CREATING A MONSTER

Online media constructions of Hillary Clinton during the Democratic Primary Campaign, 2007–8

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The United States Democratic primary campaign of 2007–8 witnessed widespread misogynistic and anti-feminist portrayals of Senator Hillary Clinton across all types of media. In particular, Clinton was regularly depicted as monstrous and/or cyborgian, collapsing the boundaries between male and female, human and animal, and organism and machine. Such portrayals indicate a gender crisis in contemporary American culture which intensifies when women attempt to enter positions of power in the public arena. Research has shown that television, radio and print media coverage of American political candidates has consistently relied on gender stereotypes that undermine the campaigns of women politicians. However, portrayals of female candidates in online media remain largely unexplored. This paper discusses the implications of online media for women's political campaigns and for the democratic process itself. Through an analysis of digital imagery, I argue that simulations of Clinton circulating on the Internet during the primaries sought to produce a political reality in which Clinton's bid for the White House could be rendered improper and unnatural. In so doing, I suggest the continuing potential of online media to produce detrimental representations of female politicians.

KEYWORDS Hillary Clinton; women political candidates; media and democracy; monsters; cyborgs

Introduction

On 8 March, 2008, Samantha Power resigned from her position as foreign policy advisor to Democratic Party presidential candidate Barack Obama. Her resignation was brought about by her reference to Obama’s main rival, Senator Hillary Clinton, as a “monster” who was “stooping to anything” to win the nomination, in an interview with The Scotsman newspaper on the previous day (Peev 2008). While Power’s resignation was necessary to maintain the “clean” image of the Obama campaign, the characterization of Clinton as monstrous was in fact widespread in both mainstream and fringe media.
throughout the primary race. Clinton was most frequently portrayed as a particular kind of monster that forms a Western cultural preoccupation in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: the futuristic cyborg. *The Washington Post* referred to her as a “homicidal cyborg from the future” with “manic facial expressions, a bulldog front, pitiless emotions and a lust to kill” (Robinson 2008). Dowd (2008) of *The New York Times* noted how a former aide to Clinton called her “The Terminator.” Dowd extended the metaphor to criticize Clinton’s refusal to concede the Democratic nomination to Obama. The Internet in particular became a site for Clinton’s cyborgization. Satirical fake news website Newsbiscuit (2008) ran a story claiming that “a battle scarred cyborg Hillary Clinton” returned from the year 2039 “to warn voters and super delegates that a victory for Obama creates a hellish future ruled by meta-droids intent on enslaving humanity.” In a series of fabricated online reports, Clinton was medicalized, her robotic body constructed as the Other of the human scientists who scanned and probed her to discover her true identity. In one report, an x-ray from a medical examination revealed the senator to be an “indestructible robotic intelligence” (Civilizer 2007); another yielded the opposite result, shocking the scientific community by uncovering Clinton’s humanity (Crowley 2007).

Monsters appear culturally at moments of category crisis (Braidotti 2000; Cohen 1996) and the construction of Clinton as monster is indicative of a society in a state of deep gender anxiety. The monster and the cyborg are hybrid, boundary-crossing figures which destabilize identity categories (see Braidotti 1994, 2000, 2006; Cohen 1996; Gilmore 2003; Kirkup, Janes, Woodward & Hovenden 2000; Lykke & Braidotti 1996; Toffoletti 2007; Wolmark 1999). As an organic aberration of normal humanity, the monster collapses “natural” distinctions between human and animal, and male and female. The cyborg—part organism, part machine—subverts the nature/culture dichotomy that underpins human identity in modernity. Monsters and cyborgs are signifiers of otherness, occupying the margins of normality, and as such they serve to define and delimit the bounds of human body and identity. The figure of the monster is feminized within the cultural imagination; as Braidotti (2000, p. 165) notes, “both the feminine and the monstrous are signs of an embodied negative difference that makes them ideal targets for the ‘metaphysical cannibalism’ of a subject which feeds upon what it excludes.” Warner (1994, p. 3) has argued for a specific contemporary connection of the monster with the feminist woman, who is viewed by conservatives and moralists as undermining conventional distinctions between male and female roles and thus becomes scapegoat for “all social ills.” As embodiments of female empowerment, women political figures are especially prone to monsterization and the political arena is a fertile site for the creation of monstrous women.

In contemporary American politics, the campaign trail constitutes a forum in which gender boundaries are tested and negotiated. Anxieties about women in power, debates about the balance of career versus family, issues concerning women’s reproductive choices, uneasiness about women’s relationship to war and militarism, and the gendering of public and private spaces all intensify with the entrance of women into political contests. The higher or more “public” the level of office, the more acute these anxieties become. Widely (though erroneously) labeled as the first serious female contender for the United States presidency,1 Hillary Clinton became the focal point of the gender crisis in American society during the 2008 race for the White House. Anxieties about gender fluidity were inscribed on Clinton in ways that point to a cultural paranoia about the potentially catastrophic consequences of electing women leaders.
Of course, gender anxieties have been mapped onto the figure of Clinton since her husband’s successful bid for the presidency in 1992. The level of unease Clinton provoked during her time as first lady was entirely out of proportion to the “threat” she posed to American society, and it also surpassed that aroused by other female political figures and politicians’ wives, before or since. Media attacks on Clinton were fuelled by the idea that she was taking over from Bill, unduly influencing his presidential decisions and collapsing distinctions between public and private spheres (Brown & Gardetto 2000). Of particular concern for her media detractors was Clinton’s supposed destructive potential. Stephen J. Ducat (2004, p. 129) identified an “epidemic of male political hysteria” in response to the first lady which culminated in depictions of Clinton as maniacal castrator. Clinton was monsterized in political cartoons which portrayed her as a shark, “a bizarre figure with a Pinocchio nose,” a Queen of Hearts shrieking “Off with his head,” and a monstrous head comprised only of a mouth (Templin 1999, p. 31). Hillary Clinton’s potential to usurp power from her husband specifically manifested itself in fears about her physical and sexual aggression.

Unsurprisingly, concerns about Clinton’s destructive potential increased when she attempted to literally take over from her husband by running for president. Clinton’s refusal to conform to gender norms in her appearance and behavior resulted in a particularly brutal media attack on both her character and her gender. The castration theme continued, reaching its epitome in the production of a novelty “Hillary Nutcracker” with stainless steel teeth between its thighs. Her hard line stance on issues of militarism and foreign policy—a feature which is often considered desirable in male presidential candidates—resulted in her repeated characterization as dangerously violent and destructive. Media reaction to Clinton’s hawkishness demonstrates the double bind for female politicians, who risk being labeled “weak” and “incompetent” if they do not adopt aggressive approaches to foreign policy issues but who are also invariably considered overly masculine if they do (Jamieson 1995). Media commentators depicted Clinton as the antithesis of appropriate femininity—cold, calculating, emasculating, and brutal—a characterization that reached its logical conclusion in her construction as the ultimate mechanized cyborg.

The cyborg is a creature of cyberspace, finding its home online, and online media showed a particular propensity towards cyborgizing Clinton. This article will examine digital images of Clinton-as-cyborg that were posted on personal and political blogs during her bid for the White House in 2007–8. This is not a quantitative analysis, nor is it a reception study of how the images may have influenced voters. Rather, analysis of the particular images presented here constitutes part of an interrogation of the Internet as a space for venting anti-feminist political sentiment, focusing specifically on the relationship between gender and cyber-technology. Before turning to the image analysis itself, I begin with an examination of the figure of the cyborg within feminist discourse, followed by a discussion of the developing role of the Internet in electoral politics.

Cyborg Feminism and Technology

The cyborg has been theorized as a figure of feminist transcendence within wider debates about the relationship between women and cyber-technology. Feminists are divided over the nature of this relationship, with debates tending to bifurcate between pessimistic attitudes towards the feminist potential of digital technologies and utopian
visions of the Internet as a post-feminist or post-gender space. Concerns about the negative implications of cyber-technology for women stem from earlier radical and eco-feminist arguments that technology has been used as a means of establishing male control over both women and nature. Feminists in this camp cite the connection of technological research and development to the military-industrial complex, arguing that technology serves patriarchal and masculinist purposes which are ultimately destructive to women and the planet. Cockburn (1983) has documented technology’s role in the subordination of women in the labor market, while reproductive technologies are seen as delimiting women’s control of their own bodies. Critics of the Internet have demonstrated the ubiquity of pornography, global prostitution rings, and cyberpimping as harmful to women and fundamentally anti-feminist (Hughes 1999). Alternately, utopian cyberfeminists propose that digital technologies encompass a radical break with masculinist systems of control by embracing the undisciplined, decentralized fluidity of female subjectivity. Plant (1995) views the virtual world of cyberspace as inherently feminine, connecting the complex systems of the World Wide Web to women via the metaphor of weaving. Cyberfeminists like Plant argue that, while men attempt to subject network culture to a process of domination, such dominance is impossible. “Cyberspace,” Plant (1996, pp. 181–182) writes, “is out of man’s control: virtual reality destroys his identity . . . and, at the peak of his triumph, the culmination of his machine erections, man confronts the system he built for his own protection and finds it is female and dangerous.”

The cyborg represents perhaps the most dangerous feminine figure in cyberspace. First to conceive of the cyborg as an image of feminist transformation was Haraway (1991, p. 149), whose “Cyborg Manifesto” posited an “ironic political myth” in which distinctions between male and female, organism and machine, human and animal, and nature and culture collapsed. For Haraway (1991, p. 180), the monster—of which the cyborg is one incarnation—offers the potential for transcending traditional gender boundaries by creating alternate possible identities outside “those proposed by the mundane fiction of Man and Woman.” Yet, as Haraway (1991) herself notes, monsters have historically played the role of defining, rather than subverting, the limits of identity in Western cultural consciousness, and the cyborg is no exception. Feminist film theorists in particular have noted the tendency for the female cyborg to be cinematically represented in ways that sexualize and demean women and reinforce heteropatriarchal authority (Balsamo 1999; Wajcman 2004). The cyborg of science-fiction cinema is an exercise in masculine technophilia, constructed by men for male consumption, and thus conforms to the conventional viewing paradigm of male subject and female object (Mulvey 1989).

Utopian cyberfeminists counter this argument by claiming that, although sight is the predominant sense used in the reception of “old” media (such as film), hyper- or multimedia reception requires a fusion of senses, the most significant of these being touch. As such, for Plant (1996, p. 179), “there is more to cyberspace than meets the male gaze.” This surpassing of the gaze is brought about by the supposed destabilizing of the body in cyberspace; there is no coherent body to commodify or fetishize. Cyberfeminists view technology as transcending the gendered body, enabling the conceptualization of “post-bodied and post-human forms of existence” (Featherstone & Burrows 1995, p. 2). Some cyberfeminists, such as Hawthorne and Klein (1999), argue that the disembodied nature of the cyborg depoliticizes it as a feminist trope. However, contradictorily, Plant’s emphasis on touch as the primary sensory faculty of multi-media technology affirms, rather than surpasses, the corporeality of human interactions with cyber-technology. Indeed, as I will
demonstrate, monstrous/cyborgian imagery in cyberspace can be used to reify the materiality and ontological stability of the gendered body in ways that undermine women’s attempts to attain political power and are ultimately anti-feminist.

Politics 2.0: Women Political Candidates, Democracy, and Online Media

Understanding the gendered implications of media representations of political candidates is imperative as these are likely to have a significant impact on popular opinion. News coverage typically provides the only contact the voting public has with candidates; as such, voters are guided largely by the information presented to them by the media (Duerst-Lahti 2007; Heith 2003; Kahn 1996; Paletz 1999; Woodall & Fridkin 2007). Numerous studies have demonstrated significant differences in American media representations of male and female political candidates, concluding that this usually works against women. Research conducted in the 1990s revealed that gender stereotypes were prevalent in media coverage of political campaigns (Kahn 1992, 1994, 1996). Kahn (1996, p. 53) found that “reporters are much more likely to refer to ‘female’ traits such as compassion and honesty when describing women candidates compared to male candidates” in senatorial campaigns. Female candidates also received less media coverage than male candidates (Kahn 1996). In addition, Kahn (1994, 1996) found that the higher the office in question, the more asymmetrical the news coverage of male and female candidates; that is, women running for governor received more favorable media treatment than women running for the senate, probably because gubernatorial campaigns concentrate on “feminine” issues such as health and education, as opposed to foreign policy and defense which men are traditionally believed to handle more effectively. More recent research has suggested that media coverage is becoming more balanced, with female senatorial and gubernatorial candidates receiving equal amounts of media attention as male candidates (Bystrom, Banwart, Kaid & Robertson 2004; Jalalzai 2006). However, news media continue to rely on gender stereotypes, focusing on women’s appearance, marital status, and personal qualities, and associating female candidates with “feminine” issues (Bystrom et al. 2004; Devitt 1999; Kittilson & Fridkin 2008). There is less data to analyze at the federal level, as few women have campaigned for the presidency, but studies of Elizabeth Dole’s bid for the Republican nomination in 1999 found that she received less media attention than her male rivals, and her coverage was more stereotyped, with reporters tending to concentrate on her appearance and personality traits rather than her policies. In addition, coverage of Dole was more negative, with emphasis placed on her lack of viability (Aday & Devitt 2001; Heldman, Carroll & Olson 2005).

While these studies focus on television and print media, the representation of female politicians in online media remains largely unexplored. The expansion of Web 2.0 as a political forum necessitates greater insight into the gendered constructions of political candidates online. In particular, the Internet is playing an increasing role in American presidential election campaigns. Candidates are utilizing online networks in their efforts to raise financial contributions, obtain support, and publicize their policies, while their supporters use social networking sites to attempt to sway public opinion. In 2007–8 these sites became a platform for venting both anti-Hillary and anti-feminist sentiment, such as the Facebook group “Hillary Clinton Stop Running for President and Make Me a Sandwich,” which had over 30,000 members during the campaign, and other anti-Hillary groups which
posted doctored photographs of Clinton with devil horns and the number 666 on her forehead. Internet technology enabled the demonization of Clinton at a level surpassing that offered by traditional media, and had the potential to circulate negative characterizations of Clinton to a much wider audience.

The Internet has revolutionized information processing and dissemination, allowing for the spread of information with a scope and speed not previously possible. The continuing development of new communications services such as Twitter—a social networking and microblogging platform—enables the almost instantaneous distribution of information to a potentially limitless audience across the globe. The Internet has also transformed the storage of news information. In traditional media, today’s headlines are forgotten tomorrow, superseded by the latest “breaking news,” but in spite of the prominence of rapid “updates,” information distributed on the Web remains online stored as data easily retrievable through a simple keyword search. This can have material political implications, such as when bloggers picked up an underreported media story about US Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott making what were believed to be racist remarks in late 2002 and continued to comment on the incident until Lott was forced to resign (Keren 2006, p. 6; Lessig 2004; Shachtman 2003). Online media also played an important role in disclosing the abuses at Abu Ghrail prison in Iraq in 2004.

Such instances have led some commentators to argue that the World Wide Web bolsters democracy by giving the public control of news and information (Barlow 2008; Feld & Wilcox 2008; Winston 2003). Internet technology reduces traditional media hegemony by allowing the public direct access to original documents and reports. In addition, new modes of online communication are changing the very way news information is generated, not just disseminated. The rapid rise of interactive, information-sharing websites has witnessed the expanding role of the public in both the creation and the longevity of news stories, as the Trent Lott case illustrates. In what Barlow (2008, p. 2) has referred to as the “horizontal” structure of online media (as opposed to the top-down “vertical” structure of conventional media), members of the public do not simply comprise the passive audience of news but are rather active participants in the production of news, deciding what merits their attention and what does not by selecting information to post and commenting on stories that are important to them.

In particular, weblogs—commonly known as “blogs”—enable the real-time participation of large numbers of people in news creation and political commentary. Blogs are online diaries in which users write about their lives and their worlds; they often allow visitors to comment on posts and typically include links to websites or other blogs of presumed interest to their readership. Proponents of blogs and other interactive websites have labeled the community of blogs and their users a “blogosphere” which, they argue, reinvigorates the public sphere of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that began disintegrating with the rise of consumer capitalism and mass communications. Drawing on the theories of Jürgen Habermas, blog researchers such as Barlow (2008), Cooper (2006), Keren (2006), and Mortensen and Walker (2002) view the blogosphere as a civic space where members of the community can assemble and share ideas outside the authority of the state and free from censorship. While mass media are subject to the hegemonic forces of the state, “massed media” have a decentralizing and emancipatory effect, enhancing the democratic process through the accumulation of numerous, disparate ideas and opinions (Barlow, 2008, p. 45).
The blogosphere, proponents argue, has given rise to a new breed of “citizen-journalist” who actively researches and composes his/her own stories and uncovers mistakes and omissions in mainstream media, along with “truths” that would otherwise remain hidden. The belief that mass media lie while new, technologized media are authentic, having the capacity to show politicians’ true colors, is common. Studies by Davis (2009), Kaye (2007), and Johnson and Kaye (2004) found that many blog users believe the content of blogs is more accurate than that of traditional news media. Joe Trippi (quoted in Feld & Wilcox 2008, p. 170), former campaign manager for Howard Dean, argues that the rise of new media constitutes “a move from the phoniness of the thirty-second spot to the authenticity of what happens when I catch you on my cell phone video.” For Trippi, “authentic candidates” are likely to have more success under the scrutiny of transparent new media technologies.

While the Internet does enable widespread access to and sharing of political information, its status as defender of truth is dubious. Statements like Trippi’s are highly problematic, not least because the definition of “authenticity” is impossible to pin down in a media culture where distinctions between fact and fiction, truth and untruth, have been blurred beyond recognition. Exactly what is an “authentic candidate?” And is authenticity necessarily tantamount to political virtue? Presumably Trent Lott’s racist comments were an expression of his honest opinion, yet such displays of authenticity are rarely valued in those elected to public office. Trippi’s remarks also provoke the question of whether new media can be labeled “authentic,” where authenticity is defined as a propensity towards truthfulness.

For the most part, the Internet remains uncontrolled, uncensored, and unregulated. While this can be seen as adhering to democratic impulses by allowing for free speech and unrestricted access to information, it also enables the spread of fraudulent information with real-world political consequences (Keen 2007). While proponents of the blogosphere as democratic bulwark counter such claims by arguing that there is no way of being sure we can trust the gatekeepers of traditional media, there are nonetheless certain journalistic standards that are for the most part upheld by mass media (Paletz 1999). The absence of regulation gives rise to spurious information as well as bigotry and hatred online. Internet publication is often anonymous, particularly on personal websites that receive no state sponsorship or commercial endorsement. Behind the veil of anonymity, many authors feel free to voice prejudiced opinions without being held accountable for them and without fear of recrimination. Information is always mediated in some fashion or other—the presentation of a lie as truth, or of information slanted by bigotry, are themselves forms of mediation—and the absence of qualified gatekeepers in new media is in many ways conducive to anarchy not democracy (Barber 2003). Lack of control and regulation, therefore, should be mistaken neither for authenticity nor as the inevitable harbinger of democratic principles.

Online Constructions of Clinton as Monster and Cyborg

This combination of hatred and falsehood characterizes the online portrayals of Hillary Clinton discussed below. The images analyzed appeared on personal and political blogs and opinion-based websites in 2007 and 2008. This is not a quantitative analysis and the images discussed are not intended as a representative sample of images of Clinton circulating online. Rather, these images reflect and project electoral and gender politics.
An Internet search was conducted for digital images depicting Clinton as monster and/or cyborg. Images were chosen specifically for their construction of Clinton as a hybrid creature—collapsing distinctions between male and female, or between human and machine, or both—and the destructive potential suggested by this hybridity. These images point both to the anxiety produced by Clinton herself and to wider concerns about the category destabilization caused by women in the political realm. The goal of this analysis is not to deduce the impact these images had on their viewers, or to draw conclusions about their effect on popular opinion of Clinton and on the voting public (further research is required to establish the impact of online representations on voter opinion and behavior). However, the online creation and dissemination of images of Clinton as monster/cyborg raise important questions about the potential of the Internet to act as a space for the construction of damaging political realities for female candidates.

The proliferation and modification of information without author is the distinguishing feature of the simulation culture in which virtual reality is produced. Specifically, digital technology enabled the simulation of Clinton as monstrous and/or cyborgian via the production and dissemination of photoshopped images. Not to be confused with the end of reality, simulation takes place when the “reality principle”—the idea that there is a structural relationship between “reality” and its representation—collapses (Baudrillard [1981] 1994). Simulation does not reproduce reality, nor “does it mask, hide or obscure reality” (Toffoletti 2007, p. 33). Rather, simulation produces reality. Images in particular have always had a potent effect as reality producers; the image has the power to assume “the force of that which it represents, to become the reality and erase therein the distinction of original and image” (Merrin 2005, p. 30). In a digital simulation culture, where images seem to replicate automatically, disseminating themselves ubiquitously through the virtual world of cyberspace, the image takes on additional power as producer of “the real.”

This ability to produce reality distinguishes simulation from traditional representation. While political cartoons in print media, for example, can do political damage by changing public perception of their targets, they do not alter reality but rather affirm the separation of the real from the representational. Digital images, in contrast, blur this distinction. It was not so much that the images of Clinton may have been mistaken as genuine but that they simultaneously were produced in and helped to create a discursive
space in which a new reality could be conceived. The pictures of Clinton exist in a
hyperreality, more real than “reality,” in which the image of Clinton (signifier) is divorced
from Clinton the woman (referent) and becomes the point on which gender anxieties
concentrate.

Figure 1
In February 2007, liberal blog DownWithTyranny! posted a photoshopped image of Hillary Clinton designed to resemble promotional material for a Hollywood movie (Figure 1). Depicting Clinton’s head spliced onto a hulking naked male torso draped with hundreds of rounds of ammunition and sporting a machine gun, the epic is titled “Rambabe: Conservative Body Count.” The accompanying post characterizes Clinton as a warmonger due to her support of the Iraq War in 2002. Within the next year, the image would spread to numerous other blogs. Bad Attitudes (http://www.badattitudes.com/MT/archives/2007/09/) used a cropped version of the picture without titles to accompany anti-Hillary commentary in September. El Borak’s Myopia (December; http://elborak.blogspot.com/2007_12_01_archive.html) and Shooting the Messenger (March 2008; http://shootingmessengers.blogspot.com/2008_03_01_archive.html) both intended it as a mockery of Clinton’s “misspeak” about disembarking from a helicopter under sniper fire on a visit to Bosnia in 1996. The latter blog, created by male blogger “Fits” from Gainesville, Florida, contains numerous posts attacking Hillary Clinton, her daughter Chelsea, and “liberated” women in general, along with copious pro-gun sentiment. Last to reproduce the picture was “Dr Tom” (April 2008) whose HipHappy Times blog (http://hiphappy.wordpress.com/2008/04/16/concerned-citizens-must-challenge-clinton-craziness/) espoused two principal goals: the election of Barack Obama as forty-fourth President of the United States and the legalizing of marijuana. While most bloggers used this image simply as a visual illustration of points made in text, Dr Tom explicitly intended this and other anti-Clinton images to speak for themselves, anticipating they would “engage and enrage all concerned citizens to ensure that the Clintons accept the will of the people.” He encouraged his visitors to comment on the images, in the hope that Hillary Clinton would be persuaded to concede the Democratic nomination to Obama.

In its possession of female head and male body, the Rambabe figure constitutes a monstrous subversion of dichotomous gender identity, destabilizing the connection between subjectivity and gendered embodiment. Clinton is both criminal outlaw—represented by the police cars and helicopters in the background—and gender outlaw; her actions are deemed to resemble behavior more appropriate in men than women, as indicated by her male body. Not only is the monstrous Clinton depicted as masculine but as hypermasculine, his/her muscles bulging obscenely, the gun a phallic extension of him/herself. The splicing of Clinton’s head onto a male body or torso was a common tactic among creators of satirical imagery during the campaign, a corporal manifestation of the pervasive belief that the power Clinton hoped to wield is naturally the prerogative of men. Images that depict Clinton’s head on the bodies of George Washington and Napoleon Bonaparte recognize that political and military leadership has historically been the preserve of males. Similarly, “Billary” images (Figure 2), which depict the bodies of Hillary and Bill Clinton morphed together, do more than reiterate the Clinton-propagated notion of a “twofer” presidency; they also create the impression that the presidency is the appropriate domain of men only, while the first spouse role is by nature a feminine one. Reversing the time-tested arrangement, these images suggest, produces only freaks and monsters. Images which combine Clinton and her husband have the dual effect of masculinizing Hillary and emasculating Bill; as such, they comprise an attack on both figures at once. Both Clintons are explicitly sexualized, as indicated not just by their gender reversals but also by signifiers such as a cigar in Hillary’s hand, alluding to her husband’s infidelities with White House intern Monica Lewinsky (Figure 2). Here Hillary subverts the
gender order by assuming the roles of political leader and sexual aggressor, twin pillars of masculine potency and authority. These images exhibit a sexual anxiety aroused by powerful women comparable to that provoked by women’s earlier attempts to enter the political realm. Anti-suffrage propaganda in the early twentieth century depicted the suffragist’s body as a monstrous hybrid of male and female and, sometimes, human and animal. Suffragettes were caricatured as lacking feminine curves, hypersexual, ugly, aggressive, violent, and hysterical (Tickner 1987). The doctored pictures of Clinton thus form part of a long tradition of using humor and ridicule to manage and dispel sexual anxiety. Images which show Hillary and Bill switching gender roles are at once anxiety-producing and anxiety-relieving.

The pictorial monsterization of Hillary Clinton evidences the powerful mixture of sex and violence that the female leader embodies in the cultural imagination. Inherent in the belief that Clinton is usurping masculine roles is the ever-recurring fear of her violent potential. The “Rambabe” image does more than suggest that Clinton is a monstrous hybrid of male and female bodies. With no indication of where body ends and weapon begins, “Rambabe” also blurs the distinction between human and machine to construct Clinton as the ultimate destroyer. According to this image, Clinton’s preferred strategy is annihilation; unprepared to negotiate with or take mercy on her enemies, she will simply slaughter them.

Figure 2
Clinton’s purported bloodlust was a key feature of her cyborgization in other digital images, with suggestions that she more closely resembled a futuristic killing machine than a human being. Richard Blakeley of Gawker.com photoshopped an image of the Terminator to resemble Clinton (http://gawker.com/5004438/maureen-dowd-calls-hillary-clinton-sci-fi-monster). Dubbed “Hillerator,” this picture appeared alongside a post about Maureen Dowd’s reference to Clinton as a cyborg in _The New York Times_ (discussed above). Conservative blog Fort Hard Knox (http://forthardknox.com/2007/09/19/how-hillary-clinton-is-like-darth-vader/) posted an image of Clinton’s head on Darth Vader’s body, accompanied by text declaring that Clinton had switched to the “dark side” (raised Republican, she later joined the Democrats) and was using the “dark force” to create her own empire. Black Folks Don’t Swim (http://blackfolksdontswim.blogspot.com/2008_01_01_archive.html) replicated the picture, citing “her passion to control and manipulate” and her lust for power as evidence of her resemblance of the Dark Lord. Democratic Underground (http://www.democraticunderground.com/discuss/duboard.php?az=view_all&address=132x4761667) posted a picture of a figure in a Darth Vader costume with the caption “Hillary Clinton in her traditional garb.” The nod to popular movie characters is partly pragmatic: the images, along with their allusions of merciless violence and lack of humanity, are instantly recognizable to a large proportion of viewers. Yet the use of movie imagery also helps to reinforce the received unnaturalness of a woman’s bid for the White House, implying that such an occurrence is more fitting in the context of a science-fiction fantasy than the real world of American politics.

Clinton’s violence has both literal and symbolic meaning in these images. It represents the belief that Clinton is prepared to destroy careers and reputations in her drive for power. At the most extreme level, it also alludes to rumors about her physical violence, such as that spread by conservative opponents that she had Deputy White House Counsel Vince Foster—with whom she was also purportedly having an affair—killed during the Travelgate controversy of 1993. In addition, it references her militaristic policies and her aggressive stance concerning international relations: she supported the Bush administration’s decision to invade Iraq in 2002 and refused to retract or apologize for her position during the primaries; in 2007 she voted for a resolution to designate Iran’s Revolutionary Guard as terrorists; she was a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee from 2003; and she consistently drew attention to her militaristic agenda during her campaign, with statements such as one made on the eve of the Pennsylvania primary that, as commander-in-chief, she could “totally obliterate” Iran if it launched a nuclear attack on Israel (Morgan 2008).

Yet implicit in these images is the anxiety that Clinton threatens to destroy not just other people or nations but the entire fabric of American society. A female president, particularly one who appears to possess traditionally masculine characteristics such as personal ambition, aggression, and emotional detachment, goes against the natural order and therefore threatens the very existence of humankind. What is most concerning, however, is not Clinton’s refusal to remain within the female gender category but her ability to oscillate between categories seemingly at will. Like the Terminator she is made to resemble, her dangerousness lies in her propensity to shape-shift, to take on characteristics of both genders. Kathleen Parker (2008) accused Clinton of utilizing “the science of morphology” to prove to the public that “she’s their ‘man’,” and her ability to morph from female to male was seen as indicative or her cyborgian nature. Jane Roh (2007) also argued that Clinton’s tendency to alter her persona made her appear like “a politically savvy cyborg.” Clinton transforms effortlessly from the feminist who refuses to “stay home and bake cookies,” to the dutiful wife...
“standing by her man” during his infidelities, and back to the career woman vying for the highest office in the land. By continually crossing category boundaries, Clinton signifies that which cannot be contained within the limits of conventional systems of classification.

These online media attacks can thus be read as part of an attempt to construct Clinton as a monstrous effigy for both female empowerment and the boundary crossing this encompasses. As Gilmore (2003, p. 19) writes of the monster in the cultural imagination, “Transcending normal limits and domains, the monster-figure appears to be invincible or unstoppable;” the monster “becomes a perfect metaphor not only for the limitless power of evil, but also for dissolving of the boundaries that separate us from chaos.” As a result, a kind of ritualized violence took place against the figure of Clinton through her construction as a monster bent on destruction, which could only be stopped by violence equal to or greater than its own. Hillary Clinton was a sacrificial victim upon which anti-feminist components of American society took out their frustration and expressed their fear of powerful women. The survival of humanity, and the binary, heteronormative gender order upon which modern Western human identity is based, came to depend on her extermination.

**Conclusion**

The images discussed in this article comprise part of an attempt to produce a political reality in which Clinton’s bid for the presidency was characterized as preposterous, unnatural, and dangerous. Efforts to destroy Clinton’s viability as a presidential candidate through her construction as monster/cyborg reflect and reinforce wider cultural anxieties about women’s place in the political realm. In spite of increasing numbers of women in political office, real anxieties about women in power remain. An analysis of images of Clinton as monster/cyborg indicates that this anxiety is at least in part caused by the perceived threat to the gender order such women represent. Anxiety stems not just from the challenge women like Clinton pose to male power but also from their perceived ability to destabilize gender itself by collapsing distinctions between the categories of “male” and “female.” Recognizing this basis of negative reactions to female candidates is vital in the bid to see more women elected to political office, and also has implications for women seeking other leadership positions in the public realm.

Sexist and degrading representations of Clinton in both traditional and new media, and the general acceptance of unfair and biased coverage of Clinton as a valid media strategy (Carroll 2009), suggest that such media campaigns will continue to be waged against female political candidates in the future. In particular, this article has demonstrated the potential of online media to produce damaging representations of female politicians. The blogosphere undoubtedly has an important democratic function in electoral politics, enabling the free flow of information and allowing all citizens with Internet access to more actively participate in the political process. Yet the lack of online regulation can also be exploited in ways that undermine the democratic process through the dissemination of false and defamatory information and imagery, and through the propagation of anti-feminist and misogynistic agendas. The existence of such material on the Internet signals the need for greater regulation of online media to ensure fair representation of female politicians moving forward.

It must be noted, however, that the Internet is also being used for the development of feminist agendas and for advancing the cause of women in politics. Internet technology has been employed by female political candidates as well as against them, most notably by
Hillary Clinton herself when she utilized social networking and video sharing sites, such as YouTube, to gain support during her primary campaign (albeit to a lesser extent, and less successfully, than Barack Obama). Web 2.0 technologies provide female candidates with greater control over their self-representation and a forum for challenging and balancing their representation in other media. Cyberspace is also playing an important role in the development of feminist identity politics, with a growing community of activists and scholars converging online. Cyberfeminists are infiltrating the once masculine domain of the Internet to create a space in which both women and feminism can thrive. Thus the same virtual spaces are utilized both by and against women, with conservative and transgressive potential existing simultaneously within the one medium.

We are only just beginning to understand the implications of Web 2.0 for women in politics, and we must not underestimate the growing importance and influence of the Internet in the political environment. As technologies develop, so too will the medium as a space in which political realities are produced and shaped. The challenge for future female political candidates is to harness the productive power of the Internet while resisting its use as a tool to undermine them. Feminists and female politicians alike must develop more sophisticated understandings of new media technologies in order to challenge the negative construction of women online.

NOTES

1. This characterization, which was a constant refrain during the campaign, was a media invention. Woodall and Fridkin (2007) note that media sources constructed Elizabeth Dole in the same way during her campaign for the Republican nomination in 1999.


3. One exception is Heldman, Oliver and Conroy (2009) who found that coverage of 2008 vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin was more negative and sexist in new media (blogs) than traditional media. The authors conclude that “the advent of New Media is not a good omen for female candidates” and “will make it even more difficult for women to gain legitimacy (and thus resources) as candidates” (p. 25). Other research on Internet representations of female candidates has tended to focus on candidates’ self-representations on their campaign websites; see, for example, Bystrom et al. (2004) and Dolan (2005).

4. Dean was the first political candidate to launch an extensive netroots campaign when he ran for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2003–4. For detailed discussions of Dean’s campaign, see Feld and Wilcox (2008) and Hindman (2009).

5. Hindman (2009) provides a different reading of online regulation, contending that it is the continuing presence of gatekeeping (not its absence) that limits the democratic potential of the Internet. He argues that gates and filters are built into the infrastructure of the Internet in the form of search engines and a link structure.

6. All websites discussed in this section were accessed in October 2009.

7. The Internet has enabled the creation of online feminist communities, such as Feminist.com (http://www.feminist.com/, accessed November 2010), which describes itself as a “feminist Google” designed to promote awareness of women’s issues and foster activism. Internet technology has also been utilized by established feminist networks like the Sisterhood is

REFERENCES


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