

# Text trajectories and media discourse: tracking gendered representations in presidential politics

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## Abstract

*During the US Democratic presidential primary campaign in 2007–8, Hillary Rodham Clinton's laughter became the subject of intense scrutiny by mass media and was dubbed the Clinton cackle. This article investigates how the 'cackle' characterisation was first established, and thus, formed the basis of an intertextual series, wherein this dominant re-presentation of Clinton's laughter circulated across multiple discursive contexts. By examining the intertextual (and ideological) processes at work in decontextualising and recontextualising her laughter as it 'travelled' across contexts, the analysis illustrates how this characterisation gained its status as an authoritative re-presentation – one that not only relied upon the reproduction of a common, (negative) gendered stereotype, but that also worked to reinforce perceptions of a stereotypically sexist, 'inappropriate' gendered identity, incompatible with the masculinist ideals of the presidency. It also discusses the significance of tracking the trajectory of this 'text' in terms of the 'double-bind' situation women politicians continue to face in the realm of presidential politics.*

KEYWORDS: GENDER; INTERTEXTUALITY; MEDIA DISCOURSE; POLITICS; SEXISM

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## Politics, gender and the 'double bind'

Much has been written about the gendered nature of US politics. Despite the significant progress women have made in gaining entry into the traditionally masculine domain of US politics in the last half century, feminist scholars contend that the presidency remains a 'bastion of masculinity' (Anderson 2002:105). Indeed, any viable contender for the role of commander in chief, who also happens to be a woman, is forced to run against the deeply entrenched cultural image of *man as president* (Carroll 2009), and is constrained and affected by pervasive gendered stereotypes (Jaworska and Larrivéé 2011).

We know from previous research on the relationship between gender bias and leadership that women and men's equivalent behaviour is judged differently. For example, numerous studies have found that men are preferred over women when they engage in leadership roles or tasks perceived as stereotypically masculine or even gender neutral (e.g. Gordon and Miller 2001). In a similar vein, research has shown that women are rated lower than men when occupying male-dominated roles and employing stereotypically masculine leadership styles, such as those required of presidential candidates (Eagly and Carli 2003).

But this relationship between gender bias and leadership poses an additional dilemma for women who aspire to leadership in the Oval Office. That is, women politicians are also faced with a double-bind situation of managing competing expectations of what constitutes 'acceptable' political behaviour – behaviour long associated with men and so-called 'men's language', and measured in terms of the masculinist ideals of the presidency – while at the same time dealing with normative assumptions and expectations about 'appropriate' femininity (Felderer 1997; on this 'double-bind' situation for women in politics, see also Jamieson 1995). Perhaps not surprisingly, one context where this double-bind situation often plays out for women politicians is in the public arena of media representations.

Media discourse has proven to be a fertile site for investigating the (re-)production of gendered representations of women candidates and potential women political leaders. Indeed, much research exists on the sexist, stereotypical or asymmetrical nature of such representations, the bulk of which comes from communication studies, feminist media studies, or political science (e.g. Falk 2008; Jalalzai 2006; Kahn 1996). These studies have tended to focus on the type of coverage – for example, the tendency to report on personal qualities such as women's appearance (e.g. Heldman, Oliver and Conroy 2009), their marital status (e.g. O'Grady 2011), and their association with stereotypically 'feminine' issues (e.g. Kittilson and Fridkin 2008; Page 2003) – or the amount of coverage women candidates receive as

compared to their male opponents (e.g. Aday and Devitt 2001; Kahn 2003; Meeks 2012). Such research has consistently demonstrated that women politicians continue to face challenges in terms of stereotypical press coverage; however, the vast majority of this research has used quantitative methods (most commonly, content analysis), qualitative methods (such as thematic analysis), or their combination, focusing on individual instances of 'texts' within singular, bounded events (as but one example, Uscinski and Goren 2011 examine differential forms of address used by television newspeople to refer to the Democratic primary candidates).

This article adopts an intertextual approach to analysing the gendered nature of media representations by instead focusing on the *trajectory* (Blommaert 2005) of a 'text' (i.e. a media representation that is gendered). Given that any 'text' has a life beyond a singular bounded event, tracing its intertextual connections provides insight into the discursive (re-)presentation of specific interactional events and the ideological status of those re-presentations. Thus, an intertextual approach is particularly useful for the analysis of media coverage of politics, since such coverage is principally based on 'the *post-hoc* recontextualization' (Blommaert 2005:46) of politicians' talk and other conduct during events like speeches, news interviews and political debates (see, for example, the work of Fairclough, e.g. 1995; and, more recently, Hodges 2011). Moreover, what that 'talk and other conduct' comes ultimately to mean may often be based on these post hoc recontextualisations (as opposed to the meanings that emerge in their originating occasions of production).

The specific gendered representation of focus here came about in the context of Hillary Rodham Clinton's bid for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2007–8. Early on in the primaries, Clinton's laughter became the subject of intense media scrutiny. The characterisation that obtained special status – what became the focus of subsequent mass media representations – was one that described the quality of her laugh, captured in the key phrase *the Clinton cackle*. This article investigates how the 'cackle' characterisation was first established, and thus formed the basis of an intertextual series (Hodges 2011), wherein this gendered re-presentation of Clinton's laughter 'travelled' across multiple discursive contexts. By examining the intertextual (and ideological) processes at work in decontextualising and recontextualising her laughter, I show how this characterisation gained its status as an authoritative re-presentation – one that not only relied upon the reproduction of a common, (negative) gendered stereotype, but that also worked to reinforce perceptions of a stereotypically sexist, 'inappropriate' femininity incompatible with the masculinist ideals of the presidency.

Before proceeding with this analysis, however, I first provide some theoretical background on intertextuality, and then outline the data on which the analysis is based.

### Intertextuality and text trajectories

The term *intertextuality* is meant to capture the way in which our words refer to and build upon the words of others.<sup>1</sup> According to Bakhtin (e.g. 1981, 1986), any use of language is effectively implicated in a wider dialogue such that texts are not only related to preceding but also subsequent links in a chain of connections. Thus, when components of interactions with politicians – such as that which takes place in contemporary broadcast news interviews – are taken up and recontextualised in news media discourse they enter into this chain. These intertextual connections involve *entextualisation*, a concept that Blommaert (2005) describes as turning intertextuality into an empirical research programme.

One of the fundamental features of contemporary communication, Blommaert (2005:47) explains, is that “original” pieces of discourse – socially, culturally, and historically situated unique events – are lifted out of their original context and transmitted, by quoting or echoing them, by writing them down, by inserting them into another discourse, by using them as “examples” (cf. Bauman and Briggs 1990; Silverstein and Urban 1996). So, as texts ‘travel’ across contexts (Blommaert 2005), they are not simply repeated, but are inevitably reshaped, ‘re-worked and re-accentuated’ – to use Bakhtin’s words – in the process. For example, they may carry aspects of their ‘original’ or earlier contexts, but may also be transformed as they are transplanted into new ones (Ehrlich 2012). The resulting ‘text’, then, is not only associated with a new context, it may also be accompanied by an ideological metadiscourse that provides a ‘preferred reading’ for it (Blommaert 2005:47). In this sense, the process of entextualisation is ‘an act of control’ (Bauman and Briggs 1990:76), in that lifting discourse from its originating context and recontextualising it in new ones has the potential to reinscribe it with new meanings (Blommaert 2005), meanings that may also serve to reinforce (gendered) ideologies and (gendered) inequalities (Ehrlich 2012).

In what follows, my analysis focuses on how the specific interactional sequences in which Clinton’s laughter originally occurred were subject to decontextualisation and recontextualisation as they were subsequently described in mass media representations. In tracking the trajectory of the ‘cackle’ characterisation across the news cycle (i.e. from its inception and early citations to subsequent media representations), the analysis reveals

how it gained status in the news media as an ‘authoritative entextualization’ (Silverstein and Urban 1996:11),<sup>2</sup> which shifted the focus of reporting: the fact that Clinton laughed was turned into a negative, gendered evaluation of her laughter, and ultimately, of her.

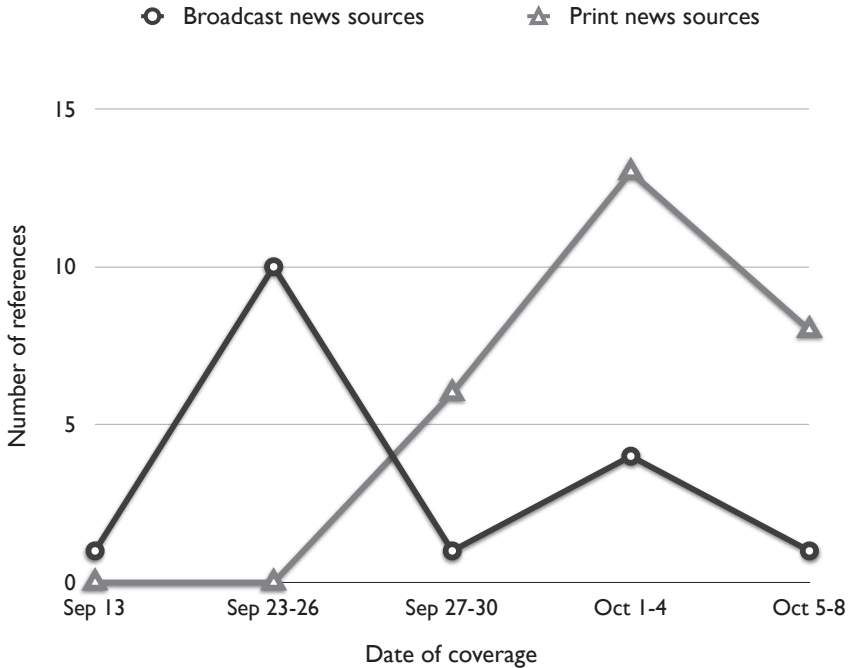
## The data

The analysis is based on a corpus of media discourse data collected using two electronic research databases of news sources: Factiva and Lexis-Nexis. Searches of both databases were conducted for relevant articles (i.e. all English language print news media references to Clinton’s laughter as well as the key word ‘cackle’) from the time Clinton announced her bid (January 2007) until the US presidential election in November 2008. This search was subsequently cross-referenced with an additional search for all references to Clinton’s laughter as well as ‘cackle’ using the Google News Archive.<sup>3</sup> The resulting collection of print news media, which constitutes the primary corpus of data, includes a total of 82 news reports and editorials, comprising 55 American publications (13 nationals, such as *The New York Times*, and 42 dailies, such as *The San Francisco Chronicle*) and 27 outside the US, (e.g. in Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and India; 10 nationals, such as *The Independent*, and 17 dailies, such as *The Toronto Star*). A secondary corpus of other media (i.e. non-print news) references to Clinton’s laughter in the first weeks of ‘cackle’ coverage was also collated for analysis, including radio (e.g. *National Public Radio*), television (e.g. *Fox News*) and Internet communications (e.g. Slate.com), and is drawn on for the purpose of tracing the origins of the phrase ‘the Clinton cackle’.

## From laughing to cackling: the de- and recontextualisation of Clinton’s laughter

On 23 September 2007, Clinton participated in what is known as a ‘full Ginsberg’ by appearing on all five Sunday morning political news programmes on the same day – ABC’s *This Week*, CBS’s *Face the Nation*, CNN’s *Late Edition*, FOX’s *Fox News Sunday* and NBC’s *Meet the Press*. It was around the time of her appearance on these programmes that Clinton’s laughter was placed under the media microscope, and the ‘cackle’ characterisation of her laughter became ‘news’. Figure 1 reports the number of references to Clinton’s laughter in September (when coverage began to appear) and the first week of October (when coverage peaked). Three points are relevant: first, the earliest reference to her laughter as a ‘cackle’ occurred on 13 September; second, no reference to Clinton’s

laughter ('cackle', or otherwise) appeared in the *print* news media prior to 28 September (but between 13 and 28 September, 10 radio and television broadcasts discussed Clinton's laughter); and third, following the publication of the first print news article, broadcast coverage subsided while print news coverage began to soar. The significance of each of these points in relation to the decontextualisation and recontextualisation of Clinton's laughter will be developed in turn.



**Figure 1:** Number of media references to Clinton's laughter by date and news source

### Origins of the 'cackle' and early broadcast commentaries

As Figure 1 indicates, the earliest reference to Clinton's laughter occurred on 13 September. That day, a conservative political commentator, Rush Limbaugh, discussed Clinton on his nationally syndicated radio show (the highest-rated talk radio show in the United States at the time), following her participation in an online debate earlier that day. Limbaugh's remarks constitute the first reference to Clinton's laughter as a 'cackle', and thus, the source of this phrase. Extract 1 is a transcript of the relevant portion posted on the programme's website following the initial broadcast. Key portions of extracts are highlighted in boldface.

## Extract 1

The Rush Limbaugh Show, 13 September 2007

RUSH: Mrs. Clinton got the next question from Bill Maher. ((Plays clip of a question–answer sequence from the debate, featuring Bill Maher)) ((BILL)): ‘Senator Clinton, all the Senators here except Senator Obama voted for the Iraq war resolution in 2002 saying their decision was based on intelligence they believed to be accurate at the time. In other words, George Bush fooled you. Why should Americans vote for somebody who can be fooled by George Bush?’

HILLARY: (**Cackling**). ‘Well, Bill, it was a little more complicated than that.’ [...]

RUSH: [...] **And how about that cackle?** You know, if I were Bill Maher, **that cackle, she did not want that question. She’s the smartest woman in the world.**

Note first how the question–answer sequence from the debate is transcribed: Clinton’s laughter is represented in a way that is inconsistent with the general practice of standardising transcripts for web publication. That is, instead of writing, for example, (*laughing*), Clinton’s laughter is transcribed as (*cackling*). As Bucholtz (2000:1446) describes, representational choices in transcription are always ideological since they ‘shape how speakers (and speech) [...] are understood by readers’. In this case, the choice to characterise her laugh as ‘cackling’ carries with it an evaluative assessment of its *quality* (and, arguably, a particularly negative and gendered assessment)<sup>4</sup> – as opposed to the more common and neutral practice of stating simply *that* she laughed. Such a choice demonstrates what Mishler (1991) calls ‘the rhetoric of transcription’: the persuasive effect representational choices can have on audiences (cited in Bucholtz 2000:1445). Second, after describing Clinton’s response to Maher’s question as ‘disingenuous’, Limbaugh poses the question, ‘And how about **that cackle?**’. This time ‘cackle’ is spoken rather than written, but it again provides a simplified evaluative assessment of one aspect of her laughter (its quality), and it highlights that aspect of representation at the expense of other (more neutral) possibilities.

Finally, Limbaugh’s association of Clinton’s laughter with being strategic or calculated – a common theme invoked in the majority of subsequent news reports – points explicitly to the relevance of gender in terms of how the ‘cackle’ should be understood. That is, here laughter is turned into a female strategy for getting out of tough questions, and Clinton is described as ‘the smartest woman in the world’ *because* she laughed in a strategic way. This manages to portray Clinton specifically, and women in general, as unprofessional, devious/deceitful and, somewhat ironically, not very smart (i.e. if Clinton is ‘the smartest’ and is portrayed like this, it means women in general are ‘even worse’).

The suggestion that laughing in a strategic way is either something women do, in general, or Clinton, specifically, is one manifestation of the

'double-bind' women face. Both Clinton's laughter, and her subsequent verbal response in Extract 1, are, in fact, consistent with other politicians' laughter in this sequential environment – that is, at the completion of an interviewer's question. Previous analyses of both Clinton's laughter (Romaniuk 2009) and that of other politicians (Romaniuk 2013b) in broadcast news interviews demonstrates that laughter occurring in the course or completion of 'serious' interviewer questions is in fact a generic interactional practice – deployed by politicians (both men and women, *not* just Clinton) as a form of 'damage control' in the face of adversarial questioning. In these environments, I argue, laughter acts as an implicit commentary on those questions – thereby undercutting their legitimacy as 'serious' – and also projects a disaffiliative verbal response. Further, by treating potentially damaging talk as laughable, politicians not only propose that they do not regard these issues as 'serious', but they also encourage the overhearing audience to publicly ratify their treatment of these questions in non-serious terms. And this is precisely what Clinton does in response to the question from Maher that Limbaugh describes. That is, rather than answer the question as to why Americans should 'vote for somebody who can be fooled by George Bush', Clinton first laughs, thereby treating Maher's question as embodying a perspective to be laughed at, and thus providing the grounds for her subsequent disagreement with its overstated nature ('Well, Bill, it was a little more complicated than that'). In seeking to challenge or at least undermine the negative presupposition embodied in the question (i.e. that she was 'fooled ...'), then, Clinton's laughter is consistent with that of other (male) politicians, and yet such laughter is re-presented as the strategic work of women.

Following Limbaugh's initial remarks, no other media commentary on Clinton's laughter emerged until 23 September, the day of her Sunday interview appearances. Although those five interviews constituted over an hour and a half of interview content, when subsequent broadcast news coverage of Clinton's laughter did appear, not a single question-answer sequence in which it occurred was reproduced in full (as in Extract 1). Instead, only selected pieces of quotable segments (e.g. an edited portion of the interviewer's question) or sound bites (e.g. short clips of singular instances of Clinton laughing) were repeatedly recycled. Producing and recycling quotable soundbites is no doubt a common journalistic practice in subsequent reportage of broadcast interactions. However, in this case it had the effect of making Clinton's laughter seem particularly inappropriate, since her laughter was decontextualised from the portion of the interviewer's talk to which it was responsive. In addition, the majority of coverage was based almost exclusively on *two* brief segments out of her five interviews – one from her 20-minute interview with Chris Wallace on *Fox News Sunday*



and another from a 16-minute interview with Bob Schieffer on *Face the Nation*<sup>5</sup> – both of which came to signify her laughter, in general. Both examples were cited in the first published commentary on Clinton's laughter following her interview appearances – a press release published by the Republican National Committee (RNC) less than one hour before Clinton concluded her final interview. In it, the RNC proposed what they deemed newsworthy about the interviews: 'Hillary, no laughing matter: On Sunday morning shows, when not laughing off important questions, Hillary hides from the facts and her own record.' The content of this briefing is reported in Table 1, no. 1, which includes other representative examples of post-Limbaugh but pre-print coverage.

**Table 1:** Sample coverage of Clinton's laughter (23–27 September 2007)

No.	Sample of report	Source	Type	Date
1	Fox's <i>Fox News Sunday</i> : In response to a question about her and her husband's partisan nature, Hillary laughs at interviewer: Click here to view. ((links to clip)) CBS <i>Face The Nation</i> : When asked whether her plan is a step toward socialised medicine, <b>Hillary giggles uncontrollably</b> . ((links to clip))	RNC	Press briefing (also made available on RNC's website)	23 September
2	In an article on Clinton's interviews, Ben Smith of <i>Politico.com</i> describes her as having responded to Chris Wallace with <b>'her signature cackle'</b> .	<i>Fox News Sunday</i> (FOX)	Television	23 September
3	Hannity replayed an audio clip of one instance of Clinton's laughter 13 times over the course of a brief segment, and calls it <b>'frightening'</b> .	<i>Hannity</i>	Radio	24 September
4	Fox News 'body language expert' Tonya Reiman characterised Clinton's laughter as <b>'evil'</b> . After O'Reilly played a portion of her appearance on <i>Fox News Sunday</i> , Fox News contributor and nationally syndicated columnist Dick Morris said, 'I thought you were going to put on the laugh, <b>the cackle'</b> .	<i>The O'Reilly Factor</i> (FOX)	Television	24 September
5	Headline: 'Hillary's true colors unfold on FOX News: [...] Clinton's 'loud, <b>inappropriate</b> and mirthless laugh – a <b>scary sound</b> [...] <b>somewhere between a cackle and a screech'</b> reveals a contrived political identity. [...] 'At the beginning and the end of the Wallace interview, <b>Hillary sounded just like a laughing hyena</b> . [...] It's part of the Hillary defense. Just as Hillary's answers are scripted, so is <b>her 'spontaneous' laughter</b> . This is <b>truly learned behavior – laughing – or pretending to laugh at will.</b> '	Dick Morris and Eileen McGann (Fox News.com)	Internet	27 September

A number of points are worth highlighting about the nature of this preliminary coverage. First, each commentary diverts attention away from the content of the interviews and the serious political issues discussed therein (e.g. the Iraq war and Clinton's foreign policy credentials, health-care reform and her plan for universal coverage) and shifts focus to a re-presentation of Clinton's laugh as a 'cackle' (among other things). Consequently, what is framed as *newsworthy* about her interview appearances is, first and foremost, *that she laughed*, thereby reinforcing gender stereotypes by focusing on a matter of style over substance (see also Aday and Devitt 2001). Second, the generic interactional practice of laughing in response to adversarial or contentious questioning described above is reframed as a distinctive political strategy, and one attributed to Clinton specifically ('her signature cackle', no. 2; 'part of the Hillary defense', no. 5). (Recall that Limbaugh introduced this association between Clinton's 'cackle' and strategic use.) Reframing her laughter as a distinctive political strategy is one key aspect of the recontextualisation that is consistently raised in subsequent print news coverage of Clinton's laugh. What gets reported is that her 'spontaneous' laughter is but one indication of an inauthentic ('the real Hillary ...'), calculated ('truly learned behavior') and contrived ('pretending to laugh at will') political identity (no. 5), an identity at odds with the masculinist ideals of the presidency. Third, these examples show how brief soundbites of Clinton's laughter were made available to the public online (e.g. no. 1, no. 5), and were also replayed repeatedly both on the radio (e.g. no. 3) and television (e.g. no. 4). By recycling singular instances of Clinton's laughter, the media not only further decontextualise it from its unique contexts of use (thereby stripping it of its contextualised meaning), they also construct and make available an audible version of 'the cackle' re-presentation. This audible 'text' lends itself to further decontextualisation and recontextualisation, since it is easily reproducible and transportable to other discursive contexts (e.g. linking the 'cackle' laugh-track to *YouTube*).

What is perhaps most significant about these extracts is that they exemplify the degree to which Clinton's laughter was scrutinised in ways that went beyond reporting simply *that* she laughed, and even beyond evaluating her laughter, *per se*. Crucially, the nature and type of evaluative commentary offered invokes a range of overwhelmingly negative (e.g. 'frightening', no. 3; 'evil', no. 4; 'a scary sound', no. 5) and specifically gendered meanings. For example, to characterise Clinton as having 'giggle[d] uncontrollably' (no. 1) not only indirectly indexes gender, but it also 'appears to' connote age, and, to some extent, competence as well. What persons canonically 'giggle'? A previous search of a 450-million

word corpus of contemporary American English reveals that adolescent girls are among the most frequent nouns that collocate with the verb (along with feminine gendered pronouns). Thus, using language to describe a presidential candidate's behaviour that connotes that of adolescent girls implicitly challenges Clinton's competence, and constructs a 'feminine' identity that is incompatible with the masculine ideals of presidential leadership. In addition, suggesting that such childish behaviour is indicative of Clinton's inability to control herself is yet another way for her competence to be called into question (interestingly, this particular characterisation stands in sharp contrast with those descriptions of her laughter as strategic, thereby calling into question the reliability of such evaluative assessments).

In this preliminary coverage of Clinton's laughter broadcast as 'news', then, partisan pundits and journalists on both radio and cable television drew attention to Clinton's laughter, in the first instance, and topicalised it as a subject worthy of attention. Starting with Limbaugh's coinage of 'the cackle', subsequent commentary not only reported that she laughed, they also evaluated the quality of her laugh. In this process, Clinton's laughter is decontextualised from its originating contexts and then recontextualised in ways that invoke overtly sexist and negative stereotypes. What happens next with this entextualised re-presentation of her laughter requires tracking 'the cackle' characterisation as it made its way into print.

### **The first print news reference to 'the Clinton cackle'**

The first print news article to discuss Clinton's laughter, a full-length piece by political correspondent Patrick Healy, appeared in *The New York Times* on 28 September 2007. Significantly, this piece appeared over two weeks *after* Limbaugh's coinage of the phrase and following the additional commentaries outlined above, and, yet, it formed the basis of the vast majority of subsequent print news articles on 'the cackle'. Thus, considering the way *The New York Times* constructs an account of Clinton's laughter also reveals more precisely how the 'cackle' characterisation became the authoritative re-presentation of Clinton's laughter. In the article's opening paragraph, Healy traces his first encounter with Clinton's laughter to an anecdotal instance from January 2005 in which she purportedly: 'let loose a hearty belly laugh that lasted a few seconds' in response to being 'grilled' about her position on abortion. Healy's recollection of this event – from three years earlier – is shown in Extract 2.

## Extract 2

The New York Times, 28 September 2007

It was January 2005, and Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton had just finished a solemn speech about abortion rights [...] Stepping offstage, she took questions from reporters, and found herself being grilled about whether she was moderating her own pro-choice position. And suddenly it happened: Mrs. Clinton let loose a hearty belly laugh that lasted a few seconds. Reporters glanced at one another as if we'd missed the joke. This was my first encounter with Senator Clinton, and with **The Cackle**.

As the first reference to Clinton's laughter as a 'cackle' in the print news media, and since all subsequent reports drew from this text in some way (at the expense of citing others, such as those listed in Table 1), several observations about the way this re-presentation is framed are worth registering. Reporting speech (or, as is the case here, speech and laughter) is not a neutral activity; that is, when someone reports on something someone else has said, s/he is also in some sense assessing or evaluating it (Bakhtin 1981, 1986; see also Voloshinov 1973). By characterising his 'first encounter' with Clinton's laugh as a 'cackle', Healy's description reinforces a simplified evaluative assessment of the quality of her laughter, in the same way that Limbaugh's initial formulation, and subsequent radio, television and Internet commentary did. Texts can bear intertextual traces of other texts in many ways and one way intertextual relations can be formed is through wording that presupposes a prior text (Fairclough 1992). In this instance, Healy's use of the definite article 'the' in characterising Clinton's laughter as a 'cackle' hypostatizes it as such; that is, it presupposes some previous event in which it was established that such an object – with all the negative connotations it implies (see Romaniuk 2013a) – actually exists (the truth of which is assumed). Further, through the stylistics of capitalisation, Clinton's laughter is transformed into a proper noun, 'The Cackle'. This not only reifies her laughter as an object in its own right – one that unquestionably and commonsensically exists (as in Extract 1; also Table 1, no. 5) – it also suggests that it is a distinctive and idiosyncratic attribute of Clinton (see also, Table 1, no. 2 and no. 5).

Further, in relying on his recollection of the interactional scene in which 'The Cackle' occurred – through a series of indirect reported speech frames and the absence of direct quotes – Healy decontextualises it from its distinctive temporal and sequential unfolding. That is, he does not portray precisely where in the course of 'being grilled' by journalists Clinton's laughter occurred and what type of actions were contained in the question to which it was responsive. What Healy vernacularly (and

in very general terms) describes is in fact the generic interactional practice outlined above (see also Romaniuk 2013b). 'Reporters glanced at one another as though we'd missed the joke' orients to the notion that her laughter occurred in response to a 'serious' line of questioning. As demonstrated in an analysis of laughter in this environment, Romaniuk (2013b) argues that such laughter disaffiliates from some proposition contained in the question or from the question as a whole. Again, to deploy such laughter in this context is not a unique feature of Clinton's discursive repertoire, as Healy's description suggests, but one that countless other politicians as interviewees deploy in the face of hostile questioning. In recounting his 'first encounter' with 'The Cackle', then, Healy's re-presentation decontextualises Clinton's laughter from its originating context and recontextualises it in a way that brings Limbaugh's negative evaluative assessment to the fore.

Having uncritically established this 'new' frame for the subject of his article – Clinton's laughter as 'The Cackle' – Healy then proceeds to offer possible interpretations of it, interpretations that paint an inaccurate and even misleading picture. For example, in outlining some of the strategies Clinton adopted for responding to attacks and criticisms without appearing defensive or 'brittle' (another term that triggers gendered inferences), Healy goes on to write: 'less often, but more notably, she copes with the pressure by using what *friends have come to call* The Cackle'. One question that arises from this formulation is whose friends are being talked about – are they Healy's friends? Clinton's? That is, who, according to Healy, has come to characterise Clinton's laughter in this way? While Rush Limbaugh, notorious for his vitriolic and misogynist treatment of Clinton, was the first to refer to Clinton's laughter as a 'cackle', nowhere does Healy mention that Limbaugh was in fact responsible for this characterisation. Similarly, Healy does not report that *any* of the multiple, conservative commentators who repeated this characterisation had *anything* to say about Clinton's laughter (let alone refer to it as a 'cackle'). Thus, Healy recalls the content of these earlier references without offering any specifics of precisely where they came from. Instead, he utilises unattributed subjects (e.g. 'they say ...') and even suggests that the characterisation originated among allies (e.g. 'friends of hers ...', 'her advisers ...'). Notably, the only specific person he does cite is political satirist, Jon Stewart, who is described as having 'skewered Mrs. Clinton' on a segment that aired on *The Daily Show* on 25 September.<sup>6</sup> The problem, however, is that although multiple, predominantly conservative voices were responsible for topicalising Clinton's laughter as newsworthy, in the first instance, establishing negative features of association (alongside other overtly sexist and negative characterisations), and

thus, bringing about a negative, gendered re-presentation of it, by suggesting that Stewart's segment constituted the 'first' reference to Clinton's laughter, those voices are obscured to the point of erasure.

What is significant about this dimension of Healy's recontextualisation? The *New York Times* article was the first to discuss Clinton's laughter – not to mention the fact that Healy devoted an entire article to the topic in the national news section – and an overwhelming amount of subsequent news coverage clearly drew upon it as though it was an authoritative source. There is a certain cachet associated with *The New York Times*, America's third largest daily newspaper, in part due to a sense of responsible – albeit, liberal-minded – journalism. Arguably, if Healy had attributed the 'cackle' characterisation to right-wing commentators, such as Limbaugh or members of Fox News (as opposed to only making reference to a more 'liberal' political commentator such as Stewart), this re-presentation would not be afforded the same value or legitimacy. Given the absence of the real sources of this 'news', and the misleading picture constructed as a result, Healy's national coverage not only failed to problematise the unflattering characterisation, he also reified that re-presentation, thus serving to reinforce a harmful, gendered image of the (then) leading presidential candidate. The unfortunate consequence of this recontextualisation is that it not only further strips Clinton's laughter of its contextualised meaning, but it is then taken to be a reputable account adopted uncritically by journalists in subsequent media coverage.

### Recontextualising 'The Cackle' coverage: subsequent re-presentations

The fact that Healy's article is taken to be an authoritative news source is evident in considering subsequent press coverage. Indeed, subsequent versions of Healy's severely impoverished account of Clinton's laughter as a 'cackle' circulated across the country and overseas in subsequent print reportage that further misrepresented and decontextualised it. Extracts 3–6 are illustrative (italics are used to highlight verbatim portions of Healy's article).

#### Extract 3

The Independent, UK, 1 October 2007

*They call it the Clinton cackle. It comes out of the blue, lasts a few seconds, and leaves those who witnessed it wondering if they have missed a joke. Hillary Clinton's deployment of the full belly laugh is the latest weapon used by the leading Democratic presidential candidate when she is being pummeled by reporters or rivals. Friends say the cackle is her way of deflecting aggressive questioning.*

## Extract 4

The Washington Post, 2 October 2007

Hahahaha – Here’s a funny one. Jon Stewart is now setting the agenda for presidential campaign coverage. No Joke! [...] Thus it was that the ‘Daily Show’ strung together clips of Hillary Rodham Clinton laughing – loudly, uproariously and sometimes oddly – during the full Ginsburg of Sunday show interviews last week. (There was also a great bit depicting her as a robot.)

## Extract 5

The Age, Australia, 3 October 2007

Hillary Clinton has been accused of being too aloof or too serious, but now she is under attack about her laugh. *Satirist Jon Stewart has run clips of the presidential hopeful’s trademark belly laughs* on his Daily Show on cable television station Comedy Central. On Sunday *The New York Times* wrote about ‘the cackle.’ By Monday night, her laugh had made the evening news and was being analyzed by so-called serious political shows.

## Extract 6

The Oklahoman, 5 October 2007

Currently the focus is on her throat – or rather what comes forth from that region during town meetings and media interviews. It’s her laugh. *When Clinton is asked a question she doesn’t want to answer, she responds with a vocal outburst that has been variously described as a guffaw, a caterwaul, a bray, or most commonly, a cackle.* A video was posted on YouTube under the title, ‘The cackle that killed 1,000 ears.’ *Comedy Central’s Daily Show with Jon Stewart presented a ‘laugh track’ of examples of Clinton cackles.* Radio hosts play sound recordings on their shows. [...] Even *The New York Times* was critical. An article by Patrick Healy described how she laughed her way through recent interviews on all five major Sunday morning talk shows.

Just as Healy’s article elided the ‘true’ source of the ‘cackle’ reference and those responsible for topicalising it as newsworthy, so too does subsequent press coverage. For example, many journalists adopt the practice of leaving sources for the ‘cackle’ characterisation unattributed in remarkably similar ways (e.g. ‘they ...’, ‘friends’; compare Extracts 2 and 3). In addition, when a possible source of such commentary is attributed, it is inaccurately represented as being either Stewart’s (e.g. Extracts 4 and 5) or Healy’s coverage (Extract 5). This inaccurate source attribution is just one aspect of recontextualisation that is repeatedly reinforced in all subsequent print coverage. By naming liberal-minded political commentators without explicitly referring to any conservative commentators (who are only alluded to via indirect references such as, ‘radio hosts’, Extract 6; ‘the evening news’,

Extract 5) – precisely where readers might expect an overtly sexist, or at the very least, critical evaluation of Clinton’s behaviour – those initially responsible for drawing attention to Clinton’s laughter, and reframing it as a negative, gendered assessment, is erased from the re-presentation. Thus, the ‘preferred reading’ of this re-presentation of her laughter is one of legitimate critique (e.g. if it is in *The New York Times*, it must be worth taking seriously; or, if Stewart is talking about it, it cannot be a conservative and/or sexist attack). Again, had the ‘cackle’ characterisation accurately been attributed to right wing commentators such as Limbaugh, the legitimacy of this re-presentation as authoritative would certainly be called into question (at least by readers of *The New York Times*).

Another significant aspect of this process of recontextualisation in subsequent print coverage concerns the ways in which portions of earlier commentary are entextualised in subsequent reportage. As but one example, Extract 3 exemplifies a portion of an article from Britain’s *Independent* (another left-leaning daily), which appears to draw heavily on Healy’s piece. Specifically, Clinton’s laughter is further decontextualised from Healy’s personal anecdote of January 2005 (see Extract 2) – when Clinton laughed in response to a specific question about abortion – and is then recontextualised as a political ‘weapon.’<sup>17</sup> This interpretation of Clinton’s laughter aptly illustrates the dominant re-presentation characteristic of subsequent print coverage. That is, negative evaluations of her ‘cackle’ are (rather seamlessly) transformed into descriptions of her laughter as a political strategy, again reinforcing the false assumption that such laughter is a unique character trait. Not once in all 82 articles is the idea entertained that laughing in response to journalists’ questions might be a practice other politicians – or others, more generally – engage in. Instead, the majority of these ‘reports’ uncritically adopted and reproduced the ‘cackle’ characterisation (e.g. ‘friends say the cackle is ...’ in Extract 3 presupposes that her ‘friends’ actually endorse the term), without subjecting it to anywhere near the same degree to which she and her laughter were scrutinised. What should be clear from these examples, which are representative of subsequent press coverage, is that none of the journalists or political commentators critically assesses the evaluation of Clinton’s laughter as a ‘cackle,’ nor do they question the accuracy, relevance or newsworthiness of such a description (for reflections on the partisan nature of media coverage of Clinton during the presidential campaign, see Carroll 2009).

### Critiquing ‘the cackle’ coverage: no witch in this White House

In retrospective accounts of Clinton’s bid for the Democratic nomination, feminist scholars have pointed out the myriad ways in which media commentators depicted Clinton as ‘the antithesis of appropriate feminin-



ity – cold, calculating, emasculating, and brutal’ (e.g. Ritchie 2013:104; see also e.g. Carroll 2009). In having tracked the trajectory of the ‘cackle’ re-presentation from its entry into the news cycle via Limbaugh’s radio broadcast, and across the nation and overseas via *The New York Times*, I have attempted to show how, through the processes of decontextualisation and recontextualisation, the media effectively reshaped a generic interactional practice that is, in and of itself, not gendered, in accordance with dominant ideas about gender. As the meaning of Clinton’s laughter was ‘re-worked and re-accentuated’ in the process of recontextualisation, what was presented as ‘news’ was not simply *that* she laughed, but rather, *the way that she laughed*. Also, *the way that she laughed* was offered, without warrant, in a way that proposed ‘insight’ into the kind of person she is or ‘must be’ – a cold, calculating witch.<sup>8</sup>

According to Lim’s analysis of gendered metaphors of women in powerful positions, *the Witch* is ‘the most resented breed of Unruly Woman’ (2009:263). Lim writes, ‘the Witch is in open rebellion with society and God (the guardian of social norms). She is not just dehumanized and animalized like the Bitch is, but [also] demonized’ (2009:263). With each repetition of the ‘cackle’ re-presentation, the media thus contributed to the demonisation of Clinton’s persona by recontextualising her laughter in powerfully negative ways, consistent with dominant gendered ideologies. In many ways, Clinton was a woman in ‘open rebellion’ with a patriarchal government and society by virtue of seeking leadership in the White House. In doing so, Clinton defied gendered norms and expectations about ‘femininity’, and, consistent with research findings on gender bias and leadership, this opened her up to negative portrayals in the media – portrayals that reinforced the image of an inauthentic and ‘inappropriate’ gendered identity, incompatible with and unfit for the ‘masculine’ role of president. In characterising *the way that she laughed* as a ‘cackle’, then, and doing so in predominantly uncritical ways, each repetition of this re-presentation by the media served to draw attention to and reinforce this ideological metadiscourse.

The notion that the media’s re-presentation of Clinton is ideological – a result of the media’s recontextualisations of her laughter as a ‘cackle’ – is not something I alone am suggesting; rather, it is something that was overtly recognised in some of the media commentary from the corpus, albeit minimally and infrequently (and, in other published work: e.g. Gutgold 2009; Lawrence and Rose 2009). For example, some journalists retained some degree of distance from the ‘cackle’ by using scare quotes (e.g. as in the article from Australia, Extract 5), although this practice was rarely adopted in early reports, that is, in the months leading up to the

primaries. Notably, however, when it became clear – according to mass media, at least – that Clinton’s chances of winning the nomination were unlikely,<sup>9</sup> some journalists began to question its status as a legitimate form of commentary in media coverage of presidential politics. Although space constraints prevent me from providing examples of such commentary here (but see Romaniuk 2013a), these (predominantly retrospective<sup>10</sup>) critiques did point explicitly to the sexist nature of ‘the cackle’ coverage and thus, reinterpreted and recontextualised the ideological re-presentation of Clinton’s laughter in a substantially different contextualising framework. In such instances, ‘the Clinton cackle’ was no longer taken for granted or presupposed to exist; rather, *the fact that her laugh was represented as a ‘cackle’* became the very object of critique. By and large, however, such critiques were reported as reflecting exclusively marginal perspectives (i.e. the opinions of individual women, women’s groups, or feminists), thereby affording them less legitimacy than if they were presented as more widely held. These critiques nevertheless provided a striking contrast to the bulk of ‘cackle’ coverage, which, in the spirit of Healy’s *New York Times* piece, uncritically adopted the phrase – along with a range of negative meanings (e.g. ‘wicked’, ‘evil’) that invoke a witch-like persona – and thereby (re-)produced an unflattering, gendered perspective of her.

## Conclusions

Clinton’s participation in the 2007–8 presidential bid for the Democratic nomination certainly raised new questions about the role of sexism in the media’s portrayal of women candidates, particularly in relation to campaigns for political offices such as the presidency. Previous research on gender, language, and media has long established the ways in which media representations continue to (re-)produce and reinforce stereotypical and sexist images of women and, similarly, how they influence public perceptions in ways consistent with conventionally-held beliefs. In this article, I adopted a different analytic lens for investigating the gendered, sexist nature of media representations, but one that offers another vantage point on their ideological nature.

Specifically, I considered how a particular communicative act – Clinton’s laughter as it occurred in broadcast news interviews – was reified as a ‘text’ (i.e. ‘the Clinton cackle’), and, how, in the process, it was decontextualised from its original interactional contexts and recontextualised in various kinds of mass media representations. By tracking the trajectory of this ‘text’ from its first use, and across subsequent broadcast and print news coverage, I showed how the ‘cackle’ re-presentation gained its status as an *authoritative entextualisation*, where crucial aspects of preliminary coverage (e.g. sources)

were backgrounded to the point of erasure and negative and gendered aspects of the reports were foregrounded and emphasised. In the process of being repeatedly reproduced in subsequent media coverage, the meaning of Clinton's laughter was not only simplified but substantially reshaped to the extent that a predominantly negative, gendered re-presentation took hold at a significant moment in the primary season. Although tracking the trajectory of this 'text' over the course of Clinton's campaign allowed for an alternative 'reading' to come into view (whereby the 'cackle' characterisation was re-interpreted by some news media through a more critical lens), unfortunately – at least for Clinton – this critical perspective was offered much too little, and, for the most part, came far too late.

Thus, I would contend that the media's coverage of 'the Clinton cackle' aptly demonstrates the 'double-bind' situation still at work in the representation of women politicians, in terms of women's ability to deal with cultural expectations about femininity and deeply entrenched beliefs about competence, leadership, and masculinity. In terms of the 'Cackle' coverage, Clinton's laughter was evaluated in terms of a dominant, cultural script for powerful, competent women vying for leadership positions steeped in masculine hegemony – a script in which women are damned no matter what they do. By way of characterising Clinton's laughter as 'inappropriate', the media re-presentations helped to reinforce the ideological belief that Clinton's bid for the White House was also inappropriate. The implication of such a re-presentation is that a powerful woman (i.e. a witch) is more fitting in a fairy tale than in the real world of American presidential politics. Ultimately, then, I would suggest that the nature and trajectory of this negative, gendered re-presentation is indicative of the ideological belief that powerful people – in this case, political leaders vying for the highest level of elected executive office in the US – should continue to be men (not witches), and speaks to this 'double-bind' situation women politicians continue to face in the realm of presidential politics.

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cian's laughter – that of Hillary Rodham Clinton. Her current research interests lie at the intersection of discourse analytic approaches to communication, mass media, and gender. She has recently published on questioning practices in broadcast news interviews ('Pursuing answers to questions in broadcast journalism', in *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 2013), on laughter in broadcast news interviews ('Interviewee laughter and disaffiliation in broadcast news interviews', in *On Laughing*, Bloomsbury, 2013) and on approaches to discourse analysis ('Discourse analysis', with Susan Ehrlich, in *Research Methods in Linguistics*, Cambridge University Press, 2014).

## Notes

1. Among discourse scholars, there is some variation regarding use of this term and the related term, *interdiscursivity*. Those who work within the framework of critical discourse analysis, for example, generally adopt *intertextuality* as the umbrella term, and then include further specifications such as *interdiscursivity* (see, for example, Fairclough 1992:104). Linguistic anthropologists, on the other hand, generally adopt *interdiscursivity* as the broader term and reserve *intertextuality* for issues related to written texts specifically (see the papers in Agha and Wortham 2005, for example). Following Hodges (2011:9–10), I adopt the term *intertextuality* – given the widely recognised understanding of a 'text' – written or spoken – within sociocultural linguistics as 'a product of discursive action' (Hanks 1989:95, cited in Hodges 2011:10).
2. While the term 'entextualisation' has generally been applied to examples such as reported speech, I am proposing that a *re-presentation* of some 'original' also constitutes an entextualised 'text'. With respect to the 'cackle' re-presentation, Clinton's laughter is 'lifted out of its original context' (i.e. out of the originating contexts of occurrence in the broadcast news interviews in which she participated) and 're-worked and re-accentuated' in a way that assesses it in evaluative terms and turns this evaluation into a 'text' (i.e. 'the Clinton cackle').
3. Although the searches using Factiva and LexisNexis were conducted in 2009 and 2010, those using the Google News Archive were conducted in 2011 and 2012. Accordingly, the latter searches included all 'cackle'-related references to Clinton's laughter up until August 2012; however, in the interest of reducing the scope of analysis, the primary corpus incorporates those references from print news media (i.e. newspapers) exclusively. Letters to the editor were excluded since they are not generated by news organisations.
4. Elsewhere, I unpack precisely how the media's characterisation of Clinton's laughter as a 'cackle', which became the caricature of Clinton's laughter, is gendered and provide empirical support for this claim (see Romaniuk 2013a). To briefly recapitulate that argument here, I make the case that the 'cackle' re-presentation, indirectly indexes (Ochs 1992) the laugh of a negative, gendered persona (i.e. a witch). This particular lexical choice not only constrains the way in which Clinton's laughter is represented; it also allows for the possibility of a series of related, overwhelmingly negative connotations to get evoked in and through its (re-)production in the news media (beyond the strictly referential, denotational ones offered in dictionaries).
5. In all subsequent news reporting on Clinton's laughter, none of the other three interviews are mentioned (except to report, inaccurately, that she laughed on all five programmes). Her 12-minute interview with ABC's George Stephanopoulos

(*This Week*) contained one example, as did her 10-minute interview with CNN's Wolf Blitzer (*The Situation Room*); however, Clinton's 30-minute interview with NBC's Tim Russert (*Meet The Press*), the longest of all the interviews that morning, did not contain any laughter on Clinton's part, despite many journalists' claims to the contrary.

6. Although characterised as 'fake' news, *The Daily Show* has gained acclaim as an incisive, satirical critique of personality-driven media shows, in particular those of US networks such as CNN, Fox News Channel and MSNBC (all of which – notably – aired commentary on Clinton's laugh prior to Stewart's programme).
7. Although the word 'weapon' connotes a ruthless politician out to conquer or destroy, and thus, implicitly, someone to be feared, it may also be used here to trivialise or ridicule Clinton, since as a 'weapon', laughter is arguably a rather weak defence.
8. Numerous mass media representations alluded to or depicted Clinton as the Wicked Witch of the West (from the Wizard of Oz), a fictional character, but also a quintessential emblem and pervasive stereotype of women politicians, specifically, and those in powerful positions of leadership traditionally occupied by men, more generally. See Romaniuk (2013a) for elaboration on how the 'cackle' re-presentation of Clinton's laughter indirectly indexes a witch-like persona.
9. Obama officially clinched the majority of pledged delegates on 20 May 2008, but the Democratic primaries lasted until 3 June, at which point Clinton conceded the nomination (5 June) and endorsed Obama (7 June). However, the media began writing the obituaries on Clinton's campaign months earlier (around the end of March/beginning of April) – a time when pundits argued she had little chance of overcoming Obama's lead in pledged delegates (on this 'exit talk' in media coverage, see Lawrence and Rose 2011). Following the primary contests in Pennsylvania, Indiana, and North Carolina on 22 April (when Obama took the lead in pledged delegates), the majority of mainstream media were already declaring the primary effectively over.
10. Within the first four months of coverage (September–December 2007), less than one quarter of the total number of newspaper articles devoted to the topic of Clinton's laughter raised the possibility that the 'cackle' characterisation may be problematic on the basis of gender (8/37, or 22%), while nearly two thirds of the total number of articles on the topic of the demise of Clinton's campaign (April–September 2008) cited the 'cackle' re-presentation of her laughter as one of many instances of sexism in her campaign (16/27, or 60%).

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