the "finger to finger" position is a traditional manner of shy dissociation from the situation. The photograph was coded as containing this traditional instance when she was lightly touching the tips of her fingers together.
3. "**Function Ranking**." Michelle Obama was coded as traditional when:
   - She is in an armlock or shoulder hold with another man
   - She is being instructed. Instruction involves some kind of subordination of the instructed and deference toward the instructor. Photos indicating instruction are likely to involve one person pointing or indicating with the hand some kind of a point to be learned. Instruction also includes when a person stands in front of several other people, either on a stage, behind a podium, or in a clear central location whereby he or she can be seen, and when the other people appear to be paying attention to what the central person is telling them
   - She is in a nonexecutive role in relation to another person who is in an executive role. Executive role involves a person in a more prominent position in some kind of function, action, or role. One person—the executive—is performing a main task (e.g., a doctor) and another person is performing an assisting task (e.g., a nurse; a non-executive role). Conversely, she was coded as nontraditional when she is pictured being an instructor or in an executive position herself; such is the case when she is on a stage or giving a speech.
4. "**The Ritualization of Subordination**." Photographs were coded as traditional that contain Michelle Obama physically lower than others, lying down, bowing, looking up toward somebody, with bent knee or standing behind others in respect. Nontraditional portrayals are coded when another person or persons are shown subordinate to her in any of these ways.
5. In addition to these Goffman (1979) variables, a fifth measure, maternal role, was added. Michelle Obama was coded as **traditional** if she was in the presence of children, either her own or others. This measure is found in other studies about the framing of the first lady (e.g., Abraham 2004; Scharrer and Bissell 2000; Watts 1997).

The three dimensions comprising the function-ranking variable were combined to create the function-ranking construct. Similarly, the four dimensions comprising the licensed withdrawal variable were combined to create the licensed withdrawal construct. Prior to coding, the researcher chose to combine the ritualization of subordination variable with the function-ranking variable because of low frequencies of the former. It was the judgment of the researcher that being subordinate or in deference to another resembled being at a lower function. This variable is referred to as "ritualization of subordination/function ranking."

Note that some variables may only be coded as "traditional" (and not *"nontraditional"*) because there is no nontraditional counterpart. The exception is function ranking/ritualization of subordination. In this case, both traditional and nontraditional schemes were coded. Each photograph could include more than one of the variables. The photographs were examined by two independent coders. Because Goffman's measures are sometimes subtle and vague, five training sessions were undertaken to ensure reliability. The training sessions provided refinement of the operational definitions of the variables. Both coders reviewed an initial selection of 60 photographs from the sample, and intercoder reliability was assessed. The kappa coefficients were as follows: Feminine Touch, 0.801; Function Ranking, 0.812; Ritual of Subordination, 0.747; Maternal, 0.924. Because too few licensed withdrawal instances were found prior to summing the dimensions, a kappa coefficient was not assessed. Subsequent discussion about observed discrepancies improved agreement for coding schemes prior to the full analysis.

RESULTS

Research question one asked: In what ways and to what extent do journalists visually portray Michelle Obama as traditional? All of the variables were used to answer the question. The journalistic photographs of Michelle Obama ($n = 139$) contain a total of 81 traditional portrayals, shown in Table 1. Please note that although 81 instances of traditionality are found in the photographs, this is not equal to a proportion of the photos (81 of 139, e.g.), because many of the photographs contained more than one category of traditionality (e.g., a photograph may contain both children and the feminine touch). Feminine touch and the presence of children resembled the greatest sources of traditional portrayals among journalistic photos, with 25 occurrences each (18 percent of the photos contained the feminine touch and 18 percent contained children). Michelle Obama was often shown in the feminine touch category when she is embracing others in a hug, placing her

TABLE 1 Traditional Portrayals of Michelle Obama in White House versus *Time*

Variable	*Time* ($n = 139$)	White House ($n = 156$)	Totals*
Licensed withdrawal	8 (1%)	24 (15%)	32
Feminine touch	25 (18%)	42 (27%)	67
Maternal role	25 (18%)	42 (27%)	67
Function rank/Ritualization	23 (17%)	30 (19%)	53
Totals*	81	138	219

*Some photographs were coded for more than one variable present; therefore, totals of such instances are not equal to *N*, and totals do not equal the number of photos with a traditional portrayal, but the number of traditional portrayals.

FIGURE 1 Feminine Touch. Callie Shell, *Time* Magazine.
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hand lightly on one's shoulder, holding her children gently and protectively, or lightly placing her hands on her knee. Figure 1 shows Michelle Obama displaying the feminine touch, as she lightly touches the backsides of her hands together, a pose frequently used in gendered photographs of women in the media (Goffman 1979). In 23 of the photos (17 percent) Mrs. Obama is seen in the more traditional "lower function" in relation to those around her, according to Goffman's function-ranking variable. For example, in one such photograph, Michelle is seen standing slightly behind her husband as a supporter and viewer as he gives a speech. She stands back and to the side, gazing up toward her husband in the lower function of audience member. She is portrayed as the student rather than the teacher—the instructed rather than the instructor, an indicator that she is in a lower function than her husband. In addition, eight photographs (one percent) contained instances where Mrs. Obama is in the traditional licensed withdrawal position. In one such photograph, Mrs. Obama is seen at a social party with her husband, shyly seeking cover behind him with most of her body, in what appears to be a large crowd of guests. Goffman would consider Michelle Obama to be shown psychologically removing herself from the situation, a symbol of women taking cover under their husbands.

Research question two asked in what ways and to what extent the White House visually portrays Michelle Obama as traditional. Overall, 138 instances of traditionality were found in White House photographs of Michelle Obama ($n = 156$). Table 1 shows that among White House photos, feminine touch

and maternal role were the two most common indicators of traditionality, with 42 instances each; 27 percent of the photographs contained the feminine touch, and 27 percent contained children. Michelle Obama is often photographed gardening, reading books, or participating in holiday events with children, as was the case when she is photographed hosting a Halloween event dressed as a cat. There were 30 (19 percent of the photos) cases in which Mrs. Obama is shown at a lower function in Goffman's "function ranking," an indicator of a more traditional feminine role. For instance, in one photograph Mrs. Obama is shown entering a room, with her husband opening the door for her and leading and guiding her into the room. There are 24 instances of Mrs. Obama displaying the traditional trait of licensed withdrawal, or 15 percent of the photographs. Most commonly, the licensed withdrawal instances include photographs in which Michelle Obama is shyly leaning into Barack Obama. A photograph of Mrs. Obama with Barack Obama meeting the Pope shows her wearing a veil on her head, standing behind and to the side of her husband and at a greater distance from the Pope.

Of the 153 photographs from the total sample ($N = 295$) that contained traditional variables, 62.7 percent were from the White House photographs (96 of 153) and 41 percent were from the journalistic photographs (57 of 139). In addition, of the 57 photographs from the total sample ($N = 295$) that were nontraditional, 24 came from the White House (42.1 percent) and 33 came from the journalistic photos (57.9 percent). Journalistic photographs contained more instances of nontraditional variables. Table 1 shows that the White House photographs consistently contain notably more instances of traditional portrayals among all of the measures. Specifically, while journalistic photographs contained 81 total instances of traditional traits in photographs of Michelle Obama, the White House photographs contained 138 of such portrayals. The difference between journalistic and White House portrayals of Michelle Obama as traditional are noticeably and consistently different in frequencies. The patterns among ways in which traditional displays are present are similar, with feminine touch and maternal being the most frequently shown instance of traditional display in both sources. The traditional portrayal of licensed withdrawal are found three times more frequently in the White House than in journalistic photographs (24 and 8 times, respectively). Overall, there is a clear and consistent pattern in which White House photographs contain noticeably more traditional portrayals of Michelle Obama than journalistic photographs.

In adding richness to research questions one and two, recall that the function ranking/ritualization of subordination variable was coded for both traditional and nontraditional instances of visual portrayals of Michelle Obama. Table 2 adds to research question one by showing that Michelle Obama was coded as traditional for function ranking/ritualization of subordination in journalistic photographs 23 times (17 percent of photos)

TABLE 2 Traditional and Nontraditional Instances of Function Ranking/Ritualization of Subordination by Journalists and the White House

	Time ($N = 139$)	White House ($N = 156$)
Traditional	23 (17%)	30 (19%)
Nontraditional	44 (32%)	24 (15%)

$\chi^2 = 5.47(df = 1), p < .05.$

and as nontraditional 44 times (32 percent of photos). Further answering research question two, the White House photographs contained traditional instances of traditional function ranking/ritualization of subordination 30 times (19 percent of photos) and contained instances of nontraditional function ranking/ritualization of subordination 24 times (15 percent of photos). Michelle Obama was often accompanying Barack in a speech or meeting or following his lead in a walk; other photographs showed the inverse ranking of function. For example, Michelle Obama sometimes is shown as the leader of a meeting or at a podium or leading a meeting in the cabin of Air Force One.

The hypothesis posited that there would be a statistically significant difference in the extent to which the White House and journalists portray Michelle Obama as traditional or nontraditional, using the function ranking/ritualization of subordination variable. This hypothesis is confirmed. Table 2, which compares both traditional and nontraditional portrayals for the function ranking/ritualization of subordination variable, reveals that the White House portrays Michelle Obama more often as traditional than journalists, thus providing support for the hypothesis ($\chi^2 = 5.47$, $p < 0.05$). With regard to this variable, the sources are inverses of one another, with journalistic photographs containing significantly fewer traditional instances (23; 17 percent) and more nontraditional instances (44; 32 percent), while White House photographs show significantly more traditional instances (30; 19 percent) and fewer nontraditional instances (24; 15 percent).

DISCUSSION

This study has used Goffman's gender framing concepts to distinguish between two outlets' framing of First lady Michelle Obama. In light of the relatively new ability for the White House to bypass the journalistic gatekeepers in disseminating images, this study was able to differentiate between the two framing sources. In looking at both sources of visual images, the researcher coded subtle instances of traditionality that were context-independent, relying on Goffman's (1979) measures of traditional gender portrayals of women in the media. Rather than measuring portrayals based on environmental context (e.g., working on domestic chores, cooking, and the like), Goffman

relies on body language and relations to others to measure traditional visual portrayals of women in the media. This measure accounted for the fact that journalists and the White House have differing environmental opportunities to photograph the First Lady: journalists mainly at press events, while the White House may photograph within the home. Another variable, the presence of children, was implemented, because it is found in most other content analyses of first lady portrayals and is context independent (e.g., Abraham 2004; Scharrer and Bissell 2000; Watts 1997). This study has confirmed that Goffman's variables are useful for measuring the extent to and different ways in which journalists and the White House frame the First Lady. The research questions reveal that although the White House displays Michelle Obama more traditionally than journalists, they portray her as traditional in similar manners. Consistent with the literature (Mandziuk 2008; Winfield 1997), she is often seen in a motherly role or with children. Goffman's variables, though, offer new ways to look at these femininity displays that have not been explored. For example, the frequent presence of the feminine touch in both outlets offers evidence that she is not only portrayed gendered in her relationship to men and children but also in her nonrelational femininity. That the First Lady would be portrayed in this more feminine manner is supported by the literature that says that the White House does not want her seen as lacking femininity, too masculine, or too tough (Gardetto 1997; Parry-Giles 2000; Schmidt 2000; Witt, Paget, and Matthews 1994). Rich differences can be seen in the extent to which each group seems to select certain of these displays. For example, the White House images display Mrs. Obama four times more frequently in the licensed withdrawal ritual, a variable that may be seen as resembling the coverture under a husband preferable in official White House portrayals (Witt, Paget, and Matthews 1994). Portrayals of traditional function ranking are much less variable between the two sources. The fact that the latter two variables, licensed withdrawal and function ranking, are seen less than children and feminine touch should not be seen as an indicator of their importance as variables. Rather, it can be attributed to the fact that Michelle Obama was not in the presence of other adults in all of the photos, a requirement for coding function ranking and some of the licensed withdrawal rituals. Variables that take into account gender displays both in the presence of others and while she is alone are important for thorough coding of her in differing contexts and reaffirms the effectiveness of Goffman's coding scheme. Overall, the results of this study show that the White House frames Michelle Obama according to these stereotypical media traditions to a greater degree than journalists. The main contribution of this research is that it suggests using these context-independent coding points is a new facet to study and add richness to studies about the visual portrayal of the First Lady in the media.

This study is also useful in understanding the portrayal of Mrs. Obama in the media. Consistent with the literature, the study suggests that motivations of the White House image handlers are more potent in engendering traditional gender stereotypes than are the journalistic routines, news values, and norms (Shoemaker and Reese 1991). The literature also suggests that the White House may have a greater motivation for displaying the First Lady in a traditional manner than journalists because the more traditional portrayals are associated with more favorable audience perceptions and less media criticism (e.g., Abraham 2004; Scharrer and Bissell 2000; Winfield 1997). In this study, the White House does display First Lady Michelle Obama more visually traditional than journalists. The study also supports the literature that professes an intentional traditional portrayal of the First Lady as dispensed from the White House (e.g., Caroli 1987; Gould 1983; Parry-Giles 2000). The findings may also relate to the fact that the First Lady carries a great deal of power to promote social issues (Gutin 2000) or because her image reflects on the entire presidency and ongoing campaign, for which visuals are of utmost importance (Coleman and Banning 2006; Edelman 1995; Grabe and Bucy 2009). Overall, this study suggests that the White House may be motivated by public approval in their photographic decisions.

The research also finds that journalists support a diverse and realistic view of the First lady as both traditional and nontraditional (Schudson 2003; Shoemaker, Chang, and Brendlinger 1987). More often in journalistic photographs than White House photographs, she was deviating from the Western standard of a traditional woman who takes care of children, is subordinate, feminine, and withdrawn, supporting the literature findings that journalists value deviance as an indicator of newsworthiness (Goffman 1979). Journalists more frequently showed her in executive, instructive, and superordinate roles (e.g., leading a meeting to which the president is attentive), reflecting similar previous literature categorizations of the First Lady as nontraditional when she is politically active as opposed to an escort or host (e.g., Scharrer and Bissell 2000). Overall, this study provides evidence that journalists may have been more motivated by their ideas of newsworthiness via deviance than by public approval.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

Goffman's (1979) variables are useful for finding traditional portrayals of women in the media, but among his variables, the absence of traditionality does not necessarily equate a nontraditional portrayal. For example, the presence of children is considered traditional, while a lack of children cannot validly be inferred as nontraditional. Therefore, this coding scheme is useful for coding visuals as traditional but less useful for coding visuals as nontraditional.

Visual content analysis among journalists greatly limited the variables that could be coded for. For example, most journalistic photographs are taken during a public event, while White House photographs may be taken in more domestic settings. Using Goffman's variables to accommodate for these differences in context meant looking directly at Michelle Obama, her body language, and her relations with others in the photographs. As a result, some of the variables used in this study revealed very few instances of the traditional or nontraditional traits.

The conclusions from this study are preliminary. The study is limited in that it only examined one first lady and is thus not able to draw generalizations about the visual framing of first ladies. The results are also constrained in that the journalistic and official outlets of images selected for this study are also limited. Only one journalistic and one official source was implemented in this content analysis. In addition, Michelle Obama cannot be compared to other first lady's portrayals because the variables used to measure portrayal differed somewhat from previous content analyses.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The results of this study provide initial support for the use of Goffman's (1979) gender portrayals in the media to the study of the visual framing of the First Lady and supports the literature suggesting that official sources have different motivations for framing the First Lady than journalists. In the past, images crafted by the White House could not be distributed to the mass public without having been filtered through a journalistic medium. Given this new opportunity for both the White House and other outlets to distribute and help mold the overall image of the First Lady in the public sphere, this new visual coding scheme may be more useful for making comparisons among the way different outlets tend to portray her as traditionally gendered. Overall, this study expanded media sociology literature in general by measuring journalistic and White House visual framing mechanisms separately in the wake of new methods for official sources to disseminate images. A further conclusion from this study is that the White House portrays Michelle Obama in a more traditional light than journalists. Further research comparing Michelle Obama with other first ladies using a similar coding mechanism would allow for such comparisons.

Future research should continue to pursue the changing photographic environment in the absence of powerful journalistic gates. Citizen journalists and other creators of user-generated content allow fruitful areas for relevant visual studies and for comparisons of these frames with journalistic frames. Future research would benefit from measurements of both traditional and nontraditional traits among many content outlets. The present study attempted to resolve the problem of differing environments and contexts

available between the different photograph sources by looking at body language and relations to others instead of environment as variables. Future research into traditional and nontraditional gender portrayals should pursue this context-independent coding scheme to refine and include more such measures. Such study would improve future research about visual portrayals in a changing environment that allows many people in many contexts to take and publish photographs of prominent persons and news events. In addition, this coding scheme should be applied to Michelle Obama in her late-term tenure and it should be applied to other first ladies. The fact that variables, such as the feminine touch and licensed withdrawal, have not been tested before but showed up in this study of Michelle Obama leads one to question whether there is something unique about this presidency in its particular gender displays of Michelle Obama or whether such displays are universal. Because this coding scheme is newly being tested, further studies are needed to truly understand the similarities and differences in the gender displays of the First Lady in Goffman's gender displays.

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