

Racial Tensions Roil Democrats' Media Narrative

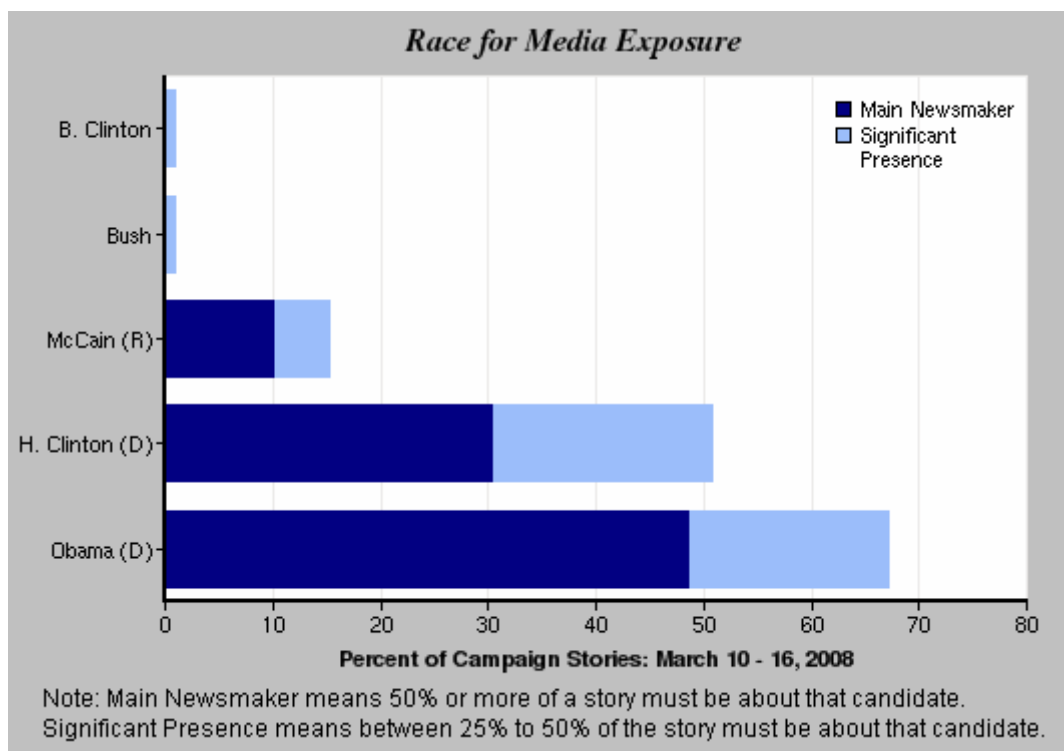
But 'Client 9' Dominated Front Page Coverage

by Mark Jurkowitz, Associate Director, Project for Excellence in Journalism
March 18, 2008

Maybe the good news for Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama last week was that the problems of another Democrat -- Eliot Spitzer -- generated almost as much media attention as they did.

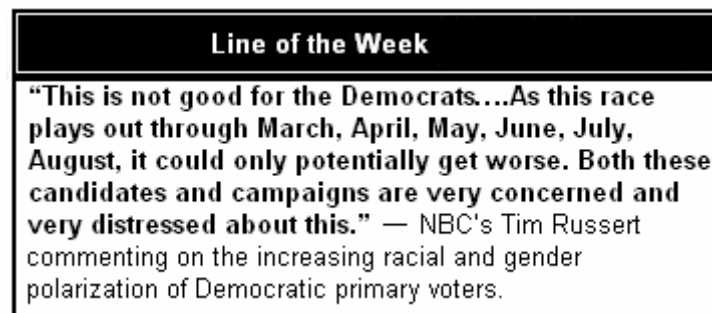
But when the media were covering the race for president, the story for Democrats was ugly. It was dominated by the candidates disavowing inflammatory remarks from supporters, by lingering resentments in both camps, and by festering divisions along racial and gender lines.

For the first time since the primaries began in January, some other story besides the election seriously competed for the media's attention last week. From March 10-16, the campaign filled 27% of the newshole, as measured in PEJ's News Coverage Index, the lowest level so far this year (well below the previous 2008 low of 38%). The disclosure that New York Governor Spitzer patronized prostitutes and his March 12 resignation was a close second, filling 23% of the newshole. Online and on the front pages of newspapers, the sordid demise of Spitzer, known by his prostitution ring nickname as "Client 9," got more attention than the campaign.



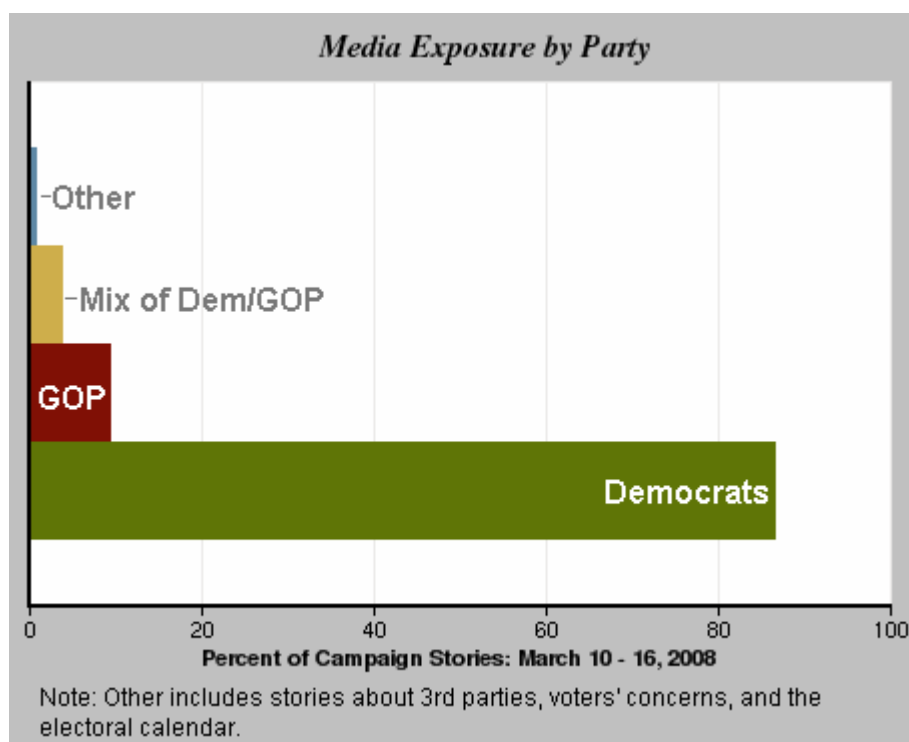
In a week of reduced campaign coverage, presumptive Republican nominee Sen. John McCain continued his disappearing act, registering as a significant or dominant factor in only 15% of campaign stories -- down from 26% the week before. Overall, stories about Democrats outnumbered those about Republicans by almost 10 to one.

Interestingly, Obama had a substantial edge in the competition for exposure over Clinton. He was a significant or dominant factor in 67% of the stories studied last week, compared with 51% for Clinton.



Obama won last week's two contests -- the March 8 Wyoming caucus and the March 11 Mississippi primary - by big margins. But those victories were largely obscured by a story line focused on fears that a nasty Democratic primary fight was beginning to rip the party asunder. The catalyst last week was racially inflammatory remarks by Clinton supporter Geraldine Ferraro and by Obama pastor Rev. Jeremiah Wright. Clinton apologized for Ferraro's statement that Obama's race and gender were responsible for his success and Obama rejected Wright remarks that, among other things, assailed the U.S. for widespread racism. But the damage was done.

For the week, Ferraro and Wright combined were lead newsmakers (someone who appears in at least 50% of a story) in 18% of the campaign stories -- meaning together they generated more coverage than McCain.

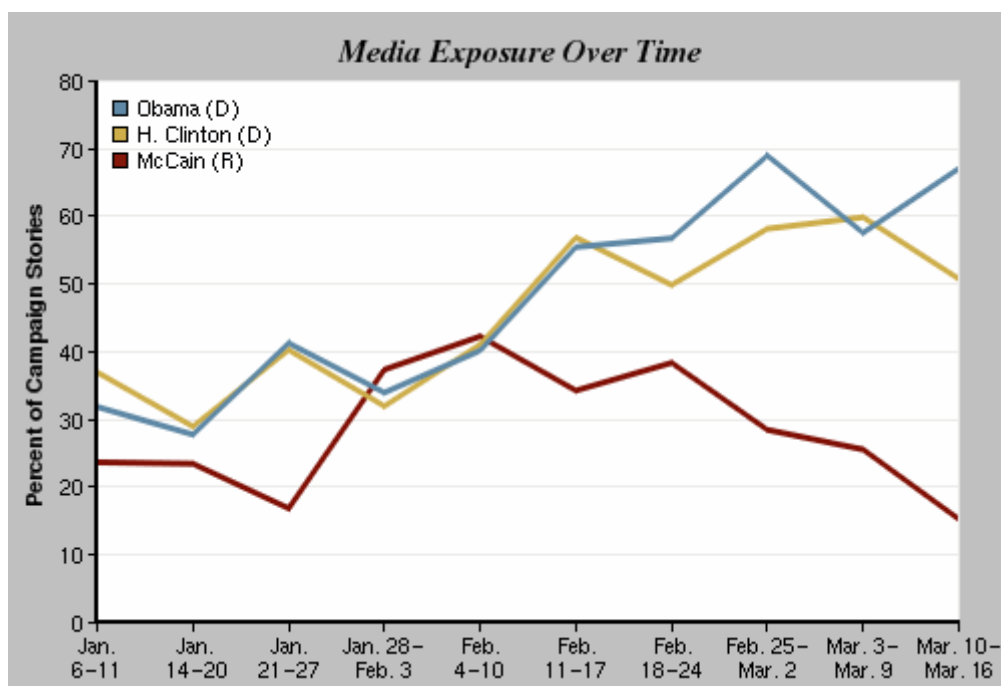


"Race and gender," warned NBC's Tim Russert on the March 13 Today show. "I think it's badly dividing the Democratic Party. This is not good for the Democrats.... Both these candidates and campaigns are very concerned and very distressed about this."

The Campaign Coverage index, which will appear weekly until nominees are selected in each party, is an addition to PEJ's News Coverage Index report, which tracks what stories the media covered in the previous week. The CCI offers a greater level of detail of the campaign coverage. That includes the percentage of stories in which a candidate played a significant role (as a subject of between 25% and 50% of the story) or a main newsmaker role (making up at least 50% of the story). The Index also identifies the key narratives in the reporting and the "Line of the Week," a statement from a journalist or source that in our researchers' estimation seems either to capture the story or is particularly colorful. PEJ's News Coverage Index will not disappear. It will come at the bottom of the CCI.

Even coverage of election results was racially tinged last week. A *Chicago Tribune* analysis of Obama's Mississippi victory, posted on Google News, noted that exit polls in that state revealed a "race-based resistance" to Obama, with "white Democrats there rejecting his candidacy 70 percent to 26 percent, while 9 of 10 blacks voted for him. It's a dramatic reflection of a recurrent pattern most pronounced in the South," The *Tribune* reported. Noting concerns that black voters were offended by Clinton's suggestion that Obama be her vice president, the March 13 *Los Angeles Times* reported on warnings that African-Americans could stay at home in November if Clinton won the nomination.

Against that backdrop came the Ferraro and Wright flare ups, which simmered for days. By mid-week, Clinton had repudiated Ferraro's remarks in front of a group of black newspaper publishers and had her surrogates spreading the message as well. During an Oct. 13 appearance on MSNBC, Congressman Gregory Meeks, an African-American Clinton supporter, told Tucker Carlson that "clearly the statements that Geraldine Ferraro made [are] a distraction and should not have been made. They're inaccurate."



Before the dust had settled came the Wright brouhaha. On March 14, Fox News' Hannity & Colmes aired video of Wright sermons that included remarks harshly critical of the U.S. and its treatment of blacks. (At one point, he described the country as "the U.S. of K.K.K.A.") Fox then aired an interview in which Obama said he had not been aware of many of those statements, and added that "I reject them completely. They are not ones that reflect my values or my ideals."

After a week in which the candidates found themselves on the defensive and racial wounds seemed to trump all else, a *New York Times* March 16 story summed up the jitters of a party that once saw itself as a heavy favorite in November.

"Lacking a clear route to the selection of a Democratic presidential nominee, the party's uncommitted superdelegates say they are growing increasingly concerned about the risks of a prolonged fight between Senators Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama, and perplexed about how to resolve the conflict," declared the story's opening paragraph.

And now, in the rest of the week's news:

The stunning Spitzer scandal -- with its mix of hubris, sex, and humiliation -- was the No. 1 or No. 2 story in all five media sectors, getting its highest level of coverage last week on cable (34%). The staggering U.S. economy was next at 8%, followed by events inside Iraq (4%). An AP investigation that found many water supplies contaminated with small amounts of pharmaceuticals came next at 3%.

Media Exposure by Candidate

	Main Newsmaker	Significant Presence	Total Percent of Campaign Stories
Barack Obama (D)	48.8%	18.3%	67.1%
Hillary Clinton (D)	30.6	20.2	50.8
John McCain (R)	10.3	5.0	15.3
George Bush	0	1.0	1.0
Bill Clinton	0	1.0	1.0
Ron Paul	0	0	0
Total Number of Campaign Stories = 301			

Top Overall Stories of the Week

Rank	Story	Percent of Newshole
1	2008 Campaign	27%
2	Spitzer Scandal	23
3	U.S. Economy	8
4	Events in Iraq	4
5	Reports of Tainted Drinking Water	3
6	U.S. Domestic Terrorism and Efforts to Combat	2
7	Gas/Oil Prices	2
8	UNC Student Killed	1
9	China	1
10	Admiral William Fallon Resigns	1