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Raising the Volume: Media and the Rise of the 21st Century Tea Party

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Raising the Volume: Media and the Rise of the 21st Century Tea Party

Abstract
Raising the Volume: The News Media and the Rise of the Twenty-First-Century Tea Party is a multi-platform analysis that critically examines the ways in which online, broadcast, and print news outlets have used the Tea Party to address modern conflicts over race, class, gender, journalism, and politics. While the current Tea Party and its previous incarnations have had a perpetual presence in American politics, national news outlets recognized the phenomenon as the rise of a New Right only recently, at the very beginning of the Obama presidency. This work locates the way that journalists have used the Tea Party movement to represent the contemporary slippages between news platforms, journalistic norms, and political institutions.

Due to its meteoric rise in the national news spotlight, this dissertation examines the news coverage of the Tea Party as a case study that explores the key themes, ideologies, and features of national news and political storytelling in a digital age. Specifically, this dissertation answers this research question: How does the news coverage of the Tea Party serve as a cipher into the values, function, and norms of a transforming media and political environment? Implicitly, I am also asking: What are the key themes and news and political storytelling in the Obama-era and technology-laden period? And what recurring ideologies appear in news narratives at this moment?

Through a close examination of the Tea Party’s early emergence in the national news media, this project describes how it was widely portrayed by reporters in two distinct ways: 1) as indicative of an increasingly complex, expansive, and digitally-enhanced news environment 2) as a political brand and 3) as a response to a socio-political landscape transformed by the race and gender make-up of the candidates in the 2008 presidential campaign. In a media environment in which everyone has the opportunity to tune out, tune in, and speak back, Tea Party news coverage ultimately shows the dissolution of the categories that distinguish citizens, journalists, activists, and consumers in a branded and fragmented media.

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in

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ABSTRACT


Khadijah White
John L. Jackson Jr.

*Raising the Volume: The News Media and the Rise of the Twenty-First-Century Tea Party* is a multi-platform analysis that critically examines the ways in which online, broadcast, and print news outlets have used the Tea Party to address modern conflicts over race, class, gender, journalism, and politics. While the current Tea Party and its previous incarnations have had a perpetual presence in American politics, national news outlets recognized the phenomenon as the rise of a New Right only at the very beginning of the Obama presidency. This work locates the way that journalists have used the Tea Party movement to represent the contemporary slippages between news platforms, journalistic norms, and political institutions.

Due to its meteoric rise in the national news spotlight, this dissertation examines the news coverage of the Tea Party as a case study that explores the key themes, ideologies, and features of national news and political storytelling in a digital age. Specifically, this dissertation answers this research question: How does the news coverage of the Tea Party serve as a cipher into the values, function, and norms of a transforming media and political environment? Implicitly, I am also asking: What are the
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# Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.......................................................................................................................... ii

ABSTRACT................................................................................................................................................... v

Chapter One: Welcome to the Party ........................................................................................................ 1
  Headphone Culture: A Prologue ........................................................................................................ 1
  Introduction............................................................................................................................................. 4
  Let the Party Begin ............................................................................................................................... 12
  Why Look at News Narratives? .......................................................................................................... 23
  Where does this fit? ............................................................................................................................. 35
  Methodology ......................................................................................................................................... 38
    Theoretical Approaches and Rationale ............................................................................................ 38
  Sample .................................................................................................................................................. 42
  Data Collection and Analysis ............................................................................................................. 49

CHART 1—2009 Lead News Stories on the Tea Party in Cable News and New York Times (months) ...................................................................................................................... 51

CHART 2—2009 Lead News Stories on the Tea Party in Cable News and New York Times (weeks) ................................................................................................................................. 52


CHART 4—2010 Lead News Stories on the Tea Party in Cable News and The New York Times (months) ................................................................................................................................ 53

CHART 5—Dominant News Topics in Tea Party Surges ..................................................................... 54

CHART 6—Analytical Structure for Examining Tea Party News ............................................................ 56

Conclusion .................................................................................................................................................. 57

Chapter Two: The Tea Party as Brand ..................................................................................................... 59

Image 1: Fox News Ad in Washington Post on September 18, 2009 .................................................... 74

Tea Party as a Social Movement ........................................................................................................ 85

Tea Party as a Political Party ............................................................................................................... 91

Chapter Three: Race, Gender, and Class ............................................................................................... 101

Rebranding Political Conservatism Through Identity: A Backdrop ................................................ 104

No Class Populism ............................................................................................................................ 116

The Tea Party: Race, Post-Race, and Post-isms ............................................................................... 130

Her Cup of Tea: Representations of Tea Party Women ................................................................. 152

vii
Chapter One: Welcome to the Party

Headphone Culture: A Prologue

Recently, on a family vacation, several relatives and friends sat around together after an afternoon meal in our small cabin. My fourteen-year-old brother was stretched out on the couch with my computer, watching a film with headphones on. Everyone else was talking about different things—my mom and sister, my boyfriend and me, my grandmother and a family friend, each pair engaging in our own boisterous conversations. My brother, still wearing headphones, occasionally took his eyes off his computer screen to participate in a discussion that caught his attention. Then, just as quickly, he would return to his movie. At one point my grandmother directed a question at him, repeating it several times as he continued staring at the computer, seemingly oblivious to the world. We all laughed as she dryly remarked, “Oh, you can hear everything you want with those headphones on, but now you can’t hear me?”

Today’s media environment functions much like this scene of a teenager with headphones in a room full of clamoring adults. In a digital era, the incessant availability of information through a variety of devices, platforms, mediums, and formats seems like the noise of many voices in a crowded room. My brother, like many consumers, chose to tune out of the numerous discussions that surrounded him. But my brother also chose when to tune in, like many other people who regularly engage the discourse that constructs the ever-expanding, digitally enhanced public sphere. Like other media consumers today, he did not only listen to the headphones in order to focus attention on
his chosen media and block out the conversations happening in the room—he also took the headphones off in order to respond to the topics and discussions that interested him or to share the information he had gathered from his film with the rest of the family.

“Headphones” stand in for the dialogic and dualistic identity of all citizens as media consumers and producers in a digital media environment. In today’s expanded media system, Facebook, Twitter, political blogs, YouTube, and other social media provide people with the opportunity to screen out, consume, engage with, distribute, and produce a variety of political news and information all at the same time.

Consider this: in the cabin, my grandmother spoke directly to my brother, uncharacteristically raising her voice when he seemed not to hear past his headphones. In this environment, journalists are particularly and similarly pressed to “raise the volume” when they address contemporary media audiences, presenting their content in a way that pushes people to either take off their headphones and interact with their mediated performances, or keep the headphones on and choose their messages to the exclusion of all others. News organizations and journalists today often take up the strategy of “raising the volume,” violating traditional news norms, ethics, and practices in order to get their messages to readers, listeners, or viewers and drown out (or subsume) their ubiquitous competition.

This dissertation depicts the ways that the twenty-first-century Tea Party was a product of the expanded pace, processes and strategies by which newsmakers across digital, print, and broadcast platforms raise the volume in a “headphone culture”. This case study shows that news outlets respond to, provoke, and target one another in an effort to dominate media coverage. Like what Jamieson and Cappella (2009) observed in
their study of Reagan-era conservative media, partisan news outlets covering the Tea Party also got people to tune into their conversations by working with producers in other platforms to produce ideologically or topically coherent news stories that dominate the public sphere. But it is also clear in this analysis that these outlets were not just producing pieces that targeted their individual audience but, rather, also aiming their reports at one another. They were each echoing the other, launching rhetorical attacks at one another, responding to the same themes, ideas, and claims about the Tea Party and contributing new insights, angles, and information with each new piece or segment. Each news outlet provided an important contribution to the Tea Party story, shaped its importance, and perpetuated its circulation. They were not just an echo chamber—they were a feedback loop.

In this landscape, the Tea Party news stories track the ways that news reporters cause scenes, participate and organize political events, and draw attention to their coverage with sensational, hyperbolic, and even inaccurate coverage. Pundits create debates, manufacture controversy, and rush to distribute messages before there is enough time to analyze, validate, and contextualize them. Columnists recast the same story in conflicting ways that fit it into prevailing cultural and political stereotypes and norms. News outlets and journalists today even literally “raise the volume” by yelling their reports, increasing the sound of ads (visually, numerically, and sonically), and producing more content across multiple platforms (Merrill & Lowenstein, 2010). Perhaps most importantly, news organizations and professionals are swayed and manipulated by their own attempts to “raise the volume” in the contemporary media environment, frequently misled and provoked by other media groups shouting more loudly and at a faster pace.
According to Bruce Williams and Michael Delli Carpini, “the emerging media regime shapes the resulting discursive environment and so, in turn, shapes future economic, political, cultural, and technological conditions” (p. 133). In an age where everyone has the opportunity to tune out, tune in, and speak back, Tea Party news coverage ultimately shows how the distinctions between citizens, journalists, and consumers are increasingly tenuous, inadequate, and obsolete.

Introduction

On January 25, 2011, nearly three million CNN viewers witnessed an unprecedented live event that reflected a major shift in the ideological underpinnings of contemporary American cultural and electoral politics (Mirkinson, 2011). After the applause and fanfare of President Barack H. Obama’s second annual State of the Union address and the traditional Republican Party rejoinder, another face soon appeared on television screens. Describing the Tea Party as “a dynamic force for good in our national conversation,” Minnesota congresswoman Michelle Bachmann delivered an official Tea Party rebuttal that promoted limited government, deregulation, and spending cuts. Never before had a national television news station broadcast a third political party’s response to a State of the Union address.

Bachmann’s speech was filmed and distributed by Tea Party HD, a Web-based network made up of “journalists, producers, shooters and editors . . . empowered to seek out and produce the unreported news that the main stream media can’t tell” ("Tea Party HD," 2011). Though Tea Party HD made the entire speech accessible to every media outlet via both a webcast and a pool camera, only CNN chose to air all of it live on TV (Falcone, 2011; Post, 2011; Shahid, 2011). Some networks called it a ratings-driven
decision. MSNBC anchor Rachel Maddow openly questioned the ethics of CNN’s decision to broadcast the Tea Party response and called it “a remarkable act of journalistic intervention to elevate, in effect, a group with which they are co-sponsoring a presidential debate to . . . the level of the major parties in this country” (Maddow, 2011; 2011). Other news outlets, such as ABC, CBS, and NBC, instead streamed the speech live on their websites (Carter, 2011). This was a powerful moment—one that captured the complexity, strength, and significance of both the Tea Party movement and its relationship to the news media environment that constructed, framed, and propelled its ascent to public consciousness.

This study stands at the intersections of various fields and disciplines, including American studies, communications, cultural studies, journalism, media anthropology, political science, sociology, gender studies, Black studies, and Whiteness studies. I examine the Tea Party’s early narrative development within news coverage to make clear the ways that the news media engaged, responded to and conveyed America’s national and social cleavages during a momentous political period. Initially, this project began as investigation of the cultural significance of the Tea Party’s spectacular political presence in the Obama-era news landscape. The data, however, revealed a political environment not just altered by the election of the first African-American president, but also shaped by neoliberal values within journalism and politics. It ultimately developed into a larger analysis of the ways in which the media depicted, actively promoted and constructed the Tea Party as a political brand and signifier.

This dissertation argues that the “news media” (itself a complex cultural discursive construction that is unpacked throughout this manuscript) used the Tea Party
movement as a heuristic through which it defined and negotiated the tensions between identity, politics, and ideology at a particular historical moment. In some ways, this dissertation is and is not about the Tea Party. It investigates what the mass-mediated construction of the Tea Party tells us about the current media and cultural moment, specifically the role of journalism in a Web 2.0 age and contemporary American notions of democracy, citizenship, and belonging. According to Williams and Carpini (2011), “in the new discursive environment, it becomes easier to develop fresh definitions… that are less bound by the traditional limits of space” (p. 130). As such, this manuscript answers this key research question: How does the news coverage of the Tea Party serve as a cipher into the values and practices of a transforming media and political environment?

Implicitly, I am also asking: How do American journalists write about politics, and what recurring ideologies do they produce in their narratives at this moment? I use the Tea Party’s meteoric rise in national news as a case study that explores the key themes, characters, and features of national news and political storytelling in a digital age. Essential to the analysis of the Tea Party as a mass-mediated construction is the way it represents the contemporary intersections and overlaps of media technology, journalism, and politics (particularly identity politics) in America today.

This project shows that the news coverage primarily documented the Tea Party’s representations, appeal, motivations, influence, and circulation – its persona, not its policies. Indeed, reporters described the Tea Party a symbolic signifier with its own set of values and emotions that appealed to particular voting constituencies; they served as its spokespersons and fluidly moved between identifying it as a protest, a “social movement”, a campaign, a political party, and a symbolic signifier. In other words, the
Tea Party functioned largely as a brand in its news coverage, much more than it was portrayed as a social movement. As Sarah Banet-Weiser (2013) explains, “brands are actually a story told to the consumer. When that story is successful, it surpasses simple identification with just a tangible product; it becomes a story that is familiar, intimate, personal, a story with a unique history” (p. 4). Thus, much of this dissertation discusses the ways in which the news media tracked, monitored, constructed, and promoted the Tea Party as a story and a brand.

In my review of the literature, this study is one of the few multi-platform narrative analyses of social movement news coverage in the digital age. In a similar vein, it was one the first in-depth qualitative examinations of the early life cycle of a single national political story as produced by both partisan and non-partisan online, cable, broadcast, and print news outlets. While journalism studies scholars frequently argue that the content and discourse of news texts are important objects for empirical study, S. Elizabeth Bird (2010) points out that few scholars conduct projects based primarily on interpretive textual analysis of news content, despite the purported inherent value of such examinations (Bird, 2010). To be clear – that is not to say that no studies of news text or discourse exist (there is an abundant literature on this topic). Rather most of these studies of news media or journalism also include additional methods – i.e., audience surveys, interviews, ethnography, and other methods besides the close discursive analysis of news texts. Mass media “effects” research often prioritizes the study of audience reception or industry production, and pairs it with cultural textual analysis. For example, in social movement studies, scholars frequently focus on the impact of specific news frames upon
the development or support of a social movement (or vice versa) among the media audience (Benford & Snow, 2000).

This dissertation moves away from such approaches—my project aims to capture the journey itself, tightening the analytical lens on the Tea Party tale as a case in political media coverage and interrogating its meanings and significations as both a cultural and historical artifact of twenty-first-century American society and politics. I concur with John Fiske’s argument (Vavrus, 2002) that “the figures who play the key roles in these [media] events literally embody the politico-cultural meanings and the struggles over them about which America is most uncertain, most anxious, and therefore most divided” (p. 80). This project aims to engage and decipher these processes and deeper logics. Moreover, it locates the news media as not just conduit through which political messages are conveyed to an awaiting audience, but a site in which political struggles, activism, and rhetoric actually play out and between media actors.

At a time when a majority of Americans had never heard of the Tea Party and only small to moderately sized crowds were turning out to its rallies, newsmakers featured the Tea Party as a key character in stories about immigration, health care, patriotism, domestic terrorism, political ethics, racism, elections, and sexism (The President, Congress, and Dissatisfaction with Government: February 5-10, 2010, 2010). Depending on the story and its source, the Tea Party played different roles—it was variously cast as a major political power changing the course of Republican politics (and American democracy), a social movement, a series of anti-establishment protests, an assortment of groups manufactured by invisible corporate backers, an uprising in response to an economic recession and wasteful government spending, a mobilization of
conservatives driven by anti-Black sentiment, or an entirely fabricated media spectacle. Topics such as race, gender, class, and journalism drove coverage of the Tea Party and gestured to its significance in American society at large.

The example of Michele Bachmann’s landmark State of the Union response speech poignantly shows how the Tea Party’s emergence into the mainstream media signaled various shifts in American culture. The Web-based production and broadcast of her speech gestured to a journalistic landscape altered by the growth of online political reporting, amateur Web journalism, and the accessibility and pace of digital technologies. As Katz and Liebes (2007) note, “these institutional changes [in broadcasting institutions and technologies] (1) have scattered the audience and undermined the shared experience of broadcasting, (2) have taken the novelty out of live broadcasting, and (3) have socialized us to ‘action’ rather than ceremony, to a norm of interruption rather than schedule” (p. 159). Moreover, the changing media environment further erodes the once-clear boundaries that separated entertainment and news (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2000).

In what I refer to here as the “headphone culture,” unverified information is distributed and publicized via established mass media organizations, opinion and commentary news set the agenda for hard-news reporting, and officials are able to evade journalistic interrogation and convey their messages directly to the public. These conditions, among others, set the stage for the Tea Party’s rapid growth and exposure.

The selection of a woman to represent the Tea Party in its inaugural broadcast also reflects the significance and importance of female identity as a key topic within Tea Party news coverage. Immediately prior to the Tea Party’s rise, Hillary Clinton’s 2008 presidential primary campaign revitalized a public dialogue on the progress and obstacles
that confront women professionals. Subsequently, the news media shined a spotlight on the Tea Party’s cultivation of conservative female leadership and used it to continue the national conversation on what defines—or restricts—a successful political woman. As figures who claimed feminism while also eschewing traditional feminist policies, Tea Party women arguably exemplified an age in which “the feminist gains of the 1970s and ’80s come to be undermined” and the “successes and failures are attributed to individual women rather than to a complex formula of . . . structural influences“ (McRobbie, 2004; Vavrus, 2002). Relatedly, the narrative construction of Tea Party women within news texts reflects the tenuousness of contemporary gender roles and performances, both off and on the political stage.

Like other tea partiers, Michelle Bachmann regularly expressed doubts about President Obama’s citizenship status and patriotism, provoking questions about the importance of racial identity and resentment in the construction and media portrayal of the Tea Party. Race and racism, as well as gender and class, were key themes in mediated discussions and representations of the Tea Party. While Tea Party supporters heralded their movement as a vehicle through which “capitalists” could voice their anti-“big government” sentiments, detractors argued that the movement (if, indeed, they acknowledged it as such) provided yet another example of conservative Republican ideology masking deeper beliefs in white racial superiority and supremacy. Various news commentators and reporters frequently framed the Tea Party as a resurgence of the “old” racism that had surfaced to malign Obama during the 2008 presidential campaign. People on both sides agreed on one thing: the nationwide rise of the most recent Tea Party movement reflected a significant change in the racial, social, and political landscape of
the United States, a terrain that had already been drastically altered with the election of President Obama. Importantly, this project shows that the debate over the Tea Party’s racism and race neutrality was a central component of its early news coverage and, more than that, amplified its cultural resonance in a “post-racial” landscape.

This dissertation also aims to analyze the nationwide telling of the Tea Party story through various news genres (newspapers, nightly cable, and online blogs) in order to better understand its significance and function as a cultural and national sign. In their reports, journalists have variously cast the amorphously defined Tea Party as a social movement, a brand, an event, a political party, and a sociopolitical ideology. At its core are rage, technology, and the ever-present tension between the government and the people. Through studying the texts of nationally mediated representations of the Tea Party movement, this project addresses a set of other related research questions, including: How do these aforementioned issues—race, gender, media, and politics—make the Tea Party narrative important today? What do any of the similarities and contrasts between the Tea Party’s constructions in different news sources tell us about the current state and function of journalism, particularly the effects of partisan and ideologically fueled reporting? And what type of politics do journalists, through their reporting, reify and convey?

The strength of discussing the Tea Party so soon after its rhetorical naissance is that this piece is able to provide an early analysis of its beginnings, well before the movement has been codified or its legacy guaranteed. There is no way to know at this time whether the Tea Party phenomenon will serve as a historical blip or a watershed moment in America’s political and social trajectory. The remaining pages of this
dissertation detail the Tea Party’s descriptive and prescriptive significance in its news coverage in order to better understand the political, cultural, and journalistic terrain of the first African American president of the United States. At the same time, I am aware that my analysis of the Tea Party chronicles constitutes its own narrative, in which I am lending my critical voice to a still-unfolding story.

The remainder of this introductory chapter is comprised of three key components. The next section discusses the origins of the Tea Party narrative, highlighting its emergence as a news story and its historical context as a reprise of a major patriotic moment. The following section places this project in its scholarly and academic context, explaining the way that news reports function as cultural and ideological artifacts that can be used to decipher the Tea Party’s significance within the American social imagination. The third part describes the theoretical approaches that guide this dissertation and its specific methods of analysis and data collection. Through these sections, I hope to provide a sense of the key ideas that inform this examination of the media and the rise of the twenty-first-century Tea Party, as well as the ways in which I plan to interpret its meaning through news texts.

**Let the Party Begin**

Examining the contemporary Tea Party demands a careful consideration of how it has “come into historical being,” how its “meanings have changed over time,” and why it “command[s] such profound emotional legitimacy” today (Anderson, 2005). As a mythic eighteenth-century spectacle, the legacy of the Boston Tea Party has informed and inspired American protest, philosophy, and political organization. Tracing the rhetorical lineage of the Tea Party, from 1773 to the inaugural “Tax Day” Tea Party protests on
April 15, 2009, elucidates the rhetorical and cultural importance of the Tea Party as signifier and explains why the term so easily resonated with news producers and their audiences.

The literal and symbolic roots of the Tea Party lie in a historical event that occurred on the cold, dark waters of the Boston Harbor in 1773, as part of an ongoing political crisis over British import taxation that had erupted in numerous American coastal cities (Carp, 2010). In December, a group of tax protestors departed from a particularly contentious town meeting dressed up as Mohawk Indians, and proceeded to the nearby docks. They boarded a British import ship and spent the next few hours throwing 342 chests of tea into the Atlantic Ocean. This action eventually became known as the “Boston Tea Party” and the “catalyst of the American revolution” (Kleeb, 1973). The dissidents’ call for “no taxation without representation” emerged as a founding tenet of the United States of America and the Boston Tea Party came to mark the daring rise of what would become one of the most powerful nations in the world.

In contemporary accounts of this historic American event, its problematic elements are often overlooked or omitted. In truth, the Tea Party moment of fiery protest and celebrated independence was also a racial spectacle in which white men performed illegal acts of vandalism in the guise of a “savage” other. What do we make of this, and of the threat of violence and sabotage that is central to a story that carries such symbolism for America? How does this less prominently discussed aspect of the Boston Tea Party contribute to its mythic endurance in the national imagination and regular invocation by a wide range of citizens? Does the eighteenth-century rejection of British rule mirror the “birther” disavowal of Barack Obama’s presidency today?
Antagonisms over eighteenth-century import taxation were, in part, fueled by fears that British soldiers were inciting slave rebellions and stripping American colonists of their liberties—early white Americans openly worried that the British were disrupting the existing social order and turning them into slaves. A Boston lawyer protesting the Boston Port Bill wrote: “I speak it with grief, I speak it with anguish,—Britons are our oppressors: I speak with shame, I speak it with indignation,—we are slaves” (Quincy, 2009). Two centuries later, an attendee at a 2010 Tea Party rally in Las Vegas called President Obama’s health care bill “just another way to enslave the American public” and demanded that the president “prove he’s an American citizen” (2010). While patriotism and democratic participation figure prominently within the American recollection of the original Tea Party, the contradictions and controversy of its less frequently acknowledged characteristics of racial spectacle, deviance, and rebellion in some ways also map onto its current incarnations and signal related connotations within news reports.

According to historian and columnist Jill Leopore (2010), the captivating tale of the Boston Tea Party functions primarily as a myth. In her work titled The Whites of Their Eyes, Leopore describes how the Boston Tea Party was originally a minor historical event that grew in importance through nostalgia, historical fundamentalism, revisionism, and presentism. For well over 50 years after the group of raucous colonists dumped tea into wintry waters, the event was referred to as “the destruction of the tea”—not the “Tea Party”—and received no special commemoration. As the heroes of the American Revolution began to die, the changing political landscape brought the newly named Boston Tea Party to the forefront:
What happened in Boston in 1773 was first called a “tea party,” at least in print, in the title of a book published in 1834: *A Retrospect of the Boston Tea-Party: With a Memoir of George R.T. Hewes*. Hewes, a poor shoemaker . . . [was] one of the last surviving participants of the destruction of the tea. In 1835, Hewes, now in his nineties, was brought to Boston for a Fourth of July parade. Calling the dumping of the tea a “tea party” made it sound like a political party: in the 1770s, parties were anathema, but in the 1830s, parties ran politics. . . . By parading Hewes through the streets of the city, Boston’s Whigs . . . claimed the so-called Tea Party as their own (Leopore, 2010).

The Whigs were only the first of countless political groups in America that would lay claim to the revitalized and rehistoricized legacy of the Boston Tea Party. As historian Alfred Y. Young (2000) asks: “What does it mean for an event to be ‘lost,’ and then ‘found’ and given a new name?” (p. xvii).

Throughout the last 240 years, Americans have frequently used the Boston Tea Party in American political and protest rhetoric. Activists in the 1960s and 1970s used the Boston Tea Party to defend civil disobedience, advocate for the equal rights of women and gays (who felt *they* were being taxed without representation), and object to property taxes (Leopore, 2010). Groups ranging from Boy Scouts to medical practitioners have ceremonially dumped tea into the Boston Harbor. A 1973 “tea party” demonstration protested the use of tax funds to racially integrate public schools, drawing a clear historical link between racism and objections pertaining to taxes (and tax spending) ("Desegregation/Richmond, Virginia," 1972). Still, while the Boston Tea Party has had a longstanding influence upon American activism, no other “tea party” group has been as covered, received as much prolonged national attention, or accumulated as much political power as the one that emerged in April 2009.

The first mentions of this most recent “Tea Party” appeared in the *Wall Street*
Journal during the very end of the 2008 presidential campaign. As Jamieson and Cappella (2009)\(^1\) found in their study of conservative media, the Wall Street Journal was the “vanguard” in initiating national news coverage of the Tea Party movement (p. xi).

Two Wall Street Journal editorials, published in August and September 2009, strongly criticized high tax rates and highlighted citizen efforts to reduce them (2008b; W. S. J. Editorial, 2008). The August article heralded an effort of “citizen activists” who were working to eliminate state income tax in Massachusetts:

> The forces of the tax and spend status quo will descend on this initiative like British troops after the original Boston tea party, but somebody has to make an effort to stop the relentless growth of government (Editorial, 2008a).

In the September editorial, the Journal took aim at Joe Biden, running mate, for suggesting that paying taxes was a patriotic duty:

> Heavens! The political left likes to score Republicans for claiming that God is on their side, but here we have Mr. Biden claiming support from both God and Caesar. If Sarah Palin tried this, she’d send the boys at the Daily Kos into cardiac arrest. We won’t get into a theological debate with Mr. Biden, except to say that Biblical tax rates tended to run around 10%, not the 39.6%-plus that Barack Obama’s tax plan calls for. As for patriotism, maybe the young Joe Biden missed school the day the Boston Tea Party was being taught.

Here, the Wall Street Journal integrated the historical symbolism of the Tea Party into a specious modern narrative. The original Boston tea partiers did not protest taxation, but,

\(^1\) To pinpoint when the Tea Party movement emerged within national news, I used LexisNexis and the Vanderbilt University Television News Archive to locate reports that included the search term “tea party.” In my preliminary searches of television news coverage alone, I found mentions of various “tea party” tax-related protests in 1978, 1981, and 1983 that mobilized around the 1773 imagery and symbolism. While these “tea party” protests frequently focused on eliminating or reducing taxes, they also targeted undesirable tax spending (in other words, spending tax revenues on undesirable persons of color). (“Desegregation/Richmond, Virginia,” 1972). Interestingly, I found few mentions of a politically affiliated “tea party” or “tea party” protests between 2000 and 2008 in national news sources. That is, while I found no “tea party” references to a political mobilization related to taxes, I did encounter stories about social functions, fairy tales, and museum events.
rather, aimed to eradicate an imperial tax system that denied colonists access to political participation and power—eighteenth-century revolutionaries wanted taxation with representation. Arguably, this (mis)appropriation of the Boston Tea Party is critical to its contemporary reincarnation. As the first twenty-first-century mention of the Tea Party in relation to contemporary politics in the national press, these editorials laid the foundation for the plot and characters that came to define the Tea Party narrative. The Wall Street Journal introduced Sarah Palin, the Obama administration, religion, patriotism, taxes, activists, and revolutionary symbolism as key to the political landscape that would unfold in subsequent reports about the modern Tea Party.

In January 2009, the Wall Street Journal again published an article describing citizens protesting taxes around the country. According to the newspaper, activists nationwide were forming groups and organizing demonstrations against property tax increases. In the article, the Journal referred to one particular Massachusetts protest as a “tax revolt,” writing that

about 100 Hampton residents formed a group called the Coalition for a Fair Assessment, and staged a protest at Hampton Harbor, waving tea bags in a mini re-enactment of the Boston Tea Party ((Levitz, 2009).

It was the first article to cover a tax protest that was also a Boston Tea Party reenactment—indeed, this was the first Tea Party protest covered by the national press in this century. For the rest of the nation, and according to all later news reports, the Tea Party did not officially begin until a spectacular media moment occurred a month later, after President Obama had officially begun his first term.

One February morning, only a few weeks after Obama’s inauguration, a business reporter from the financial cable news network CNBC went on what several major
newspapers referred to as a “rant” directed at the newly minted Obama administration. From the Chicago Mercantile Exchange trading floor, Rick Santelli railed against federal spending that aimed to stimulate a debilitated American economy:

The new administration is big on computers and technology? How about this, President and new administration. . . . have people vote on the Internet . . . to see if we really want to subsidize the losers’ mortgages or . . . reward people who want to carry the water instead of just drink the water! . . .

We’re thinking of having a Chicago Tea Party in July. All of you capitalists who want to show up to Lake Michigan, I’m going to start organizing! (Santelli, 2009)

Another anchor expressed surprise as traders in the background loudly cheered Santelli on and joked, “This is like mob rule here, I’m getting scared!” In response, Santelli motioned to the group of exclusively white male financial traders that surrounded him and declared, “This is America! President Obama, are you listening?” (italics mine).

In this singular move, Santelli became known as the catalyst of the Tea Party movement and introduced it as a phenomenon that rebelled against the leadership of President Barack Obama and aimed to restore the ideals of capitalism and American belonging. It was a spectacular feat that recast an eighteenth-century democratic protest for legitimate governance as a twenty-first-century opposition movement aimed at the newly-minted African American president. The news of Santelli’s remarks spread quickly. The next day, New York Times reported on his call for a “Chicago Tea Party” (Stolberg, 2009). In an effort to “maximize publicity and Web traffic,” CNBC immediately posted the footage of its reporter’s tirade on its website; it became CNBC’s most popular video clip ever and quickly elicited an official White House response (Stelter, 2009). According to one Wall Street Journal columnist, Santelli’s “rant heard
round the world” gave others the idea to start organizing their own Tea Party rallies.

Another Wall Street Journal columnist claimed that Santelli had not triggered the movement but, rather, given the Tea Party its “moniker” (Reynolds, 2009). The New York Times, USA Today, and the Wall Street Journal referenced his tirade as the impetus of the nationwide Tea Parties and tax protests that occurred on April 15, 2009, marking Santelli’s onscreen outburst as the beginning of the contemporary Tea Party movement2 (Dorrell, 2009). Regardless of the attribution—as inspiration or founder—reporters and activists alike have universally credited Santelli with starting the Tea Party movement. In a later interview with Politico, he described the Tea Party as representing a pivotal moment in American democracy: “I think that this tea party phenomenon is steeped in American culture and steeped in the American notion to get involved with what’s going on with our government” (Calderone, 2009). The Wall Street Journal’s initial reports on pre–Obama era tea parties, on the other hand, were long forgotten.

Recent studies on the Tea Party provide further insight about its influences, configuration, and contemporary meaning. A collection of political science studies on the Tea Party found that it had a major impact on the outcomes of congressional elections across the country (Bullock, 2011). According to Skocpol and Williamson (2012), the Tea Party was not an “Astroturf” (or fake grassroots) movement as some have suggested; approximately a thousand Tea Party groups formed between fall 2009 and spring 2010.3

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2 I want to emphasize the point that the first time the “Tea Party” was invoked it carried the primary definition of “party” as a social gathering or rally. It was not yet considered a party in the sense of a political organization. I will discuss the important function of ambiguity in the term “Tea Party” in the next chapter.

3 Ronald P. Formisano (2012) explains that the term Astroturf came into use in the 1980s and is usually associated with corporate lobbying that creates campaigns that “are made to appear to be spontaneous mass activism but are actually front organizations with names that disguise their true purposes” (p. 7).
Skocpol and Williamson found that the Tea Party was the united effort of “grassroots activists, roving billionaire advocates, and right-wing media purveyors,” all of whom were articulating “new variants of long-standing conservative claims about government, social programs, and hot-button social issues” (pp. 11 and 13). They conclude that media was critical to the development of the Tea Party by shaping public opinion, orchestrating and promoting events, and increasing awareness about the movement. On the other hand, a recent book written by law professor and Tea Party advocate Elizabeth Price Foley (2012) voices concerns that “left-leaning media outlets, whose . . . pundits and reporters have pejoratively and crudely labeled” tea partiers (pp. 15–16).

Anthony DiMaggio (2011) argues that the twenty-first-century Tea Party not as a protest movement, but rather as a rhetorical construction manufactured by national political figures who used the media to present Tea Parties throughout the nation as cohesive force cloaked in the language of protest movements. He finds that the Tea Party was primarily a media phenomenon, existing primarily through the way pundits, commentators, and reporters assembled its narratives. According to DiMaggio, the mass media gave the Tea Party positive coverage, unlike other historical and progressive social movements, and falsely portrayed it as a bottom-up organization despite its top-down leadership and mobilization. For him, the media coverage of the Tea Party showed that “the majority of those writing in the media cannot distinguish between real and artificial movements” (p. 123). Beyond that point, I argue that the debate over the Tea Party as a movement reflects the centrality of performativity and spectacle in political reporting. Was the Tea Party real? Who was the Tea Party? What were its goals? While Tea Party
scholars have diverging takes on what the Tea Party represents, they all share a focus on the media as integral to its development and significance.

Since the first major surge of news coverage about the Tea Party in April 2009, different news sources have molded its story to fit specific narratives, whether it was used as an example of modern racism, white citizen disenfranchisement, or anti-establishmentarian populism. The dispersed and decentralized nature of the Tea Party made space for the press to greatly shape its story and required journalists to connect a number of seemingly unrelated events into one coherent narrative about the “movement.” Additionally, self-appointed Tea Party spokespersons were granted authority through press interviews and features, rather than through any official or organizational process. Numerous citizens, fundraising groups, institutions and well-established conservative think tanks adopted the Tea Party label, in some cases renaming existing organizations; this all made it difficult to identify a central leadership or organizing group (or even surmise the Tea Party’s origins). Thus, news pundits and journalists helped construct the Tea Party as a unified group, producing divergent frames that fulfilled particular storytelling goals and transformed a loosely connected set of protests into a major political power. Its rhetorical force from reimaginings of eighteenth-century revolt, nationhood, and independence helped fuel its narrative rise in twenty-first-century America.

Ultimately, the Tea Party news coverage exemplified what theorist Guy Debord called the “society of the spectacle,” in which “all that was once directly lived has become mere representation” (Debord, 1994). As a news spectacle, the Tea Party’s “realness” did not rely on its actual physical presence—that is, the number of activists or
voters who participated in the Tea Party. Rather, the performance of activism—and the
mass mediation of this performance—made the Tea Party real. Critiques of the Tea Party
as “AstroTurf” and debates about whether it was organized by normal citizens or skilled
political strategists failed to diminish the Tea Party’s pervasive portrayal as an energetic
uprising of conservatives. The meaning of the Tea Party lies not only in its “real” nature
as a grassroots or populist movement, but in its importance as a construct that gained
meaning from the mediums that conveyed it to the public which, in turn, understood it as
real. As Debord wrote:

The spectacle cannot be set in abstract opposition to concrete social
activity, for the dichotomy between reality and image will survive on
either side of any such distinction. Thus, the spectacle, though it turns
reality on its head, is itself a product of real activity (Debord, 1994).

In this way, mediated representations of the Tea Party are arguably as significant as the
people and brick-and-mortar organizations that drove it. More precisely, the media’s
representation of the Tea Party was inextricably bound to its development as an unfolding
movement, making the media analysis of the Tea Party news coverage crucial to
understanding its formation, success (or failure), and significance.

Even before the first box of tea landed in Boston Harbor, American colonies were
sites of ongoing tax-related skirmishes that emblematized larger political battles over
belonging, citizenship, democracy, and power. Through the epic reinvention of a single
event, the Boston Tea Party became a symbol of American resistance, revolution, and
patriotism and subtly conveyed the potentially violent threat of a dissatisfied populace.
While subsequent “tea party” protests have occurred for much of American history, the
press-initiated resurgence of the concept in April 2009 imbued it, yet again, with
newfound meaning fueled by a digital age. The media functions as a space of cultural transmission and cultural practice: a way of representing, negotiating, and debating discrepant takes on our sociopolitical present (Gray, 2004). Thus, it makes sense to think about how the battles over the Tea Party within news coverage operationalize such disputes. This project discusses how, amongst other things, the emergence of the twenty-first-century Tea Party narrative reflects new forms of in journalism, politics, and identity in American society.

**Why Look at News Narratives?**

Essential to the power of journalism is that it presents itself as an objective reporting of truth and, thus, functions as a medium that defines reality. In cultural studies, scholars who examine news narratives see them not as a set of reported facts but, rather, as coherently scripted stories that place a select set of events within a well-defined explanatory frame. As Barbie Zelizer (2004) explains, “the emphasis on journalism as a text considers the public use of words, images, and sounds in patterned ways” (p. 38). In other words, scholars who look at the language of news argue that narratives tell us about our culture; affect public opinions and attitudes, particularly about race; and (re)construct people’s conceptions of reality. By examining Tea Party news narratives as a performance and representation of different forms of citizenship and belonging, I hope to better understand the current configuration of American political and social norms.

Communication scholars have frequently focused on the media as a site of culture building, a location where identities of nation and self are regularly constituted, dispersed, and understood. According to Oscar Gandy (1998), “aspects of identity,
especially those which afford the group a basis for pride, are jealously protected and
reproduced through a variety of myths, rituals, and symbolic activities,” including various
modes of mass communication. Gilroy (2006) writes that the mass media breeds a
coherent and dominant national identity that supersedes “subnational (local or regional)
and supranational (diaspora) structures of belonging and kinship” (p. 394). Similarly,
ethnographer Purnima Mankekar (1999) observes that state-run television dramas in India
recast, reconstruct, and redeploy particular notions of national identity.

Viewers’ engagement with television narratives is central to their
constitution as gendered and national subjects, to their construction of
national and communal pasts, and to their understanding of violence
committed in the name of the nation (p. 17).

For Mankekar, these television programs became part of the interdiscursive space of
human interaction. In this space, people are constantly engaging in the interpellation (or
internalization and performance) of ideology and their practices are affected by the
projected subjectivities of media—not necessarily because people thoughtlessly adhere to
certain texts, but because those texts introduce novel ways by which people can
understand themselves. In regards to the news media specifically, Zelizer (2008) writes
that journalism can be understood as a form of culture that “impert[s] value preferences
and mediat[es] meanings about how the world does and should work” (p. 90).

In understanding the role of news in shaping and producing culture, Teun van
Dijk (1988) pushes researchers to “analyze news as a type of text or discourse” and
contends that one must first recognize news as producing and being produced by
discourse. Van Dijk suggests that scholars take a systematic approach to news analysis
premised upon the idea that media discourse as a “social, institutional practice” expresses
“underlying knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, or ideologies” (pp. 176 and 179). As a concept, discourse relies on the idea that people understand their world and themselves through language and codes. Phillips and Hardy (Phillips & Hardy, 2002) define discourse “an interrelated set of texts, and the practices of their production, dissemination, and reception that brings an object into being.” According to Stuart Hall (2001), “different areas of social life appear to be mapped into discursive domains, hierarchically organized into dominant or preferred meanings” (p. 169).

As a ‘discursive domain’ the news functions as a site where reporters collect a series of texts, identify preferred meanings, and create one (or several) acceptable narratives (K. H. Jamieson & P. Waldman, 2003). The final “factual” product is dependent upon subjective choices regarding which material complements an already existing understanding of social life. Inherent to the idea of discourse is interaction—how one communicates, deliberates, participates in, and engages with other people and texts provides meaning that constitutes a perceived reality (Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004).

Mass media select and interpret available information according to principles that define news value. In so doing they produce a transformed reality which diverges from the reality as a social actor defines it (Klandermans, 1996).

The main objective of the news media is to produce and circulate discourse that depicts what is happening, why it’s important, who’s involved, and, perhaps most importantly, how the audience may be implicated. As media scholar Todd Gitlin (2003) explains, journalism composes reality and such compositions enter “into our own deliberations—and more, our understandings of who we are and what we [are] about” (p. xiv).
Other scholars articulate alternative understandings about the way news discourse functions in society. Social theorist Jurgen Habermas (2006) contends that in order to develop an informed public opinion within a society, there needs to be space for people to receive and transmit knowledge. He argues that the news functions as a conduit that relays information between the ruling structure and the larger public and contributes to the construction of a knowledgeable and “rational” society. For Habermas, the media is a site for “public discussions about the exercises of political power” (p. 274). Elihu Katz notes that, in the modern era, the Habermasian public sphere has transformed into a “political and economic establishment that has armed itself with image makers and spin doctors who dazzle and charm in the name of the legitimacy and prerogatives of their clients” (Katz, 2000). Though people can mobilize and exert control on the ruling structure through the knowledge gained from mass communication, they can also become easily manipulated consumers of a “representative publicity” (p. 122) (instead of information in a representative democracy).

Gaye Tuchman’s *Making News* (1978) marked the beginning of literature that focused on the social construction of news. In it, Tuchman argues that the news shapes knowledge and provides a way for Americans to learn about themselves, others, and political institutions and leaders. As such, the news functions as a communal, ritualistic, symbolic, and cultural ordering of facts and elements through which people can locate meaning that affects and guides their social practice. Ronald Jacobs (2000) contends that news narratives help people “understand their progress in time in terms of stories, plots which have beginnings, middles, and ends, heroes and anti-heroes” and generic form (p. 8).
The hegemonic tendency of news production is a concern for some news scholars. Van Dijk (1996) explains that race and gender frames in the news form a “joint production of a consensus that sustains elite power” (p. 29). Journalism conjures white racism and resentment toward minorities through its discriminatory hiring policies, biased news gathering, marginalization of antiracism, selective quotation of white elites, stereotype-confirming topics, denial of racism, and the consistent semantic, stylistic, and rhetorical construction of a contrast between (good) us and (bad) them (p. 23).

Other empirical studies confirm Van Dijk’s observations. According to Greco Larson (2006), the stories told by the mass media help justify a system in which some groups (such as racial minorities) are subordinate to others by using narratives that reconcile the fact of racial inequality with belief in justice and equality. Ideologies that guide these stories make the status quo seem natural, inevitable, and right. These discourses provide explanations for why things are the way they are. They deny the extent and the systemic causes of racial inequality (p. 2).

Political communications researchers have also found that the media functions as a major social learning vehicle through which whites glean information about racial others. The characteristics that whites use to describe Blacks frequently mirror representations of minorities in media (Larson, 2006; Gilens, 1999; Kellstedt, 2003). Since the consumption of media is one major way that people receive information about and engage with others outside of their immediate communities and social networks, theorists find that its representations and messages can help explain pervasive group differences (Jacobs, 2000). Thus, as a site that claims truthfulness while espousing ideology, the news functions as an ideal location for representational analysis.
Examining the news media is also important in looking at the Tea Party’s portrayal as a political and social movement. Journalistic portrayals of social movements raise the public profile of a movement, validate its importance, and show activists how others see the movement and understand its cause.

Movement activists depend to a considerable degree on the mass media for information on the stand-points of authorities, third parties, and the larger public on the issues that concern them . . . they learn about others’ reactions to their actions from the news media. In other words, media discourse is both a crucial source of strategic information on which movement activists base their decisions, and a sounding board for the evaluation of strategies, and as such provides the critical information input for a next round of interactions.

What is true for social movement activists also holds for those with whom they interact, be they authorities, countermovements, or allies. All of them use the mass media as a crucial source of information on each other’s views and behavior, and evaluate and adapt their own strategies as a result of the reactions they bring about in the public sphere (Koopmans, 2004).

Similarly, Sean Scalmer (2002) finds that “political activists attempt to take account of which protests are reported by the media, and to shape their behaviour accordingly” (p. 8). In looking at the media discourse surrounding the Tea Party, particularly in its portrayal as a social movement, one also uncovers insights regarding its strategy, reception, challenges, and effects. As there is only a bounded amount of space in the mass media at any given moment, political actors must compete for coverage. Koopmans (2004) refers to this as a struggle over “discursive power,” in which some actors are better able to gain public attention and legitimacy as a result of selection and diffusion in the public sphere. The discursive selection of media stories ultimately shapes the tactics, aims, and frames that political actors choose to employ.
The literature on social movements and media argue that close examinations of how politics are mediated contribute to a larger understanding of democracy and governance. According to Paul Kellstedt (2003) “If social movements are defined by conflict between societal groups with grievances and governments, then the national press has a distinct role in portraying the origins, processes, and outcomes of that conflict” (p. 24 – 24). In the same vein, Simon Cottle (2008) writes that how the news media frame protests; how they display their spectacle and drama; how they give voice to the oppositional views, values, and grievances that drive them and the contention that surround them—all are integral to the media politics of dissent. These matters of ‘representation,’ then (in the condensed ‘political’ and mediated’ senses) are consequential for democracy (p. 854).

Similarly, Karen Johnson-Cartee (2005) says that journalistic renderings of political events and phenomena “play an increasingly powerful role in the process of constructing political reality” (p. 147). Bibby and Schaffer (2007) explain that the media today have replaced party leaders in the traditional function of screening political candidate, swaying elections in favor of and against candidates from Jimmy Carter to Bill Clinton. As they put it, “political reality for most Americans is what they see on the network and cable news programs” (p. 14). Cook (2006) describes the news as “an outcome of interaction between journalists and other political actors” (p. 159). In accordance with this line of thought, scholars have frequently considered journalists to be the “fourth branch of government” (Broersma, 2010).

The television age expanded the role of the news media as a primary intermediary between politicians and voters (Hanggli & Kriesi, 2010; Needham, 2005; O'Shaughnessy, 2001; Scammell, 1999); in the last few decades, politicians have become increasingly
reliant on public relations strategist and techniques in their self-promotion and campaigning. While the news media continues their primary function in mediating between parties and publics, they have also assumed the roles previously handled by political parties in the “pre-modern campaign era” – that is, they conduct outreach to voters, facilitate face-to-face interaction with social movements and actors, and “generally provid[e] all the machinery linking voters and candidates” (Norris, 2004, p. 3). As a result, “campaigning for office and governing are increasingly tailored to the needs and interests of the mass media” (Swanson & Mancini, 1996) and has transformed the news media into “the major instrument of political communication”, largely through marketing practices that target voters like businesses target consumers (Schneider, 2004, p. 43). The recent emphasis on branding in politics in recent years is reflected in the way politicians apply consumer logics to political decision-making, often appealing to the “ideal voter” who is seen as “a well-paid consumer whose disposable income goes largely toward product purchases”(Vavrus, 2002, p. 123). The news media’s increased influence in politics, and their push to entertain and attract highly fragmented mass audiences, has led to the “permanent convergence of branded entertainment and the formal political system” (Ouellette, 2012, p. 190).

Consequently, journalism in the last few decades has become “overcome with the charms of celebrity, commercial success and national reach” (Schudson, 1995, p. 30). Robert McChesney (1999) identifies neoliberalism as another major factor in the corporatization and depoliticization of American journalism. As a political theory that “posits that society works best when business runs things and there is as little possibility of government “interference” with business as possible”, neo-liberalism “refers to the
policies that maximize the role of markets and profit-making and minimize the role of nonmarket institutions” (p. 6). According to McChesney, the scope of commercialization in the 21st century is significantly greater than in any other historical moment, and “all signs point to further commercial expansion into every nook and cranny of social life” (p. 47).

This media-centric and neo-liberal political landscape has only been exacerbated by the introduction of social and digital media, particularly in regards to social movements (Lester, 2006; Rupar, 2010). Simon Cottle (2008) calls the “extent to which protests and demonstrations today have become reflexively conditioned by their pursuit of media attention,” and the importance of this coverage, “unprecedented” (p. 853). According to scholars like Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012), the emphasis on branding in political communication has changed the essential nature and manifestation of social change and political movements so that, “profitability, not ethical or collective ideals, forms the moral framework, and consumerism is an efficient route to social change, best achieved through “free” market force” (p. 150). As such, she concludes that “we need to rethink those practices that historically have been considered “progressive” or even “anticapitalist.” The Tea Party news narratives clearly show the ways in which media coverage of activism and militancy takes shape in a neoliberal framework.

This project looks specifically at Tea Party news reports as stories: ways to describe the Tea Party as a new character at play on the stage of American cultural and electoral politics. Scholars Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul Waldman (K. Jamieson & P. Waldman, 2003) explain that “in order for an event to reach the public, it must first be viewed by reporters, then related in stories” (p. xiii). S. Elizabeth Bird and Robert W.
Dardenne (1988) understand news stories as narratives. They remind scholars that “news accounts are traditionally known as stories, which are by definition culturally constructed” (p. 67). Examining the “story” of the Tea Party pushes me to focus on “the story-telling devices that are an integral part of that construction” (p. 68), the way that they “place people and events into the existing categories of hero, villain, good and bad” (p. 80). Is the Tea Party painted as a protagonist or antagonist? Against whom is it pitted? Does the story seek to entertain or inform? Both? Looking at the storytelling aspects of news coverage also requires attention to other key elements, such as “plot, characterization, action, dialogue, sequencing, dramatization, causation, myth, metaphor, and explanation” (B Zelizer, 2004). As a brand is both a story and the “the setting around which individuals weave their own stories” (Banet-Weiser, 2013, p. 4), this analysis of Tea Party storytelling in news also simultaneously tells the story of the Tea Party brand.

Jack Lule (2005) encourages an understanding of news as myth, “a societal story that expresses prevailing ideals, ideologies, values and beliefs” (p. 102). Greco Larson affirms this notion of news, arguing that news functions as a value system and a moral narrative with characters, structures, and legitimizing tendencies that advance certain ideas (p. 8). Schudson (2005) concludes that “the news story must . . . offer a kind of commentary on our public life.” Robert Manoff (1986) adds that looking at news stories inform readers about the practices and conventions of the media because they:

- reflect the identities of the people reporters talk to, the places they go, the things they believe, the routines that guide how they work, and the conventions that govern what they write(p.197).

In other words, in analyzing the news coverage of the twenty-first-century Tea Party movement, this project does not aim to reveal what is true or false about Tea Party media
depictions. The goal of this dissertation is to show what “stories about reality” attached to
the Tea Party tell us about how the media figure within modern social disputes and the
values that animate America’s body politics (Lule, p. 68).

As frames are “the central or organizing ideas or story lines that provide meaning
to a strip of events, and connect them to each other,” they are of particular importance to
my narrative analysis (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987). Gitlin (1980) insists that “any
analytic approach to journalism” must focus on frames, particularly in depicting events or
ideas. He defines media frames as the “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and
presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely
organize discourse, whether verbal or visual” (p. 7).

Jamieson and Cappella (2009) also add that frames “make some features of an
event more salient and omit others.” (p. 11). The frame metaphor helps us think of a
frame as looking at something through a photo or window. The scene in a photo or
outside the window comes with a limited perspective that may leave out the crumbling
house next door or the new family moving in across the street—important information
that can help shape the viewer’s understanding of the neighborhood. Similarly, news
frames in stories create “a fixed border that includes some things and excludes others”
frame metaphor:

Like any frame that delineates a world, the news frame may be considered
problematic. The view through a window depends upon whether the
window is large or small, has many panes or few, whether the glass is
opaque or clear, whether the window faces a street. The unfolding scene
depends upon where one stands (p. 1).
News frames define problems, identify key characters, explain events, and highlight actions through presentations that often shape the audience’s understanding of a situation. In short, the news media “help determine what the public knows” (K. Jamieson & P. Waldman, 2003)—and how they make sense of that knowledge. In identifying the key frames used to locate the Tea Party within news narratives, I pay attention to source divergence, examining how both news genres and outlets contradict (or validate) each other, as well as patterns and particular emphases in coverage that help lead to certain interpretations.

The idea that the news media function as an ideological apparatus is also central to my examination of Tea Party news texts. While the process of constructing news is often formulaic (B Zelizer, 2004), it is also ideological. Slavoj Žižek (1989) describes ideology as a “fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our ‘reality’ itself: an illusion which structures our effective, real social relations” (p. 45). Theorist Louis Althusser (2006) argues that “an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices” (p. 82). As an ideological apparatus, the mass media become sites in which “the ruling elite exercises its hegemony . . . a ‘stake’ and ‘site’ of class struggle” (p. 83). In other words, “the mass media produce fields of definition and association, symbol and rhetoric, through which ideology becomes manifest and concrete” (Gitlin, 1980). In this way, I think through the news narratives about the Tea Party as both an ideology and an ideological apparatus, focusing on how they explain and define social reality while also maintaining, performing, and publicizing various other ideologies, such as liberalism, social Darwinism, militarism, nationalism, imperialism, and even race, class, and gender identities.
In examining the news discourse produced about the Tea Party, this dissertation focuses on looking at news reports about the Tea Party as a cipher that identifies the ways in which nostalgia, race, ideology, and new media technology function today by co-constructing novel forms of political subjectivity that would have been impossible before the emergence of new social media and its imbrications with traditional forms of news production and dissemination. Through a close analysis of these reports as stories, this project interprets the Tea Party’s symbolic function in the American imagination and explains its rise and significance in the national media.

Where does this fit?

While it aims to speak to (and across) several disciplines, this dissertation serves primarily as a contribution to the scholarship in the areas of political communication, journalism studies, and social movements. In particular, it adds to the growing literature on political marketing and branding as forming a new era of contemporary mediated politics (Adolphsen, 2009; Butler & Harris, 2009; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; French & Smith, 2010; Groeling, 2010; Norris, 2004; O’Shaughnessy, 2001; Scammell, 1999, 2007; Smith & French, 2009; Swanson & Mancini, 1996). This research on political marketing describes the much-amplified use of business marketing techniques in political communication and, consequently, the expansive role and power of the news media in modern politics. However, the role of the media is often downplayed in marketing analyses of political messaging (Savigny and Temple, 2010). This analysis highlights the specific ways that the press played much more than an instrumental role in relaying the Tea Party brand and shows that distinctions between campaigners, political strategists, and news media professionals are becoming increasingly anachronistic and irrelevant.
This manuscript also serves as a substantial departure from most journalism studies scholarship that examines discourse and meaning in news narratives. In large part, other work has studied journalistic texts from the perspective of the audience, the reporter, or the subject (Gitlin, 2003; Zelizer, 1992, 2004). They often focus on examining the journalist’s perspective in creating a story, evaluate the transmission of an intended message via a news medium, or attempt to assess how a story affects the beliefs or perception of the audience that receives it (Benford & Snow, 2000). Instead, my ethnographic approach to news texts applies Zelizer’s (1993) notion of journalism as an “interpretive community united through its shared discourse and collective interpretations of key events” solely to narrative analysis. In studying the texts that journalists produce for the public, this manuscript tracks the ways in which journalists evaluate, challenge, describe, and perform their own work and the political world.

Rosen (2000) also observes that “While the behavior of journalists has often come under scrutiny, there are few studies of journalists as potential actors, initiators of something new in the public realm” (p. 211). As the beginning of the Tea Party as movement began with a reporter’s rant on live television, this analysis focuses specifically on the ways in which journalists functioned as key actors in the concretizing, promotion, and construction of the Tea Party. Moreover, in analyzing the Tea Party coverage in online, broadcast, cable, and print news, this piece contributes to the growing literature on the complexity and function of the news environment in the new millennium (Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Kim, Baek, & Martin, 2010; Lacy & Sohn, 2011; McChesney, 1999; Papandrea, 2009; Tewksbury & Rittenberg, 2012).
Relatedly, the Tea Party story was generated by partisan outlets and much of its initial coverage in print media came from editorials, columns, and op-eds. Online and cable news content is a hybrid of news and opinion programming that shapes the way political entities come into being and are understood by the public. Jacobs and Townsley (2011) explain:

The problem with a research agenda that privileges fact-based reporting over other forms of news and commentary is that it tends to misperceive objective journalism as the only effective form of news work and, in so doing, it misses the empirical diversity of news styles (p. 10).

As there has been little empirical analysis of punditry and opinion spaces in academic research, this project aims to fill this particular gap in the literature by integrating the “space of opinion” into the larger news media narrative instead of subjugating, ignoring, or marginalizing it.

Finally, Paul Kellstedt (2003) calls for more “all-encompassing” (p.24) analyses of the way the press covers social movements and their particular political issues. Most research on press coverage of social movements focuses on traditional and national news organizations (Edgerly, Toft, & Veden, 2011) and disproportionately examine leftist social movements (Amenta et al., 2009); this study looks at the coverage of (what was deemed) a conservative social movement in both traditional journalistic venues and in new media political blogs and cable news. Simon Cottle (2008) also notes that studies on the media coverage of demonstrations and protests tend to focus on visual, rather than discursive, displays and negotiated meanings. Additionally, the press rarely acts as mobilizing agencies for such protests (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2012). However, this analysis shows that the Tea Party was organized, promoted, and initiated by journalists,
radio hosts, and political strategists. While recent scholarship on the Tea Party has argued that the “status quo-oriented nature of the Tea Party may, to some degree, inoculate the movement from traditional marginalization devices” (Weaver and Scacco, 2013, p. 78), I highlight the specific ways in which journalists used race, gender, and class to make the Tea Party appear to be “status quo”. As “movement scholars are interested in media selection processes to understand when, why and how social movements and their protest events make it into news” (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2012, p. 387) this project provides a new take on social movement coverage as a dimension of political branding and adds to the existing literature (see also: Andrews & Caren, 2010).

**Methodology**

*Theoretical Approaches and Rationale*

This dissertation functions as an ethnographic case-study: a close examination of early twenty-first-century American culture and politics through its media discourse. As a method, case studies are useful for holistic and in-depth investigations, particularly because they use multiple sources of data and produce findings with real-world anchoring (Tellis, 1997). While ethnography does not prescribe a specific method, it can best be understood as an approach guided by “a commitment to cultural interpretation” through a close, personal engagement with the people and phenomena studied” (S. E. Bird, 2010).

As Mikhail Bakhtin wrote:

> Living utterance, having taken meaning and shape in a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads . . . cannot fail to become an active participant in a social dialogue (1981).
As a part of the social dialogue, news narratives about the Tea Party are a product of a particular political moment, a dialogic thread that helps constitute the meaning-making processes of our everyday lives. This work is ethnographic in the sense that it examines journalists’ work to understand their narrative practices and looks closely at the “competing rhetorics and intertexts that define social situations” (Alasuutari, 1999).

According to John Tulloch (1999), when a “text is constructed within [a] particular socio-cultural group, its messages are ‘processed’ and its audiences are implied according to the rhetorical strategies generated in these broader contexts of space and time” (pp. 153–54). Moreover, “news both reflects and reinforces particular cultural anxieties and concerns” (S. E. Bird, 1996). Both the audience and the journalists are inherently implicated in news texts and become ethnographic subjects in this study.

My own theoretical leanings in this project embrace two distinct approaches: discourse analysis and semiotics. Neither discourse nor semiotic analysis prescribes a specific method for research—rather, each provides the theoretical guidelines for a research approach. Discourse is defined broadly as any social text (or set of texts) that can be analyzed that “brings an object into being” through “practices of their production, dissemination, and reception” (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 3). Scholars who undertake discourse analysis embrace a social constructivist approach to understanding the world.

In other words, social reality is produced and made real through discourse, and social interactions cannot be fully understood without reference to the discourses that give them meaning. . . . As discourse analysts, then, our task is to explore the relationship between discourse and reality (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 3).
In regards to news discourse specifically, I analyze reports according to various elements highlighted in Van Dijk’s (1988) proposed structure of a news schemata: background, evaluation, history, expectations, situation, main events, and conclusion (p. 55).

As a part of this close examination of discourse, I specifically employ narrative and rhetorical analyses of Tea Party news texts. I borrow here from Noha Mellor’s description of narrative analysis of the news as a method.

[Narrative analysis is] the analysis of the news texts as social products produced in specific social and cultural contexts. Narrative here refers to the element of storytelling offered in the news texts and through which people represent themselves and their worlds to themselves and to others. . . Thus news becomes a social construction, and repeated telling of familiar stories with familiar themes, actors, and moral lessons, reflecting journalists’ view of their world. Such an analysis helps show how the text, as a semiotic code, serves to encourage the readers to act upon the information in the text in particular way (Mellor, 2011).

Semiotics research adds an additional and necessary component to discourse analysis—it allows for the interpretive understandings and meaning-making that surround certain signs, i.e., icons, indexes, and symbols (Berger, 2005). Similar to discourse analysis, through semiotics we understand that a sign has no inherent, linguistic meaning, but rather is imbued with meaning through specific systems of decoding and deconstruction. According to Ferdinand de Saussure ([1916]1983), a sign represents the relationship between a signifier, the form it takes, and the signified, the concept that it represents. John Jackson Jr. (2005) further explains:

The value of the linguistic sign rests not in some natural and intrinsic bond between the sound-image and the concept, and especially not in some inherent link between the sign and a prelinguistic real. For Saussure, the linguistic sign can only ever have value when looked at in (and locked within) the context of an entire sign system (85).
Charles Sanders Pierce (1931) writes that, “Nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign”—that is, my approaches to understanding the Tea Party as a sign of a post-journalism, post-race, and post-feminist era means that I will interpret how news texts use the Tea Party to signify, or stand in for, these things (p. 58). For scholars like Tali Mendelberg (2001), semiotic analysis also allows a researcher to take into account the presence of textual racial references in televised and printed texts.

For example, in Michelle Bachmann’s Tea Party aforementioned address, her body can signify gender and whiteness, just as the use of the term “Tea Party” can convey patriotism, violence, and civil unrest. In her speech, Bachmann used terms like “limited spending” and “big government,” to connect to larger ideas about liberty, government intervention, and individualism. These ideas, too, stand in for ideological commitments related to race and power in American politics and policy (Kellstedt, 2003). My project describes the signs that newsmakers highlighted in covering the Tea Party and in what ways (and with what language) they interpreted the significance and meaning of those signs.

This research design ultimately has several related goals. Close textual analysis of a specific case provides empirical evidence of the different ways that the same story is constructed by a multi-platform, fragmented, and increasingly partisan media system. Coe et al. (2008) argue that scholars looking at today’s news environment “must study news in all its forms” and I assume this challenge by examining online, cable, broadcast, and print news (p. 203). The classic thick description required of an ethnographic approach not only provides a close examination of the political institutions and leaders
described in Tea Party narratives, but also a better understanding of the news media environment and its cultural and epistemological commitments.

**Sample**

For many people, newsmakers included, it seemed like the Tea Party phenomenon came from nowhere. Out of thousands, likely hundreds of thousands, of political organizations around the country, suddenly one particular group of people carrying homemade signs seemed to captivate national attention and political debate. Thus, I focus my analysis on the first two years of Tea Party news coverage, in order to isolate and understand the enigmatic qualities that propelled the Tea Party’s initial emergence into mass media and the political public sphere.

But what is the news media? As it is generally deployed, “the media” represent multiple platforms and venues. The term “media” functions as an abstraction, a signifier that reminds people that what they know is based primarily on what they have been told. It’s not necessarily directed at any particular outlet, program, or media platform, but, rather, all of them. It includes, of course, more than just professional news outlets. Political institutions and actors are depicted in satires like the “fake news” of Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show* or *Saturday Night Live*, which entertain audiences while conveying important political information. For most politicos, the ‘media’ stand in for the way that issues affecting the public are portrayed and conveyed to mass audiences. The news media is at the center of these circulations, often providing information and fodder for citizen bloggers and talk show hosts alike.
The news media is different, however, than other segments of the media because it not only reports on “what’s happening,” but lays authoritative claim to its telling of “the real.” National news outlets tell the story of the country, constructing its national identity, collectivizing its struggles, and highlighting its most important moments. While I initially planned to focus solely on newspapers, a pre-test review of print articles revealed that cable news outlets and political blogs played a major role in constructing and disseminating the Tea Party’s news narratives. As such, this study looks at multiple national news programs and outlets. I look at four specific media genres—cable news, broadcast news, print newspapers, and political news blogs.

Baym (2005) notes that the “once-authoritative nightly news has been fractured”—yet many scholars continue to study news in traditional ways. In a technological age, circulation and viewership has fallen in platforms across the board; conclusions drawn only from newspapers or broadcast news programming tell a decreasingly significant and comprehensive story (p. 260). Since breaking news reports are generated, circulated, and affected by multiple platforms today, it seemed that a broader analysis of these three genres would better elucidate the Tea Party’s construction within the changing news landscape and identify key differences in its reporting. The Tea Party, in particular, was primarily a product of what Jamieson and Cappella (2009) call the “Echo Chamber”: the “mass-audience, ideologically coherent, conservative opinion media outlets” that “play both offense and defense in service of conservatives objectives” (pp. 4–5). Jamieson and Cappella, taking note of the “transformed world” of media

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4 The rising demand for cross-platform broadcast media monitoring services, such as TV Eyes (http://www.tveyes.com/), reflects this very different landscape.
partisanship, look at radio, print, and cable news programming (p. 241). I follow their lead in this multi-platform and multi-partisan analysis of news outlets.

Analyzing news across different platforms takes into account the changes in news and informational consumption—as Michael Delli Carpini (2000) explains, younger generations of Americans are getting less of their information from traditional news sources such as newspapers and are using the Internet more frequently than other groups. Cable news is now the primary source of political news for many citizens, and its audience increases every year (Coe, 2008). Thus, a more comprehensive approach has helped me track the origins and flows of various Tea Party frames in key spaces of political information and civic engagement. The sources were also selected to represent a range of political and ideological spectrums.

I look within four mass media platforms from December 2008 to January 1, 2011. These parameters were established by the date of the first print news report on the national tea parties (as explained earlier) and the data available and by the Tea Party’s first nationally televised response to President Obama’s State of the Union address. Within each platform, I picked the outlets with the largest audience. For print news, I examine the three highest circulating newspapers: the USA Today, the New York Times, and the Wall Street Journal. In broadcast media, I look at three cable news networks that market themselves explicitly as 24-hour news stations and carry the most viewers—MSNBC, Fox News, and CNN. For comparison to cable news, I also include a non-cable broadcast news program, ABC World News. In terms of online sources, I look at Politico, the Drudge Report, and the Huffington Post (EBizMBA, 2011), political news sites with

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5 As 2011 Pew data was not yet available upon the writing of this dissertation, the analysis of media coverage effectively ends in December 2010.
the highest unique-visitors rankings. Additionally, I also extended my analysis to content that is mentioned significantly within these narratives or that helps provide further context—for example, the Chicago Tribune article helped clarify how the media responded to Rick Santelli’s “rant” and is included in that discussion.

Each political blog has very different origins and goals. The Huffington Post was started in May 2005 by Arianna Huffington and other media executives; it was the first commercial and native digital news outlet to win a Pulitzer Prize for reporting. It generally operates as a left-leaning online news and commentary magazine, though its 2011 acquisition by AOL indicates that it may soon target a broader nonpartisan audience. Newsmax and Politico, on the other hand, both began as online news sites that later added print components. Journalist Christopher Ruddy started Newsmax, a conservative news magazine, in 1998 (Manjoo, 2000); a New York Times reporter called it “the right-wing populist’s Time or Newsweek” (Peters, 2011). The only conservative site with a larger audience is Foxnews.com (ibid). Much of Newsmax’s business model relies on selling conservative merchandise and advertisements, particularly political campaigns that use the email lists of Newsmax subscribers to contact potential supporters. Politico, the final site, began as a venture started by two former Washington Post reporters that covered the 2008 presidential campaigns. After the election, it continued to create news specifically for Beltway insiders (in fact, the print edition was delivered to Capitol Hill staffers for free) (Jaffe, 2007). Rather than merely providing commentary on the news, Politico aimed to compete with the likes of the New York Times and USA Today, but with a paper focused solely on politics. Though Politico has been criticized by
both the left and the right for partisan bias, it is the only political news blog that explicitly seeks to stick to “neutral” journalistic practice and norms (ibid).

MSNBC, CNN, and Fox News are the three major news outlets on cable television. They each have different political audiences, viewer numbers, and beginnings. CNN is the oldest of the bunch and the first network to create the 24-hour news cycle. The “CNN effect” eventually changed the speed, depth, and rigor of political news reporting (Livingston, 1997). MSNBC, a partnership between Microsoft and NBC, is a left-leaning cable network started in 1996. Originally, it was created as a vehicle for NBC to provide up-to-the-minute reporting that drew on its already existing staff of NBC journalists and news producers. Though its lineup of pundits and news commentators had included several shows hosted by conservatives, MSNBC’s programs overall tend to advocate for progressive positions and policies (Steinberg, 2007). Fox News was started by Rupert Murdoch and former NBC executive Roger Ailes. It was “developed with the goal of providing a ‘fair and balanced’” antidote to the ‘liberal media’” and caters to a conservative audience (Coe, 2008, p. 205). The content on all of these news channels is a combination of news and opinion programming. Pinning down where the news begins and the punditry ends is virtually impossible because even programs labeled as “just news” include interviews and segments with politicians, strategists, and commentators.

For this reason, and because of the availability of information on primetime scheduling, I focused on specific primetime programs on each of these stations: The O’Reilly Factor on Fox, Countdown with Keith Olbermann on MSNBC, and Campbell Brown on CNN.6

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6 Campbell Brown later became Rick’s List and Parker/Spitzer in the summer and fall of 2010, which includes Surge 9 and Surge 10 data.
USA Today, the New York Times, and the Wall Street Journal have the widest circulations of any newspapers in America. USA Today and the Wall Street Journal vie for top circulation, with roughly 1.8 million and 2 million copies, respectively, sold in 2012 ("Access ABC: eCirc for US Newspapers," 2012). USA Today was started in 1982 and is based near Washington, D.C. Though it started off as an easy-to-read “infotainment” newspaper, it gradually developed a hard-news focus (McCartney, 1997; Nehus-Saxon, 1990). The Wall Street Journal was founded in 1874. It originally reported primarily on financial institutions and the New York Stock Exchange, but expanded into coverage of current news, sports, entertainment, and other typical news sections, but with a distinctly pro-business bias. The New York Times is the oldest among these three newspapers, but has the lowest circulation. It is “widely regarded as the national paper of record” and is included in most media studies and analyses of news (Jacobs, 2011).

Across media platforms, each of these top-performing news outlets can be fairly easily placed along a political and ideological spectrum. Fox News, the Wall Street Journal, and Newsmax are all considered right-leaning, conservative outlets. MSNBC, the New York Times, and Huffington Post target a progressive audience. USA Today, Politico, and CNN are arguably the most neutral of their more partisan counterparts. All of the newspapers publish columns that have both right and left-leaning tilts.

Though I have divided these outlets according to their primary mode of distribution, they are all part of a complex media environment that blurs such boundaries more every day. Politico is both an online blog and a print newspaper, and does more original reporting than either Newsmax or Huffington Post. Based on content alone, its focus on breaking news probably has more in common with the New York Times or USA
Today than the other two political blogs. Though all of the online news sites produce some original content and commentaries, they also take advantage of their digital platform to repost, summarize, and link to stories from print and broadcast news outlets. On cable news, Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC each run and discuss clips of news reports from the other print and online outlets. All of these media groups have an online presence that provides unique content, including multimedia and user-generated stories. The lines between print and digital media are blurry and overlap in intricate ways that defy easy categorization.

Trends in media convergence and intertextuality have been noted by numerous scholars studying the news media (Entman, 2005; Russell & Bird, 2009; Tewksbury & Rittenberg, 2012). Disentangling them from one another in the Tea Party narratives was not only difficult, but also inherently limited. For these reasons, my analysis not only explains how each outlet’s Tea Party news narratives diverge from one another, but also identifies the key tropes and themes that surface throughout all of them. Within this more generalized approach to analyzing Tea Party news narratives, I take time to highlight points of convergence and divergence.

Thinking of journalism as a space, field, or landscape does not focus on evaluating truth-telling, but rather respects its authority in reflecting and articulating reality. What is a journalist, anyway? While it’s been useful to conceive of journalists as professionals or reporters, even these typologies neglect the dynamic of production within journalistic spaces, such as the editorial impact of news laborers like production associates or camera operators, and the somewhat questionable projection of the title “journalist” onto a person whose primary function may be to read text from a
teleprompter. To avoid this quagmire, I point to news institutions as spaces that endow legitimacy, where the authority of truth-telling and the “fourth estate” is bestowed upon all actors (and content) within a news production. As a result, this dissertation comprehensively engages all of the Tea Party coverage in these journalistic spaces, with the understanding that all content produced by mainstream news is endowed with the authority to portray, create, and produce social reality.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

In approaching my narrative and textual analysis, I examine news reports produced during 10 peak periods in the Tea Party news coverage. The Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism tracks major lead news stories in broadcast and print news outlets. In 2009, its team of analysts coded 68,717 news reports. The Pew data codes only front-page news stories in print media, but all lead stories in cable news, producing substantive divergences in cable and newspaper data on Tea Party news coverage and making the print data less useful in isolating news peaks (see Chart 1).

Consequently, I used Pew data on cable news to identify ten weeklong surges in Tea Party news coverage and to locate any distinctions in coverage patterns. As Pew did not began to code data on the Tea Party until after its first major surge in April 2009 and 2011 data was not available until July 2012, I looked at surges that span the period from April 1, 2009 to January 1, 2011.

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7 I did not examine the online publications from the television and print news organizations (i.e., cnn.com or the Wall Street Journal blog).
8 More on the details on Pew’s coding protocol can be found at [http://www.journalism.org/about_news_index/methodology](http://www.journalism.org/about_news_index/methodology)
9 I focused on only the five weekdays for TV coverage, since the cable news channels only work on these schedules. This means that the Sunday opinion news spaces on ABC were not examined, though they undoubtedly would have impacted and altered my overall reporting from the station.
I tracked news stories on the Tea Party between its first mention in the *Wall Street Journal* in September 2008 to April 2009 through the Factiva and LexisNexis archives of news articles and transcripts in order to understand how the group developed into a major news story. I collected the news articles and broadcast transcripts through a keyword search for “tea party” in headlines or text. I obtained the blog stories by searching the front page of each site for headlines that included “tea” or “tea party.” In total, I analyzed about 4,380 pages of text data in my newspaper, Web, and television samples.¹⁰

Using LexisNexis and Factiva, I collected news stories in *USA Today*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *New York Times* that discussed the Tea Party. Using LexisNexis transcripts, I looked at news stories and segments about the Tea Party within cable news channels—specifically focusing on the 8:00 pm news segment in cable news and the 6:30 pm national news program on ABC. I used Archive.org to retrieve the daily home pages of the *Huffington Post*, *Drudge Report*, and *Politico* during the surges, and looked at all stories that had “tea party” in the headline.¹¹ Moreover, I extended my analysis to include news stories either mentioned or featured in the press coverage during each surge.

I focus on surges in coverage of the Tea Party because they set parameters that yield relevant, substantive, and manageable amounts of data about Tea Party news coverage over time. Each surge of coverage consolidates an extensive amount of the Tea Party news coverage around a specific event or issue, making the contrasts, similarities, themes, and patterns in coverage much more apparent. In this way, I also show increases in the volume of Tea Party coverage and changes in its reporting over time.

¹⁰ Based on the total number of words divided by the average words per page in a standard document (250).

¹¹ The data available through Archive.org does have missing content, but it is currently the most reliable source of website content over time.
Limiting my examination of the Tea Party to a specific number of surges significantly reduces the amount of reports, which makes the study more feasible and allows me to engage in close, in-depth analysis of the news coverage at the height of its density, consumption, and distribution. I selected surges based both on the number of stories and time (meaning proximity to previous surge in coverage) to avoid allowing the stories to cluster around one or two moments. Using surges provided an additional advantage. The surges I examine are important not only as a way of providing a systematic look at the Tea Party coverage in various outlets, but also because they provide specific cases in which the same story could be reported from multiple perspectives.


Chart 1 shows that there were two significant surges in Tea Party coverage in 2009: in the weeks surrounding April 15 (the date of the Tax Day Tea Party nationwide)
and in September. Chart 2 shows the specific weeks in which Tea Party coverage was at its highest within those months. So, the first two surges I examine include: Surge 1 (Week 16): 04/12/09–04/18/09, and Surge 2 (Week 38): 09/13/09–09/19/09. Charts 3 and 4 show the surges in the weeks and months of news coverage in 2010. Surges were selected based on the number of stories and proximity to significant political events. The events that were most featured in these surges and their specific dates are listed in Chart 5. Overall, the charts suggest that MSNBC and Fox News gave relatively equal coverage to the Tea Party, and significantly exceeded CNN’s reporting.

As the Pew Research Center cautions, in news research “some of these shows are not news programs per se, but rather their content derives from the host's opinions and guests on any given day. Separating news and talk proves problematic because it is often difficult to distinguish between the two categories, and several programs offer both news
and talk in the same hour (Pew Research Center, 2012). With this concern in mind, I only specifically identify editorial or opinion reports about the Tea Party within the only platform in which they are most clearly delineated from “fact-based” pieces—newspapers. As mentioned in the previous section, within blogs and cable news, and even newspapers, there are areas of overlap between these categories; part of that ambiguity is emblematic of what I call “headphone culture.”

### CHART 5 – Dominant News Topics in Tea Party Surges

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<tr>
<th>SURGES</th>
<th>DATES</th>
<th>KEY COVERAGE TOPICS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Surge 1</td>
<td>04/12/09–04/18/09</td>
<td>First tea parties/tax day protests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surge 2</td>
<td>09/13/09–09/19/09</td>
<td>Rallies in D.C.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Surge 3</td>
<td>1/31/10–2/6/10</td>
<td>First Tea Party convention</td>
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<td>Surge 4</td>
<td>3/28/10–4/3/10</td>
<td>Congress members report racial epithets at Tea Party rally</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Health care reform passed</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sarah Palin Tea Party rally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surge 5</td>
<td>4/11/10–4/17/10</td>
<td>Tax Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surge 6</td>
<td>4/18/10–4/24/10</td>
<td>Tax Day continued</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surge 7</td>
<td>6/13/10–6/19/10</td>
<td>Election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surge 8</td>
<td>7/11/10–7/17/10</td>
<td>NAACP Tea Party resolution announced</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mark Williams letter to NAACP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surge 9</td>
<td>7/18/10–7/24/10</td>
<td>Mark Williams resigns Sherrod incident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surge 10</td>
<td>10/17/10–10/23/10</td>
<td>Midterm election</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
I examined the stories produced during each surge for storytelling elements (detailed earlier) such as themes, frames, keywords, and other items outlined in Chart 6. First, I went through all of the transcripts, blogs, and articles, coding each according to the stated categories. Additionally, as certain topics frequently surfaced within the Tea Party news texts, I also specifically coded them as an analytical category. For example, news representations of the media became an additional category. I went through these texts using keyword searches related to the most patterned items—race, gender, class, and media—to focus on these central themes. I then coded all of these notes and organized them by outlets and surge dates (and, for newspaper, opinion versus news reporting). Ultimately, this analysis of the media reports yielded useful insights on how news stories defined the Tea Party as a group, movement, brand, and political party, and what it represented as an American cultural sign.
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<th>TEXT/DISCUSSION</th>
<th>VISUALS</th>
<th>SECTORS (Cable, Print, Blog)</th>
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<td>Plot: Beginning, middle, end, heroes, anti-heroes, villain, characters</td>
<td>Images: photos, graphics, people Locations Signs or Symbols</td>
<td>Similarities/differences Opinions about the Tea Party “Facts” about the Tea Party</td>
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<td>Genre: Tragedy, comedy, drama, etc.</td>
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<td>Representations: Race, gender, class, nation, citizenship, tea party, ethnicity</td>
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<td>Goal: Entertain, inform—whom/ about what?</td>
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<td>Action: What is it doing?</td>
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<td>Agents: Who is doing it?</td>
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<td>Ideology: Interpretations of what society has been and should be</td>
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<td>Moral Panic: Is any one group being exaggerated or generalized as a threat to another?</td>
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<td>Frames: 1) Persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, presentation, selection, emphasis, and exclusion 2) organizing a storyline that provides meaning to a series of events (what are the events?) and connects them to each other</td>
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<td>Reporting: sourcing, background, explanation, evaluation, history, expectations, situation, main events, and conclusion, omission</td>
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<td>Additional Considerations: Characterization, dialogue, sequencing, dramatization</td>
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Conclusion

In a headphone culture, the lines between activist and journalist, news and rumor, and new and old media are not only blurred—these distinctions are increasingly obsolete. Similarly, news portrayals of the Tea Party as a brand, as a political party, as a social movement, and as isolated events each produce their own meanings about existing notions of politics, news, citizenship and civic participation. Within these narratives, the Tea Party was a trope and a vehicle by which various news outlets addressed modern conflicts over race, class, gender, electoral politics, nationhood, and authority after the election of the first African American president. Radical conservatives, old-fashioned feminists, and tech-savvy senior citizens provided new and appealing archetypes that helped to propel the Tea Party and reestablished long-standing political values as still central to an evolving nation.

In this chapter, I have described the Tea Party’s history and the reasons for undertaking this study. The remainder of this dissertation is organized into four chapters. The next chapter discusses the news media construction and promotion of the Tea Party as a political brand. The third chapter highlights how race, gender, and class were key attributes in establishing the Tea Party brand in news stories—and what the mediated discussions of these identities tells us about their significance in today’s society. The fourth chapter details what the Tea Party news coverage portrays about the media. It first describes how members of the news media portray their own roles, functions, and values through the Tea Party news coverage. It also tracks the particular points of convergence in style and medium that the Tea Party news stories reveal. The conclusion summarizes the key findings from this text and its implications. All of these chapters
show the ways in which the news reports supported, or contested, neoliberal politics vis-à-vis the Tea Party and how they employed the Tea Party as a floating signifier in narratives about race, class, gender, activism, and politics.

My point in this project is to demonstrate the inextricable links between and among these discrete domains, arguing for a more holistic and empirically accurate accounting of their discursive moves. As Stuart Hall writes, “signifiers refer to the systems and concepts of the classification of a culture to its making meaning practices. And those things gain their meaning, not because of what they contain in their essence, but in the shifting relations of difference, which they establish with other concepts and ideas in a signifying field” (Foundation, 1997). Through an intense interrogation of the contexts, stories, and discourse of Tea Party news narratives, this dissertation shows that old divisions between politics, journalism, and personal subjectivities have dissolved, shifting American culture, ideology, news, and identity in unprecedented and important ways.
Chapter Two: The Tea Party as Brand

The story of the Tea Party is one of political transition, a narrative that describes how a set of national protests developed into a renewed brand of American conservatism. While this chapter initially set out to compare the media coverage of the Tea Party as a social movement to other historical media analyses of political activism, it soon became clear that reporters were instead constructing the Tea Party as a brand through an assortment of diverse political narratives. In its early stages, the Tea Party was described as a type of event (a demonstration or rally) and a burgeoning grassroots movement. As coverage continued, the Tea Party also came to be framed as a mainstream political party seeking leadership, governance, and institutional status that posed a challenge to traditional Republican and Democratic two-party leadership. Throughout these early characterizations, the news stories described the Tea Party as a profitable brand of politics that combined a particular set of social and fiscal values that appealed to a specific subset of Americans. The news narratives constructing the Tea Party as a brand told a story of the Tea Party as a new conservative identity that reshaped allegiances, represented a particular segment of the electorate, and generated profit, publicity, and political power. In short, the news coverage about the Tea Party both tracked and facilitated the creation of the Tea Party brand.

News media reports about the Tea Party facilitated the production of its brand with stories that examined Tea Party profiteering, identity, and values and branding challenges. Not only did reporters explicitly refer to the Tea Party as a brand, the news coverage about the Tea Party was complicit in promoting, defining, and publicizing the
Tea Party brand.

Thus, this chapter discusses the way in which the “Tea Party as a Brand” news stories functioned on three levels—one, explicitly reporting on the Tea Party as a brand, two, emphasizing and constructing key attributes of the Tea Party brand, and, three, intentionally engaging the media as a brand representative and manager. The first section explains the ways that our contemporary political brand culture provided the requisite environment for the Tea Party’s unique development and growth. The second section identifies the ways in which members of the media were actively involved in developing and maintaining the Tea Party brand, including performances as brand spokespersons and strategists. The third section describes the two primary brand identities highlighted by the press: the Tea Party as a Social Movement and the Tea Party as a Third Political Party. The chapter concludes by reviewing some of the implications of the news media’s role in constructing the Tea Party brand.

**Background: Political Branding through News**

The defining attribute of a brand is its emphasis on developing distinctive sentimental connections with consumers, rather than simply providing them with information about a product’s quality, function, or use (Pasotti, 2009; Groeling, 2010; Karth, 1998). In other words, the process of branding is about both “creating relationships with customers that cultivate an emotional preference for your brand” (Travis, 2000) *and* differentiating a product from its competitor (for instance, think of ranchers who literally put brands to mark their herds of grazing cattle)(Banet-Weiser, 2012; McDowell, 2004).
While the term “brand” originates in marketing and sales research, recent decades have shown a rise in the political application of branding practices (Scammell, 2007) and the successful cultivation of a brand identity using the news media.

As Robert McChesney (1999) notes, while branding, corporate influence, and commercialism has been a common theme throughout the history of US politics and society, “there is an enormous difference between the degree and nature…in what is emerging today [at] the dawn of the twenty-first century”(p.48). Margaret Scammell (2007) argues that today’s “consumerized paradigm of political communication” is a distinct shift from the older model of the permanent campaign to the more recent “brand concept” (p. 189). Specifically, this notion describes an era of widespread development in communication technologies, marked by an increasingly self-interested press and political campaigns that are capital intensive, rely on fewer volunteers, and engage in much less face-to-face communication with citizens and voters (Norris, 2004; Scammell, 1999). While elected leaders in the permanent campaign model of governance prioritized the constant courting of public opinion and approval when making policy decisions (i.e., “horse-race” politics) (Needham, 2005), branding describes the growth and expansion of political marketing tactics and strategies that target specific groups of voters and deemphasize substantive issue-based decision making.

In an effort to construct more moderate and universally appealing political agendas and policy goals, political parties have become more alike one another (Lilleker, 2006; Smith & French, 2010). In the United States, the heavy reliance of political parties on the financial support from corporations and the super-wealthy has augmented corporate-friendly messaging and regulation among both political parties (Entman, 2005;
McChesney, 1999). Moreover, the desire to target and attract “floating voters” has also increased the rise of “non-ideological ‘catch-all’ parties” (Scammell, 1999, p. 720-721). Branding tactics have become more popular in contemporary political contests precisely because the increased similarity between Democrats and Republicans has produced a growing need to distinguish between the two factions. In this landscape of conformist and converging politics, contemporary political actors depend heavily on the news media to develop brand identities that differentiate them from rivals and maintain voter loyalty through emotional connections based on shared values and ideals.

In cultivating a brand identity, a political brand generates group feelings of belonging and identity that transcend traditional political divisions. Helmut Schneider (2004) calls this effect “sentimental utility.” For example, “human personality traits associated with Harley-Davidson might be described as macho, American, patriotism, and freedom” (Baek & Martin, 2010, p. 119). According to Schneider, sentimental utility results from “a feeling of solidarity with a group of like-minded voters in the sense of a community of values or a feeling of identification with the party or its candidates” (p. 52). As the use of value-based words, phrases, and symbols to connect with the public is vital to the production of sentimental utility, the media plays a crucial role in producing the brand.

In other words, political branding (also called political marketing) depicts the process by which political actors apply the operational logistics of consumerism to citizens and use intangible values and cultural authority to shape voters’ tastes and desires, create emotional connections, generate profit (in terms of money and power), and yield voter allegiance. The cultivation of a brand identity allows political parties and
actors to standardize their messaging, influence citizen preferences for policies and leaders, attract donors, and enhance political power—all through symbolic and cognitive shortcuts that make a brand’s meaning readily accessible to a citizen-consumer. Sarah Banet-Weiser further explains that the “contemporary shift to political brand cultures…[has been] authorized by an advanced capitalist market and the concurrent focus on individual consumer choices rather than a historically informed form of collective action” (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p.151). Eleonora Pasotti (2009) writes that a citizen-consumer can use a political brand to express his or her identity as a form of political participation, so that:

...the self-expressive need to be hip and environmentally conscious can be satisfied by owning a hybrid vehicle OR by voting for a Green Party candidate, while the self-expressive need to be part of the establishment can be satisfied by driving a Lexus or voting for a member of the business elite (Pasotti, 2009).

Branding, then, is more than mere commodification – the process of turning social and cultural experiences into something that can be bought and sold -- rather, “the process of branding impacts the way we understand who we are, how we organize the world, what stories we tell ourselves about ourselves” (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 5). Political branding aims to satisfy the emotional needs of citizens more than their functional ones and “transforms the consumption experience” rather than the consumption outcome (Caldwell & Freire, 2004, p. 51).

The stories that cultivate a brand’s emotional connection to consumer-citizens are primarily conveyed and established through media narratives (Warner, 2007). As Yannopoulou, et al (2011) put it, “the media constitutes a third party, which influences the trusted relationship between consumers and brands” (p. 541). Thus, like traditional
business marketing, political branding occurs through “the proliferation of emotional messages across various media through the use of sound bites, and talking points, and repetition/saturation strategies within each medium” (Warner, 2007, p. 20).

Studies have shown that perceptions about political brands are shaped strongly and specifically by news media exposure and media representatives. News reports gather and summarize the political information that citizens (who tend to have low involvement in party politics) need in order to make voting decisions (Alan & Smith, 2010). At least one study has shown that, in a diverse media environment, a person’s preference for news is a better indicator of political knowledge than even education (Prior, 2007). Moreover, not only does the news media contribute to what people know about politics, they shape what people believe to be true about politics and politicians. Information communicated by the news media has been shown to significantly impact the trust people place in a brand’s reputation, the loyalty they have to that brand and the decisions they make about it (Yannopoulou, et al, 2011). Even though the press has become “direct participants in the creation of partisan information and not mere conduits of it” (O’Shaughnessy, 2001, p. 1055), it is still seen as a viable and important medium for conveying political messages to the public.

Political strategists increasingly rely on using the news media to “sell” their political brand. James Karth (1998) explains that there has been a rise in using the news media for “brand placement”, which occurs when brand marketers work with the “creative professionals involved with the programs (such as producers, directors, writers, actors, or set designers) [and] strategically use brands to create particular impressions on the audience (p. 31)”. A survey of news stations found that up to 78% frequently use
externally supplied public relations video (referred to as video news reports, or VNRs) in their own news reports, often airing this material without any edits (Tewksbury, et al, 2011). In terms of costs, using the news media to convey promotional brand messages to a target audience is generally viewed as a less expensive alternative to paid advertising (Butler & Harris, 2012; Morgan et al, 2012).

The placement of public relations material in news broadcasts has been shown to increase the recognition of branded content while leaving the perceived trustworthiness of the news source intact (Tewksbury et al, 2011; Karth, 1998; Needham, 2005; Yannopoulou, 2011). Brand placement in the news media has more persuasive impact than similarly constructed advertisements, and brands that are paired with media characters are particularly effective at connecting to an audience. By reporting (or repeating) carefully stitched political messaging on policies, and values, the news media function as a highly trusted and credible mass media platform for promoting political brands (even in cases when media consumers are critical of the news source).

The remainder of this chapter tracks the ways in which the news media and news media representatives actively mobilized and constructed the Tea Party brand by explicitly discussing and advising its brand strategy, describing its values, serving as a platform for Tea Party messaging and brand promotion, attributing human emotional characteristics to the Tea Party brand, identifying and serving as its spokespersons, and participating in brand placement through advertising, news coverage. A number of traits distinctive to the Tea Party brand become clear through the news stories. According to political scientists Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson (2011), the conservative media was “one of three main forces” that orchestrated the Tea Party. While the most
The Media as Tea Party Brand Strategists and Spokespersons

News outlets and their workers were frequently described in the media coverage as shaping the larger social and political landscape by functioning as Tea Party promoters, sponsors, supporters, and even strategists. In this way, Tea Party news narratives show how the media intentionally facilitated and advanced the recognition, messaging, and growth of the Tea Party brand. Through narrative emphases on anger, constitutionalist fervor, and antigovernment, anti-media, and anti-Obama sentiment, the Tea Party brand was born. Furthermore, news narratives regularly illustrated the Tea Party’s power was linked to its financial value and ability to raise money (Zernike, 2010a).

Throughout the news stories, the reporters explicitly referred to the Tea Party as a brand. On Fox News, an anchor complained about the actions of some tea partiers, saying that, “Every time a Tea Party person threatens to overthrow the government or other nonsense, the brand gets hammered” (O'Reilly, 2010e). In the New York Times, a candidate was mentioned as being known for his own “brand” of Tea Party politics (Barbaro, 2010). The Huffington Post described the “Tea Party brand of right-of-the-GOP
conservatism” and discussed “the ability of some smart politicians to brand themselves as "Tea Party" candidates” (Ellis, 2010; Nyhan, 2010).

Some members of the news media reported specifically on the Tea Party as a massive branding and marketing scheme. The *Wall Street Journal* contended that the “Tea Party movement” in Pennsylvania was just the repackaging of an already existing conservative initiative called “Operation Clean Sweep”:

The Keystone State's tea party movement actually began several years ago . . . when our state legislature rammed through a pay hike for its members and the state's judiciary. . . . Editorial pages and radio show hosts denounced the pay hike while voters took to the streets of their capital city with placards and bullhorns and giant inflatable pigs. The movement became broadly known as Operation Clean Sweep.

. . . Over the past year, Operation Clean Sweep rebranded itself into a tea party movement. But it's still the same people (Bowyer, 2010).

Various other news organizations described the rise of Tea Party PACs (political action committees) as taking advantage of the financial profits generated by the Tea Party brand. A MSNBC anchor reported that one Republican PAC had added “Tea Party” to its name and “stolen the brand name to make money” (Olbermann, 2010a). A report in *USA Today* specifically noted the expansion of this branding effort:

A dozen political action committees bearing the Tea Party name have been created since July 2009, filings with the Federal Election Commission show. Another 24 fundraising committees have been established with the IRS. Those groups, known as 527s for the section of the tax code under which they operate, can raise unlimited amounts of money for their political activity. Political action committees can collect no more than $5,000 a year from an individual (Schouten, 2010).

The Tea Party Express, a particularly powerful PAC, was frequently mentioned in terms of the money—and influence—it accrued by using the Tea Party label. A *USA Today*
article discussed the Tea Party Express as a clear example of the Tea Party’s profitability, marketing, and branding:

The Tea Party-affiliated PAC raising the most—$4.4 million so far in this election cycle—is not led by political upstarts. Its top officials are veterans of GOP politics, including Sal Russo, a Sacramento-based consultant who was an aide to Ronald Reagan when he was California governor. The group was organized in 2008, as Our Country Deserves Better PAC to oppose Obama's presidential campaign before launching national "Tea Party Express" bus tours and adding TeaPartyExpress.org to its name.

Russo is the PAC's chief strategist and nearly $1.5 million—or about a third of the PAC's spending through the end of April—was paid to Russo's firm, Russo Marsh, and an affiliated company, according to campaign filings compiled by CQ MoneyLine (Schouten, 2010).

*Politico* also noted that the “Tea Party Express” had “made a conscious decision to adopt tea party branding for its PAC” in order to give itself a “boost” as a force in the midterm elections (Barr, 2010).

The news stories also described the Tea Party as a brand through narratives that exclusively focused on its profitability. Reports described the Tea Party as a money-making scheme and a way of attracting donations from social and fiscal conservatives. ABC reported concerns that a Tea Party convention had been “set up for profit” (Berman, 2010). *USA Today* quoted a joke from ‘fake news’ comedian Stephen Colbert on Tea Party marketing:

[Sarah Palin] was in Nashville giving a rousing speech to a for-profit convention . . . the national Tea Party convention. A little-known fact, folks. The Boston Tea Party also turned a profit. Hence their slogan: No taxation without representation. But there is a two-drink minimum (Staff, 2010).

In the *Huffington Post*, a blogger wrote that “big bucks are pouring into the tea party movement,” including online sales of Tea Party merchandise and extremely expensive
fundraisers (Delaney, 2009). To refute these ideas, Sarah Palin wrote an op-ed column in *USA Today* that refuted the idea that the Tea Party was “a commercial endeavor” (2010).

News coverage from progressive outlets particularly reinforced the narrative of the Tea Party as a profit-driven brand by describing it as a manufactured rhetorical enterprise backed by the wealthy and powerful. A *New York Times* article reported that two billionaire brothers had organized a “secret network” of “ultrawealthy” donors and business people to provide money to “[help] Tea Party groups set up” (Zernike, 2010b). On MSNBC, an anchor called tea partiers “a bunch of greedy, water-carrying corporate-slave hypocrites defending the rich against the poor” (Olbermann, 2009c). A blogger at *Huffington Post* said the Tea Party would not criticize Wall Street during the economic recession because it was “manipulated by right-wing organizations funded by corporate America” and its members were “ignorant dupes being led by the nose by their corporate overlords” (Uygur, 2010). An earlier piece on *Huffington Post* suggested that the Tea Party was a profitable political invention and encouraged readers to “to take a look behind the [Tea Party’s] curtain—where Dick Armey is laughing and counting his cash” (Hamsher, 2009).

Additionally, news stories captured how the Tea Party brand was being deployed to gain support (or foster contention) in political contests. The *New York Times* described the Northern Illinois Patriots as a “Tea Party group,” and *Politico* reported on a candidate with “few ties to the tea party movement” running with the Tea Party name. In Florida, a Democrat tried to weaken a Republican challenger by sending out mailings to “conservative voters labeling [one candidate] as 'the Tea Party candidate' and [his opponent] as a 'raging liberal' by comparison” (Rutenberg, 2010).
In fact, a journalist on the job started the modern Tea Party and contributed to the early development of its brand. As described in the first chapter, CNBC Rick Santelli’s lengthy diatribe criticizing the president called for conservative protests, rallied cheers from the traders who surrounded him, and transformed him into a Tea Party leader while he was reporting live on-air from the Chicago Board of Trade:

Quick: Wow. You get people fired up.

Santelli: We’re thinking of having a Chicago Tea Party in July. All you capitalists that want to show up to Lake Michigan, I’m going to start organizing.

Quick: What are you dumping in this time?

Santelli: We’re going to be dumping in some derivative securities. What do you think about that?

Wilbur Ross, in studio: Mayor Daley is marshalling the police right now.

[...]

Ross: Rick, I congratulate you on your new incarnation as a revolutionary leader.

Santelli: Somebody needs one. I’ll tell you what, if you read our Founding Fathers, people like Benjamin Franklin and Jefferson, what we’re doing in this country now is making them roll over in their graves ("Rick Santelli and the 'Rant of the Year'," 2009).

Santelli’s combination of Founding Father historicism, anti-Obama sentiment, explicit anger and impassioned conservatism provided the foundational attributes of the Tea Party brand. His tirade quickly found a wide audience, fueled by postings on conservative news sites and its record-breaking popularity on the CNBC website. The following day, White House press secretary Robert Gibbs drew even more attention to Santelli’s “rant heard 'round the world” in a lengthy press conference when he disputed the reporter’s
assertions and extended an invitation for Santelli to join him for a cup of “decaf” coffee (as opposed, of course, to tea) (Reynolds, 2009; Stolberg, 2009). Conservative activists who later became Tea Party organizers and leaders cited Santelli’s message, and its swift circulation and publicity, as inspiration for their subsequent participation (Foley, 2012; Formisano, 2012). When the Tax Day Tea Party protests began in April, Santelli admitted that he was “pretty proud” of the nationwide events (Calderone, 2009).

Fox News was also discussed as a major contributor to the Tea Party brand; its advocacy and support of the Tea Party was an ongoing theme and topic across news outlets. A New York Times story included a Jon Stewart quote that described Fox News as the Tea Party’s “media arm” (Stelter, 2010). In Politico, a reporter noted that Fox News was hosting a “virtual tea party” on its website and described show hosts directing viewers to Tea Party rallies, concluding that:

Nobody’s covering the tea parties quite like Fox—and that’s prompting critics and cable news competitors to say that the network is blurring the line between journalism and advocacy.

“Fox appears to be promoting these events at the same time it is presenting them in a way that looks like reporting,” said Stephen Burgard, director of Northeastern University’s School of Journalism. Burgard called the practice “pseudo-journalism” (Calderone, 2009).

In a later story, Politico also described a Fox News producer “rall[y]ing a crowd to cheer” while covering a protest. Fox later claimed that it had been a “young, relatively inexperienced associate producer who realizes she made a mistake and has been disciplined” (Raju, 2009).

In another highly publicized example, Fox News host Sean Hannity planned to broadcast his show from a Tea Party event that charged admission and was advertised as
a headliner. When Fox News executives cancelled what Huffington Post referred to as Hannity’s “starring role appearance in a tea party rally” (Shea, 2010), they explained that the news company had never agreed to “allow Cincinnati tea party organizers to use Sean Hannity’s television program to profit from broadcasting his show” (Olbermann, 2010b). The New York Times wrote that this incident showed that Fox News leadership was sensitive to concerns over the network’s “perceived closeness to the antigovernment Tea Party movement” (Stelter, 2010a). News reports on the Tea Party also frequently mentioned the participation of Fox News hosts and paid commentators such as Neil Cavuto and Sarah Palin as speakers, leaders, and supporters of the Tea Party.

More than simply promoting the Tea Party on its network, Fox News also helped manage the Tea Party brand’s publicity in the news. In one of the most striking and unprecedented instances, Fox targeting the outlets it referred to as “media war” enemies. In September 2009, Fox News took out a full-page ad in the Washington Post accusing ABC, CBS, MSNBC, and CNN of “miss[ing] the story” about the “9/12” rally, an early tea party event organized by Glenn Beck (radio personality and former Fox News host). “We cover all the news,” the ad claimed (Image 1). Huffington Post and Politico reported on the ad as a story about Fox News’s relationship with the Tea Party (referring to the 9/12 rally as “tea party protests”) and cited evidence that showed that the networks had, in fact, covered the rally. CNN reporters responded to the charge on air and showed clips proving that they were at the 9/12 rally:

We usually like to stay out of the way when certain cable channels take cheap shots, but, tonight, we're standing up to a flat-out lie being told about CNN by the FOX News Channel. . . . I was watching on Saturday, our team was all over that story. We had four reporters there. There were
two live trucks and more than a dozen staffers. Heck, we even sent the CNN Express.

. . . Saturday's march was a major news event. CNN covers major news events. It's what we do. It's why we're here. So to think that we'd "miss something that big," well, that's just ridiculous. Let me also add, the FOX ad sends a false message that we at CNN are not listening to a whole lot of people out there, that their views somehow don't matter to us, and that their events don't merit our attention. And that's also just not true (Brown, 2009d).

In this case, Fox News used advertising space in a separate news outlet to manufacture a false media story that ultimately provoked additional coverage of Tea Party protests and yielded wide consensus among news groups that the Tea Party was “major” news. More than that, by deeming it inherently newsworthy, it was also bolstering the value of the Tea Party brand.

Across all of the outlets, media professionals were used as sources and spokespersons in covering, and publicizing, the Tea Party. On cable news, show hosts frequently interviewed journalists as political experts and insiders. These guests not only reported on current political events, but also used them to interpret and explain the political and media landscape. On political blogs, media experts, personalities, and
Image 1: Fox News Ad in *Washington Post* on September 18, 2009
reporters were frequent contributors. Mark Williams, a conservative radio host and chairman of the Tea Party Express (the most powerful and profitable Tea Party political action committee), was interviewed and quoted as a Tea Party spokesperson in multiple media outlets, including CNN, FOX News, and MSNBC. Represented by Fox News host Sarah Palin, the *Tea Party Express* functioned as a major brand promoter and publicist in news narratives through stories that described its national bus tours, endorsements of Tea Party candidates, and fundraising. Dana Loesch, a radio host in St. Louis, was also interviewed as a Tea Party leader. In this way, the boundaries separating political analyst, party strategist, reporter, and journalist were regularly blurred and easy access to media coverage helped to amplify the Tea Party brand.

The news media also identified key Tea Party brand spokespersons and conveyed key Tea Party messaging points. Since no single entity claimed credit for organizing the Tea Party protests, news pundits and staffers were able to argue that the Tea Party was a “leaderless,” “grassroots,” or “bottom-up” movement of normal Americans. In the *Wall Street Journal* a guest columnist explained that

> the tea-party protest movement is organizing itself, on its own behalf. Some existing organizations, like Newt Gingrich's American Solutions and FreedomWorks, have gotten involved. But they're involved as followers and facilitators, not leaders. The leaders are appearing on their own, and reaching out to others through blogs, Facebook, chat boards and alternative media (Reynolds, 2009).  

As a result, the Tea Party movement’s goals and aims were largely articulated by the news media and by whomever an outlet selected as a spokesperson. While Tea Party news reports frequently described the Tea Party as a leaderless movement, they also credited various politicians and organizers as leaders or consulted them as sources. For
example, former congressman Dick Armey was identified both the chairman of the conservative thinktank, FreedomWorks, and a major financial Tea Party sponsor, fundraiser, organizer, and strategist. He was given a platform to promote Tea Party messaging in various television news interviews, and even a New York Times op-ed.

Tea Party leaders and brand representatives were also identified through their appearances at Tea Party events and perceived influence in drawing or mobilizing crowds. Sarah Palin, the former Alaskan governor and Republican vice-presidential candidate, was the person most often mentioned in Tea Party reporting. Ron Paul, a Republican Senate candidate, was also considered a Tea Party leader. One Newsmax blogger drew on poll data to argue that Ron Paul and Sarah Palin each represented the values of the Tea Party’s key constituencies:

Tea partyers are almost evenly divided between those who favor former Alaska Republican Gov. Sarah Palin and those who support Rep. Ron Paul, R-Tex., according to a new Politico/TargetPoint poll.

. . . Palin best reflects the 43 percent who say the government is too big and should do more to promote traditional values. Meanwhile Paul most represents the 42 percent who say government is too big but shouldn’t try to promote any particular set of values—the libertarian philosophy (Weil, 2010c).

Other frequently mentioned “Tea Party candidates” include Nevada Republican Senate candidate Sharron Angle and Delaware Senate candidate Christine O’Donnell.

The news stories were key in portraying and identifying the Tea Party’s intangible values and qualities with repeated patterns and emphasis on certain characteristics. They described what it meant to be a Tea Party member and articulated the meaning of Tea Party identity through polls, interviews, and coverage of Tea Party rallies and signs. In particular, brand’s emotional connection to consumers is typically conveyed and
established through media (Warner, 2007) and relies on attaching human characteristics and personality traits to non-human entities (Kim et al, 2010, p. 117). The news stories about the Tea Party repeatedly focused on anger. A *Wall Street Journal* guest columnist called the Tea Party a “post-partisan expression of outrage” (Reynolds, 2009). The Tea Party was “mad,” “angry,” and full of “rage.” Other reporters described Tea Party activists as “mad-as-hellers” who were expressing “moral outrage,” and the group as the “mad-as-hell party.” Anger was described as the Tea Party’s “motivation,” its source of “energy,” and “contagious” (suggesting that its growth was inevitable).

Surprisingly, the targets of Tea Party outrage were mentioned far less than the anger itself, suggesting that anger was more valuable as a branding mechanism than an explanatory detail in Tea Party stories. One key target of Tea Party ire, however, was President Obama. The Tea Party brand was decidedly understood as “anti-Obama.” President Obama was mentioned so often as a target of the Tea Party’s anger that one MSNBC guest referred to it as “Obama derangement syndrome” (Olbermann, 2010b). A *Huffington Post* blogger argued that the movement was clearly “anti-Obama” after “judging from the crowds and the signs they waved” (Ostroy, 2009). On its sight, the *Huffington Post* also posted a slideshow that featured signs that read: “Obama’s Plan White Slavery,” “The American Taxpayers are the Jews for Obama’s Ovens,” “No Taxes Obama Loves Taxes Bankrupt USA Loves Baby Killing,” and “Obama was NOT bowing. He was sucking Saudi Jewwels,” which included a drawing of Obama bowing in front of a man dressed in stereotypical Middle Eastern clothing (“10 Most Offensive Tea Party Signs And Extensive Photo Coverage From Tax Day Protests”, 2009). A *Wall
Street Journal columnist explained the function of anger and its connection to President Obama:

But whatever our politics, we don't want people to be free from anger altogether. We want them to be moved by injustice to act, and to do so with a vigor tinged every now and then with righteous wrath. Which is why President Obama's enthusiasts have been so distressed at his seeming inability to rage. Ever since BP started glopping up the Gulf of Mexico with crude, they've been begging him to drop his cool demeanor, to exhibit some anger (Felten, 2010).

This quote in particular highlights the branding process as it occurred within news stories. As President Obama’s “brand” was based on him being calm and collected, the brand of his Tea Party adversaries seemed logically premised upon anger and a strong show of emotion.

Former President Ronald Reagan was also a recurring figure mentioned in Tea Party news texts, a gesture to 1980s Republican populism. (In many ways, Reagan himself was deployed as a brand.) Newsmax wrote that there are “many parallels between the modern tea party movement and forces that brought Reagan to power” and that tea partiers are “on the verge of triggering another ‘Reagan revolution,’” (Brown, 2009c; Patten, 2010). One Wall Street Journal article that referenced the Tea Party focused on comparing the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama (Steele, 2010). Many of Reagan’s mentions come up in this way—as a historical reference in the story of the Tea Party—even if not directly attributed or relevant to its development. In these narratives, Reagan stands in for the age of successful white conservatism, an aspirational model for tea partiers, and an exemplar for the Republican Party.

News narratives consistently used language that described the Tea Party as new, regularly reinforcing novelty as a central Tea Party brand characteristic. In stories about
the Tea Party, protestors were frequently cast as “first-time” activists, Tea Party candidates were depicted as “inexperienced” and new to politics, and journalists described the Tea Party as trendy and “fashionable.” One Wall Street Journal guest columnist wrote: “What's most striking about the tea-party movement is that most of the organizers haven't ever organized, or even participated, in a protest rally before” (Reynolds, 2009). Similarly, Senator John Cornyn referred to Tea Party activists as “relative newcomers to the political process” (Grim, 2010); another Huffington Post blogger referred to the Tea Party as “a new group of the dispossessed [who] have taken to the streets” (Sinker, 2009). The Huffington Post quoted Sarah Palin, who said the Tea Party was a “fresh, young and fragile” movement and “the future of American politics” (Sidoti, 2010). A guest on Fox News referred to the Tea Party as the “Republican renaissance” (O’Reilly, 2010). In an editorial, Palin wrote that tea partiers were Americans who “had never been involved in their government before” (2010); a USA Today article quoted Senate candidate Rand Paul saying that his “greatest attribute is that I’ve never held office” (Fritze, 2010).

In cable news, a CNN guest and Politico columnist explained that a lack of qualifications was actually key to the Tea Party’s success in the current political landscape:

I think inexperience [of Tea Party candidates] is clearly an advantage, so they're saying change and don't worry whether they can balance the books, they're going to get in the way of Obama’s agenda. That's what they've been selling (Parker & Spitzer, 2010b).

Similarly, other stories portrayed the Tea Party as manifestly in opposition to the political “establishment,” which situated the Tea Party as an entirely new political actor
responding to historical political divisions.

Reporters also highlighted other Tea Party brand attributes through their coverage and interpretation of the signs and rhetoric at Tea Party events. Soesilo and Wasburn (1994) explain that political events like protests and demonstrations (or what Deluca and Peeples (2002) call “image events”), function either “as a symbolic representation of political reality, or as a symbolic construct reflecting and serving political, economic, and ideological interests” (p. 367). One Newsmax blogger confirmed both of these notions of the Tea Party event, writing that “the tea party effort is both symbolic and a catalyst” (Towery, 2010). News media pundits and reporters treated Tea Party events as messaging platforms that relayed Tea Party brand characteristics. In reporting on and broadcasting Tea Party events, news journalists gauged the meaning, qualities, and power of the Tea Party brand.

At rallies and events, reporters captured tea partiers presenting themselves as anti-taxation. Journalists also reported that tea partiers had a “distrust of government.” According to one poll cited by Newsmax, “94 percent of the tea party movement” believe that the federal government “poses an immediate threat to the rights and freedoms of ordinary citizens” (O’Leary, 2010). One particular attribute frequently highlighted was any unconventional and eccentric rhetorical displays (in both words and dress) that implied Tea Party extremism. The New York Times wrote that “some people wore their teabags hanging from umbrellas or eyeglasses. Others simply tossed them on the White House lawn” (Robbins, 2009). MSNBC anchor Keith Olbermann played on the double entendre of “teabag” as a sexual reference, reporting that:

It began with a handful of patriots echoing the Boston Tea Party, sending
teabags to individual politicians. Then they said, "Let’s teabag Congress. Let’s teabag the White House." . . . After all the anticipation and buildup, the teabagging exploded all across America, pulling in several teabaggers in Washington who planned to dump a million teabags in Lafayette Square only they forgot to get the permit (Shuster, 2009a).

A devout commitment to the Constitution was also key to the Tea Party brand. The New York Times described the Tea Party as hungry for “high-minded constitutional talk”; a tea partier on Fox News saw the Tea Party as a way of stopping the president and his allies from “destroy[ing] the Constitution” (McKinley, 2010; Bill O'Reilly, 2010g).

Another Tea Party brand feature commonly mentioned by journalists was an aversion to the “mainstream media”—generally defined as any media source that is critical (or potentially critical) of the Tea Party and other conservatives. For example, a Politico story wrote that tea partiers “were boisterous in their denunciations of . . . the hated mainstream media they believe unfairly linked them to the harassment [of health care–bill supporters]” (Vogel, 2010).

At both conventions and rallies, journalists also used Tea Party events as a way of gauging the brand’s political power and success. In one story about the first Tea Party convention, a New York Times reporter wrote that:

As they opened their inaugural national convention here, Tea Party advocates from across the country declared that they would turn the grass-roots anger that burst onto the streets a year ago into real political power (Zernike, 2010).

Another New York Times reporter covering the first Tea Party rallies wrote that “it was hard to determine from the moderate turnout just how effective the parties would be” (Robbins, 2009). Frequently, the Tea Party was also perceived as a source of “energy” for
conservative politicians that could reinvigorate the Republican base and be a major “force” in the upcoming midterm elections (Raice, 2010).

The signs that Tea Party activists carried at rallies and demonstrations were frequently cited in news stories as way of explaining the Tea Party’s sentiments, goals, and beliefs -- key components of a political brand. Often handwritten on posterboard, these signs functioned as a way for journalists to interpret the goals and beliefs of Tea Party activists. Print journalists, especially, reported the text of the signs. A New York Times writer cited signs verbatim:

In Pensacola, Fla., about 500 protesters lined a busy street, some waving "Don't Tread on Me" flags and carrying signs reading "Got Pork?" and "D.C.: District of Corruption."

In Austin . . . American flags abounded, along with hand-painted placards that bore messages like "Abolish the I.R.S.,” "Less Government More Free Enterprise,” "We Miss Reagan” and "Honk if You Are Upset About Your Tax Dollars Being Spent on Illegal Aliens” (Robbins, 2009).

In the Wall Street Journal:

At a tea party I attended . . . speakers railed against the administration's stimulus package and defended deregulation and free markets. "Your Mortgage is Not My Problem," read one placard (Frank, 2010).

USA Today also described the signs in detail:

Yellow flags bearing the slogan "Don't tread on me" were flying high. "Impeach Obama" posters and T-shirts were spotted. One poster depicted the president as a vampire about to sink bloody fangs into the neck of a prostrate Statue of Liberty. "I fought in Vietnam to stop communism, and now I have one in the White House," another sign read (Kiely, 2010b).

News organizations particularly tracked Tea Party signs for inflammatory or racist rhetoric, often conflated with anti-Obama sentiment and interpreted as central aspects of
Tea Party identity. A *Huffington Post* blogger argued that the movement was clearly “anti-Obama” after “judging from the crowds and the signs they waved” (Ostroy, 2009). On CNN, news anchor Campbell Brown questioned a Tea Party group coordinator specifically about the signs as a symbol of Tea Party ideology in this exchange:

BROWN: The people carrying those signs of the president of the United States as an African witch doctor, is that how you define the movement or is that the fringe element in this movement?"

WIERZBICKI: That is not representative at all of what this movement is about. And that's what my point of contention is.

By showing that as indicative of what the tea party movement is about is misleading. As I said, when you look at polls that show 40 percent to 50 percent of the American people having opposition to Obama's and the Congress's economic policies, I think that speaks volumes about the size and expanse of this movement and the discontent.

And does that represent people who believe that Obama's a witch doctor? No, of course not, totally not representative.

BROWN: What do you say then, Joe, to people you see carrying a sign like that? Do you say, put it down, it's not helping the cause here?

WIERZBICKI: Sure (Brown, 2009c).

Deciphering the significance of signs at events continued to be a major part of the Tea Party narrative, as was the idea that they posed a threat to the Tea Party’s messaging. A *Newsmax* blogger later noted that “tea party organizers” were distancing themselves from “potentially controversial views” by hiring security and renting private venue to keep out “extremists” who carried “racist signs” from their events (Bauman, 2010).

As its brand solidified, reporters regularly deployed the Tea Party as a signifier that no longer had to be defined or explained. References to the Tea Party as a brand
became increasingly more prevalent in different news outlets as the October midterm elections approached in 2010. In news articles, the Tea Party label referred to voters, candidates, and groups that shared Tea Party brand attributes, regardless of their party affiliation or other political associations. For example, a *USA Today* article described Republican leaders competing “against candidates claiming the Tea Party mantle” (Kiely, 2010c).

Finally, the management and protection of the Tea Party brand was both a topic and a function of Tea Party news stories. In particular, Fox News argued that the accusations of racism mounting against the Tea Party in the media represented a counter-branding effort against the Tea Party that aimed to “keep people from joining” (O'Reilly, 2010e). One anchor said that the president of the NAACP was “on a mission to brand the Tea Party as racist” (O'Reilly, 2010d). Other stories covered Democrats posing as tea partiers and lawsuits filed against people using the Tea Party name. Reporters also described (and expressed) anxieties that the Tea Party brand—with its emotional connections and far-right conservative values—could alienate right-leaning voters and sponsors.

In this way, the Tea Party brand was forced to tackle several problems. A brand dependent upon the expression of rage and anger could also be interpreted as dangerous, and descriptions of Tea Party anger ranged from moral outrage to something potentially violent and threatening. *USA Today* described a Democratic advertisement that called a Tea Party candidate a “crazy” person, with views “so extreme they’re dangerous” (Page, 2010b). Stories about Tea Party “armed militias,” “secession,” and “revolution” connoted terrorism and impending civil war drove Tea Party coverage. While the Tea Party brand
could be useful in gaining support, news stories showed that it also had to be managed carefully, both within and outside of the news narratives that brought it into being.

**Tea Party Brand Identities: Movement or Political Party?**

As explained earlier, a political brand aims to make people feel like they belong to a community based on values that elide traditional political divisions (Schneider, 2004). Brand names also aim to help consumers distinguish one product from another (Groeling, 2010). In branding, differentiation is essential. Through differentiation a brand is constructed as unique through a focus on attributes that both distinguish it from other competitors and attract a target audience (Adolphsen, 2009; Pasotti, 2009; Schneider, 2004). The media reported on the Tea Party as a brand with two key shifting identities – a social movement and political party. The following sections describe how the alternating identification of the Tea Party as a social movement and a political party in Tea Party news stories achieved both differentiation and political division. Through its brand identity as a social movement, the news media invoked civil rights imagery and legitimized the renewed attention given to traditional conservative values and goals. As a political party, news texts about the Tea Party concretized it as an identity that united social and fiscal conservatives and distinguished official Republican Party members from other GOPers.

**Tea Party as a Social Movement**

Examining the Tea Party brand identity as a movement (or not a movement) also
provides insight into a larger social context. In journalism studies, social movements are seen as “carriers of extant ideas and meanings that grow automatically out of structural arrangements, unanticipated events, or existing ideologies”; “movement actors are viewed as signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observer” (Benford and Snow, 2000, p. 613). Social movements “embody and exploit the fact that the dominant ideology enfolds contradictory values: liberty versus equality, democracy versus hierarchy, public rights versus property rights” (Gitlin, 1988, p. 11). In this way, the news stories that characterized the Tea Party as a social and political movement can be seen as cultural devices that interpreted and made meaning of the actions, beliefs, and values of the Tea Party brand (and its citizen-consumers), and also the political structures that it engaged. Accordingly, I argue that the mass-mediated construction of the Tea Party as a movement actually captures the public renegotiation of ideology, digitized identities, and social practices, and the disruption and reformulation of the ways these identities inform our contemporary social order.

The Tea Party’s most common news narrative was its depiction as a “movement.” In one of the Wall Street Journal’s first pieces on the Tea Party, guest columnist Karl Rove wrote that “large numbers of Americans turning out for an estimated 2,000 tea parties across the country” showed that “this movement is significant” (Rove, 2009). Another Wall Street Journal guest columnist wrote that it was “a mass movement of ordinary people who don't feel that their voices are being heard” (Reynolds, 2009). ABC described the tea parties as a “rebel yell that signals a conservative movement
rediscovering its voice” (Harris, 2009). In the Huffington Post, a blogger wrote that the tea party was a real movement that the left should not “write off” (Sinker, 2009).

The Tea Party movement was largely portrayed as a new civil rights movement and as analogous to historical and left-leaning activism. Describing the Tea Party as a story about angry citizens willing to engage in civil disobedience was an essential American narrative that easily conjured images of average people fighting against an unjust society. In USA Today, Sarah Palin declared that “the spark of patriotic indignation that inspired those who fought for our independence and those who marched peacefully for civil rights has ignited once again” (2010). A Huffington Post blogger wrote, “Now a new group of the dispossessed have taken to the streets” (Sinker, 2009). On MSNBC, Keith Olbermann quoted a Tea Party organizer who said the “tea party movement has a lot in common with the civil rights movement” (2010). Other articles describe the Tea Party as borrowing tropes from the civil rights movement. Politico wrote about the Tea Party’s co-optation of leftist rhetoric, quoting an organizer of a rally that mobilized tea partiers and other conservatives to “March on Washington”:

He explains they were “trying to evoke the imagery of the counterrevolutionary protests of the 1960s that captured the imagination of the world.” And as for the phrase “March on Washington,” Brandon says, “this is something people said in the office. If we had been alive back in the 1960s, we would have been on the freedom bus rides. It was an issue of individual liberty. We’re trying to borrow some from the civil rights movement” (Coller & Libit, 2009).

Alluding to Seattle’s well-known reputation for radical protests, one Wall Street Journal guest columnist (and Tea Party supporter) claimed that “that the [Tea Party] protests began with bloggers in Seattle, Wash., who organized a demonstration” (Reynolds, 2009). Newsmax referred to a large Tea Party rally in Nevada as “a conservative
Woodstock” (Associated Press, 2010b). In keeping with this civil rights theme, Huffington Post later contended that tea partiers “see the federal government as oppressors and enemies of the people” (Eisele, 2010). The underlying rhetorical argument implied that white conservatives were now oppressed by the federal government, which was now led by an African-American —and the predominantly white and conservative Tea Party movement represented this newly marginalized faction of society.

A number of the news stories expressed their sensitivity to the mass media branding of the Tea Party as a social movement by describing it as entirely counterfeit, driven secretly by corporate powers and Republican powers. Some stories suggested that the Tea Party was more manufactured than organic, a movement “created by” the news media and secretly funded and manufactured by Republicans and other conservative organizations. New York Times columnist Paul Krugman (2009), for example, referred to the Tea Party as “AstroTurf,” rhetorically differentiating it from an authentic “grassroots” movement.

It turns out that the tea parties don't represent a spontaneous outpouring of public sentiment. They're AstroTurf (fake grass roots) events, manufactured by the usual suspects. In particular, a key role is being played by FreedomWorks, an organization run by Richard Armey, the former House majority leader, and supported by the usual group of right-wing billionaires.

On CNN, a Democratic strategist said that:

This is what I refer to as—as everyone refers to as kind of Astroturfing. The only people that think these protests are real are the people that think George Bush was a good president. I mean, the fact is, you know, to be brutal about it, this is a Milli Vanilli type of movement. It sounds real, but it's not (Brown, 2009a).
In the *Wall Street Journal*, a columnist called the tea parties “plastic populism” (Frank, 2010) and at MSNBC a guest commentator maintained that the Tea Party was maybe “grassrootsy” but not a “party” or “a movement” (Olbermann, 2009a, 2009b). Numerous articles sought to identify the true conservative powers behind the Tea Party’s formation. An MSNBC anchor described “sponsors” offering money in exchange for Tea Party publicity and refuted the idea that the gatherings were “spontaneous”:

Eric Telford of Americans for Prosperity, one of the corporate sponsors of the completely spontaneous Operation Tea Bag. Again, it’s completely spontaneous, which is why Mr. Telford posted a message on Facebook yesterday offering, on behalf of his group, and the also totally uninvolved Heritage Foundation, 5,000 dollars in prizes for the best promotion of Tea Bagging Day, best testimonial, best frustration video, best letter (Countdown, 2009b).

Other reports described tea partiers circulating fake photos of a Tea Party rally and an organizer misquoting and inflating an *ABC News* crowd estimate in order to make rallies seem larger and better attended than they were.

In response, conservatives pushed hard against the notion that the movement was a sham, by accusing detractors of elitism (drawing on a negative attribute of the Democratic brand) and explaining the Tea Party’s mass media presence as endemic of contemporary mediated political culture. A *Wall Street Journal* guest columnist argued that the Tea Party was “derided by elitists as phony” (Rove, 2009). In *USA Today*, Sarah Palin wrote that those who dismiss this “grassroots uprising . . . don't understand the frustration everyday Americans feel” (Palin, 2010). Proponents explained that the Tea Party was a spontaneous product of the digital age:

We saw a bit of this in the 2004 and 2008 presidential campaigns, with things like Howard Dean's use of Meetup, and Barack Obama's use of
Facebook. But this was still social networking in support of an existing organization or campaign. The tea-party protest movement is organizing itself, on its own behalf. . . . The leaders are appearing on their own, and reaching out to others through blogs, Facebook, chat boards and alternative media.

The protests began with bloggers in Seattle, Wash., who organized a demonstration on Feb. 16. As word of this spread, rallies in Denver and Mesa, Ariz., were quickly organized for the next day.

. . . The movement grew so fast that some bloggers at the Playboy Web site—apparently unaware that we've entered the 21st century—suggested that some secret organization must be behind all of this. But, in fact, today's technology means you don't need an organization, secret or otherwise, to get organized (Reynolds, 2009).

In other words, the Tea Party as a real movement signaled that conservatives were “catching up” with tech-savvy liberals and its ambiguity was emblematic of a digital landscape. A USA Today article echoed Reynolds’ argument:

The Information Age has given people the ability to network as never before. . . . In that sense, the Tea Party movement resembles the early days of MoveOn.org, which began in 1998 as a small, tech-savvy liberal group and became a behemoth in Internet fundraising and rallying (Dorrell, 2009).

As a grassroots movement, the Tea Party was modern, net-savvy, and, most importantly, difficult to dispute, verify, or assess. In short, new media and technology made it difficult for journalists to identify whether or not the Tea Party as a movement was “real” and reporters relied upon conservative political leaders to shape its narrative.

While online interactions and digital organizing obfuscated the identities of the factions driving the Tea Party, the homemade signs carried by tea partiers helped verify its authenticity. The signs were held by ‘real’ people and written in their own handwriting. The signs gave the Tea Party a genuineness that was hard to locate in anonymous web sites, blogs, and online discussion boards. To borrow from Benjamin,
the signs had an “aura” that made them even more important in news reports that described the Tea Party as a movement.

The debate over the Tea Party’s authenticity as a movement—and the question of who it really represented—was a source of constant debate in its portrayal. If inauthentic, the Tea Party movement would just be a carefully crafted political or corporate strategy—or “politics as usual.” If not a movement, the Tea Party was a form of subterfuge, an expansive political co-optation and an attack on democracy itself by the wealthy and powerful.

The tension here reflects a larger question of authenticity in a society increasingly defined by the constant blending of virtual and material worlds and a culture increasingly produced through branding. In other words, the interrogation and construction of the Tea Party’s identity as a social movement was a symptomatic of the inherent ambiguity of a political brand culture. The question that pervaded the Tea Party was not just paranoia about who controlled this small movement, but also who controlled all of American politics and, by extension, society.

**Tea Party as a Political Party**

News stories constructed the Tea Party as an autonomous political party by highlighting its focus on elections, labeling its candidates, and emphasizing its distinction from the major parties. Indeed, reporters and columnists describing the Tea Party as a third party 1) gave it credibility as a news topic by framing it as the historic emergence of a major third party; 2) characterized it as a threat to the major political parties; and 3) allowed both parties to avoid potentially negative associations with Tea Party rhetoric.
and ideas. Since “stories of intraparty strife are among the most credible and damaging types of partisan story” (Groeling, 2010) to a political party, characterizing the Tea Party as a distinct third party likely benefited the Republican Party and allowed the Tea Party to be seen as a legitimate political institution. As the Tea Party was described in news narratives as “leaderless” and “nonpartisan,” it was able to avoid the media portraying it as a fractious split of the Republican Party, as the Democrats experienced over the rise of its Dixiecrat contingent in the 1950s (Savage, 1997). While the media typically give little attention to third parties, developing the Tea Party brand as a third-party threat to Republican and Democratic dominance propelled it as a major news topic and helped to differentiate the Tea Party Republicans from other GOPers.

Unlike interest groups, which seek to influence legislators and decision makers, American political parties are generally defined as groups that primarily function to pursue and obtain political office. Political scientist Joseph Schlesinger’s (1985) definition of a political party is particularly helpful in this regard:

A political party is a group organized to gain control of government in the name of the group by winning election to public office. Note two things about this definition. First, it focuses on officeseekers. Thus by implication it excludes from the party all those who see themselves primarily as choosers among parties, that is, voters. . . . Second, the definition implies that office seeking itself has a dominant place in the direction of democratic parties (p. 1153).

Pursuant to this idea, Schlesinger argues that parties pass through three phases while seeking office—nominations, elections, and government. Kaare Strom (1990) adds vote-seeking and policy-seeking as functions specific to political parties. As the Tea Party was a dispersed, still-developing phenomenon, news narratives that drew attention to the Tea Party as pursuing, and obtaining public office. Since third parties have always been
particularly influential in shaping American politics, constructing the Tea Party as a developing third party likely helped to amplify its coverage. J. David Gillespie (1993) argues that “the greatest social utility lies in what third parties contribute to our relatively free marketplace of ideas” (p. 24). For example, third parties advocated for abolition and suffrage long before mainstream parties began to publicly debate the issues. Third parties even initiated the tradition of national party conventions.\(^{12}\)

News texts frequently ascribed political-party characteristics to the Tea Party. An *ABC News* correspondent reported that the Tea Party was focusing on “the nuts and bolts of politics, like voter registration” at its first national convention (Berman, 2010).

*Newsmax* described a typical tea partier as someone who “holds candidate meet-and-greets to help get out the vote” (Arrillaga, 2010). News stories repeatedly credited the Tea Party with winning elections, supporting its characterization as a third party.

*Newsmax* reported that “in two high-profile primary elections Tuesday, establishment GOP candidates were stunned by come-from-behind winners backed by tea party activists” (Associated Press, 2010d). In particular, the Tea Party Express, a conservative group that renamed itself during the Tea Party’s rise in the media, contributed to the framing of the Tea Party as a developing third party. The *New York Times* reported:

> The Tea Party Express, whose political action arm spent about $350,000 to help make Scott Brown the new Republican senator from Massachusetts, released a list of seats, all Democratic, it had set its sights on in November (Zernike, 2010d).

*Newsmax* also reported on the Tea Party Express’s work as a third party, writing that that

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\(^{12}\) In the nineteenth century, the Anti-Masonic Party was the first American political party to create a system of quadrennial caucuses and a national convention to nominate a presidential candidate. Thereafter, the GOP and Democratic Party followed suit; national conventions continue to function as major national media and publicity events for both parties.
the group’s bus tour would stop “in key battleground states where Democrats are fending off serious challengers in the midterm elections” (“Obama Slams Tea Party 'Core' as Fringe Radicals, Birthers,” 2010). The Tea Party was also described as having its own candidates, who were often nominated or supported by Tea Party–affiliated groups. Politicians running in midterm elections, such as Sharron Angle, Christine O’Donnell, Michele Bachmann, and Scott Brown, were all labeled as “Tea Party candidates.”

In some news stories, the Tea Party was not only described as having third-party characteristics, but explicitly referred to as being or becoming a third party, separate from both Democrats and Republicans. A USA Today article described Republicans running “against candidates claiming the Tea Party mantle” (Kiely, 2010c). The Wall Street Journal wrote that the Tea Party could be considered:

… third party—the "I'm mad as hell" party—a ragtag collection of tea partiers furious at establishment Republicans, left-wing Democrats angry at what they consider lily-livered Democrats in Washington, and independents disgusted with everybody inside the Beltway (Reich, 2010).

A Fox News host asked guests to vote in an online poll about whether “Sarah Palin will run for president on the Tea Party ticket,” suggesting that the Tea Party might run its own presidential candidate. On CNN, a correspondent discussed whether the Tea Party movement would “morph into a third party” (Phillips, 2010). In Newsmax, a writer argued that “the decision confronting the tea party is whether to become a third party, à la Ross Perot, or become a powerful political force, much like the NRA” (O'Leary, 2010). The New York Times reported that its poll showed that Tea Party supporters did “not want a third party,” but that it might potentially develop (Zernike & Thee-Brenan, 2010a).
Much of the “Tea Party as a Third Party” news narrative focused on the Tea Party as a potential threat to the Republican Party. A Wall Street Journal guest columnist wrote in an ominous tone that “the tea-party movement may lead to a new third party that may replace the GOP, just as the GOP replaced the fractured and hapless Whigs” (Reynolds, 2009). Another Wall Street Journal article made clear that the conservative Tea Party even had an adversarial relationship to its umbrella group, the Republican Party:

At New York's GOP convention two weeks ago, candidates with strong support from the conservative grass-roots were almost routinely denied backing from the establishment. In response, tea-party candidates seeking federal, state and local offices are mounting large-scale petition challenges to face off against fellow Republicans (Raice, 2010).

News reports suggested that the Tea Party becoming a third party would weaken the Republicans by dividing the support of conservative voters. Anxiety over this possibility was repeatedly voiced by pundits and columnists. On Fox News, a guest commentator said:

As long as it stays within the Republican Party and helps them nominate good, conservative candidates and defeat Democratic candidates, it's good. But if it starts getting into its head to be a third party, it could be the Republican equivalent of Ralph Nader and hand Congress back to Obama for another term (O'Reilly, 2010).

The Huffington Post wrote that “the GOP is working to head off the danger of the Tea party movement forming a third party” (Grim, 2010). In the New York Times, Governor Haley Barbour “argued in favor of the two-party system [and warned] against the creation of a third” (Zeleny, 2010a). Politico wrote that “both Republicans and tea party activists have blasted” a candidate running for the U.S. Senate under a “a newly created party called the Tea Party of Nevada” (Vogel, 2010c).
Conclusion

As a brand conveyed in news reports, the Tea Party took shape as a multifaceted signifier. In terms of campaign contests, it was deployed as a third party and a money-making commodity. As a social movement, the Tea Party narrative constructed activists and supporters as oppressed and marginalized. As an event, the reporters interpreted the Tea Party’s meaning, power, and leadership, produced a spectacle for media consumption, and mobilized Tea Party leaders and activists. The variability of Tea Party brand allowed certain voters, activists, conservative groups, elected representatives, and ambitious politicians to unite and amplify their influence under the same label. In this way, the Tea Party was the “un-party” party, its activists non-revolutionary revolutionaries.

The Tea Party’s financial value as a brand appeared to shield it from the denigration that media typically give to social movements. Todd Gitlin (1980) studied the way the news media covered the leftist group Students for a Democratic Society in the 1970s. He found that the media trivialized, polarized, marginalized, and disparaged protestors and their aims and emphasized the violence of demonstrations. While the media’s framing of the Tea Party does at times portray the movement as a threat, overall its performance and framing as a political party and its participation in established customs such as conventions, candidate nominations, fundraising, and electoral contests, allowed it to also be embraced as part of the status quo. Negative depictions and conclusions about the Tea Party were a matter of debate amongst the journalists who wrote about it, and not the overall theme of its coverage. This is important because Gitlin and others (Cottle, 2008) argue that social movement activists are usually depicted as
threats to the existing social structure and its ideology—by being “non-radical” activists, tea partiers were able to maintain the veneer of conventionality even as a social movement, which helped protect it from negative coverage.

Furthermore, in news coverage of decentralized social movements, the media have typically identified certain movement participants as leaders and spokespersons in order to cover these stories, and typically focused such coverage on marginal and most militant characters displaying “telegenic theater” (Sigal, 1986, p. 33). This, too, occurred in the Tea Party news narratives. However, this dissertation shows that the Tea Party was framed by the press, and throughout its coverage, as a decentralized group with no leadership but, rather, a movement with celebrity and high-profile supporters (who used their frequent media op-eds and interviews to reinforce the message that the Tea Party was “leaderless”). This framing is distinct and makes the news media’s coverage of the Tea Party particularly interesting as an object of study. Quite possibly, it decreased the negative and fractious effect that such celebrity and spokesperson press selection have had on other movements (Gitlin, 2003).

The brand identities also collapsed the distinctions between protest movements and political parties upon which other scholarship has touched. According to Gerhards and Ruchts (1992),

In contrast to political parties, social movements and protest groups do not compete to occupy administrative positions in order to propose and implement solutions to problems. Therefore, protest groups, unlike parties, are not usually expected to offer solutions to the defined problems (p. 582).

News coverage that described the Tea Party as a brand allowed it to accrue power through the rhetoric and performance of a political party and protest group, and focused
attention on its fundraising instead of specific policies or goals. However, as Tea Party candidates started running for political office, coverage honed in on their lack of policy solutions and ideas, criticism from which their branding had initially been able to shield them. Unlike earlier studies on social movements, Tea Party news coverage did not rely on providing the perspective of elected officials, and the number of attendees at Tea Party events was rarely mentioned. As such, news stories about the Tea Party constructed it as a political and cultural indicator instead of a nationwide revolution.

The articulation of the Tea Party political brand in the news stories articulated the modern exemplars of a political brand culture. As one Tea Party PAC leader explained, the Tea Party did not have to become a political party because “candidates elected with PAC support would be expected to caucus around those first principles” (i.e., lower taxes, states’ rights, and national security), (Zernike, 2010a). Another New York Times reporter concluded that Sarah Palin’s ability to raise and dispense funding had transformed her into a new political ideal:

Whether she ever runs for anything else, Ms. Palin has already achieved a status that has become an end in itself: access to an electronic bully pulpit, a staff to guide her, an enormous income and none of the bother or accountability of having to govern or campaign for office (Leibovich, 2010).

The branding of the Tea Party in news stories also gestures to the meaning of political participation in the age of the citizen-consumer, a “new consumer world of empowerment, self-actualization, and personal values” (p. 190). As formal parties have articulated their principles and policies through the language of corporations and businesses, citizens have also changed the way they interacted with government. Tea Party activists and spokespersons defined their values and explained their positions using
rhetoric based on money and spending. Tea Party news narratives poignantly reflect a major shift in how citizens today express their criticism towards government—through the language of investors and shareholders, rather than norms of society and community building.

Branding engages citizens as consumers—it frames citizenship through consumption, producing rhetoric that focuses on affluence and choice. As branding experts note, the postmodern rise in political branding yields only short-term benefits—in the long term, “political brand equity has shallow roots and is easily buffeted. This is a striking difference from commercial branding where much of the effort is directed at retaining the loyalty of existing customers” (p. 190). As politics have become more dependent upon constructing the citizen as a consumer, citizen-consumers’ value is dependent upon the money they spend and the ways they contribute to their economy. As Scammell notes, “Individuals’ greater control as consumers exacerbated their sense of loss of control as citizens” (p. 190). “Hard” political issues like policy specifics were less important than the performance of the Tea Party brand, suggesting that those who believe that “branding is yet another step on the road to Politics Lost” (Scammell, 2007) might be on the right track.

In particular, the Tea Party news stories highlight the specific ways in which the news media can mobilize and activate a political brand identity, buttressing arguments about the importance of press activism and partisanship in political branding (O’Shaughnessy, 2001). While most branding literature emphasizes the important function of the news media in publicizing and endorsing promotional material, there are few case studies that examine specifically how news stories track and engage the
development of political brand. Through this analysis, it is clear that the news outlets do more than passively mediate and reiterate political messaging passed on by strategists – they also intentionally, actively, and explicitly analyze, manage, and participate in the establishment of a political brand.
Chapter Three: Race, Gender, and Class

Reporters covering the Tea Party frequently questioned whether the anti-tax hostility aimed at President Obama and the federal government was about more than taxation. A Huffington Post blogger noted that “Taxes [under President Obama] are at their lowest levels in 60 years” (Weiler, 2010). In the Wall Street Journal, conservative columnist Ben Stein expressed skepticism about the Tea Party’s dual anti-tax/anti-Obama sentiment:

These tea parties strike me as off-base.

. . . First, I don't quite get the taxation uproar. As far as I know, no new taxes of any size have been enacted. The only new tax I can spot immediately in front of us is the "cap and trade" levy on carbon emissions. . . . And even that, based on a questionable idea, doesn't seem imminent (Stein, 2009).

According to political scientists Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson (2012), the Tea Party had misplaced their fears about federal taxes “because most of them fall into income categories that have enjoyed tax cuts under President Obama, not tax increases” (p. 67). These anxieties, they argue, were actually based on “generational and class fears about who gets what and who pays” (ibid.).

Because the topic of taxes invokes discussions of citizenship, belonging, and nationhood, equally implicated are the historic fights to include (or exclude) those who have been barred from power in American society, such as abolitionist, women’s suffrage, and working-class labor struggles. Historian Jill Leopore (2010) explains that
the Tea Party’s Revolution wasn’t just another generation’s story—it was more like a reenactment—and its complaint about taxation without representation followed the inauguration of a president who won the electoral vote 365 to 173 and earned 53% of the popular vote. In an age of universal suffrage, the citizenry could hardly be said to lack representation. Something more was going on, something not about taxation or representation but about history itself (p. 7).

Studies show that public attitudes about taxes are greatly influenced by perceptions of self-interest (Campbell, 2009, p. 49). Thus, debates on taxation, tax policy, and federal spending often pivot on who is perceived to benefit from federal revenues—and frequently and implicitly rely on racial attitudes towards the “undeserving poor,” ethnocentrism, and racial resentment (Gilens, 1999; Kinder & Sanders, 1996). On CNN, one tea partier put it simply: “We have got to take the country back by taking back the way they take our money from us” (Brown, 2010b). Tea Party news stories beg the questions—who is “we”? Who are “they”? And how was the Tea Party’s brand identity rhetorically constructed and articulated in news coverage through the tropes of race, gender, and class?

Like other human characteristics, race, gender, and class help anthropomorphize a brand and increase its appeal and emotional connection to consumers (Chan-Olmsted & Cha, 2007). Brands are not just labels or identifiers, they are identities rooted in social relationships (Messner & de Oca, 2005; Marsh & Fawcett, 2011). The more that a brand mirrors a consumer’s image of him or herself, the stronger its appeal. This effect is particularly relevant in terms of race, gender, and class – in marketing, these social categories represent consumer and subculture group memberships that exist outside of spatio-temporal parameters and share beliefs, experiences, norms, and consumptive
practices (de Burg-Woodman & Brace-Govan 2007). Race, gender, and class identities, in effect, lend themselves to the formation of brand communities in which users feel a strong attachment to a brand (such as the Tea Party) and one another. As brands are the image of a product in the consumer psyche that is made up of specific associations and characteristics (Schneider, 2007), the media are critical to creating and establishing brand familiarity through conveying these attributes to a mass audience. The news coverage of the Tea Party shows that race, gender, and class were essential to its influence and the enduring significance of its narrative.

While the last chapter discussed some of the Tea Party brand attributes that the news media relayed in their stories, this chapter provides much more detail on its most prevailing ones. In the Tea Party news coverage, the beliefs and characteristics associated with the Tea Party brand were inextricably linked to race, gender, and class identities. In the words of one Huffington Post reporter, “The Tea party brand of right-of-the-GOP conservatism is particularly unsympathetic to the African-American, the poor and the immigrant” (Nyhan, 2010). As described in the last chapter, branding shapes consumers’ tastes, desires, and loyalties and creates profit through the invocation of intangible values. This chapter examines the ways in which the Tea Party news stories depicted class, race, and gender as key ‘intangible values’ that helped to produce and reify the Tea Party brand identity. While the news narratives depicted the Tea Party as attracting and representing white working and middle class voters, they were also (to borrow the phrasing from Bell (2011)) discourses of race, gender, class, consumption, belonging, and social ideology. Thus, the chapter also discusses what these news stories tell us about modern conceptions of race, gender, and class identities in the media and politics.
The first section describes how media attention to identity during the 2008 presidential campaign served as a backdrop and foundation for the rise of the Tea Party in early 2009. The themes of race, gender, and class in Tea Party news stories signaled a larger question born in the midst of the presidential contest—did the diversity of gender and racial identity among the candidates competing for the White House in 2008, and the subsequent election of a Black president, also reflect a deeper shift in American values and beliefs? Each of the other remaining sections address this question by 1) examining the particular ways in which the media talked about race, gender and class as attributes of the Tea Party brand and 2) theorizing its brand logic (Kuehn, 2011) through an analysis of their larger meanings in media and politics. Finally, I close with a discussion of how the media portrayal of these identities intersected in complex ways that propelled the Tea Party news narrative and concretized its brand.

Rebranding Political Conservatism Through Identity: A Backdrop

The 2008 presidential race marked a substantial change in the focus of presidential campaign media coverage on portraying the racial and gender identities of candidates as indicative of a new age. Significantly, the politicians in the election looked differently than those of any previous presidential run. On the Republican side, Sarah Palin, the first woman vice-presidential nominee, represented a new fusion of traditional and conservative values. For the Democrats, this change was captured by Hillary Clinton’s primary contest with Barack Obama. The excitement generated by the potential election of the first female or Black president drew regular press attention, and Obama’s
campaign slogan of “yes we can” resonated as a much wider rhetorical appeal for voters to revise the course of American history through the corporeal transformation of its leadership. As a brand, the Tea Party story relied heavily on the news media’s focus and commodification of race, gender, and class identities during the 2008 campaign.

This trend, in fact, seemed to originate from Obama himself. After a loss to Hillary Clinton in the New Hampshire primary, Obama gave a speech that suggested his victory would be the beginning of a new age, weaving his potential election into the tapestry of American racial and social progress:

It was a creed written into the founding documents that declared the destiny of a nation. Yes we can. It was whispered by slaves and abolitionists as they blazed a trail toward freedom through the darkest of nights. Yes we can. It was sung by immigrants as they struck out from distant shores and pioneers who pushed westward against an unforgiving wilderness. Yes we can.

It was the call of workers who organized; women who reached for the ballot; a President who chose the moon as our new frontier; and a King who took us to the mountaintop and pointed the way to the Promised Land. Yes we can to justice and equality. Yes we can to opportunity and prosperity. Yes we can heal this nation. Yes we can repair this world.

. . . We will remember that there is something happening in America; that we are not as divided as our politics suggests; that we are one people; we are one nation; and together, we will begin the next great chapter in America’s story with three words that will ring from coast to coast; from sea to shining sea—Yes. We. Can. (Obama, 2008b).

Indeed, the frame of newness helped propel Barack Obama to ultimately defeat Clinton in the Democratic primary.

While Clinton did not do the same rhetorical work in framing her victory as a part of history (perhaps to her detriment), she did believe that her presidency would signal major progress for American women. In one interview, Clinton said, “Too many people
have fought too hard to see a woman continue in this race, this history-making race, and I want everybody to understand that” (Balogh, 2008). According to Clinton, “being the first woman president” would be a “huge change” for the country (Friedman, 2008) and in her campaign concession speech she concluded that women were still unable to “shatter that highest, hardest glass ceiling” (Stewart, 2010).

Hillary Clinton’s camp made its own waves when a strategist said that Obama’s South Carolina victory had branded him the “Black candidate” (Post, 2008). Another Boston Globe article title summed the primary contest in five words: “Black man vs. white woman” (Bennett, 2008). Few were surprised when, during a CNN debate, each candidate was asked to address critics who thought that “either one is not authentically black enough, or the other is not satisfactorily feminine” (Cooper, 2007).

While either Clinton’s gender or Obama’s race would make for a historical presidency, their differences in age and political experience allowed only one to fully encapsulate a new age in the media coverage. According to McIlwain and Caliendo (2011):

The heightened attention to race drawn out in news stories about election contests involving racial minority candidates is in large part due to the sense of racial novelty and the journalistic presumption that what is new is news, so that journalists consider the racial dynamics of certain election contests newsworthy” (pp 121 -122).

News coverage of the Democratic primary competition pit newness, embodied in a young African-American man with little government experience, against oldness, in the form of a politically savvy former First Lady who was just short of senior citizen status. For example, New York Times reporter Mark Halperin wrote:

Your typical reporter has a thinly disguised preference that Barack Obama
be the nominee. The narrative of him beating her is better than her beating him, in part because she's a Clinton and in part because he's a young African American. . . . There's no one rooting for her to come back (Kurtz, 2007).

Obama’s newness and his campaign promise of “change” were embodied in his age, political (in)experience, racial identity, and, even, the age of his supporters. In comparison, Clinton seemed out of date.

Jackman and Vavreck’s (2010) study of preferences among Democratic primary voters found that race and age overlapped in complex ways and boosted Obama’s candidacy as a signifier of white progress. They observed that Obama’s racial identity helped to “powerfully structure preferences over who should be the party’s nominee” (p. 177) and that Clinton’s younger voters were much more likely to switch to Obama than her older supporters. As a Newsmax blogger summed it up, President Obama “got more young whites to compensate for defections among older whites” (Morris & McGan, 2010). This articulated division in support for Obama among old and young white voters was important—it represented a split between two potential versions of America that depended upon the outcome of Obama’s candidacy. While his victory through young voters would reflect a triumph over America’s racist past, his loss would reaffirm America’s continued commitment to and the prevailing reign of white supremacy—and “old” America. In this way, Obama’s election would signal the progress of American whites in embracing a new America. This explains why Ray Block Jr. (2011) found that “Obama’s race mattered more to White voters than to Blacks” and that “whites, not African Americans, were most liable to base their backing on Barack’s ‘Blackness’” (p. 424). Newness through race and age overlapped in complex ways and boosted Obama’s
candidacy as a signifier of white progress.

The presence of a major female candidate on the Republican side also transformed the ways in which the news media described any outcome of the 2008 campaign as the beginning of a new era. On the Republican side, Alaskan governor Sarah Palin became the first woman ever to run on the party’s presidential ticket. Just as Hillary Clinton as a presidential candidate represented progress for women in American society, Palin claimed that the success of the McCain/Palin ballot would “shatter that glass ceiling once and for all” (Palin, 2008). A former beauty contestant, wife, and mother of five children, Palin publicly identified as a feminist when even high-profile Democratic women like Michelle Obama were veering away from claiming the term (White, 2011). Palin was also the youngest person and only woman to ever be elected governor in Alaska and, as such, represented a repackaging of American conservatism retrofitted to accommodate right-leaning female voters. Her symbolic function was essential to her campaign persona; her rhetoric indicates that she was well aware of its effect. In the speech announcing her nomination, Palin said:

It's fitting that this trust has been given to me 88 years almost to the day after the women of America first gained the right to vote. . . . It was rightly noted in Denver this week that Hillary left 18 million cracks in the highest, hardest glass ceiling in America. It turns out the women of America aren't finished yet (Palin, 2008).

Sarah Palin represented something new in a media landscape keen for a remade political era, as exemplified via the race and gender identities of its leaders. As a modern model of conservative womanhood who defied traditional gender norms with regard to occupation, age, and engagement in the public sphere, Sarah Palin provided her running mate John McCain with a much-needed freshness.
In turn, news coverage of McCain, the Republican presidential nominee, portrayed him as a relic. In the matchup against Barack Obama, the candidates’ ages, experience, and technological expertise were often invoked in ways that placed them on opposite sides of the new-versus-old divide. Questions about McCain’s age and health were frequent topics of news stories, as were references to Obama’s youth. In one example, in the final days of the campaign, the elderly McCain told a *New York Times* reporter that he had little familiarity with computers (Harnden, 2008). Democratic strategists were able to transform this ill-advised admission into the perception that McCain lacked meaningful engagement with the reality of the average American citizen and the needs of an advanced society. McCain’s campaign also responded to criticisms about his advanced age by painting Barack Obama as a “young man with very little experience” (Kondracke & Sammon, 2008). In the end, inexperience won out and “old” lost. The political stage was set as a modern and unfamiliar terrain—and only something perceived as new could make clear the reconfigured parameters of the contemporary American political landscape.

Journalists also kept tabs on their own coverage of these atypically successful candidates. American identity in regards to race and gender was no longer just a campaign topic—it was the campaign—and reporters explicitly paid more attention to the depictions of the candidates circulating in the public sphere. Articles discussing the race or gender biases of campaign reporting were common, as were debates surrounding perceived violations of acceptable political discourse. For example, Chris Matthews, a MSNBC news anchor, was accused of sexism when he reported on Hillary Clinton with denigrating comments that referenced her gender. He suggested that Clinton was trying to
play “the Betty and Veronica number” in terms of policy (a reference to teenage girl comic-book characters), said she was the “queen bee” in a “matchmaking” and “pimping operation”, and remarked that her husband Bill Clinton kept her on a “short leash” (Staff, 2007).

Thus, the media paid close attention to what was being said about the candidates in reference to identity and “displayed a renewed interest in talking about race” (Perry, 2011, p. 2) and other traits. In this hyperattentive space, each political candidate in the campaign functioned as a symbolic stand-in that represented America’s own progress on various fronts. While John McCain stood in as an older, archetypal politician, Barack Obama represented how far Americans had come from their own racial past. Palin and Clinton, similarly, demonstrated the success of women. No matter the outcome of the 2008 election, journalists were prepared for a new era in America as symbolically represented in the bodies of the nation’s elected leaders. On November 4, 2008, Barack Obama was elected president, America was altered, and the media sought to identify the new boundaries of the American political sphere.

From the beginning of the Obama term as president, reporters continued heralded his symbolic win as indicative of a national, social, and political transformation. In the Chicago Sun-Times: “Instead of cringing at war rioters and club-wielding National Guardsmen, America cast aside centuries of racial prejudice and elected its first black President” (McKinney & Pallasch, 2008). Similarly, the Washington Post reported: “With the election of its first black president, it can now begin to erase on of the stains on that reputation, one that repeatedly shamed us in front of other countries” (Merida, 2008). Recently, Huffington Post editorial director Howard Fineman remarked that “Barack
Obama as a public figure is about making history. He said in 2008, we are the change we’ve been waiting for. The fact of his very election as an African-American made history” (Matthews, 2012).

Only one month after President Obama’s inauguration, Santelli’s rant marked the beginning of the media’s coverage of the rise of the Tea Party as a new anti-Obama social movement – as will be shown throughout this chapter, it was predominantly defined by the social group status and signifiers of its supporters and spokespersons. In the immediate period after President Obama’s election, the Tea Party became a “new” political story —not just as an emergent and unfamiliar social phenomenon, but because its development helped articulate a new era marked by the political success of political candidates who had been branded through their race, gender, and class identities. Debates relating to the Tea Party’s newness (or oldness) cloaked larger concerns about American progress in relation to race and gender equality. The “newness” of the Tea Party story went beyond the novelty of the initial media spectacle—the news media’s prevailing portrayal of the Tea Party as new was integral to its overall characterization, symbolism, and political significance in a modern moment. As a result, the Tea Party news stories seemed to largely depend not on the uniqueness of tea partiers, or the originality of their values and beliefs, but the branding of race, gender, and class within the political context that birthed the Tea Party.

Repeatedly, the particular theme of newness as a Tea Party quality emphasized throughout Tea Party news coverage. According to a Wall Street Journal guest columnist, the Tea Party was a product of a new media age, a reflection of changing technology that allows citizens to unite with centralized organization or leadership:
As I write this, various Web sites tracking tea parties are predicting anywhere between 300 and 500 protests at cities around the world. A Google Map tracking planned events, maintained at the FreedomWorks.org Web site, shows the United States covered by red circles, with new events being added every day.

The movement grew so fast that some bloggers at the Playboy Web site—apparently unaware that we've entered the 21st century—suggested that some secret organization must be behind all of this. But, in fact, today's technology means you don't need an organization, secret or otherwise, to get organized (Reynolds, 2009).

The metaphorical nature of “new technology” as advanced, progressive, superior, dispersed, and a challenge to preexisting media forms was embodied in the form of the Tea Party rallies—a new movement for a new century. The Tea Party’s use of new technology to organize its rallies and publicize its message associated it with newness and, like technology, positioned it as potentially threatening to existing structures of power, in contrast to John McCain’s technological deficiency.13

Even the news media’s regular reference to the Tea Party as a form of “populism” reinforced newness as part of Tea Party brand identity. As Francisco Panizza (2005) explained,

populism [is] about a crisis of representation in which people are weaned off their old identities and embrace a new ‘popular’ one. . . . There is no populist leadership unless there is a successful constitution of new identities and of a representative link with those identities (p. 11).

Strategically, the Tea Party articulated its place as a new political player by expressly targeting a newly elected President Obama; he had won the presidential primary and general election against much more experienced and established candidates and also

13 Throughout the 2008 presidential campaign, John McCain’s lack of familiarity with technology had come to represent him as a relic, unfamiliar and unprepared to deal with the needs of an increasingly digital society. McCain’s technological deficiency came to symbolize his lack of meaningful engagement with the lives of everyday Americans.
stood in for “newness.” Symbolically, constructing the Tea Party as a novel social movement also paralleled the fundamental transformation that America’s political landscape was presumed to have undergone in the wake of President Obama’s election.

Certainly, journalists and commentators challenged this conception of the Tea Party as new by arguing that the Tea Party was, in fact, “old.” New York Times columnist Paul Krugman wrote, “One way to get a good sense of the current state of the G.O.P., and also to see how little has really changed, is to look at the ‘tea parties’” (2009). In a blog post describing a typical “tea-partyer” as elderly, a Newsmax blogger writes that the Tea Party is the “likes of Bill Warner,” a “soft-spoken” senior citizen (Arrillaga, 2010). Various news sources corroborated the characterization of tea partiers as older and part of an old-fashioned generation, with polls that showed tea partiers were more likely to be “Republican, white, male, married and older than 45” (Bendavid, 2009; Weil, 2010b; J. Williams, 2010; Zernike & Thee-Brenan, 2010a). New York Times columnist Gail Collins described tea partiers as old people who wanted to be young again, writing, “I think they just want to go back to the country that existed when they were 28 and looked really good in tight-fitting jeans” (Collins, 2010).

While the “Taxed Enough Already (TEA)” Party was quickly described as an “anti-tax” movement, deeper arguments about citizenship, identity, and worthiness were also made clear through its anti-tax discourse. The rhetoric Rick Santelli used in his pivotal “rant” on CNBC clearly showed the link between taxes and perceptions about the value of certain citizens:

You know the new administration’s big on computers and technology. How about this, (Mr.) President and new administration—Why don’t you put up a web site to have people vote on the Internet as a referendum to
see if we really want to subsidize the losers’ mortgages, or would we like to, at least, buy cars and buy houses in foreclosure and give them to people who might have a chance to actually prosper down the road, and reward people that could carry the water, instead of drink the water. . . . This is America! (referring to traders behind him)(“Rick Santelli and the ‘Rant of the Year,’” 2009).

As Santelli identifies his immediate audience of white male financial traders as “America,” he made a clear distinction between them and the “losers” who “drink” rather than “carry”—that is, those who make money instead of spending money. Drinking literally involves draining—the rhetorical implication being that these “drinkers” are not America but, instead, are a drain on America (i.e., white males who are financially well off).

Who were these “losers” in the subprime mortgage crisis to which Santelli is referring? According to Jacob Rugh and Douglass Massey (2010), the mortgage crisis was the result of a “highly racialized process” that disproportionately targeted and harmed Hispanics and Blacks.14 Conversely, those most likely to benefit from mortgage assistance were people of color. Implicitly, Santelli’s call for a Tea Party protest movement was predicated upon an “us vs. them” assumption that invoked this underlying racial meaning about the “losers” and distinguished them from the people who counted as the “real America.”

It appears that the key difference in the news coverage of the Tea Party versus previous versions of Republican conservatism and populism in American politics was

14 The term “Hispanic” was used specifically by Rugh and Massey in their study (as opposed to other identities, such as Latino or nationality-specific).

15 The news coverage shows that subsequent tea partiers regularly deployed “us vs. them” rhetoric. One tea partier put it simply (echoing the NRA slogan) — “They can have my country when they pry it from my cold, dead fingers” (Brown, 2009c).
that the media explicitly focused and interrogated the meaning and significance of their whiteness in relation to their activism and appeal. For example, while the national media covered and even mobilized supporters for the Reagan revolution in the 1980s (Jamieson and Cappella, 2009), this version of white populism received widespread attention during a political period in which successful political communication relied on implicit and racially-coded language (and both Democratic and Republican parties were experiencing major ideological and demographic shifts in the wake of the Women’s Liberation and Modern Civil Rights Movements)(Gabriel, 1998; Mendelberg, 2001; Omi & Winant, 1994). With the Obama-era mediascape primed for explicit discussions about the relationship between identity and politics, reporters articulated its meaning and significance through these lenses. As such, I argue that, in the news stories, the Tea Party functioned as an opportunity to rebrand traditional versions of Republican conservatism based on changes in racial power hierarchies (a new black president), feminizing itself by introducing novelty to its conventional values and ideologies and drawing on class as a way of promoting authenticity. The reporters used Tea Party stories as an opportunity to extend the campaign debates and discussed whether the Tea Party represented old or new versions of America.

In drawing on these identities as narrative tropes, the news stories paradoxically used the Tea Party to represent collective social action as a form of self-expression and individualism, create a commodity that garnered both financial and social profits, and reaffirm existing economic practices and inequality through emotional and symbolic appeals. Moreover, these narratives created a meaningful consumer-citizen experience for those actively engaged in Tea Party branding, promotion, and support – all fundamental
branding practices (Kuehn, 2011). In short, the news reports that framed the Tea Party through race, gender, and class analyses also told a story about how race, gender, and class is understood and deployed in contemporary media and politics.

**No Class Populism**

In the news coverage of the Tea Party, class functioned as a central component of its brand identity. Through both explicit and implicit labeling, the news media depicted the class position of tea partiers in slippery ways, variously portraying them as working-class, middle-class, and wealthy people. Journalists and pundits just as easily described the Tea Party as a rebellious group of the economically downtrodden *and* as a coalition of affluent citizens who favored anti-poor policies. These narratives lent legitimacy to the Tea Party story by drawing on the “authenticity” conveyed by a working-class identity, the disarming normalcy of the middle class, and the societal esteem given to the wealthy and powerful. The variability of Tea Party class identity in news stories helped situate the Tea Party as a group of important social consequence, despite its small size and low influence among American voters. Ultimately, the Tea Party’s multifarious class identities within news reports gave it a narrative fungibility that both expanded its media characterization and amplified the potential reach of its political brand.

Across all news networks and outlets, reporters and pundits frequently used implicit references and allusion to link particular class identities to the Tea Party. Instead
of describing tea partiers through specific class categories, news stories largely referred to them as “average folks” “ordinary,” “plain,” or part of “middle America”—code words that signaled working-class (and racial) status while obfuscating class (and race) divisions. A Wall Street Journal guest columnist described another writer who jokingly suggested that Republican intellectuals were “being overrun by the unsightly hordes of Wal-Mart untermenschen typified by the loathsome 'Tea Party' rabble.” On CNN, Tea Party organizer Dick Armey described tea partiers as “real working men and women in America.” One Fox News anchor reporting on the first Tax Day rallies said that they were “average folks. They're not rich folks” (Cavuto, 2009). In USA Today, Sarah Palin referred to the tea partiers as farmers, small business owners, teachers, soldiers, and civil servants, collapsing middle-class and working-class signifiers (Palin, 2010).

Media scholars explain that the news media often downplay the significance of class in America by attaching vague or nonspecific class labels to the people they cover. In news stories, “signs of cultural capital or lack thereof function as markers of social class, even when explicit references are not verbalized” (J. Phillips, 2004, p. 146) and the media avoid mentioning class in news coverage in order to perpetuate the notion that “the vast majority of citizens belong to the middle class” (Kumar, 2004, p. 6). In reality, more than 62% of employed Americans are working class—a class of people with little discretion or control over their work. 32% of employed Americans middle class, people who do not own the means of production but have autonomy in their work. News stories tend to be more favorable towards the capitalist class, or the wealthiest and most

16 Gans (1980) explains that the term “Middle America” was a historical media referent to working and lower-middle class people that that referred to President Nixon’s conservative constituency and “became a quasi-political term to describe white ethnics who opposed racial-integration policies” (p. 24).
powerful people who make up only 2% of the population (Newton, Dunleavy, Okruch, & Martinez, 2004). Herbert Gans (1979) writes that the news recognizes four class strata—the poor, the lower middle class, the middle class, and the rich (p. 24).

While Americans generally avoid specificity around class status, it is a powerful identity construct to which people attach strong beliefs and values (Heider & Fuse, 2004). In the public imagination and in news stories, African-Americans are often portrayed as the “poor,” but not as the “working poor” or the working class (Gilens, 2004). According to Gans, the news media have historically eschewed “the term ‘working class’” in order to bring “blue-collar workers into the middle class” (1979, p. 24). Stories about working-class people are often absent in media representations except in “periods of class struggle” (Kumar, 2004, p. 17). With the recent economic recession as a backdrop for the Tea Party’s rise, journalists used class differences and disenfranchisement to explain Tea Party activism and, frequently, the term “working class” to describe tea partiers.

Narratives often combined the “working class” with the “middle class” in order to form one consolidated category. For example, tea partiers were described as “middle class, working class” (O’Reilly & Hume, 2009) people and as “doctors and real housewives and real farmers” (Brown, Henry, & Gergen, 2010), collapsing the distinctions in income and education between all of these occupations and cohering them into one group. The Tea Party’s “middle-class identity was also used to highlight or connect it to other class groups, such as the “poor and middle class” (Shuster, 2009b) and

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17 According to Deepa Kumar (2004), while lifestyle, occupational status, or income can be indicators of class, American society is divided into a capitalist class (people who own or control a means of production), a middle class (people who have some autonomy and control over their work, but depend on the capitalist class), and the working class (which who have little or no control over their work or its conditions).
the “middle class or rich” (Zernike & Thee-Brenan, 2010a). For the most part, though, references to Tea Party class identity depended on innuendo and wordplay.

Reporters generally based their class descriptions of tea partiers on anecdotal interviews and interpretations of visual cues on display at Tea Party rallies. In particular, the racial makeup of tea partiers and the outlandishness of their clothing, appearance, behavior, and homemade signs were understood in some news outlets as indicators of social status. During the first year of Tea Party news coverage, tea partiers were primarily depicted as working-class and middle-class people. At one of the first Tax Day rallies, a Fox Business news anchor reporting said that he “didn’t find many in the Grey Poupon crowd here. [He] didn't find many of the top 1 percent or 2 percenters” (Cavuto, 2009). A Huffington Post writer attending another Tea Party event wrote:

> Judging from the crowds and the signs they waved, it was pretty clear this was a decidedly anti-Obama movement.

> . . . I didn't see any seemingly rich dudes in NY, Chicago, DC and elsewhere parking their Benz's and raising any protest signs at these rallies. The crowds, though small, were filled with the same types who've been used and abused before: low and middle-income taxpayers (Ostroy, 2009).

Similarly, a New York Times columnist described tea partiers as working-class people who would not fit in at an event hosted by members of the intellectual and more prosperous Republican elite.

> Whither the conservative establishment in today's bilious political landscape? Certainly the typical Tea Party denizen, with his "I Wanna Party Like It's 1773" T-shirt and "You Lie!" trucker hat, would seem out of place on the Frums' well-tended grounds, nibbling chicken skewers and mini-B.L.T.’s. In the presence of Ms. Hirsi Ali, at least, there was a sense of shared purpose (Paul, 2010).
“Trucker hats,” “Wal-Mart,” and the Nazi reference to inferior people (untermenschen) are labels that bestowed upon the Tea Party a working-class status without a stated reference. Another New York Times columnist complained that the news media often shows “small-town folks [as] dumb wackos” (Brooks, 2009). In discussing a large rally a few months later, a Fox News host said “militant folks [had] compared the president to Hitler, to the mafia, to Muslim Marxists.” According to him, “overwhelmingly the crowd was white middle class, working class. . . . But it seems the message, the anti-Obama message is being heard by white working class people” (O’Reilly & Hume, 2009). This quote highlights the way news reports mobilized class and described the Tea Party as both middle class and working class. Regardless of the news outlet or platform, inappropriate and offensive antics at Tea Party events were often blamed on its low-class variants; the Tea Party’s virtue was established through its middle-class respectability.

Later, Tea Party news narratives began to depict tea partiers as affluent people, but continued to subtly use class identities to distinguish between tea partiers. Right before the second annual Tax Day protests in April 2010, the New York Times published polling data that described tea partiers as “wealthier and more well-educated than the general public” and mostly “Republican, white, male, married and older than 45 (Zernike & Thee-Brenan, 2010b). Instead of working-class white men, reporters began to describe tea partiers as small business owners or “stay-at-home moms” (Bowyer, 2010). The same Fox News anchor who had disparaged the Tea Party’s “militant folks” used this new information about their class identity to describe tea partiers as “thoughtful Americans” (O'Reilly, 2010e). In Newsmax, one blogger wrote, “Those who think of tea party members as a bunch of country bumpkins will have to think again” (Weil, 2010a). An
exchange between two Fox News anchors illustrates how the upward shift in the Tea Party’s perceived class status helped legitimize its supporters.

WALLACE: I was going to say, it's 24 percent according to polls. But also, if you look at the *New York Times* poll, they're better educated than most Americans.

O'REILLY: They make more money.

WALLACE: They're wealthier than most Americans.

O'REILLY: Right, right. They don't—they're not rubes. And that's my next question on this.

WALLACE: They're not rubes, they're not yahoos and they're not Timothy McVeigh. They are—it's like a meeting of the Rotary Club.

O'REILLY: Yes—

WALLACE: They are small businessmen and women.

O'REILLY: —they're regular folks. They're regular folks.

WALLACE: Who are professionals in California. You know, they are thoughtful Americans (O'Reilly & Wallace, 2010).

In *Newsmax*, a detailed profile of a rally participant named Bill Warner depicted him as a savvy former businessman and mentioned details that distinguished him from lower-class Tea Party “wackadoos”:

Bill Warner is hardly a naive man. He ran his own engineering firm for three decades, and sold the assets just before the economy tanked. He built his dream home on a majestic hill abutting a national park, back when the housing market was steady. While some neighbors have since been foreclosed upon, Warner is resurfacing his flagstone deck.

... Warner packed up his motorhome and drove with his wife, Pat, to Searchlight, Nev., to join thousands of others at a tea party rally dubbed the Woodstock of conservatism.

There were, as his friend put it, some "wackadoos" among the masses: The Barrel Man wearing only a barrel and a hat, the guy dressed like Jesus.

There were also plenty of people just like Warner, who held a coffee mug instead of a sign (Arrillaga, 2010).
On ABC, a reporter drew a contrast between a middle-class tea partier and another attendee wearing unusual apparel and criticizing the government, subtly excluding people who dress strangely and use extremist rhetoric from middle-class status:

REPORTER: The first ever national Tea Party convention brought in delegates as diverse as the Dams, who came in from Indiana in a car. . . .

ATTENDEE (TEA PARTY CONVENTION): We're really normal people. Very middle class.

REPORTER: . . . to William Temple, who came in a kilt.

WILLIAM TEMPLE (ATTENDEE): The government, now for the last 50 years, has been moving away from the Constitution and to governing as a tyranny (Berman, 2010).

As new texts constructed the Tea Party as both middle class and working class, it simultaneously normalized it as a political group and rationalized any spectacles of overt racism, extremism, violence, or lack of knowledge among its activists.

On the other hand, news reporters also used the working-class characterization of tea partiers to construct them as oppressed people and consequently legitimize any of their hostile behavior or extremist rhetoric. A Wall Street Journal guest columnist (and paid Fox News contributor) argued that Tea Party anger was rooted in the struggles of white working-class men.

That is a key shift in this recession—white men, notably working-class white men, being hit hard and concerned that their needs are not a priority in Washington. A top White House official told me recently that working-class white men are going through today the kind of economic pain, and the social breakdown that comes with it, that black men went through in the recession of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

This all makes for populist anger, embodied in the tea party movement, at politicians who are not focused on the jobs agenda (Williams, 2010).
Through syllogism, this writer blames irresponsible politicians and a failing economy for the overt and misdirected anger of white male tea partiers, who he paints as a marginalized and disenfranchised group acting out of fear. For him, the anti-Obama venom of “opposition to health-care reform from the tea party is not based on racism but self-interest”; the Tea Party movement is justified as the unpolished expression of white working-class men’s concerns. Through the language of class, journalists not only altered the perception of Tea Party activists, but also explained their motivation.

Once the New York Times poll showed that tea partiers were on average wealthier than most people, their lack of working-class status allowed some journalists to deepen their criticism of the movement. Whereas, before the poll, a guest on MSNBC had called the tea partiers a “bunch of teabagging rednecks” (Olbermann, Fineman, & Ebersol, 2009) and an anchor said they represented the way that “poor and middle-class voters” were easily manipulated (Shuster, 2009b), the Tea Party was now described as a “prosperous-looking revolution” made up of “elite, well-off intellectuals” who were “out of step with the real America” and “led by people who are in the upper tax brackets.” A New York Times columnist defended the Tea Party’s claim to populist identity by arguing that “you do not have to be working for the minimum wage, after all, to seethe about the effects of the Wall Street meltdown on your retirement savings” (Bai, 2010a).

But without the defense of class oppression, the racial tension in Tea Party anger towards the Black commander in chief was hard to justify and their anti-poor sentiment hard to explain. According to the editor-in-chief of the Huffington Post, Arianna Huffington, the New York Times poll showed that the Tea Party had a “anti-poor, anti-black sentiment” and triggered a “debate about whether [tea partiers] are fueled by rage,
racism, or class divisions” (Huffington, 2010). As a result, various reporters, columnists, and pundits alternately described tea partiers as affluent people and as members of the working and middle classes, depending on the political message they wanted to convey.

By far, the news media most frequently used the term “populism” to tacitly portray the Tea Party as a working and middle class. Francisco Panizza specifically defines populism as

an anti-status quo discourse that simplifies the political space by symbolically dividing society between ‘the people’ (as the ‘underdogs’) and its ‘other’ . . . that is deemed to oppress or exploit the people (p. 3).

According to Michael Kazin (1998), populism, in America, is a process by which citizens “protest social and economic inequalities without calling the entire system into question” (p.2). It also ignores class barriers by maintaining the idea that most Americans “are moral, hardworking people” (p.2). Populism as a political identity comes from “populist,” a word that originally referred to the followers of the nineteenth-century People’s Party. The People’s Party was “radical in [its] animus . . . toward capitalism and [the] ownership class” (Gillespie, 1993). It “adopted a platform with the principle that all wealth belongs to the workers and farmers who produced it” and demanded the nationalization of socially beneficial infrastructure, such as the railroads and telephones (p. 72). Historically populism targeted the rich and explicitly demanded more taxes and the expansion of government-funded public infrastructure to protect the poor against industrial interests (Gerber, 1999). Populist Party leaders advocated for, and not against, a “redistribution of wealth” (Bendavid, 2009). In short, populists were concerned that “industrial-capitalist” money was corrupting the society and wanted bigger government (Formisano, p. 18).

18 CNN and ABC were the only news outlets that did not include a refer to the Tea Party specifically as a “populist.”
News coverage that described Tea Party activism as “populism” invoked images of tea partiers as the disenfranchised working class and imbued the Tea Party with the working-class identity of historical populists, while relying upon the inherent class ambiguity of the term “populist”. Even as the Tea Party policy agenda aimed to undercut the poor, news descriptions of Tea Party “protestors” were written to assume the familiar Robin Hood archetype, an impoverished social rebel and classic underdog resisting the greed of the rich and powerful. In the Tea Party news narratives, Tea Party “populism” cast the Tea Party as members of the disenfranchised working class and minimized its pro-wealthy platform.

In language that drew on the class critique in traditional populist sentiment, the media transformed tea partiers into a modern-day People’s Party. News stories used populism to depict the Tea Party as ordinary people mobilizing against the structural forces that led to the recession. A New York Times columnist explained that the Tea Party was “the latest iteration of [America’s] populist tendency” (Brooks, 2009); a CNN anchor called it “the voice of the people” (Parker & Spitzer, 2010a). Along these lines, tea partiers were painted as a small but powerful group of people resisting unjust and greedy rulers.

News reporters described the tea partiers as financially devastated citizens rising up in response to the economic crisis. In USA Today, a guest columnist wrote:

The Tea Party movement comprises protesters politically awakened by the recession. Many Tea Partiers voice their protest by describing lives freshly toppled by a layoff, a foreclosure, a bankruptcy, a catastrophic illness, a depleted retirement account (Benjamin, 2010).
Other news stories also describe economically downtrodden people suffering in an
economy ruined by the wealthy and powerful. A Huffington Post blogger wrote that:

The financial crisis has made clear to millions of Americans that we now live in a billionaire bailout society where economic elites can gamble, lose, get bailed out and then refill their coffers with our money in preparation for the next round, while millions of the rest of us are thrown out of our jobs and homes. Frankly, we'd be stupid not to join a populist revolt against that kind system. For the moment the Tea Party represents much of this anger (Leopold, 2010).

Newsmakers used populist imagery to minimize the contradiction of the Tea Party’s anti-populist, pro-business, and anti-tax agenda. In the Huffington Post, a reporter suggested that it was ironic for a wealthy Tea Party candidate to claim a populist mantle:

[Ron] Johnson, who currently enjoys an eight point lead in the polls, is a millionaire businessman who has never held office. . . . Like all Tea Party candidates, he believes he is running a populist campaign—no matter that he has personally poured 4.4 million dollars into his war chest in an effort to unseat Feingold, the 95th wealthiest senator and a renowned champion of the middle class. Disregard this fact, and disregard the effects of the stimulus, too: these are details, and Mr. Johnson doesn't think this election is about them (Cluchey, 2010).

As this quote highlights, the media’s characterization of the Tea Party as a populist movement allowed Tea Party candidates and members to claim a “folk” identity, regardless of their personal wealth or class status. A Wall Street Journal columnist concluded that the news coverage of the Tea Party as populist was more of a rhetorical performance than an accurate reflection of Tea Party values, asking: “What is populism? To judge by this coverage, populism is a trick that politicians perform—a clumsy disguise they adopt or a fake-folksy rhetorical line they try to put over” (Frank, 2009).

Undoubtedly, the racial logic that mobilized the Tea Party’s working-class identity contributed to the rationalization of its anti-poor populist discourse. The USA
Today quoted a Tea Party attendee describing tea partiers as “people who are working hard for their families and they don't want their money taken away from them to be given to people who aren't working hard.” If tea partiers were white people “working hard,” then an inference can be made that those not working hard were non-whites. Edsall and Edsall (1992) emphasized the strategic use of similar rhetoric to cultivate conservative populism in the Reagan era, which used “the new Republican agenda of race and taxes in order to portray the Reagan administration as protecting the working man against ‘big government’” (p. 12).

Calling the Tea Party “populist” also had the additional effect of legitimizing the fury that tea partiers expressed. Like “Tea Party,” the term “populism” placed conservative activism in the context of American history, heritage, and citizenship. Through it, the Tea Party’s “paranoid . . . pathological hatred of the president” (Brown, 2009c) was rooted in civic duty and democratic participation instead of in resentment, racism, or other negative systemic causes. If the tea partiers were hateful or acrimonious, it was because their rights as citizens were being violated.

The ways in which different news outlets represented the Tea Party’s class identity varied across outlet, platform, and over time. Among the online news sites, there were clear ideological divisions on how the Tea Party’s class identity was described in each platform. Before the New York Times poll, the Huffington Post largely described tea partiers as legitimately concerned “low and middle-income taxpayers” (Ostroy, 2009) who were being controlled by the wealthy. After the poll’s findings were reported, the Huffington Post rarely used working-class signifiers to depict and frame the Tea Party. Newsmax, however, did not mention Tea Party class identity until after the New York
The *New York Times* poll was released. *Newsmax* cited the poll and focused on the Tea Party as a movement made of upper-middle-class people in order to dispel the stigma and stereotypes (i.e., domestic terrorists, militants, uneducated, ignorant, racist, etc.) of the Tea Party’s news construction as a group of angry and resentful poor whites. *Politico* largely refrained from giving the Tea Party a specific class label.

In television news, CNN and ABC also scarcely mentioned class identity among tea partiers. The few mentions of class status and indicators typically specified a working-class or middle-class identity (i.e., “very middle class” on ABC; “working men and women” on CNN; “middle-class voters” on MSNBC) (John Berman, 2010; Brown, 2009a; Shuster, 2009b). After the *New York Times* released its survey data, MSNBC’s descriptions of the Tea Party changed substantially and reinforced the narrative of the Tea Party as a wealthy and powerful group of people, instead of a disenfranchised and marginalized group. Fox News, by far, was the broadcast news program that most frequently and explicitly attributed working- and middle-class labels to the Tea Party from early in its news coverage. Following the publication of the *New York Times* poll, Fox News largely ceased to refer to the Tea Party as a group with a specific class identity.19

In the newspapers, descriptions of the Tea Party largely varied and, in particular, depended on the partisan leanings of the writers. *USA Today* did not report on Tea Party class identity; the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* primarily and frequently used columnists to describe the Tea Party’s class demographics, largely portraying tea partiers

19 There was one mention of tea partiers as “average, middle-class American stakeholders and people like Sarah Palin” (Ingraham & Bruce, 2010).
as either working-class or middle-class people. Almost all descriptions about class in the *Wall Street Journal*’s coverage occurred before the *New York Times* poll was released.

The use of class in the Tea Party news narrative also fell along lines of ideology and partisanship. Politically “neutral” news outlets like *ABC News*, *Politico*, *USA Today*, and CNN avoided discussion of Tea Party class status. In the partisan press, conservatives in newspapers, cable, and blogs relied on narratives that used class identity to legitimize the Tea Party. For some conservative journalists and news commentators, such as those on Fox News, an “authentic” working-class identity helped the Tea Party refute allegations that it was an “AstroTurf” movement or was fueled by racism. Other conservative news workers, like in *Newsmax*, focused on depicting the Tea Party as upper-middle-class in order to make it more relatable, respectable, and legitimate and to distinguish conservatives from the highly visible Tea Party “fringe.” Progressive columnists and outlets largely described tea partiers as working-class people being used by the rich. Like Fox News, the writers of the *Huffington Post* used the Tea Party’s working- and middle-class identity to argue that it was an authentic movement voicing legitimate concerns about the government’s failure to protect and serve average citizens. For the *Huffington Post*, however, tea partiers were suffering because of failed conservative policies, while at Fox, they were outraged and weighted down by a biased progressive agenda. Reporters, pundits, and spokespeople drew on different class-based stereotypes in order to explain the Tea Party’s goals and significance in particular ways.

Regardless of its portrayal, the news media used the Tea Party to justify preexisting notions about the political and social world. Tea Party class identity was used to justify and elucidate larger narratives about classism, racism, liberalism, elitism, and
oppression, depending on the partisan ideology of the news outlet or its writers. The Tea Party’s class identity, then, functioned more as a rhetorical device than an assessment of the Tea Party. The news media used the Tea Party to discuss the recession, to criticize the government, to analyze the state of the Republican Party, and to evaluate the overall divide between the “haves” and the “have-nots,” be they divided by political power or by wealth. Journalists used ambiguous and flexible language to denote Tea Party class status, mobilizing class resentment around certain political issues while eliding specificity about social inequality and categorization.

The Tea Party: Race, Post-Race, and Post-isms

On April 15, 2009, MSNBC anchorman Keith Olbermann introduced “actor and activist” Janeane Garofalo as a guest commentator on his nightly cable newscast. The evening’s discussion topic was the Tax Day Tea Party protests that had been led by fiscal conservatives throughout the country, calling for a decrease in local and federal government levies and spending. As scenes of Tea Party protestors rolled across the screen, Garofalo dismissed the idea that the Tea Party reenactments were merely innocuous patriotic displays and remarked:

Let’s be very honest about what this is about. This is not about bashing Democrats. This is not about taxes, they have no idea what the Boston Tea Party was about. They don’t know their history at all. This is about hating a Black man in the White House. This is racism straight up. That is nothing but a bunch of teabagging rednecks (Olbermann et al., 2009).

This comment serves as just one example of the rhetoric that frequently circulated within the news public sphere about the Tea Party and race. From the moment the fiery and
controversial Tea Party demonstrations began, news pundits and reporters questioned whether racism, and not policy, motivated the new movement. As journalists described the Tea Party through its explicit anti-tax discourse, they implicitly produced it as a brand that symbolized ethnocentrism and racial resentment towards the “undeserving poor” (Gilens, 1999; Kinder & Sanders, 1996). These debates about the centrality of race (and racism) within Tea Party rhetoric and ideology helped to fuel its news coverage and were entirely responsible for at least three of the surges in Tea Party news coverage. This chapter examines both those debates about Tea Party racism and aims to decode their larger meaning.

Garofalo’s accusation of implicit racism within the Tea Party protests is not a surprising criticism, considering the effects of race and racism in American political discourse. In a recent study, Samuel Sommers and Michael Norton (2006) saw that “when laypeople think about White racism, they tend to focus on overt old-fashioned forms: participants’ psychological impressions of racists consisted of ‘fearful of change’ and ‘old-fashioned,’ and demographic descriptions included ‘Southern’ and ‘old’” (p. 131). As Tea Party protestors were predominantly white, older, and mostly highly concentrated in the South (Cillizza, 2010), they easily fit this stereotype, as shown in Garofalo’s “redneck” reference and provided easy signifiers for the Tea Party brand. Stuart Hall (2001) draws the connections between the discourse that creates race and the experience of race when he writes “discursive “knowledge” is the product not of the transparent representation of the “real” in language but of the articulation of language on real relations and conditions “(p. 167).

Paranoia that the decline of explicitly racist discourse and attitudes compels us to look constantly for signs of the racist within. In political communication, this means recognizing the ways that “people can speak about racially tinged issues without referring to race and still convey racial meaning implicitly” (Mendelberg & Oleske, 2000). In her study of the history of explicit and implicit racial appeals in political messages, Mendelberg (2001) found that

The enormous shift in public norms of racial discourse . . . created a near-universal tendency to self-censor. Some people censor themselves because they aspire to be egalitarian, others because they wish to conform to the social pressure of norms of discourse. Implicit appeals are more effective than explicit appeals because they avoid the conscious perception that they derogate African Americans and thus circumvent self-censorship (p. 26).

Importantly, Mendelberg’s study also showed that implicitly racial messages—which draw on rhetorical symbols and use the language of individualism and local control to appeal and cohere “racially resentful white voters” (p. 26)—are less effective when they are explicitly and publicly challenged.

As a discursive construct, race allows the visual markers of phenotype to signify meanings about identity, social location, ability and performance. Glen Loury (2002) explains that the idea of race is based on visual markers that are highly difficult to alter, giving them a misleading sense of veracity. For Blacks, the social stigma associated with slavery maintains a negative social signification for their racial markers and perpetuates inter-group status disparities that are observable in America today. These concepts surrounding race affect our interpretations and production of discursive realities that give it substance – Loury writes,
Everything depends, I am arguing, on racially biased social cognitions that cause some situations to appear anomalous… while other situations appear normal, about right, in keeping with what one might expect, consistent with the social world as we know it (p. 71).

In this way, while racial difference is not real in any scientific (biological or genetic) sense, it is real experientially. “”Race”, Loury notes, “is all about embodied social significations. In this sense, it is a social truth that race is quite real, despite what may be the biologic-taxonomic truth of the claim that there are no races” (p. 58). As it relates to race, some theorists argue that discursive production in American social life primarily functions to promote and disseminate white male hegemony and dominance (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Gandy, 1998; Mulvey, 1975; Van Dijk, 1996).

Visual racial cues in implicitly racial political messages are also key to their effectiveness. As Evelyn Hammonds (1997) puts it, “in the US race has always been dependent upon the visual” (as cited in Joseph, 2009, p. 238). Linda Williams (2001) finds that American racial narratives rely on a regular refiguration of virtue and villainy and require that melodrama manifest itself in the hyperexpressive body of the Black man, white woman, or white man. In short, race and racial meaning have a long history of conveying themselves via nonverbal, metaphorical, and nonexplicit communication.

Through implicit racism, the Tea Party news stories can be interpreted as a racialized narrative from its very first reports. As journalists described the Tea Party’s rise as an angry movement of older, blue-collar, working-class white Americans, the Tea Party assumed the familiar tropes of the American “racist.” As explained earlier, Santelli’s landmark call to “reward people that could carry the water instead of drink the
“water” carried loaded racial cues. Similarly, one Fox News anchor explained that the Tea Party represented “the battle between Americans who want government entitlements and those who don't and object to paying for them” (Hannity, 2009a). Studies that examine government entitlement programs show that racial prejudices play a major role in the attitudes of those who oppose or support these efforts. In looking specifically at whites’ attitudes toward welfare policy and spending, Martin Gilens (1999) found that racial attitudes and perceptions that Blacks are lazy have a significant effect on whites’ attitudes toward welfare policy and spending. That is, “the belief that black Americans lack commitment to the work ethic is central to whites’ opposition to welfare” (ibid, p. 3).

In arguing that the Tea Party was fundamentally opposed to taxes and government spending on undeserving people, there was an implicit racial appeal to white attitudes about Black (un)worthiness. Mendelberg (2001) shares an anecdote from President Nixon’s presidential campaign to show how this type of racial filter functions within conservative political messages:

> During the campaign, Nixon offered "freedom of choice" in opposition to school busing. . . . What one former Alabama senator said of [George] Wallace now applied to Nixon too: "He can use all the other issues—law and order, running your own schools, protecting property rights—and never mention race. But people will know he's telling them “A nigger's trying to get your job, trying to move into your neighborhood" (p. 96-97).

In news stories, the Tea Party was described as a movement that opposed taxes, spending, big government, and the first Black president. Simultaneously, this description also carried coded racial messages that could cohere white racial prejudices amongst news audiences.

Within the Tea Party news stories, rhetoric that appeared old or seemed like an
antiquated version of America was cast in a negative light. Deviant or “old,” political rhetoric or participation, such as explicit racism, was cast as “fringe,” “crazy,” a “threat,” “unstable,” “unintelligent,” lacking in “civility,” or staged as a conspiracy of the old simply masking itself as new. In some cases, the connections between “old” and discarded values were made explicit, as in one New York Times article that spoke directly about the disproportionate elderly segment of Tea Party activists and their outdated ideas. Here, a New York Times guest columnist uses the example of racism to show how the features of the old-versus-new political divide are based not on morality but, rather, the passage of time:

The Tea Party and the N.A.A.C.P. represent disproportionately older memberships. And herein lies a problem with so much of our discussion about race and politics in the Obama era: we tend not to recognize the generational divide that underlies it.

The question of racism in the amorphous Tea Party movement is, of course, a serious one, since so much of the Republican Party seems to be in the thrall of its activists. There have been scattered reports around the country of racially charged rhetoric within the movement.

But such incidents—or, maybe more accurately in some cases, an utter indifference toward racial sensitivities --shouldn't really surprise anyone. That's not necessarily because a subset of these antigovernment ideologues are racist, per se, but in part because they are just plain old.

. . . In other words, we are living at an unusual moment when the rate of progress has been dizzying from one generation to the next, such that Americans older than 60, say, are rooted in a radically different sense of society from those younger than 40. And this generational tension—perhaps even more than race or wealth or demography—tends to fracture our politics (Bai, 2010b).

This writer is not arguing that racism is evil, reprehensible, immoral, or rooted in an often brutal and exploitative economic system that maintains white supremacy—rather, racism is a generational trait, one that the younger or “newer” generation has mostly escaped. In
this framing, older people are not necessarily racist, just insensitive to appropriate racial discourse.

“Old” as a gauge of political extinction was not only used with regard to the Tea Party but also to its perceived adversaries. Thus, as also shown in a *Huffington Post* piece described a Tea Party leader calling the NAACP a “bunch of old fossils looking to make a buck off skin color” (Paul, 2010); similarly, the *New York Times* wrote that the “NAACP scratched an old wound . . . when it called on the tea party to expel racists” (Blow, 2010).

Some journalists covering the Tea Party particularly focused on protest signs (and their carriers) as a way of documenting the racism of the Tea Party movement. As a *Huffington Post* blogger explained, the racist “placards” of the Tea Party made it “catnip to the news media” (Ellis, 2010). Signs gained significant attention in news reports—journalists actively examined, discussed, and highlighted them as evidence of Tea Party racism. For instance, a CNN segment focused on viewing and deconstructing Tea Party signs with guests:

SANCHEZ: You went to a rally recently, right?
JOHN AVLON: I went to the D.C. tea party rally on September 12.
SANCHEZ: And you took some pictures.
AVLON: That's right.
SANCHEZ: Let's go through these pictures. You ready?
This is one is a picture. Let me do—describe this first one for us, if you would, John. Apparently, it's the president with Hitler and Lenin?
AVLON: Yes.
SANCHEZ: Is it? OK. Let me just ask the question, you at home watching right now. Is this racist?
Roland, is this racist?
MARTIN: Well, I think you're associating the president with two dictators.

SANCHEZ: . . . makes people angry.

AVLON: That's the hate trifecta...

(CROSSTALK)

SANCHEZ: Tim, is this hateful or racist?

WISE: Well, I think it's pretty hateful. The only way it might be racial is, you think of Hitler. Hitler wasn't just a fascist. He was a racial fascist. So, if you say the black guy running the country is a racial fascist, it might set off psychologically these notions of, oh, who's he going to come for? And then white folks get nervous because of that. It's possible (Brown, 2009b).

On MSNBC, an anchor also argued that the embedded meanings in Tea Party protest signs were racist:

The kind of poster that showed up in various town hall meetings, with the 9/12 protests serving as a road rage convention. The most blatant examples were there, along with the heavily coded ones. The president as the devil, the president as the blood-sucking alien, the president as undocumented worker, the president as Hitler.

And if you think that allusions to violence are not racially motivated, you may soon reconsider (Olbermann & Fineman, 2009).

Tea Party signs were also described in relation to racial violence, drawing on the connections between American disenfranchisement of Black Americans and its perpetuation through mob violence. For example, another Huffington Post blogger wrote:

But even to see 50,000 people with signs like, "We come unarmed THIS time" and "The tree of liberty must be refreshed with the blood of tyrants" was chilling. I saw one placard that read, "I'm not a racist, I'm a patriot" standing right next to someone in blackface and I saw groups of them mock and shout down a group of immigrant rights activists. To witness those signs alongside ugly caricatures of Obama with a bone through his nose was to see an open declaration of the attempted hate crimes to come (Zirin, 2009).

Referring to those who held signs as “militant folks,” Fox News also lent subtle credence
to the idea that Tea Party signs that “compared the president to Hitler, to the mafia, to Muslim Marxists” were symbols of violence (O'Reilly & Hume, 2009).

In addition to describing the Tea Party signs as racially coded, violent, and threatening, reporters mentioned the content of specific signs as evidence of Tea Party racism. While reporters interpreted the signs carried at tea party rallies as racially coded, signs were also shown and described as explicitly racist. In one interview, an ABC correspondent said, “We've all seen the signs. There have been signs that compare Barack Obama to a monkey. There have been signs that have had the ‘N-word’ on them” (Harris, 2009). As mentioned in chapter 2, a specific feature titled “The 10 Most Offensive Tea Party Signs,” Huffington Post showed photos of tea partiers carrying signs that conveyed specifically racial rhetoric such as “Obama’s Plan White Slavery,” “The American Taxpayers are the Jews for Obama’s Ovens,” “Obama—What you Talkin about Willis! Spend My Money?,” and a photo of a Black man holding a knife to Uncle Sam’s throat (“10 Most Offensive Tea Party Signs And Extensive Photo Coverage From Tax Day Protests,” 2009).

Reporters generally drew on Tea Party signs as irrefutable evidence of racism among Tea Party supporters, particularly citing them when accusations of racism surfaced from high-profile politicians, such as former president Jimmy Carter or members of the Congressional Black Caucus. For instance, one Politico blogger reported on a document about Tea Party racism released by the NAACP:

At its annual convention last week, the NAACP passed a resolution condemning bigoted elements of the tea party. Members have carried signs comparing President Barack Obama to Adolf Hitler and telling him to “Go back to Kenya” (Wong, 2010).
As the media used signs to explain the motivations, goals, and feelings of Tea Party activists, supporters grew sensitive to the ways in which racially specific signs threatened to invalidate the Tea Party as a legitimate political movement. Consequently, signs were also reportedly policed by Tea Party event organizers and even caused some tea partiers to be publicly disavowed by fellow activists. In one example, *USA Today* reported that the owner of the domain “teaparty.org” was “repudiated by the Houston Tea Party Society after being photographed holding up a sign with a racial epithet” (Kiely, 2010a). The conservative site *Newsmax* also said that Tea Party organizers were hiring security and “renting venues” to keep out “extremists” at their events—specifically, people carrying “racist signs” (Bauman, 2010).

Thus, discussions of race and racism in Tea Party news stories focused on spectacular moments—explicit displays that sparked news coverage and debates. Across outlets and mediums, news narratives that discussed race and racism in the Tea Party that crossed ideological and platform divides. In the *New York Times, Huffington Post, MSNBC,* and CNN, reporters regularly questioned whether the Tea Party was fueled by hostility toward people of color and reported on specific incidents of racism at Tea Party events. CNN and MSNBC also described Tea Party racism as potentially threatening and violent. MSNBC argued that the Republican Party was deliberately using Tea Party “race-baiting” to attract white voters—and, likewise, Fox News accused Democrats of using “race-baiting” to sabotage the Tea Party (Olbermann & Fineman, 2009; Olbermann & Klein, 2010). *New York Times* articles, columns, and polls also largely painted the Tea Party as a group that harbored anti-black sentiment and attracted and accommodated racists. *Politico* and ABC primarily described the ways in which the Tea Party was
defending itself from accusations of racism, but did not draw any conclusions about the how race might shape the Tea Party’s development. *USA Today* described the Tea Party as a white movement and reported on a few sensational shows of racial prejudice among its leaders, but otherwise did not discuss Tea Party in the context of race and racism.

The conservative outlets, however, had a largely uniform approach to discussing race and the Tea Party. Fox News, Newsmax, and the *Wall Street Journal* all ran stories that depicted accusations of Tea Party racism as a type of slander and political mudslinging, denied that racism actually existed in American society, and attributed any explicit shows of racism at Tea Party rallies to an isolated and insignificant component of the group. In particular, there were three significant stories connected to surges in early Tea Party news coverage that involved accusations of racism. Through these incidents, the news narratives reveal different dimensions of Obama-era discourse regarding race and racism.

In mid-March 2010, two weeks before the third key surge of Tea Party news coverage, a group of congressmen reported that they were verbally and physically assaulted as they entered the Capitol for a controversial vote on health care policy. While a gay congressman, Representative Barney Frank, was called a “homophobic slur” (O’Connor & Hohmann, 2010) much of the coverage of the incident focused on the incidents involving three Black congressmen, subsequently reported as “members of the Congressional Black Caucus” (Gordon, 2010). Noted civil rights activists and congressmen James Clyburn and John Lewis specifically claimed that several tea partiers directed racial epithets toward them. Capitol police also arrested another Tea Party protestors for spitting on Representative Emanuel Cleaver (O’Connor & Hohmann, 2010).
Two weeks later, the *New York Times* described a speaker at a major Tea Party Express rally denying these claims:

One speaker doubted Representative John Lewis's account that he had been spat on by a protester at a Tea Party rally on the Capitol, challenging him to a $10,000 bet to produce proof or take a lie detector test (Zernike, 2010c).

*A Wall Street Journal* guest columnist raised similar doubts:

Rep. John Lewis (D., Ga.) claimed that when he and other members of the Congressional Black Caucus walked through a tea party protest last week in Washington, they heard the N-word hurled at them 15 times. No video or audio recording—in an age when such recorders are ubiquitous—has surfaced to back up the claim. No one was arrested (Gordon, 2010).

In this way, journalists integrated the denial of non-witnesses and non-evidence into the reports about the attacks on the congressmen, eventually shifting from reporting the incident as fact to describing it as “alleged” (an “alleged phony incident”) (Limbaugh, 2010; O'Reilly, 2010f; Towery, 2010). For example, an *ABC News* correspondent reported that “the NAACP points to the racial epithets *allegedly* hurled at black members of Congress by tea party members during the health care debate” (Harris, 2010) (italics mine) and on the *Huffington Post*, a blogger wrote that “some member of Congress *alleged* racism after voting for Obama’s healthcare law” (Zirin, 2009) (italics mine). Similarly, other instances of Tea Party reporting related to accusations of racism, such as “*alleged* [racial] profiling” of undocumented immigrants in Arizona, remained perpetually doubted and unverified. More than that, though, they were *unverifiable*.

Unlike other “alleged” crimes on which journalists report, these reports suggested that there was no way to validate Tea Party racism, even with evidence of explicitly racist
rhetoric. For example, a Fox News anchor and guest discussed whether there was adequate evidence of the incident at the Capitol:

**SHARPTON:** People standing outside of Congress using the "n" word.

**O'REILLY:** How do you know they did that?

**SHARPTON:** I have seen the tape.

**O'REILLY:** There is no tape. There is no tape with the "n" word on it. There's no way. Let's be clear. There is no tape.

(CROSSTALK)

**SHARPTON:** So, everyone hallucinated the "n" word use?

**O'REILLY:** I don't know what happened and you haven't seen the tape.

**SHARPTON:** Against Barney Frank?

**O'REILLY:** You haven't seen the tape.

**SHARPTON:** There were all kinds of reporters that were there, Bill.

**O'REILLY:** No. No reporter said this one said the "n" word. The police who were there didn't hear any "n" word. I'm not saying it didn't happen. I know John Lewis. And I think Lewis is an honorable man. If he says it happened to him, if Lewis says it happened to him, I will believe Lewis... Absolutely. However, let's assume it did happen.

**SHARPTON:** OK.

**O'REILLY:** Let's assume it did happen. You can't hold the Tea Party accountable for that (O'Reilly & Hume, 2009).

This exchange is important in that it shows a Fox News anchor suggesting that there was no proof of a racial attack from Tea Party protestors. Moreover, while the validity of accusations of racism rested upon the character of the aggrieved—i.e., the “honor” of the congressmen—this, too, could not suffice in substantiating their claims. This type of
rhetoric suggests that Black people have a vested interest in perpetuating, and not ending, racism.

The contention that the incident never happened was pervasive. In an interview with a *Huffington Post* blogger, a National Tea Party Federation leader later said:

LEADER: We actually did some investigation, along with BigGovernment.com. And Andrew Breitbart’s organization produced a number of videos, which refute not only the allegations but call into question the veracity of the charges being made. Not by Congressman Lewis per se, although I think he was sort of used, in particular. We subsequently sent a letter to the Congressional Black Caucus calling for any evidentiary documents and or videos.

INTERVIEWER: I saw that letter.

LEADER: And what we got was, as the *Christian Science Monitor* reported and actually called the Congressional Black Caucus. What they found is not only were they [the Caucus] angered by the letter and their inability to produce any documentation but also they [the Monitor] began to question some of the videos. . . . And so it was clear that it simply did not happen (Fowler, 2010).

As an aside, the *Christian Science Monitor* article did not actually question the “veracity of the videos,” but only noted that the racial epithets were not recorded (Jonsson, 2010). The implication in this clip is clear—racism requires proof, but even proof of racist tea partiers could not show that the Tea Party itself was racist (Jonsson, 2010). Alternatively, *Huffington Post* also reported that a “popular argument among tea partiers” was the idea that any people screaming slurs were plants “to make the movement look bad” (Vogel, 2010c). Through the coverage of this Tea Party incident, racism emerges as a conspiracy theory or paranoid delusion made up by black Americans. Additionally, the language used for racism echoes that of a criminal violation—“charges” of racism, “alleged”
incidents, and “accountability.” While racist rhetoric is not a crime, the news language used to describe racism treats it as such.

The news coverage of another major incident involving race and the Tea Party provided further insight. In early July, the NAACP approved a resolution for “people of good will to repudiate the racism of the Tea Parties,” citing various reports of racism at Tea Party events (Hollingsworth, 2010). In response, Tea Party supporters said that the NAACP was racist because of its resolution. For example, this Politico blog post, written by two Tea Party leaders, argues that the NAACP is responsible for the prevalence of racism:

   The NAACP has a long history of liberalism and racism.

   If you are a conservative—including a conservative African-American—there is no room for you at the NAACP. If you have opinions that differ from the NAACP and the liberal establishment, and if you are African-American, you are an “Uncle Tom,” a “negro,” “not black enough” and “against our people.”

   In other words, the NAACP fancies itself the thought police for millions of black Americans (Martin & Meckler, 2010).

As this quote shows, racism and racialism are constructed in public debates as synonymous—that is, the writers here make no distinction between the process of identifying racism and racism itself. According to them, “The tea party is a truly post-racial movement . . . [and] is uninterested and uninvolved in the politics of race.”

   In other stories, racism was an insult that the NAACP directed towards the Tea Party—in this case, racism was described as a way that Blacks unfairly judge Whites based on racial prejudice. As a Fox News anchor explained:
For people to now use these terms like racist, racist is a lazy, lazy way to describe someone. It's like you don't like your boyfriend, you call him a racist. I think that we've got to stop with this hateful rhetoric.

And the more they use it, the more a legitimate mainstream organization like the NAACP uses these sloppy, lazy kind of broad-based stereotypes, the more they destroy their own credibility (O'Reilly, 2010a)

Moving past the racially embedded meaning of the word “lazy,” this quote is fascinating in its description of “racism” as a charge, a matter of personal disagreement or dislike between people of different racial identities. Later on in the same discussion, the Fox News anchor argued that the NAACP resolution was actually a publicity stunt and part of the Democratic Party’s overall election strategy:

O'REILLY: Now last night, Karl Rove and Dick Morris basically said that Jealous is taking his marching orders from the Democratic party, that the Democratic party wants the controversies about the Tea Party to drive their constituents to the polls next November, because they fear that minority voters will not go in an off year election. This is what Rove and Morris believe is behind this.

RIVERA: Well, I don't know what evidence they have, because to me to make a charge that incendiary, you better back it up. Here's a memo. Here's an email. Here's some kind of evidence—

O'REILLY: You know, it's logical.

RIVERA: Logic and evidence is different.

O'REILLY: I got it, I got it. We can't—it's speculation.

RIVERA: Right.

O'REILLY: But it was an interesting speculation (O'Reilly, 2010a).

Not only is the “charge” of racism an empty signifier, this anchor argues that it is deployed strategically. A Christian Science Monitor article reporting on the incident explained that the refusal of some conservatives to denounce racist acts was part of a
larger effort “to move into a ‘post-shame’ age in which the politics of race are dialed back to allow America to move forward” (Jonsson, 2010). Importantly, the issue here is not racism—rather, it is the process of calling someone racist that tea partiers reportedly oppose. Being called a racist can be unfair, strategic, and destroy a person or group’s reputation, and is in fact racist, as it involves an argument premised on racial distinction (i.e., differentiating between the racist and the racially oppressed). The logic of victimization through racism is reversed in these types of Tea Party news stories.

Another race-related surge in Tea Party news was linked to the resignation of prominent Tea Party spokesman Mark Williams. As the chairman of the prominent Tea Party Express and a regular Tea Party rally speaker, Williams was interviewed as a Tea Party leader by several national news bureaus. In particular, Williams was frequently asked about Tea Party racism. Early in the Tea Party coverage, Williams was called out for using “racial imagery” in “call[ing] the president of the United States an Indonesian Muslim and a welfare thug” and “r racist in chief” (Brown, 2009c; Graham, 2009). However, Williams continued to be interviewed by various news outlets, particularly with regard to racism. In one segment with CNN in September 2009, Williams disclaimed any racism in the “movement,” telling CNN that he observed “very little racism or anger, and those [he saw] were on the fringes and were marginalized.” When CNN showed Williams videotaped footage of Tea Party protest signs that depicted President Obama as a witch doctor, he dismissed the significance of those representations and said they were carried by outliers of the group. Ironically, Williams himself would soon become one of those “outliers.”

In July 2010, Williams posted what he called a satirical commentary on his blog.
In a piece titled “The Lincoln Letter,” Williams posed as the current president and chief executive officer of the NAACP, Ben Jealous—or, in his words, “Precious Ben Jealous, Tom’s Nephew NAACP Head Colored Person” (Reid, 2010). He wrote:

Dear Mr. Lincoln,

We Coloreds have taken a vote and decided that we don’t cotton to that whole emancipation thing. Freedom means having to work for real, think for ourselves, and take consequences along with the rewards. That is just far too much to ask of us Colored People and we demand that it stop!

. . . Mr. Lincoln, you were the greatest racist ever. We had a great gig. Three squares, room and board, all our decisions made by the massa in the house. Please repeal the 13th and 14th Amendments and let us get back to where we belong (Finkelstein, 2010).

Williams’s call to revoke the amendments that abolished legal slavery and broadened the definition of citizenship to include African-Americans triggered an immediate response. After this letter was posted, Williams’s words spread quickly throughout the blogosphere and reignited a now-familiar debate about the racism of the Tea Party. It ultimately prompted the Tea Party Federation, an umbrella group for numerous Tea Party groups throughout the country (including the Tea Party Express) to disavow Williams’s views (Memolia & Hennessey, 2010). Within a week of publishing this blog post, Mark Williams resigned as chairman and spokesman of his Tea Party group. Or, as Fox News put it, “The Tea Party ha[d] to fire one of its members for racial insensitivity” (O'Reilly, Garrett, & Rosen, 2010).

In retaliation for the way the NAACP treated Williams and the Tea Party, conservative blogger Andrew Breitbart released the Sherrod video titled “Video Proof:
The NAACP Awards Racism” (Stickings, 2010). The grainy scene seemed to be spectacular proof of Fox News assertions that Black people, and the NAACP in particular, were the “true” American racists who used race to undermine white progress. After watching the clip, one political analyst on a MSNBC morning show drew an immediate comparison to Mark Williams, saying, “How about if Shirley and Mark Williams, the Tea Party guy, are locked in a room together as their punishment? . . . It’s every bit as hateful. I mean, look at that woman. I mean, aren't you ashamed?” (Cesca, 2010).

After Sherrod’s vindication, Breitbart explained that posting the misleading video on his popular website, Breitbart.com, was a tactical response to the accusations about Tea Party racism from the NAACP:

This was not about Shirley Sherrod. This was about the NAACP attacking the 'Tea Party' and this (video) is showing racism at an NAACP event. I did not ask for Shirley Sherrod to be fired. I did not ask for any repercussions for Shirley Sherrod. . . . Racism is used by the left and the Democratic Party to shut up opposition. And [by releasing the Sherrod video] I am showing you that people who live in glass houses should not be throwing stones ("This was about the NAACP," 2010).

CNN described Sherrod as having “changed her outlook and [realized that] people should move beyond race” (Keck, 2010). Thus, her vindication came through a media narrative that showed that she had transcended race through helping whites, instead of her own personal experience of racism (including the lynching murder of her father). A guest on Fox News connected the Sherrod controversy to President Obama, arguing that it had “forced him to have to come from behind that curtain and address the issue” of race (O'Reilly, 2009). According to one ABC World News reporter, the Sherrod incident
ultimately provided a “teachable moment” on “race, media, and the Obama administration” (Tapper, 2010).

The Sherrod case proved to be a particularly revelatory opportunity for Fox News reporters to explain how they conceived of the media in racialized terms. According to O’Reilly, the media aftermath of the Sherrod story resulted in a lot of finger-pointing at Fox News for “race-baiting.” O’Reilly felt that his peers were accusing Fox News of “gin[ning] up the story to make blacks look bad,” and the only way that the mainstream media understood race was through the lens of black victimhood20 (O'Reilly, 2010f).

If it doesn't fit their story line on race, they're not interested. And the only story line, Bill, the only story line they care about is that white conservatives and FOX News are the racists in this story, in this picture. And they're out to get a poor, innocent, black woman. That is the only way the mainstream media today understands race. And it's pathetic” (O'Reilly, 2010c).

This narrative also reflected a larger media “storyline on race” that “white conservatives and Fox News are the racists.” O’Reilly then declared that covering race on his show was a fruitless effort:

I don't want to have [the discussion of race] anymore. Every time I have it with somebody like you, with Al Sharpton or whatever, my words get taken out of context, I'm branded a racist. It doesn't do me any good personally (O'Reilly, 2009).

Fellow Fox News host Glenn Beck echoed a similar sentiment. “If you are a woman or a Latino or an African-American, you are supposed to tow [sic] a certain line in the media; if you don't, they will target you” (O'Reilly, 2010b).

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20 The quote was specifically: “If it doesn't fit their story line on race, they're not interested. And the only story line, Bill, the only story line they care about is that white conservatives and FOX News are the racists in this story, in this picture. And they're out to get a poor, innocent, black woman. That is the only way the mainstream media today understands race. And it's pathetic” (O'Reilly, 2010f).
These incidents exemplify how racial episodes function in the age of post-racism, in which criticisms of racial performance within media narratives regularly aim at countless moving targets. As Imani Perry (2011) argues, while “the media are often a convenient straw horse for racial images,…they probably reflect racial ideology far more than they guide it” (p. 48). The term “post-race” signals an era in which recognizing or ostensibly referencing discrimination based on race can be equated with racism—in other words, we are in a period in which the public is focused on transcending race rather than eliminating racism. As Enck-Wanzer (2011) points out, this type of political boundary setting has created a space in which President Obama is “operating within a racially neoliberal discursive field that binds him to antiracial (as opposed to antiracist) responses to subtly (and not so subtly) racist discourses” (p. 24). The Shirley Sherrod case shows that this confinement extends to other Blacks in power and shows the material consequences of perceived violations.

Neoliberal frameworks emphasize the individual’s role in his or her own success or failure—put differently, neoliberal discourse mirrors what Bonilla-Silva (2006) refers to as “colorblind racism,” in which whites use a “loosely organized set of ideas, phrases, and stories” to justify contemporary racial inequality. Or as Enck-Wanzer explains it, “racism is ‘shorn of the charge’ and the structural irrelevance of race is underscored through the neoliberal fantasy of personal responsibility” (p.26). While scholars refers to this as a “post-race” or “post-racial” era, signaling an end to the importance of racial identity, I want to instead use the term “post-racism,” which references the idea that race is no longer important because systematic discrimination against people based on race has ended. Thus, the Tea Party’s leadership could be explicitly racist, and yet news
organizations did not dismiss it as a fringe racist group—in other words, the Tea Party was able to explicitly allude to race and elude accusations of racism at the same time. This is, in fact, indicative of the ever-present “post-shame” mantra that has always marked American attitudes towards race. Through this line of argument, one can conclude that without explicit acknowledgement of racial difference in regards to power, there is no racism—and without racism, there is no racial inequality.

This leads to one of the final insights about race and racism that emerge from the Tea Party news stories. The search for explicit racism in the Tea Party provided the disproportionately white news media and its audience an opportunity for internal validation—that is, identifying the “racist out there” allows some whites to both dismiss the personal relevance of racism and to alleviate any feelings of personal liability in perpetuating or benefiting from a system predicated upon racial inequality and white privilege. This particular point buttresses bell hooks’s (2006) conclusion that diversity in media representations is generally about white men “eating the other”—consuming and appropriating race for their own consumption and ego -- and not about featuring humanizing depictions of marginalized people. As a racialized melodrama, the Tea Party provided a space to air concerns about white respectability in the Obama era and permitted a larger discussion about the (in)appropriate performance of a politicized whiteness in a “post-race” environment.

Ultimately, journalists used the Tea Party as a racial “bogeyman,” a figure that represents modern racism within an era that denies its existence, providing the hyperexpressive bodies needed for the ongoing melodrama of race. That is, the debates over the Tea Party’s racism also represent larger arguments about our inability to
precisely or definitively identify racist acts, ideas, or even people, leaving the Tea Party to symbolize racism’s “imaginary” social force. Similarly, it seems that the Tea Party used race to maintain a consistent spotlight within a narrow political stage. Within a “post-racial” political landscape, the question of racism fueled the growth and development of the Tea Party narrative. Additionally, while many scholars have noted the way that American Blacks have historically struggled with adhering to notions of “Black respectability,” whiteness rarely, if ever, undergoes such examination.

*Her Cup of Tea: Representations of Tea Party Women*

Outside of the story that describes the fateful events at the Boston Harbor, the term “tea party” carries a distinctly feminine political and historical connotation in Anglophone societies. Women in the Victorian age were drawn to tea parties as a result of their exclusion from the sociopolitical spaces of men’s coffee houses and to reinforce their gendered roles and duties in the home (Heath, 2012). Today, the word “tea” still evokes the image of a domestic and traditionally feminine role—as Hillary Clinton discovered during her husband's 1992 presidential campaign, when she made waves by commenting that she could have “stayed home and baked cookies and had tea” (Koppel, 1992). In 1990, an unwitting *New York Times* editor triggered a teabag-donning protest amongst his newsroom colleagues when he said of women’s visibility in the press, “If you are covering the local teas, you’ve got more women than the *Wall Street Journal*” (Jamieson, 1995).

It is perhaps fitting, then, that women would so visibly renegotiate their roles in politics and society within another type of Tea Party—this time expanding and redefining
women’s participation in politics and society at large. Journalists covering the twenty-first-century Tea Party overwhelmingly covered its female participants. Women figured prominently in the narratives that explained and defined the Tea Party’s significance as a cultural and social signifier. While modern-day Tea Party women activists and candidates were notably distinct from their Victorian antecedents, the stories journalists told about female tea partiers were particularly important in reconceptualizing notions of gender, politics, and performance in a contemporary landscape. Ultimately, media reports on Tea Party women denoted the birth of a new brand of conservative political woman and imbued the archetypal populism of the Tea Party with a renewed sense of modernism and progress, even as it drew on problematic and regressive notions of femininity and civic engagement.

Under the bright spotlight of American news coverage, political women have always had to negotiate gender norms and biases carefully. In a 1935 news interview, Eleanor Roosevelt famously wrote about her exceptional political work as a First Lady outside of the typical household and ceremonial duties associated with the role:

> When people say a woman’s place is in the home, I say, with enthusiasm, it certainly is, but if she cares about her home, that caring will take her far and wide (Parry-Giles & Blair, 2002).

Roosevelt was an extremely politically active First Lady and this quote reflects her deliberate use of rhetoric to blur the boundaries separating private and public spheres and the gender roles assigned to each—a move that was crucial in the rise of Tea Party

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21 I confined my examination of Tea Party women to stories that specifically mention the Tea Party—if Tea Party women were featured in stories unrelated to the Tea Party (for instance, there were many news stories about the unplanned pregnancy of Sarah Palin’s teenage daughter), I did not look at that coverage.
women. The twenty-first-century rise of viable female candidates and activists has been
cultivated through a reconfiguration of American values that simultaneously embrace and
defy patriarchy (and the suffragist legacy), forcing women involved in American politics
to adopt a very tricky public persona that scholar Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1995) calls
“the binds that tie.”

The media tends to frame women in politics “through a feminine lens . . .
focus[ing] more on [their] clothing, hair style, family, and other ‘soft’ matters” (Watson,
2006), p. 78. Women also receive less press coverage than men and there is a major
political disadvantage for female candidates who present stereotypically feminine
characteristics or focus on perceived “men’s issues” like crime or foreign policy (Huddy
& Capelos, 2002; Jamieson, 1995; Mendelberg, 2001). Moreover, the media often fails to
mention the contributions of women candidates outside of “women’s issues” and often
negatively portrays their viability as candidates (Heldman, Carroll, & Olson, 2005;
Mendelberg, 2001). Since Roosevelt’s time (and before), women involved in politics
have continued to carefully walk the line of pushing for women’s equality while adhering
to social norms about gender in order to appeal to voters, colleagues, and the media that
tells their stories.

Tea Party women activists and candidates were particularly effective in attracting
news coverage for the Tea Party. According to Daniel Reed (2012), Christine
O’Donnell’s primary victory “started a media frenzy, as her nomination sparked renewed
attention on the midterm elections on the cable news networks and the Internet” (p. 30).
Journalists identified Tea Party women activists and candidates based on their
appearances at Tea Party events, leadership in local Tea Party groups, and endorsements
from high-profile Tea Party leaders (Sarah Palin, in particular). In a *Politico* and *Newsmax* (Associated Press, 2010c; Vogel, 2010e) article, all of the potential speakers highlighted for the first Tea Party convention were women—Sarah Palin, Michele Bachmann, and Marsha Blackburn. Palin’s speeches at various Tea Party Express rallies emphasized her importance as a Tea Party leader and bolstered the perceptions of her centrality in midterm election organizing. Michele Bachmann also received press coverage for her appearances at Tea Party Express events and for creating the first Tea Party caucus in Congress. An MSNBC anchor referred to her as the “face of the Tea Party” (O'Donnell, Robinson, & Sanders, 2010).

In some cases, women gained national attention following Palin’s endorsement (Vogel, 2010e). For instance, *Newsmax* covered Nikki Haley’s rise as a congressional candidate as a natural byproduct of Palin’s public support:

In South Carolina's Republican gubernatorial primary, state Rep. Nikki Haley trailed a congressman, the lieutenant governor and attorney general for months. But a tea party surge and Sarah Palin's endorsement propelled her to an easy first-place finish. She faces Rep. Gresham Barrett in a June 22 runoff (Associated Press, 2010d).

The *New York Times* also highlighted Karen Handel, a Georgia gubernatorial candidate, as “at least the 50th candidate to win the Palin seal of approval”; the *Wall Street Journal* said that “Ms. Palin's backing was seen as important to both [Nikki Haley’s and Carly Fiorina’s] victories” (Weisman, 2010a; Zeleny, 2010b).

When one news poll suggested that female Tea Party supporters slightly outnumbered males, the feminization of the Tea Party in news media coverage became even more firmly entrenched. In April 2010, Quinnipiac University released a poll that said the Tea Party movement was “a group that has more women than men,” the tone of
the press coverage changed substantially (Poll, 2010). *Político* produced a full feature story with a headline that announced: “The Face of the Tea Party is Female” (Vogel, 2010a). Drawing on the poll, the reporter asserted that “many of the tea party’s most influential grass-roots and national leaders are women” and that “women might make up a majority of the movement as well.” In fact, a “relatively consistent finding in national surveys of Tea Party supporters is that men outweigh women overall. Most surveys peg males as numbering 55% to 60% of Tea Partiers” p. 42 (Skocpol and Williamson, 2011).

Other news stories began to portray women as the most influential Tea Party leaders on both the national and local levels. A *USA Today* began an article about a competitive Colorado race with:

Meet Lesley Hollywood, stay-at-home mom turned kingmaker.

Thirty years old and new to politics, she has in short order become director of the Northern Colorado Tea Party and state coordinator of the national Tea Party Patriots, leading some of the had-it-up-to-here conservatives who have flipped the Senate race in this swing state upside down (Page, 2010a).

Since the Tea Party was considered “leaderless,” these women were recognized as Tea Party leaders through more informal, often feminized, references, like Hollywood’s “kingmaker.” Michele Bachmann was referred to as the “beloved of the tea party” and a “hero of the tea party movement” (Frank, 2010; Vogel, 2010d). Sarah Palin was a “kingmaker, media personality, best-selling author” and “tea party personality” (O'Reilly & Wallace, 2010; Page, 2010a). Sharron Angle, a Nevada Senate candidate, was the “tea

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22 Tom Rosenstiel (2005) provides an in-depth discussion of the rising significance of polls and the way journalists increasingly rely on surveys to shape, interpret, and organize political news stories. Kathleen Frankovic (2005) and Lawrence R. Jacobs, et al. (2005) also write about the influence of partisan bias and ideology upon contemporary public opinion polls, survey questions, and the ways that poll findings are reported in news.
party darling” (O'Donnell, Robinson, et al., 2010). While the Quinnipiac survey was actually an outlier among most public opinion data on the Tea Party, new outlets continued to highlight feminine power and influence as a major component of the Tea Party narrative.

Sarah Palin, by far, received the bulk of the news coverage of Tea Party women. In part, Palin’s news coverage followed from her high profile in the 2008 presidential campaign. One Fox news anchor said of Sarah Palin that “she is a news magnet . . . there’s just constantly news about this woman” (O'Reilly, 2010g). Early in the Tea Party coverage, MSNBC called her the “rock star in the Republican Party” (Shuster, 2009b). Eventually, reporters cast this description of her “rock star” persona onto her involvement with Tea Party events, particularly after she resigned from office and took on Tea Party–related engagements full-time. At one Tea Party event, an ABC News correspondent said Palin received a “rock star–like welcome” (Sawyer, 2010b). The New York Times wrote that Palin represented a “new breed of unelected public figure operating in an environment in which politics, news media and celebrity are fused as never before” (Leibovich, 2010). Politico described Palin as a “celebrity” who “has positioned herself as a tea party champion” (Vogel, 2010c). MSNBC called her a “tea party icon” and described her supporters as “fans” (O'Donnell, Fineman, & Friesen, 2010). Palin was described as “rallying the Tea Party troops” on CNN (Brown, Velshi, & Gupta, 2010). A Fox News anchor declared that “Palin comes closest” to being the Tea Party’s leader (O'Reilly & Wallace, 2010).

In the news coverage, Sarah Palin’s political celebrity relied heavily on what Laurie Oullette (2012) calls her “affective economy… that trades the “private”
performance of self and personal relations for the affective consumer connections that sell commercial television programs, websites, DVDs, and books” (p. 189). As a Tea Party emblem, reporters noted Palin’s particular “brand” (Olbermann, Wolffe, & Crawford, 2010)—she was “every mother, every daughter, . . . every wife, she’s every young businesswoman,… [and a] Christian lady” (Griffin, Lah, & Gupta, 2010) and represented the “traditional values” component of Tea Party ideology (the other component being fiscal conservatism) (Weil, 2010c). Palin’s brand in the press drew on her perceived authenticity—as one tea partier explained, she “walks the walk, talks the talk” (Griffin et al., 2010). Or, in the words of another Tea Party female candidate interviewed on CNN, “even a lot of Democrats and independents admire her spunk and her willingness to stand up for what she believes and say what's on her mind” (Zeleny, 2010b).

News reports also described the Tea Party women as a useful political shield for conservatives. According to Politico, the “political elite” don’t know “how to deal” with Tea Party women, and “it makes it harder to vilify a movement when its public face is a female one” (Vogel, 2010a). Skoda expanded on this idea later in his interview:

And if you want to have an antagonistic approach, you cannot have it against women, right? It's the idea you don't hit a woman. And the reality is that the Tea Party movement is so overwhelmingly led by women, and so positioned as a majority by women that if they recognized that, then all these antagonistic and derogatory comments are essentially focused on those women. And it will in fact diminish their own credibility (Fowler, 2010).

Skoda’s quote shows that classifying the Tea Party as a movement of women presented an image that could avoid political criticism or attacks. According to Kathleen Hall
Jamieson (1995), attacking female candidates has consistently presented this type of political contravention:

Playground rules set for boys are clear. Don’t beat up smaller kids and don’t hit girls. In politics the result plays out as a double bind for the male candidate confronting a female opponent (p. 176).

In the *New York Times*, one Republican primary candidate sensitive to this perception was quoted as telling his female opponent to “stop hiding behind the skirt of Sarah Palin” (Zeleny, 2010b).

In Tea Party news stories, women activists and candidates regularly functioned as narrative interventions that simultaneously modernized the Tea Party and helped to shield it from criticism. Drawing on the misleading Quinnipiac poll, a *Politico* reporter explained the deeper significance of the Tea Party’s female “face”:

When the tea party movement burst onto the scene last year to oppose President Barack Obama, the Democratic Congress, and the health care legislation they wanted to enact, some liberal critics were quick to label its activists as angry white men.

As the populist conservative movement has gained a foothold over the past year, it’s become increasingly clear that the dismissive characterization was at least half wrong (Vogel, 2010a).

As the *Politico* story shows, Tea Party women disrupted and dispelled the notion of the Tea Party as “angry white men.” It, in fact, remade the Tea Party into a place “where conservative women have found their voices” (ibid). It was a rhetorical move captured succinctly in the title of conservative radio host Michael Graham’s (2010) book about the tea party: *That’s No Angry Mob, That’s My Mom*. Newsmax ran an abbreviated version of *Politico*’s column and echoed this same sentiment, writing that “those who say the tea party movement consists mostly of angry white men will have to recast their stereotyping
in at least one regard” (Patten, 2010). When the Huffington Post later interviewed the founder of the National Tea Party Federation, Mark Skoda, about a recent New York Times poll about the tea partiers, he responded:

> It's interesting—when you look at the Tea Party demographics 55% are women, and as we know there is a great deal of wealth in the female population of America. I think that the sort of cartoonish association of Tea Partiers as being old white males, Southern, illiterate . . . I think it's again, the narrative doesn't fit the reality. Right? (Fowler, 2010)

After the Quinnipiac poll, a New York Times poll published only three weeks later showed that “the 18 percent of Americans who identify themselves as Tea Party supporters tend to be Republican, white, male, married and older than 45” (“New York Times/CBS News Poll: National Survey of Tea Party Supporters,” 2010; Zernike & Thee-Brenan, 2010b). Specifically, the poll’s results showed that Tea Party supporters were 59% male and 41% female. It also found that “Tea Party supporters are more likely to classify themselves as ‘angry.’” The Tea Party as a rise of angry white women was construed as a new political spectacle that added a sense of change and rejuvenation to the typified version of conservative populism that had prevailed since the Reagan era.

Both subtly and overtly, reporters also drew attention to Tea Party women in ways that defied the stereotype of old, outdated (i.e., racist), angry white men that persisted in Tea Party characterization. According to a female Tea Party leader interviewed by Politico, the influence of women explained the Tea Party’s leaderless quality:

> Walker said it is women in particular who have pushed back against efforts to build a more centralized leadership structure for the tea party.

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23 Some of the differences in the Tea Party polls are likely based on differences in survey methodology. For example, the Quinnipiac poll specifically targeted registered voters and asked them whether they were “part of the Tea Party movement” or had a “favorable opinion” of the Tea Party. The New York Times poll conducted a survey with two distinct and generalizable samples of all Americans generally and people who identified as Tea Party supporters.
movement, which some organizers suggest could help the movement translate its energy into electoral success.

“Most of the women do not want a large, top-down movement,” Walker said. “We like the local flavor and independence of the tea parties. We don't need anyone to tell us what to do from D.C. or a large organization to lead us. We're capable of handling most of it on our own” (Vogel, 2010a).

The use of new media was also mentioned in reporting about Tea Party women, namely Sarah Palin. Palin was frequently noted for distributing her messages via digital technology, often the only way in which her perspective was integrated into news reports. In an article about her political influence, the Wall Street Journal wrote that:

Through Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin has burst back into the political spotlight this month, while her family life has once again become part of the broader American conversation.

… Last week, SarahPAC posted a "Mama Grizzlies" video online aimed at reaching out to women voters. . . . Political experts said the video—with its high production values and campaign-like blue hues—was impressive (Weisman, 2010a).

On MSNBC, featured a story about a controversy involving Palin’s use of Twitter; the New York Times wrote that Palin had brought a political primary “alive” “through a breezy 194 words posted on Ms. Palin's Facebook page” (O'Donnell, 2010; Zeleny, 2010b).

In part, the focus on female tea partiers in Tea Party news coverage could be attributed to the rise of female candidates in the 2008 campaign. In the 1990s, the highly publicized “Year of the Woman” and election of female political candidates came after Anita Hill’s testimony (Vavrus, 2002). The Hill hearings produced “critical analysis in the mediated public sphere” around the unequal treatment of women and garnered
support and attention on female candidates in a variety of races (p. 77). Similarly, the presence (and losses) of Clinton and Palin in the presidential campaign drew national attention to the plight and treatment of political women. The rise of Tea Party women possibly mirrored the nineties trend, this time allowing journalists to produce the Year of the Conservative Woman—or, as one New York Times guest columnist put it, “The Year of the (Pro-Life) Woman” (Ponnuru, 2010).

In various ways, the news media conformed to expectations in reporting on Tea Party women, describing them through stereotypically feminine attributes and traits. Tea Party women’s roles as mothers or grandmothers were often used to explain their value as candidates or activists and account for their political involvement. As Jamieson (1995) put it:

No matter how you dress it, maternity remains more relevant than paternity to those who put together the news pages. . . . [Their] texts invite us to conclude that marital status and childbearing are important facets of a woman’s life (p. 168, 169).

On Fox News, an anchor forsook the title “Governor” and repeatedly referred to Sarah Palin as “Mrs. Palin” (O'Reilly, 2009). CNN reported that Palin said she “would consider running for president in 2012 if she thought it was right for the country and for her family” (Griffin et al., 2010). Being a grandmother and mother was particularly highlighted in depictions of Nevada Senate candidate Sharron Angle. The Wall Street Journal reported that Angle’s “first foray into activism was when her son was held back” (Moore, 2010). Politico’s article about Tea Party women, almost universally referred to female interviewees as “mothers,” “grandmothers,” or even “stepmothers.” According to Politico, the Tea Party attracts conservative women because it “revolves around family
rituals” such as doctor’s appointments and family budgeting (Vogel, 2010a). In this way, domesticity maps onto the “domestic” of domestic policy, allowing healthcare and national debt to be framed as issues that require the skills of an attentive mother.

As a result, an explicit and implicit rhetorical argument emerged in the press that any qualified female candidate must be a mother. A New York Times columnist wrote of Sarah Palin, Michele Bachmann, and Nancy Pelosi:

What does it say about this country at this moment that, of the small handful of women who have achieved highly visible political roles, three are matriarchs of such very large families? Could it be that the skills of managing sprawling households translate well into holding office? Or that such a remarkable glut of mom cred makes a woman's bid for external power more palatable to voters?

. . . Whatever forces may be at play, taking a look at present dynamics, any American woman with long-range political ambitions might do well to also look to her nursery (Schillinger, 2010).

In large part, the emphasis on motherhood in news coverage of Tea Party women can be attributed to the descriptions provided by the candidates themselves (as opposed to their male counterparts) as shown in this ABC News clip:

SHARRON ANGLE (REP) (SENATORIAL CANDIDATE)
I'm a mother and a grandmother.

RAND PAUL (REP) (US SENATE CANDIDATE)
I'm a physician.

RON JOHNSON (REP) (US SENATE CANDIDATE)
Full-time business person (Karl, 2010).

As shown above, news reports on Tea Party women begins to erode the binary of what Angela High-Pippert calls “mom discourse” versus “policy discourse.” According to Pippert, “‘mom discourse’ frames political participation in terms of women’s status as mothers, rather than their expertise on policy issues,” while “‘policy discourse’ is more
rational and technical than mom discourse and more closely resembles the speech of
officeholders than constituents” (Carilli & Campbell, 2005, p. 201). Though women
activists and (presumably) candidates are able to garner attention using “mom discourse,”
it also leads to their portrayal as “emotional (rather than rational) and unreasonable . . .
[and] the perception that they are less suited for politics than (rational) men” (ibid, p.
209). In other words, the ways that journalists and candidates used maternalist politics to
frame Tea Party women would likely backfire.

Journalists also labeled Tea Party women with gendered tropes and references
that dismissed, demeaned, or trivialized them as political candidates. A New York Times
columnist marked the rise of Tea Party women as the “era of Republican Mean Girls”
(Dowd, 2010). On CNN, an anchor and his guest, a comedian, joked about the
appearance and age of female tea partiers:

SPITZER: I heard you say before you're really frustrated by the Tea
Party and the fact that the Tea Party seems to be driving the politics of
the moment. What's the best response to it? How do you respond to
them?

D.L. HUGHLEY: Well, I think it's arsine to call them all racist. I don't
think they are. I do find that their fascination with middle aged semi-
attractive white women who shop at Lenscrafters is amazing to me.

(LAUGHTER) (Parker, Spitzer, & Zakaria, 2010)

Sarah Palin’s descriptions were consistently feminine—she was a “cheerleader” and “Tea
Party princess” in the New York Times, “Medusa” (Blow, 2010), the “Queen of the Tea
Party” (Fowler, 2010), the Tea Party movement’s “informal godmother” (Shear, 2010)
and frequently “Sister Sarah” on MSNBC (for example, see: Olbermann, 2010b;
Olbermann et al, 2009) (Blow, 2010; Fowler, 2010; Shear, 2010). (The terms
“cheerleader”, “queen”, and “princess” are particularly poignant, as these roles denote highly visible women with public profiles but little actual power or influence—cheerleaders literally perform on the sidelines and in the modern day, members of royalty generally denote people whose power comes more from tradition than active leadership.) At a joint campaign appearance, Michelle Bachmann and Palin were “sorority” sisters who wore “coordinating outfits” (Schillinger, 2010). During her campaign, Senate candidate Christine O’Donnell had to refute allegations that she was a “witch” (Olbermann & Fineman, 2010). In the Wall Street Journal, Sharron Angle was “petite, [and] has Irish red hair with and [sic] a pretty round face” (Moore, 2010). In the New York Times, Angle was the “Red Queen of the Mad Hatter tea party” who wore “girlish bangs,” a “casino red suit and lipstick” and “had the slightly threatening air of the inebriated lady in a country club bar” (Dowd, 2010).

As seen in coverage of other political women, the press typically described Tea Party women as unstable stars rather than viable political candidates. Constructing female candidates as unfit for political office is a common feature in the coverage of political women.

Issues of credibility are confronted by all candidates or political players in national campaigns. Due to historically limited participation of women in national politics, questions of credentials, and consequently legitimacy or participation in national politics, become major campaign obstacles (Carilli, 2005, p. 192).

A USA Today article on the Nevada Senate race asked whether Sharron Angle was “damaging vs. dangerous” (Page, 2010b). In other places, Tea Party women were depicted as stupid and unprepared for office. In one highly publicized incident, Christine O’Donnell questioned whether “the separation of church and state” was written in the
Constitution. In fact, the exact phrase “separation of Church and State” is not in the Constitution and is an oft-debated interpretation of the First Amendment. But the media seized on the story as reflective of O’Donnell’s ineptitude. The *Huffington Post* reported on O’Donnell’s “apparent lack of awareness that separation of church and state is enshrined in the First Amendment,” while an MSNBC anchor spoke directly to O’Donnell: “You’re so dumb—how do you find the door every day?” (“Howard Fineman On What Christine O'Donnell's Constitutional Ignorance Says About The Tea Party,” 2010; Olbermann & Fineman, 2010). On ABC, Meghan McCain called O’Donnell a “nut job” who was “making a mockery of running for public office” (Kerley, 2010).

Frequently, journalists highlighted the women’s direct messaging tactics through social media networks and reported that they avoided the media, implying that the women were unprepared and afraid of hard questions rather than avoiding unfair or biased treatment in the press.

Sarah Palin, as the most featured Tea Party woman, also received most of the coverage that dismissed her potential political career prospects. A CNN segment about Palin writing speech notes on her hand featured an interviewee saying, “If you can't answer the question ‘What are your priorities?’ without reading the palm of your hands, maybe you're not the best leader to be leading people” (Griffin et al., 2010). A *Newsmax* blogger said he was “searching for Mr. Conservative” and complained that Palin was “polarizing” and not an “electable candidate” (LeBoutillier, 2010). Note that there was an implicit assumption that an “electable candidate” would be male. *Politico* argued that “Palin hasn’t done so well on her own, with as many endorsements exposing weakness as showing strength . . . and others showing comical disorganization” (Smith, 2010). An
article in the *New York Times* included a Palin fan who opposed her seeking political office:

Judy Pruitt, a 70-year-old retiree in Lawrenceville, said she came to see Ms. Handel partly because of the Palin endorsement. But she had a swift answer when asked if she would welcome a 2012 Palin campaign.

"I'm not sure she's ready for the presidency," she said. "I do like listening to her, and I respect her views on things. But I think she can have more of an impact if she's not running. I really do" (Zeleny, 2010b).

An exchange between two CNN anchors suggests that Tea Party women had also taken on the general tropes of Tea Party news coverage (or vice versa).

PARKER: The Republican Party is very, very disciplined and they will incorporate the Tea Party.

[...]

SPITZER: The Republican Party of George Bush, Sr., and even George W. Bush had the perception of discipline, but who's taken over the party? John McCain is an afterthought. John McCain is begging Sarah Palin, at least back when he was in the middle of a primary to come, hey, help me out Sarah. He almost threw her off the ticket. This has been a complete role reversal. You know, it's kind of staggering to those of us who don't feel comfortable with it, of course, you know, we still have Christine O'Donnell. . . .

(LAUGHTER) (Parker & Spitzer, 2010a)

The Tea Party, led by women, was undisciplined, rowdy, emotional (angry), and a site of buffoonery, but could be ultimately be *refined* through its assimilation into the “disciplined” Republican Party, led by men. As these quotes reflect, Palin and other Tea Party women represented a political brand that generated “buzz” and influenced public discourse, but were not political candidates prepared or qualified for office—in short, they were fit to be kingmakers, but never king.
The news media’s portrayal of female Tea Party activists and candidates conforms to the expected media representations of women as consumptive power-holders. In her book *Enlightened Sexism* (2010), Susan Douglas argues that images of women in the media are anchored in “fantasies of power” and “imagined power” that construct “sexual display and rampant consumerism as alleged sources of power and control” (pp. 5, 6, 8). These “images . . . insist that purchasing power and sexual power are much more gratifying than political or economic power” (p. 5). Vavrus also found that the “consumption of high-status commodities” is a common feature in media messages that target and depict women in a post-feminist landscape (p. 23). According to Laurie Ouellette (2012), Sarah Palin’s “political celebrity has no economic value in the formal political system; only in the broader domain of media and consumer culture can its profit-making capacities be realized” (p. 189).

Compared to Tea Party men, journalists more frequently highlighted the funds that Tea Party women were able to raise (and, hence, spend) to describe and explain their political power, significance, and performance. *Politico* called Bachmann a “fundraising juggernaut” (Sherman, 2010). Sharron Angle was noted for “rais[ing] a stunning $14 million from July through September . . . [while her opponent Harry] Reid raised about $2 million during that time” (Page, 2010). According to the *Wall Street Journal*, Palin’s “influence” lay in her “fund-raising abilities” and capacity to pump money into the campaigns she endorsed (Weisman, 2010a). While these women were not seen as prepared for political office, the money they were able to raise and spend guaranteed their perceived power and coverage in the press. Male Tea Party candidates such as Senators Rand Paul and Scott Brown, on the other hand, were often described in the context of
their surprising success, candidacies, and political prowess, and there was less emphasis on the money their campaigns raised. As DiMaggio puts it, “ultimately, money speaks louder politically than do words” (Bullock, 2011, p. 84)—especially for Tea Party women, who stood in as political commodities to both raise and wield funds, reinforcing the consumerist image of political women in media.

However, in some important ways, the news coverage of Tea Party women also defied typical portrayals of political women in media and rebranded conservative women. First, at least one notable female Tea Party figure claimed to be a feminist. In a piece titled “No Mystique about Feminism,” a New York Times columnist notes that Sarah Palin “repeatedly laid claim to the ‘feminist mantle,’” and calls the increase in Republican women vying for and winning political office marked an “emerging, conservative, feminist identity” (Douthat, 2010). Newsmax proclaimed that “Sarah Palin became an icon of the new feminism,” heralding women who were “smart, independent, successful, and they're shaping feminism today—even if it means being a mom and raising kids!”

McRobbie (2004) finds that “feminism is routinely disparaged” in media representations of women (p. 258) and Vavrus (2002) argues that women in what she calls the "post-feminist" period have typically eschewed feminism as an unrealistic, unnatural, objectionable, victimizing ideology and aesthetics (173-178). Susan Douglas (2010) writes that the “F-word” has been “stereotyped as man-hating, child-loathing, hairy, shrill, humorless, deliberately unattractive Ninjas from Hades” (p. 11); Jenny Coleman (2009) agrees that “the last two decades have been marked by . . . an increasing rejection of the label ‘feminist’” (p. 4). Typically, though the news media have negatively
depicted feminist groups and favorably framed conservative women’s organizations, journalists generally construct conservative women’s organizations as representing conservative issues, while feminists are considered to advocates for women’s interests (Schreiber, 2010). By claiming “feminism,” Palin erased the binaries of the two positions in the press and became a women’s symbol.

News stories about Tea Party women were also different in other ways. Though the widely held academic opinion is that the press typically focus on female candidates’ clothing, marital status, and children, these attributes were rarely mentioned in stories about Tea Party women. Jamieson (1995) cites the following examples of female senators described in the New York Times in 1992:

59-year-old Ms. [Dianne] Feinstein . . . faces another race in 1994 . . . no doubt she will rely, as she has in the past, on the assets of her husband, Richard C. Blum, an investment banker.

The 42-year-old Ms. [Patty] Murray lives in the Seattle suburb of Shoreline, where in addition to her two children, ages 12 and 15, she cares for her aging parents.

Ms. [Carol Moseley] Braun, who is divorced and the mother of a 15-year-old son (p. 170).

While “mothering” was important in explaining a Tea Party female candidate, activist, or leader’s entrance into politics, their children and husbands are almost never mentioned or discussed.24 When descriptions of Tea Party women’s physical appearances did occur, they were extremely rare and typically isolated to stories about their initial emergence into the political spotlight.

24 The only specific mention of a child that I could find was an interview with a young conservative couple attending a Tea Party event with their small child (NYT 3). The article described them as a “family,” instead of focusing solely on the woman.
Journalists also portrayed Tea Party women as a potent combination of femininity and masculinity. While political women generally have had to be careful of appearing too weak or too assertive, Tea Party women were written as brazen and tough. Tea Party mothers drew on motherhood as a way to defend political engagement (as did Roosevelt before them), while still using masculinist imagery to project confidence and competence. The *New York Times* said that Palin was “hardened” by attacks on her (Leibovich, 2010). In the *Wall Street Journal*, Sharron Angle was a “60-year-old grandmother of 10” who drove a “Harley Davidson Road King bike.” The primary example of this rhetoric of maternal aggression came from the “Mama Grizzly” label frequently claimed or assigned to Tea Party women. Moving from the “hockey mom” label Palin claimed during the 2008 campaign, the “Mama Grizzly” label allowed women to explain and defend their perceived aggression as a function of their committed motherhood. For example, Sharron Angle explained her entry into politics: “I was just a mother, and the government had gotten between me and my child, and that's like getting between a mother bear and her cubs” (Moore, 2010). In *Politico*, a female tea partier also said of her activism that “Mama comes out fighting . . . when legislation messes with mama’s kids” (Vogel, 2010a). In this way, the Tea Party women explained aggression as a feminine quality—contrary to the typical rhetoric of female political candidates. While Jamieson argues that political women typically fail because they are judged against a masculine standard, she also concludes: “Women are judged against a masculine standard, and by that standard they lose, whether they claim difference or similarity. The bind is broken by positing a form of equality not solely based on a male norm”
By drawing on “Mama Grizzly” rhetoric, the Tea Party women were now being judged on a *female* norm.

It is important to note that the rise of the media coverage of “Mama Grizzlies” is markedly different than previous political labels for women voters and candidates, particularly the “soccer moms” of the 1990s. The political significance of “soccer moms” as a voting bloc focused on women who were white, middle-class, consumerist, suburban, perceived as non-threatening, and largely confined to domestic concerns (Vavrus, 2002). Additionally, “soccer mom” news coverage focused on married women, excluding single mothers (p. 119). On the other hand, the term “Mama Grizzly” makes the identity of mother a descriptor, not the noun—these women are more grizzly than mom. Grizzlies are bears—they live in the woods, survive off the land, and are dangerous, tough, and popularly known for their instinctive and murderous protection of their offspring. Bears also do not live in cities, which are considered Democratic strongholds and generally known as the domain of left-leaning, “latte-drinking” liberals, yuppies, hipsters, and people of color. The term “Mama Grizzlies” dismisses the consumerism of the “soccer mom” label, eschews the suburban and urban landscapes, and includes single moms. Moreover, the “Mama Grizzlies” moniker seems to address Douglas’s (2010) concern that in the news, there remained a deep, unyielding contradiction between and discomfort with “female” and “power.” . . . “Female” is still equated with being nice, supportive, nurturing, accommodating, and domestic—not compatible with anything that might involve leadership. “Power” is equated with domination, superiority, being tough, even ruthless. These two categories simply are not supposed to go together (p. 272).
Instead, “Mama Grizzlies” merge traditionally masculine tropes such as fierceness, toughness, and violence with feminine tropes—particularly the attentive and self-sacrificing mother. In short, the portrayal of Tea Party women in the media redefines what a (political) mother looks like and what she is able to do. Moreover, Palin’s “Mama Grizzly” endorsement of candidates Carly Fiorina and Christine O’Donnell—neither of whom are mothers—reflects that the label was primarily rhetorical in its intent and use.

Another unique feature in Tea Party news coverage was the attention given to women’s regular attacks on the masculinity of their opponents. ABC reported that Tea Party women’s use of “man up” made it the “catch-phrase of the [2010 midterm election] campaign” (Karl, 2010).

JONATHAN KARL (ABC NEWS): (Voiceover) The concept, if not the exact phrase, began with none other than Christine O'Donnell, who had this to say about her primary opponent Mike Castle, back in early September.

CHRISTINE O'DONNELL: These are the type of cheap, underhanded, unmanly tactics that we've come to expect. This is not a bakeoff. Get your man pants on.

MSNBC deemed it the “phrase of the year” (Keith Olbermann, 2010c). The New York Times featured Sharron Angle directing the term at her Senate opponent:

"Man up, Harry Reid," Sharron Angle taunted [Harry Reid] at their Las Vegas debate here Thursday night. That's not an idle insult, coming from a woman who campaigns at times with a .44 Magnum revolver in her 1989 GMC pickup (Dowd, 2010).

In this way, female Tea Party leaders were seen as “extraordinary conservative women” who were needed to deal with the perceived failure of conservative male leaders in the Senate and Congress (Fowler, 2010) and who drew on hypermasculinity as part of their political performance.
This political performance of masculinity was not unique to conservative women. In fact, throughout the 2008 Democratic primaries, “the press consistently portrayed Hillary Clinton as a mythical man [and] attribute[d] to her those characteristics of hegemonic masculinity: tough, self-sufficient, stoic” (Walsh, 2009). Montalbano-Phelps (2005) notes that a 1988 female presidential primary candidate reportedly asked whether America was “man enough to back a woman” and concluded that:

More than a clever play on words, this expression borrowed from outmoded ideas that man equals strength, man equals power. Such phraseology does little more than perpetuate negative stereotypes (p. 192).

Like “man enough,” the Tea Party phrase “man up” emphasizes “man” as a political ideal and essentializes gender (though not more than the rhetoric of motherhood). Yet there were some important differences in the way Tea Party women used masculinity as a point of vulnerability for their opponents. Tea Party women were not simply deploying a masculinist performance. Rather, media accounts cast them as arbiters of masculinity and allowed them to reclaim masculinist tropes as feminine. To some extent, they were also challenging the effectiveness of those who performed and embodied masculinity in the Tea Party.

Of course, certain networks and outlets emphasized some of these narratives more than others. All of the outlets portrayed Sarah Palin as an influential and controversial character in the Tea Party. With the exception of ABC News and Politico, they all used feminine descriptors to frame Tea Party women (i.e., cheerleader, queen, princess, mother, grandmother, etc.). Fox News implicitly invoked sexism when it described the political left as afraid of Sarah Palin or referred to Palin as “Mrs. Palin” instead of

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25 ABC did report on the way Tea Party women deployed the term “man up” during the midterm elections.
“Governor Palin,” but rarely discussed women as a Tea Party topic. Only Newsmax, Politico, the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times explicitly analyzed the meaning and social significance of the rise and power of conservative Tea Party women. MSNBC, USA Today, the Huffington Post, and CNN all reported errors made by high-profile women in the Tea Party to show them as unqualified or unprepared, but MSNBC regularly emphasized this narrative in its coverage of Tea Party women. Newsmax was the only outlet to explicitly argue that Sarah Palin symbolically represented a Tea Party constituency that favored social and traditional values, though, arguably, mentions of domesticity and motherhood in coverage from all of the news outlets buttressed this point.

Ultimately, the women of the Tea Party movement were incredibly important to the Tea Party rise in the press. They gave it celebrity, helped it defy stereotype and convention, and challenged notions of femininity and masculinity, while also receiving the same “outsider” treatment that the media typically give political women. This paradox is captured succinctly in a quote from Fox News: “There is no Tea Party leader [but] Sarah Palin comes closest” (O'Reilly, 2010e). In this way, Tea Party women also reflected the new embrace of feminism among conservatives (White, 2011). By providing the media with another narrative about revitalized conservatism, the changing notions of conservative women, the potential for female politicians, the integration of feminism and

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26 In his paper “Masculine Republicans and Feminine Democrats,” Nicholas Winter (2010) explains that people generally map ideas about the two genders onto the Republican and Democratic parties (p. 609). Republicans are generally seen as more masculine and Democrats are considered to be more feminine. Also, Winter found that “a candidate’s party affiliation might influence voters’ perceptions of his or her enactment of masculinity and femininity” (p. 609).
conservatism, and the wide embrace of political women among conservatives, the women made the Tea Party new while leaving the power structures largely intact.

While Tea Party women embraced ‘traditional values,’ they also further complicated Douglas’ notion that these Tea Party women “turned feminism inside out” when it comes to substantive political issues (Douglas, p. 272). Indeed, the news stories about female activists and leaders in the Tea Party exemplify Campbell’s (Campbell, 2005) argument that “culturally available subject-positions are, simultaneously, obstacles and opportunities” (p. 4). Being a political woman in American society demands a delicate balance, often requiring that female political actors reify patriarchy by both performing and embracing femininity. Tea Party women continue this legacy of women’s tenuous political performance, conforming to patriarchy while unsettling its constitutive notions and practice. The rise of the Tea Party and its female leaders forced an embrace of working mothers and a repudiation of sexism among conservative media makers. Moreover, it effectively argued for the presence and right of women to engage as both political leaders and activists (even if they are not ultimately perceived as viable). Simply dismissing any of them as “post-feminist” or “enlightened sexists” (Douglas, p. 271) appears inadequate. It seems that that the Tea Party news coverage shows conservative female leaders in the process of rebranding (and selling) feminism itself.

**Intersections and Overlap: Race, Gender and Class**

As complex signifiers that function on a number of ideological, social, and political levels, the news narratives about the Tea Party attached race, gender, and class identities to “populism”, helped construct the Tea Party brand as a form of white middle-
class/working-class identity and resistance, and provided the Tea Party brand with emotional meaning and symbolic value. When some in the conservative media argued that media accusations and coverage of tea party racism represented a counter-branding effort that aimed to undermine and diminish the Tea Brand, Tea Party women were held up as brand leaders in response. As such, race, gender, and class collectively enhanced and bolstered the Tea Party brand as a new model of conservative political engagement.

Though much of this chapter has looked at race, gender, and class politics in Tea Party news stories as separate constructs, I want to take some time to more closely recognize the power of the interactions between these categories in propelling the Tea Party narratives within the national news landscape. The concept of intersectionality provides an analytical lens that helps to explain how signifiers like race, gender, and class can overlap and produce new meanings. Nicholas Winter (2008) provides a valuable summary of intersectionality:

Intersectionality refers to the ways that multiple dimensions of social stratification interact with each other to shape individual identity and experience.

. . . Intersectionality also refers to the ways that cultural images of race and gender interact. Many powerful political symbols exist at the intersection of race and gender (and other) categories, either explicitly or implicitly. Thus, for example, the “soccer mom” is defined explicitly by her gender but, equally important, she is also defined by her race (white) and class (suburban middle); the paradigmatic “violent black criminal” is not just racial but also has a specific gender (male) and age (young); the “welfare queen” is black, female, and poor. These sorts of images, and related rhetorical issue frames, need not draw only on racial schemas or gender schemas individually, but rather can draw on both simultaneously or on some more-specific schemas for the intersectional categories. When they do so, race and gender interact such that the impact of both is something more complex than the sum of the separate dimensions (p. 159–160).
In Tea Party news stories, intersectional identities are particularly powerful and valuable, signaling a larger embrace of complex political discourse. Moreover, while some of these categories (i.e., woman) seem to stand alone, it is imperative that we consider their deeper significance in resituating familiar tropes of racism, classism, and sexism. This intersectional (dis)empowerment\textsuperscript{27} produces rhetorical resonance that requires careful consideration for its multiplicative signifiers and singular meanings, which Johnson-Cartee (2005) calls \textit{condensational symbols}:

Condensational symbols are a shorthand means by which large numbers of beliefs, feelings, values, and perhaps world views are telegraphed to others sharing a similar culture. The example of “family values” is just such a condensation symbol. Conservatives using the phrase “family values” evoke a wealth of positive cognitions, attitudes, and past behaviors among those similar to themselves. Consequently it is perhaps more appropriate to say that condensational symbols evoke stored meanings already residing within the minds of individuals sharing a given political culture (p. 167).

The race, class, and gender narratives of the Tea Party overlapped and complicated one another, which helped propel the Tea Party as a news topic and allowed it to avoid any simple constructions within its media coverage.

For example, the Tea Party use of eighteenth-century imagery is significant on a variety of levels. The 1776 Boston Tea Party was more than just a revolutionary act; its participants were white men who used sabotage and, ultimately, violence to overthrow British colonial rule. Thus, militancy and danger easily mapped onto the narratives of the 2009 Tea Party; reporters focused on Tea Party members’ identities as predominantly white men in ways that resonated with contemporary notions of right-wing militia groups. Additionally, 1776 (and the American revolutionary period generally) was a

\textsuperscript{27}To borrow from Kimberle Crenshaw’s (1992) notion of “intersectional disempowerment,” used to analyze the Anita Hill hearings (p. 406).
particularly exclusionary and oppressive period in American history—slavery was still legal and women were still considered property. As historian Jill Leopore (2010) argues:

Removing slavery from American history, even from eighteenth-century Boston, takes some doing, and means misunderstanding the Revolution, not least because . . . slavery made liberty possible (p. 75-76).

When Tea Party members declared that they wanted America to return “back to the basics of how it was founded” (Lorber, 2010), this nostalgia had specific implications regarding gender and race.

While I discussed the class connotations of populism in the Tea Party news stories, terms like “middle American” also signify race. According to Herbert Gans:

The term [Middle American] originally appeared as a synonym for the Silent Majority, Richard Nixon’s label for his intended new conservative constituency. It gained further currency in stories about the white urban backlash against the ghetto uprisings and the War on Poverty. As a result, it became a quasi-political term to describe white ethnics who opposed racial-integration policies (Gans, 1979, p. 24).

“Middle America” is a hybrid term that combines class (middle-class) with national identity (American); understanding tea partiers as part of “middle America” created an identity that both drew upon and affirmed the racial and gendered meanings inscribed in each. As a Fox News anchor explained to his colleague, Bill O’Reilly,

Now the fact of the matter is, Bill, that the United States of America is, you know, overwhelmingly white, overwhelmingly middle class and so on. But you know, if you could attract people from the minority community, Hispanics, African-Americans and the rest, obviously you would like to do that. But you know . . . these are the people that happen to turn out. They still constitute, broadly speaking, an American majority (O’Reilly & Hume, 2009).

Indeed, 78% of Americans identify as white—but that fact does not logically lend itself to the conclusion that a predominantly white group represents all of America (United
States Census Bureau, 2012). Rather, the argument that tea partiers represented “America” relied on their constructions as a raced and classed group and masked the truth that the Tea Party had very little political support. Even attributing the term “populist” to tea partiers spoke to an imagined understanding of “the people” and reified this fallacious race- and class-based inference. If the tea partiers had been widely reported as predominantly African-American, or female, or Jewish, etc., it would have been represented as a women’s or a civil rights movement. Rather, a group of protesting white middle- or working-class men was referred to as “populism.” As Edsall and Edsall (1992) explain, “At the core of Republican-populist strategy was a commitment to resist the forcing of racial, cultural, and social liberalism on recalcitrant white, working, and middle-class constituencies” (pp. 12–13).

In part, Tea Party women were even more important to the news narratives because they defied the “working-class white male” stereotype. As discussed earlier, their femininity diffused the notion of “angry white men” and the entailments (racism, violence, etc.) that came with it. But the gender of Tea Party women leaders also allowed them to embody tropes associated with old-fashioned Republicans—uneducated, ignorant, rural, white, and heralding masculinity—while being hailed as new political figures. That is, the femininity of its women helped to retrofit a new identity for the Tea Party through their embodiment and performance of traditional notions of conservative male whiteness, similar to the newness that Barack Obama’s Blackness brought to right-leaning Democratic politics and that Tea Party whiteness and class identity brought to the news framing of a social movement.
This analysis has produced other important insights outside of intersectionality, particularly in relation to race (though, in truth, racial representations are both gendered and classed). Tea Party news texts become a way to locate what a post-race/post-racial/colorblind/post-racism era means. Through a rhetorical and narrative analysis of the debate concerning Tea Party racism, the importance of post-racism becomes clear. Post-racists do not just want a system where race is not a category, but rather a system in which whites are not blamed for the continued oppression of others. A post-racism era is an age in which history does not matter, where racism simply means treating someone differently because of race—a neoliberal move that shifts attention from culturally embedded systems of white supremacy to individual interactions. In truth, it should be called the “post–white supremacy” era.

Of course, white supremacy seems to be an old-fashioned term, more relevant to men in Klan costumes than the everyday spaces of office cubicles and subway stations. But the rhetorical decline of white supremacy is akin to the work of post-racism—a claim that history has been corrected for Blacks that has been posited since the end of slavery (if not before). In disavowing white supremacy, racism becomes meaningless and “reverse racism” is possible—Blacks can be racist against whites, calling whites racist is racist, and the continued impoverishment of people of color can be blamed on only on fantastic neoliberal markets that reward hard work (and punish laziness). Moreover, the post-racist era allows whites to lay legitimate claim to oppression—as Ralina Joseph(2009) puts it, “Inclusion of white [people] as a racially aggrieved group can be seen as an ultimate post-racial move” (p. 243).
CONCLUSION

The news stories that highlighted the beliefs and characteristics associated with the Tea Party brand relied heavily upon discussions of race, gender, and class. In closely examining these three components of Tea Party branding in news texts, this chapter has shown that reports about Tea Party profiteering, identity development, branding challenges, and emotion frequently centered upon race, class, and gender, or more specifically, white working-class identity and racial resentment. These key social identities drove the Tea Party narrative, gave it salience as a national news story, explained the Tea Party’s function as a cultural sign, and provided symbolic meaning and value to the Tea Party brand.

In the end, the Tea Party texts help elucidate the significance of post-racism and post-feminism in popular culture. As Ralina Joseph (2009) notes, post-racism and post-feminism are not the same thing. Post-feminism bolsters gender essentialism and heterosexism through hyperexpressive performances of and claims to femininity and maternity, while post-racism eliminates race as a category of identity through a denial of racial discrimination as a form of systematic oppression. Post-feminism reifies gender, while post-racism seeks to eradicate race in the ways in which it implicates racism.

While denying the effects of legalized codes of white supremacy is not unusual in American political discourse, the rhetorical turn that racial difference no longer matters is distinct. The Tea Party narratives show that these media spectacles help to maintain post-racism ideology and hegemony. By describing Tea Party racism as “fringe” (or the Tea Party as racist and fringe), the media also marginalized racism as exceptional or abnormal in American society. It also showed how the election of a Black president, and the defeat
of his white competitors, provided new ways for whiteness to signal both American authenticity and oppression.

Tea Party news stories show a similar effort to minimize the importance of class in American society and de-center sexism in the consideration of female political candidates, while drawing on both as important signifiers. Heralding the power of Tea Party women while denying their viability as political leaders both denies and affirms sexism. Women like Sarah Palin imagine themselves undertaking a project to empower women and help them defy gender constraints while adhering to gender convention. In this way, while these women do not so easily integrate into academic understandings of the post-feminist or anti-feminist politics, they hint at the nature of gender branding and commodification. The news stories about Tea Party women confirms the idea\(^{28}\) that the process of mainstreaming feminism has resulted in its integration into the very hegemonic politics that it sought to oppose. Similarly, appealing to class groups while avoiding discussions or critiques of class inequality reifies American ideology (i.e., meritocracy).

As discussed throughout this chapter, much of the literature on race, gender, and class in news examine implicit references of these identities (i.e., visual representations, coded language, etc.), rather than the way the news media explicitly discuss and making meaning of them (Entman and Rojecki, 2000; Mendelberg, 2001; Meyers, 2004; Winter, 2008). This analysis shows that the news outlets substantially cover and analyze the impact of race/racism, gender/sexism, and class/social inequality in Obama-era politics, partly due to the expanded contributions of external media creators and citizen-

\(^{28}\text{For example, see: (Banet-Weiser, 2004).}\)
journalists. While political candidates have always represented social ideals and norms, this Tea Party news stories suggest that they have grown more willing to regularly acknowledge, and debate, the role of race, gender, and class in their portrayals. This is not to argue that the election or appointment of government leaders belonging to historically underrepresented groups (or the rise of identity-based social movements) has never heightened media attention to and coverage of systematic discrimination and exclusion in American politics and society – as this chapter has shown, this would be thoroughly untrue. Rather, I am proposing that the media treatment of the Tea Party indicates that race, gender, and class now function as standard analytical lenses in political news coverage for all candidates (and not just those with marginalized identities). While President Obama’s blackness was hypervisible in the news coverage, so, too, was the whiteness of the Tea Party.

Tea Party news reports showed the inversion of twentieth-century notions of politics, portraying political activists as credible government candidates, feminists as anti-choice, white people as oppressed, and old people as the fiery radicals. Journalists were drawn to certain Tea Party stories because they helped to make sense of a new era of politics borne out of the 2008 presidential election. But they also reported on these identities as part of a political landscape increasingly affected by celebrity, marketing, and consumer culture – their coverage reflects the way that the “traditional voter-politician relationship [has been translated] into the logic of fandom and branding” (Ouellette, p. 190). The focus on these identities in Tea Party news stories not only elucidates their salience and significance in mediating and proliferating the Tea Party
brand, but also reveals the ways in which race, gender, and class politics are debated, constructed, and understood in an Obama/2.0/political branding age.
Chapter Four: Reading the Tea Leaves—The News about the News

Whether it was a “media war” on Fox News, a reporter’s rant at CNBC, or a defamatory online video triggering the dismissal of a high-ranking Obama appointee, one thing was clear—at its core, Tea Party news narratives were a story about modern journalism. From the moment the Tea Party political phenomenon emerged into the national spotlight, reporters used it as a way of debating and critiquing the role of the news media in a polysemous, technological, and partisan-driven journalistic age. Covering the coverage of the Tea Party, as well as its relationship to the media, was central to the Tea Party’s tale and fueled its publicity and growth.

Indeed, several surges in the early Tea Party news coverage were largely devoted to debating news reporting and depictions of the political phenomenon. In part, these concerns came from the Tea Party itself, with activists and spokespersons frequently disputing and highlighting unfavorable coverage. Thus, as news workers reported on the Tea Party, they also found themselves integrated into its story, resulting in frequent discussions about the role and meaning of journalism in the current political moment. Within the complexity of both being and covering the story, Tea Party news coverage captures a period in newsmaking marked by heightened media self-coverage, activism, and (self-)criticism.

At the moment of the Tea Party’s rise in 2009, the news media and journalism were undergoing massive systemic and conceptual transformations that were reshaping the contours of political reporting (Alasuutari, 1999; Baym, 2005; Bird, 2010; Merrill, 2010; Rojecki, 2002; Tewksbury & Rittenberg, 2012; Usher, 2011). Zelizer (2004)
explains: “As journalism has flourished in form and in content, it now seems to be no clear place in the public imagination” (p. 7). Anxieties regarding the declining newspaper industry (overblown, according to some) drove news workers to diversify their skills, platforms, and styles in order to compete with the massive growth of online content. Technological advances allowed politicians to communicate their message directly to supporters through social media and evade journalistic gatekeeping, analysis, and access. User-driven spaces in news sites generated feedback, boosted audience interaction, and provided new metrics for evaluating stories (i.e., “most emailed,” “most commented”). On a societal level, a declining faith in and growing public antagonism toward the media; the rise of “infotainment” news; journalists’ embrace of the White House and national security ideology in the aftermath of 9/11; media conglomeration that put journalistic control under the control of an increasingly few people; and the shrinking of news outlets nationwide shifted the context and demands of news production during the Tea Party’s emergence. In the words of Williams and Delli Carpini (2011), “the technological changes occurring over the past two decades along with broader and quite profound political, cultural, and economic changes have destabilized the media regime of the mid-twentieth century” (p. 21).

Ultimately, the news media was not just the medium by which information about the Tea Party traveled to American audiences; it also functioned as a topic discussed within Tea Party stories and an actor that explicitly facilitated and advanced the Tea Party’s recognition, messaging, and growth. As a medium, topic, and political actor within the Tea Party news stories, the depictions of the news media expose the interconnectivity of the contemporary media environment and the forms and function of
journalism in a digital age. This chapter is divided into four parts. First, I provide a brief description of journalism and the news media at the contemporary moment. In the next sections, I highlight how the “media” functioned as a topic, political actor, and medium in Tea Party news coverage. I conclude with a reflection about the significance of political news in a “meta-journalistic” age.

**On Background: Journalism And/Or/Versus/Within the News Media**

Examining the stories that the news media tell about the Tea Party is an assessment of modern journalism, the practice of collecting, interpreting, and distributing information about current events to the public. While there is clear overlap in these two constructs, the terms “news media” and “journalism” convey somewhat distinct meanings that become even more apparent throughout the Tea Party news stories. The “news media” (or, more abbreviated, the “media”) as a concept evades specificity and typically refers to the converging ideological tendencies of the topics, routines, discourse, and rhetoric among a vast array of news providers, formats, and platforms. In a *Newsmax* article, a quote from an NBC interview with President Obama gestured to the generalized nature of the term:

> He called it an environment fostered to some extent by the modern news media. "Frankly, it gets spun up in part because of how the media covers politics, in the 24/7 news cycle, cable chatter, and talk radio, and the Internet, and the blogs.” (Newsmax, 2010).

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29 In truth, this medium/topic/political actor distinction can in some ways feel artificial, as each analytical category almost necessarily implicates the other. For instance, Rick Santelli’s widely circulated televised rant tells a story about the importance of different mediums, shows how a news segment became a national news story, and captures the moment Santelli became a Tea Party leader.
This collective notion of the “news media” mirrors academic uses of the phrase in analyses that typically assess it as both an influential social and cultural institution and a corporate conglomerate fueled by financial competition and profit margins. According to one writer, the “media have become a way to colonize not only other nations but also one's own nation” (Weibel, 1988). Scholar T. E. Cook (2006) calls the news media a “heady brew of ‘mass media, middle media, and micro-media’ that ‘tends toward homogeneity.’” The news media’s audience is often constructed as consumers, but journalists produce their work for citizens.

*Journalism* is a term deeply imbued with civic and aspirational values that guide news workers in truthfully identifying, investigating, and summarizing current events (political events, more specifically). Zelizer (2004) variously describes journalism as a profession, an institution, a text, a group of people, and a set of practices. According to (Schudson and Tifft, 2005) “the normative commitment of this occupational group [is to write] political news in order to inform the citizens of a democracy” and, in this way, they have been long understood as critical to maintaining a non-tyrannical, people-led, and accountable government (Merrill, 2011). Though one reporter has dismissed these sentiments as “just so much sanctimonious bullshit,” many scholars writing about American journalism frequently discuss it in almost-reverential ways (Ugland & Henderson, 2007). Numerous academics describe its sacred role as promoting and enabling freedom and democracy; providing reliable, factual, and non-sensational information; transparency; accuracy; and public service (Borden & Tew, 2007; Deuze, 2005; Hayes, Singer, & Ceppos, 2007; Shapiro, 2010). According to Thorbjorn Broddason (2000), the quality of “sacredness” is what, in fact, contributes to the notion of
journalism as a profession, despite its lack of formal training and codes of conduct (Zelizer, 1992). Still, journalists’ associations have formalized journalistic conventions through handbooks and guides, and legal rulings have reified these guidelines as occupational norms (Hayes et al., 2007; Ugland and Henderson 2007).

Over the last four centuries, American journalism has gone through several major structural, occupational and professional shifts (Muhlmann, 2008; Papandrea, 2009; Payne, 1925; Patterson, 2000; Schudson & Tifft, 2005; Williams, 2002). Two years after the second printing press was brought into the United States in 1660, the first permit laws were passed to regulate and monitor its primary use in producing religious tracts and pamphlets. While the number of printing presses grew throughout the American colonies, it was not until well into the 18th century that the first “free press” began to develop. Newspapers at the start of this “party-press era” functioned primarily as vehicles through which political parties and elites only printed news and commentary that reinforced their values, beliefs, perspectives, and reputation. Even in this revolutionary period, many editors were brought up on sedition charges for running papers that criticized the federal government. Though the First Amendment decreed in 1791 that “Congresss shall make no law… abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press” (Patterson, p. 3), moving to protect the right for Americans to express their opinions and ensure its legacy as an essential founding principle, its true vision did not flourish until the 19th century began. While the party-press newspaper rivalries continued, journalism was again changed by the rise in a financially profitable tabloid press that could be purchased by the masses (known as the “penny press”). Now including much more sensationalized (i.e. “yellow journalism”) and fact-based content, and using reporters to collect and write up this
information, the “popular press” introduced the modern concept of news and the common usage of the term journalism. The commercialization of the news continued to grow with the development of the telegraph, which allowed news to reach a wider audience.

As communications technology expanded at the dawn of the 20th century, the growth of news chains and media conglomerates increased the standardization of news practices, styles, values, and topics (Lowrey, 2011; Payne, 1921; Schudson, 1978; Schudson & Tifft, 2005). In order to distinguish themselves from advertising and public relations specialists and increase their appeal to audiences across the political spectrum, magazines, newspapers, and radio reporters and publishers adopted journalistic codes that demanded truthfulness, accuracy, and impartiality. Even as political columnists began to thrive in the 1930s, they understood their roles as primarily interpretive and nonpartisan. The growth of watchdog journalism and investigative reporting (i.e. muckraking) also concretized the role of the press as a “fourth estate”, a public service institution that would increase the transparency and accountability of the three branches of government. Despite these idealized notions of journalism, it often upheld the status quo, served as mouthpieces for government and official authorities, and still continued to produce business-friendly, sensational, and entertaining content that appealed to both advertisers and consumers.

However, scholars and communications professionals have tracked another major shift at the beginning of the 21st century, caused once again by commercial media interests and technological innovation (Butsch, 2011; Castells, 2011; Chan-Olmsted & Cha, 2007; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Gerbner, 2012; Kim, Baek, & Martin, 2010; Lacy & Sohn, 2011; McChesney, 1999; Papandrea, 2009; Tewksbury & Rittenberg, 2012). The
Increasing conglomeration of mass media ownership, development of cable television, mass availability of user-generated and professional news on the internet, and the growth of social media through which political elites can communicate directly to mass audiences, and the elimination of spatial and temporal boundaries, have once again transformed the roles, boundaries, and functions of journalism. As professional news organizations experience a decline in audience, advertising revenue, and an increase in the constraining forces of its owners’ business interests and political interests, resources for investigative journalism and a commitment to public service values have also dwindled. Marketing and business approaches to the press push news outlets to differentiate themselves from rivals through branding, diversify their distribution platforms, and embrace partisanship in news delivery and story selection (seemingly making branding practices even more important than breaking news in journalism today). As Tewksbury and Rittenberg (2012) put it, “the very meaning of news is shifting” (p. 1) – so, too, has journalism.

The rise in electronic technology and user-generated media has pushed scholars and news workers alike to draw distinctions (and connections) between “real” journalists and other media information producers (also known as cyberjournalists, citizen journalists, bloggers, vloggers, online journalists, participatory journalists, accidental journalists, etc.) (Allan, 2006; Singer, 2011). In a 2012 news broadcast, Fox News pundit Juan Williams declared, “I’m a real reporter, not a blogger out in the blogosphere somewhere” (Martel, 2012). Such delineations primarily rely on differences in employment status and compensation, but the resulting debates regarding the value of user-generated news has evoked contentious and unresolved debates about the definition
of journalism in a new media age. These muddled lines, Jane Spring argues, only increase the public’s need for “the trustworthy analyst, the interpreter, the sense-maker – the journalist” (p. 226).

The practice of journalism involves discovery, examination, interpretation, and presentation of news events and political issues (Shapiro, 2010). According to Barbie Zelizer (1992), journalists function as interpretive communities that circulate knowledge and legitimize their practices through journalistic authority, the “ability of journalists to promote themselves as authoritative and credible spokespersons of ‘real-life’ events” (p.8). James W. Carey (2002) contended that journalism is at its best when producing critical coverage of important stories that trigger major social shifts, like the Vietnam War and the modern civil rights movement. On the other hand, even when covering major social issues, journalists often fail to fully inform the American public due to an excessive reliance on official sources that allows powerful elites to control what journalists report (McChesney, 2002; Sigal, 1986). Mark Deuze (2002) argued that that the role of a journalist is more of ideological, defined by a set of shared beliefs and values, than occupational (reducible to a particular set of tasks or duties):

There seems to be a consensus among scholars in the field of journalism studies that what typifies more or less universal similarities in journalism can be defined as a shared occupational ideology among newsworkers which functions to self-legitimize their position in society (p. 446).

According to Deuze, the professional ideals that define journalistic practice are public service, neutrality or objectivity, editorial autonomy, freedom and independence, immediacy, and ethics and legitimacy.
Objectivity, the “separation of facts and values” (Day, 1999, p. 6) in news is perhaps the most commonly mentioned journalistic value and, as mentioned earlier, helped to redefine and reorganize American journalism since the beginning of the twentieth century. In being objective, journalists create impartial and accurate news coverage and confine “overt persuasion” to editorial spaces (ibid; Rachlin, 1988; Vaughn 2007). Objectivity was a response to the ways in which citizens were increasingly disgruntled with political partisanship, the desire for journalists to establish clear boundaries from the public relations industry, and the drive for consolidated media organizations to appeal to wider audiences. Michael Schudson (2001) further explains:

According to the objectivity norm, the journalist’s job consists of reporting something called “news” without commenting on it, slanting it, or shaping its formulation in any way. The value of objectivity is upheld specifically against partisan journalism in which newspapers are the declared allies or agents of political parties and their reporting of news is an element of partisan struggle (p. 150).

“Good” journalism is assessed by whether reporting is based on facts, not emotions or opinions, and “makes a good faith attempt to portray social phenomena as they really are” (Chyi, Lewis, & Zheng, 2011, p. 307). Objective journalists are “politically detached” and “remain autonomous from politics—to develop a position outside or beyond the rough-and-tumble of partisan politics” (Jacobs & Townsley, 2011, p. 241).

In reality, the pursuit of journalistic values like neutrality, fairness, and objectivity have primarily served the bottom lines of news organizations. Only employers are able to hold news workers accountable for their behavior while on (and off) the job (Lowrey, 2006). The enforcement decisions regarding appropriate and ethical journalistic performances are left to newsroom managers, not the journalists themselves (or even
their audience) (Day, 1999; Tuchman, 1980). In this media paradigm, journalists work within the news media and journalists produce journalism, but not all news media content is journalistic.

As a result, researchers and news professionals alike herald the transparency and democratizing potential of the Internet. Scholars like Matt Welch and Stuart Allan contend that Internet news “bring[s] ‘a collective intelligence to bear on question[s]’ of political consequence and serve as a corrective to culturally biased and overly reductive journalistic work” (Allan, 2006). Other news critics and professionals, like veteran reporter J.D. Lasica, express concern about the lack of accountability and standards to govern online content and argue that online journalism functions primarily as a new space for muckraking and political gain (Day, 1999; Hayes et al, 2007; McGann 2011). According to Lasica (2003), “[all] anyone seeking to be an online journalist really needs is a computer, Internet connection, and an ability to perform some of the tricks of the trade” and, even then, they only produce “random acts of journalism” (Allan, 2006, p. 87).

Still, determining who does (and doesn’t) count as a journalist is much more than strictly a rhetorical exercise. Those identified as professional journalists are granted a number of legal privileges on both the state and federal level that enable press entities to work free of political control and perform specific functions (Pandey-Jorrin, 2008). Some of these press liberties include the right to provide unfettered media coverage of a political candidate, facile access to public records, special protection from charges of defamation or libel, the “fair use” of copyrighted material, and more (Carpenter, 2008; McGill, Iggers, & Cline, 2007). While the Federal Election Commission closely monitors
and regulates the work of political lobbyists and activists, journalists are free of such restriction and oversight. Additional benefits for recognized journalists include credentials that grant access to public events (and officials) and offer protection from police violence and incarceration, membership in journalist organizations, and professional recognition and awards for journalistic labor. Within the Tea Party narratives, there is a clear tension related to laypeople identifying as journalists and accessing press privileges while also refusing to conform to traditional press values and roles.

In certain ways, journalists’ depictions of the Tea Party were conspicuously analogous to the self-described state of the news media. Though reporters were unlikely to be aware of the parallels, the Tea Party narrative in some ways functioned as a metaphor for journalism in this moment, and its ambiguities mirror the uncertainty that confounds the news media today. Descriptions of Tea Party rallies were similar to depictions of the digital news environment—they were both described as advanced, progressive, superior, fragmented, and a threat to preexisting media forms. The Tea Party’s use of new technology to organize its rallies and publicize its message imbued it with a sense of modernity, and like online news, it challenged existing structures of power, politics, and authority in journalism. Like the Tea Party, journalism defies easy classification. Is it a profession? An occupation? A form of creative expression? Similar to the difficulties in categorizing contemporary journalism, reporters struggled to define the Tea Party, locate its parameters, and identify its members and spokespersons. Like the Tea Party, the media also described itself as a brand and commodity in news narratives.
New media technology decentralized the Tea Party and established new rules for interactivity, publicity, and self-promotion, just as it did for journalists.

As the Tea Party became a prominent news story, the impact and flows of Internet-based information spaces also exposed inextricable connections to the mainstream press and a massive convergence of discursive style, news features, and story selection. In the face of these complexities, the lines defining media dichotomies such “as old versus new,” “big versus small,” “mainstream versus alternative,” “journalists versus bloggers,” and “hard news versus soft news” began to fade away slowly. It was in this multilayered, multimodal, multimedia context that the Tea Party emerged and prospered through the active engagement and contributions of reporters and journalists. Through the news stories about the Tea Party, another narrative about the news media’s contemporary identity and functions as a topic, a political actor, and a system of interdependent but distinct mediums became a central component in Tea Party texts.

**News Media as a Topic**

Looking at how the media was covered as a topic within Tea Party news narratives means examining the claims made and representations of the news media that surfaced within them. These descriptions of the news media showed the different ways in which journalism is understood and discussed in contemporary society. The meaning of news was clarified through its relationship to the Tea Party, particular ideological attachments, and itself. This section will cover both the language and the themes used within the Tea Party news stories to describe the contemporary media landscape.
In Tea Party news coverage, the media was described with adjectives that tied it inextricably to political ideology and partisanship. Terms used by tea partiers to describe the media across news outlets, both by news workers and their sources, include:

- liberal media
- populist media
- new media
- lamestream media
- national media
- willing media
- populist media
- traditional media
- politically correct media
- corporate media
- public media
- conservative media
- mainstream media
- right-wing media
- state-run media
- left-leaning media
- rapid-fire media
- progressive media
- liberal establishment media
- infidel media

These adjectives overwhelmingly suggest a conviction that the media has inherent ideological commitments or biases that affect its content. Other language describing the Tea Party drew on juxtaposition, a pattern of grouping “media” with other words that suggested a larger relationship or association. For instance, news reports linked "white conservatives and Fox News" to suggest a relationship between the two. Other similar examples include:
• Liberal Media and the NAACP Condemn Tea Party as Racist (Hollingsworth, 2010)
• Left-Wingers in the Media and Democrats (O'Reilly, 2010h)
• Media and Elite Universities (Bai, 2010a)
• Media and Our Domestic Enemies (Wing, 2010)

These media juxtapositions connected the media to specific political groups and philosophies.

Tea Party news texts confirmed the ethical and sacred connotations of the term “journalism,” specifically invoking the label when describing perceived violations of journalist norms. In one instance, Fox’s support and publicity of Tax Day tea parties drew concerns that it was “blurring lines between advocacy and journalism” (Calderone, 2009). In an interview with Politico, Arianna Huffington, founder and namesake of Huffington Post, drew a clear line between political championing and journalism when she claimed that the citizen journalists she sent to cover the Tea Party would be “purely journalistic” and not “activist.” Later, an anchor at Fox acknowledged the importance of journalists’ commitment to autonomy when discussing a congressman’s report about tea partiers using racial epithets: “I'm a journalist. And journalists aren't supposed to believe what politicians tell them simply because they're politicians” (O'Reilly, 2010c). In another example, Fox News commentator and former NPR reporter Juan Williams said, “I have always thought of journalism in a way as a priesthood, you know, that you honor it, that you protect it” (O'Reilly, 2010b). Echoing these sentimental notions about journalism, a MSNBC anchor decried Fox’s “illusion of journalistic credibility.”
One particular incident in July 2010 provided insight into how the media discusses and conceives of journalism in the age of new media. As a form of retaliation against perceived attacks on the Tea Party by the NAACP, conservative blogger and self-identified journalist Andrew Breitbart of Breitbart.com released a drastically edited video and description of a speech delivered by Shirley Sherrod, an NAACP honoree and high-ranking Obama administration official (Hagey & Vogel, 2011). Breitbart’s piece organized segments of the speech in a way that implied that she had maliciously discriminated against a family of white farmers as a form of retribution for the racism she had witnessed and endured as a child growing up in the South (including her own father’s lynching murder). Responding to the clarion call of “reverse racism,” Fox News picked up the misleading story and called for Sherrod’s resignation. Other news outlets quickly followed, producing and circulating reports about Sherrod’s apparent misconduct (Rose, 2010). Within hours of Fox’s initial report, the Department of Agriculture cited a “zero-tolerance policy” for racial discrimination and fired Sherrod. Over the next few days, the full video of Sherrod’s speech was released and revealed the complete text of Sherrod’s speech about growth and forgiveness of racist wrongs. It was clear that Breitbart’s video was extremely and deliberately deceptive. More than that, it had elicited rapid action from a trigger-happy Obama administration and successfully garnered national attention and distribution within every major news outlet and platform.

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30 To be clear, this section refers to the information gathered on how the Shirley Sherrod incident was described in news stories that also mentioned the Tea Party.
31 Sherrod later filed a defamation lawsuit against Breitbart and his colleagues for their release of the video. Breitbart defended himself by claiming that the information on his blog was “protected speech” under the First Amendment, a protection typically extended to members of the press. Interestingly, a judge denied that motion and allowed the lawsuit to proceed (Tillman, 2011).
The “Sherrod incident” quickly became a story about the state of journalism, the importance of journalistic standards, and the impact of digital content. The *Wall Street Journal* said that the case showed “how a toxic political atmosphere and a rapid-fire media can quickly turn a minor event into a media conflagration” (Weisman, 2010b). An *ABC News* story included a sound bite from President Obama lamenting that “we now live in this media culture where something goes up on YouTube or a blog and everybody scrambles” (Sawyer, 2010a). According to *Huffington Post*, “The most outrageous aspects of the story are fairly typical of everyone involved: Breitbart, the so-called ‘liberal’ news media, Democrats, Fox News Channel and all points in between” (Cesca, 2010). On *Politico*, staff reporters wrote that the Shirley Sherrod story “will remind journalists and politicians alike that personal reputations and professional credibility are at stake, and a bit more restraint and responsibility are in order” (Harris & Vandehei, 2010).

Some news outlets used the Sherrod case as an opportunity to define blogs and other information online as inherently untrustworthy. According to the *New York Times*, the unfolding events of the Sherrod case were “humiliating” to the national news media and demonstrated the unethical inclinations of a media cycle driven by Internet news sources:

The controversy illustrates the influence of right-wing Web sites like the one run by Andrew Breitbart, the blogger who initially posted the misleading and highly edited video, which he later said had been sent to him already edited. (Similarly, Mr. Breitbart used edited videos to go after ACORN, the community organizing group.) Politically charged stories often take root online before being shared with a much wider audience on Fox. The television coverage, in turn, puts pressure on other news media outlets to follow up (Stolberg, Dewan, & Stelter, 2010).
On CNN, an anchor blamed the NAACP for taking “information solely from these conservative bloggers” and concluded that the “lesson” of the Sherrod case is that “not everything you see on the Internet is true” (Brown, 2010a). For one Wall Street Journal columnist, the Sherrod case was a “teachable moment” that showed that “we are not skeptical enough of what new media can cook up in its little devil's den. Anyone can be the victim of a high-tech lynching, and . . . because of this we have to be careful, slow down, look deeper” (Noonan, 2010). The USA Today editorial board wrote that:

> It would be naive to think that blatantly partisan bloggers or cable TV hosts will favor truth over distortion. Whipping up anger is their stock in trade. . . . More objective outlets, meanwhile, received another lesson in the need to check the facts before rushing to give Internet posts legitimacy (USA Today editorial, 2010).

This language regarding online content reflected the general treatment of “user-generated journalism” in Tea Party news stories. The two specific instances that included reporting from non-professional journalists (“citizen journalists” on Huffington Post and an “I-reporter” on CNN), used such reporting as primary sources to supplement professional journalists’ larger framing or reporting about the Tea Party.

News blogs shifted the blame for the Sherrod fallout onto factors outside the digital environment. All three political news sites argued that the Sherrod case showed that Democrats, and particularly the Obama administration, had acted too quickly because they were afraid of Fox News and the rest of the conservative media. In the Huffington Post, writers also pointed to the traditional news media (and politicians) for advancing a story from the unreliable echo chamber of the “conservative blogosphere” (McGlynn, 2010; Stickings, 2010). Moreover, Huffington Post writers said that Sherrod’s treatment showed how easily liberals were intimidated and controlled by the right. Posts
on Newsmax defended Breitbart and criticized Sherrod’s views on race. Politico’s coverage highlighted the faults of a 24/7 media culture fueled by sensationalism, enamored with the ratings success of partisan news stories, and changed by the viral tendencies of social media and “Web aggregators” like the Drudge Report. HuffPost Post also mentioned sensationalism as a key driver in overall Tea Party news coverage, arguing that the contemporary media was attracted to “political freakshows” (Linkins, 2010).

Fox News, too, was criticized for their initial reporting of the Sherrod story. Though USA Today seemed to argue that partisanship was endemic to the work of “cable TV hosts,” other news outlets refused to give Fox News a pass for publicizing the Breitbart video, instead targeting the cable news channel for failing to abide by journalistic norms. A Huffington Post writer referred to Fox News reporters as “miserable excuses for journalists [who] relentlessly plugged the entirely false story before and after Sherrod was fired” and “propagandists posing as ‘journalists’” (Potok, 2010). An anchor on CNN said that the Sherrod incident reflected Fox’s lack of “journalistic diligence” and that its regular intermingling of scheduled news and opinion programming signaled that “it operates by different journalistic standards, depending . . . on what time it is” (Sanchez, 2010). He continued, concluding that CNN was the better news organization because it had refused to run the story:

Now, it's important to note that FOX News pounced on Breitbart's Shirley Sherrod scoop hours after he posted it Monday. By the way—and this is part of the story, too—at CNN, we knew as soon as FOX did that the Shirley Sherrod video was out there. We watched and we decided not to run it because there were just too many unanswered questions at the time.
After FOX aired it, we did our due journalistic diligence and we're the ones, frankly, who fairly quickly debunked the FOX Breitbart story and undid the damage to an innocent woman's reputation.

... [I] learned in journalism school that there's a difference between reporting and distorting.

Fox News also discussed the role it had played in the Breitbart/Sherrod story in the context of journalism. Anchor Bill O’Reilly said that it showed that “journalism in America is on the verge of collapse” (O'Reilly, 2010f). According to O’Reilly, he had reported the Sherrod story because the “establishment press” regularly ignored “important stories” and kept accurate information from Americans. The “liberal media,” he went on, were constitutionally bound to “serve the folks,” but instead spent their time strategizing and cohering narratives against conservatives in secretive online discussion groups like Journalist. Furthermore, the Fox anchor said that “dishonest personal attacks [were] . . . a major violation of journalistic ethics.”

Outside of the Sherrod case, the media was a general topic discussed within each outlet and platform. In the blogs, the Tea Party coverage elicited different discussions about the media. The pieces in the Huffington Post primarily examined the motivations behind the media’s coverage of the Tea Party, particularly Fox’s role as its “promoter.” Huffington Post also discussed the Tea Party’s negative attitude towards the media and analyzed Tea Party coverage in other outlets. Politico also discussed how different outlets reported on the Tea Party. Politico covered the media debate regarding Fox’s involvement in the Tea Party, and quoted tea partiers voicing concerns about the media. Newsmax blogs regularly complained that the media was biased against the Tea Party (i.e., that the media was portraying tea partiers as terrorists, racists, and Luddites) and
defended the Tea Party against what they saw as malicious and negative characterizations.

In broadcast news, the media came up in debates between guests and hosts, in anchors’ explicit analysis or summaries, and through the use of news clips and reporting from other networks. Mentions of the media on MSNBC focused on Fox News as a creator, sponsor, publicist, and fundraising platform for the Tea Party, specifically identifying Fox News anchor Bill O’Reilly in one segment as the “worst person in the world.” The Tea Party’s negative opinion and evasion of the media was also a regular topic on MSNBC. On CNN, the media was not a frequent subject. When CNN did discuss the media in Tea Party news, it was to criticize Fox’s accusations about other outlets ignoring the Tea Party. CNN also reported on the role of online organizing and conservative radio as key to Tea Party mobilization (Brown, 2009a).

*ABC News* mentioned the media least in its Tea Party reports. In a few instances, ABC highlighted tea partiers’ attitudes toward the media as part of larger reports about a particular event or action, and described Fox News as “cheer[ing] on” the Tea Party when it first emerged (Harris, 2009).

Fox News was, by far, the outlet that covered the media most in Tea Party reporting. According to Fox News, the media ignored the Tea Party and were “out of touch” with Americans (Hannity, 2009b). A Fox News anchor complained that other news organizations “demonize[d]” the Tea Party and unfairly labeled its demonstrators as “kooks and racists” (O'Reilly & Hume, 2009). Fox News repeatedly defended its news coverage, arguing that it was actually a journalistic intervention that sought to correct the “liberal,” “corrupt,” and “obscene” turn of a “left-wing media” that was “damaging the
nation” and was ”on the side of monarchy.” Fox News demonstrated its commitment to journalistic norms as correcting a “liberal” media bias by providing coverage of and for conservative Americans, which it deemed a neglected and maligned constituency. In this way, Fox News argued that it was engaged in journalistic public service, not political advocacy. A Fox News anchor also claimed that Fox News was the agenda-setter for the national news media, contending that Fox News was now the “dominant media force in America” and “set the daily discussion” for the rest of media.

Perhaps most significant was the frequent argument from the same Fox News anchor that the Tea Party had exposed a “media war . . . between Fox News and talk radio on one side and the New York Times and the liberal networks on the other side” (O'Reilly, 2009). Other media entities specifically named as “players” in the “media war” included NBC, MSNBC, the media watchdog group Media Matters, and Jon Stewart of the satirical news program The Daily Show. These media “enemies” wanted to “destroy” Fox News and “attack” the Tea Party. In this metaphorical media battle, the Sherrod case was just another “hand grenade” used to “weaken Fox” (O'Reilly, 2010f).

In the print new outlets, the language describing the media was much less combative. The New York Times primarily mentioned the media in “hard news” stories that highlighted Fox News’s favorable coverage and close relationship with the Tea Party and the Tea Party’s aversion to reporters. In the Times, writers discussed the media as “fragment[ed]” and prone to exaggeration and emphasized the media’s role in the Tea Party’s development (Brooks, 2009; Stevenson, 2010).

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32 NBC and MSNBC are used interchangeably, so it is difficult to assess to which of the two networks Fox News anchors referred.
In its non-opinion spaces, *USA Today* also covered the Tea Party’s troubled relationship with the media and described the media’s negative portrayals of tea partiers. It noted tea partiers’ accrual and use of tech-savvy media skills. Finally, the *Wall Street Journal* only mentioned the media in editorial columns written by staffers and guests. Among these voices, some argued that the media aimed to “discredit” the Tea Party in collusion with “liberal politicians.”

Examining the media outlets along partisan lines also uncovers additional trends in how the media was discussed as a subject in Tea Party texts. The news outlets associated with a more liberal ideology—the *Huffington Post*, the *New York Times*, and *MSNBC*—all closely reported the Tea Party’s coverage and relationship to the media, particularly Fox News. In the conservative press, specifically Fox News and *Newsmax*, reports about the media focused much more on proving liberal bias and defending the Tea Party from negative portrayals. The *Wall Street Journal*, *ABC News*, *Politico*, and *USA Today* generally avoided discussing or reporting on the media in their Tea Party coverage, primarily focusing on events.

Interestingly, more than half of the outlets explicitly reported that Fox News favored and promoted the Tea Party (with the exception of *Newsmax*, CNN, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*). There are at least two potential explanations for this finding—*USA Today* and CNN might actually align themselves with more conservative reporting, either because they adhere to conservative ideology or want to maintain the appearance of neutrality; or, since CNN’s coverage does criticize Fox for “misinformation” and lack of credibility, it is more likely that its refusal to comment on Fox’s reporting reflects an effort to avoid making unsubstantiated attacks on Fox News
(or provoking the outlet’s ire). *USA Today*, on the other hand, did not mention Fox News’s overt support of the Tea Party and was generally critical of the media’s portrayals. Attempts at more “neutral” storytelling came from ABC and *Politico*, and focused on reporting details related to the media’s relationship with the Tea Party without drawing conclusions about the story.

In the end, media coverage of the Tea Party was key to the news stories of the emergent political phenomenon—it was, in short, a story *about* the media. Fox News—the only news outlet mentioned by every single news program—stood out as a major media topic. Through meta-analyses of news reporting about the Tea Party, journalists articulated the ways they understood the media and journalism in a digital era.

**News Media as a Political Actor**

The story of Santelli’s involvement with the Tea Party reveals several key aspects of contemporary journalism. In particular, there was very little explicit criticism of Santelli’s lack of objectivity and overt activism, despite his professional position as a reporter. On the contrary, journalists who commented on Santelli’s speech seemed to frame it as a success story. The *Chicago Tribune* argued that the “self-described rant” had raised Santelli’s profile, increased his value to CNBC, and opened up possibilities for book contracts and talk shows (Rosenthal, 2009). In other words, journalism and journalists were now part of a market paradigm that sees branding and monetary potential as key indicators of success, rather than the quality of the actual news product. On a similar note, a *New York Times* article argued that in the past Santelli’s outburst would have been embarrassing for cable news stations, but now presented an opportunity to
“maximize publicity and Web traffic” (Stelter, 2009). In another New York Times piece, a columnist bemoaned the absence of criticism as symptomatic of a news media more concerned with branding and self-expression than with journalistic integrity:

Nobody at his network seemed concerned that Mr. Santelli had exceeded the bounds of news reporting. Instead, he was propped up by constant replays on CNBC and rival networks as a populist hero. It's all too likely that he will be rewarded with his own show someday (Stanley, 2009).

Other news outlets, including Fox News and MSNBC, avoided the quagmire of evaluating Santelli’s violation of journalistic norms by failing to use the word “reporter” in describing Santelli, mentioning his previous background as a financial trader to explain his motivation or describing him as a “pundit” or “commentator.”

Santelli, for his part, defended his speech in an apologia posted on CNBC’s website titled “I want to set the record straight.” The piece largely took aim at critics. Rather than explaining his violation of journalistic norms, Santelli used the opportunity to deny that his tirade was staged or unusual, claiming that it was his typical “aggressive and impassioned style” that targeted both Republicans and Democrats. Importantly, he explained the outburst by writing a blog post titled “I Want to Set the Record Straight”:

Many millions of Americans seem to agree with my position otherwise why would this "rant" be so much different than many of my impassioned comments of the past. . . . The answer seems pretty obvious; the nerve I struck resonated across the country. I love my country and hope that the current administration succeeds in fixing the complicated economic and social issues our country now faces [bolding mine] (Santelli, 2009).

Additionally, he wrote that he had no affiliation with any Tea Party websites or “political agenda.” Despite the USA Today reporting that Santelli was “kidding” (Kiely, 2010a), most news outlets and scholarship continue to credit Santelli with beginning the Tea Party.
The coverage of Santelli as a political actor also shows the rising significance of “professional communicators like politicians, journalists, experts, and other high-status intellectuals who use the media as a staging ground to gather and debate the issues of the day” in a digitally enhanced, cross-platform media age (Jacobs & Townsley, 2011, p. 10). Journalists in this new environment function more like celebrities—they aim to diversify their content across platform, outlet, and genre. While journalists in the past were once fired for blogging and airing personal views (Allan, 2006, p. 86), they are now able—and even encouraged—to use social media as a way to diversify their brand and expand their audience. As one New York Times reporter wrote, even Twitter has changed the journalistic landscape by facilitating “me-first journalism” and functioning as a “gateway drug to full-blown media narcissism” (Stanley, 2009).

Fox News was also discussed as a major political actor in the Tea Party narratives; its support of the Tea Party was an ongoing theme. In some instances, news stories showed Fox News employees personally attacking public figures who criticized their coverage. Other outlets argued that the network wielded undue influence on Democratic political officials. After Fox News host Bill O’Reilly called for Sherrod’s resignation, the Obama administration quickly fired her; this hasty response was cited as evidence of the network’s power and influence. Additionally, media outlets voiced concerns that Fox News’s participation and promotion of Tea Party events was more activism than journalism. An MSNBC anchor said that the Fox News coverage of the tea parties demonstrated an “unprecedented politicization of the news media” (Olbermann, 2009).

For instance, L. L. Cool J complained about a previous Fox News interview being used to advertise Sarah Palin’s new Fox show as if he was an upcoming guest. Also, Howard Dean called Fox’s publicity of Breitbart’s video racist. In response, Fox senior executives released official statements that suggested both men were failures in their particular careers.
These reports captured the push to establish clearer boundaries around Fox News’s role and reflected that the network felt responsible for adhering to certain journalistic ethics.

Tea Party supporters worked in concert with conservative news outlets like Fox to paint the rest of the media as explicitly anti–Tea Party. Tea partiers and conservative media pundits argued that their mainstream competitors were more than just biased in favor of liberal ideology—they were actively engaged in a campaign to defame and eradicate the Tea Party and the conservative media regime. A Wall Street Journal editorial claimed that “liberal Democrats and their friends in the media” want to “dismiss and discredit the tea-party movement” (Wall Street Journal editorial, 2010). Another Wall Street Journal columnist contended that tea partiers “imagine their movement as a great uprising of the common people against elitism . . . and against the arrogant power of the media.” According to him, political actors like Sarah Palin used a Tea Party narrative of media victimhood to deflect and undermine journalistic criticism:

[Palin] was able to keep up the martyrdom act last week even after she placed a map on her Web site in which rifle-scope crosshairs marked the congressional districts of Democrats who voted for the health-care bill. Many saw the map as an act of intimidation by itself, but Ms. Palin was able to flip the script at her speech in Searchlight, Nev., on Sunday. . . . "Media," she said, addressing the villain by name, "you guys ginning up an issue like that, making it sound like it’s a crowd like this of patriotic Americans who are inciting violence, it's a bunch of bunk, and we ask for some fair and some balanced reporting coming from you, please” (Frank, 2010).

According to Fox News managing editor Bill Sammon, “the mainstream media hates the tea party movement almost as much as it hates Sarah Palin. . . . And the reason is simple: that's because both are a threat” (Calderone, 2010). Bill O’Reilly (2010f) also complained
specifically about mainstream media depictions of the Tea Party that portrayed “white conservatives and FOX news [as] the racists.” Still, O’Reilly felt that the conservative media would prevail because his show was “the number one show that dominates cable news” and “politically correct media operations [were] going south fast” (antiwylinout, 2007; Bill O'Reilly, 2010e), specifically referring to MSNBC, CNN, and the *New York Times*. Through its peer relationship with other news outlets, it held them accountable to journalistic norms—and, through its partisanship, it used its position to advance a conservative cause.

Tea partiers’ perception of the non-conservative media as a political enemy made it more difficult for reporters to interact with tea partiers or access their events, limiting their ability to include the voices they were accused of excluding. In their recent book, Tea Party organizers and leaders Mark Meckler and Jenny Beth Martin (2012) warn that “if all you know about the Tea Party is what you’ve heard from the mainstream media, you haven’t gotten an accurate portrayal of who we are and what we’re trying to do” (p. 11). *Politico* described an instance of a major Tea Party event that initially denied entrance to “non-friendly” media outlets (Vogel, 2010b). Another *Politico* story quoted a Tea Party organizer who claimed to ban tea partiers who had an “association with liberal media outlets and [were] conspiring with each other to ‘Take TPN and this convention down’” (Vogel, 2010e). Two Tea Party organizers wrote a guest column in *Politico* that complained that their group had undergone “16 months of liberal media scrutiny and bombardment” (Martin & Meckler, 2010). Reports about Tea Party candidates’ “reporter-dodging” were also common. An *ABC News* report from a Tea Party event showcased the hostility that conservative activists directed towards its reporters:
JONATHAN KARL (ABC NEWS): (Voiceover) They came to Washington, angry about President Obama's policies, to be sure, but also angry at the way they've been portrayed. . . . Many of them blamed us, the news media.


ATTENDEE (TEA PARTY RALLY): Give us some space. We don't want to talk to you.

ATTENDEE (TEA PARTY RALLY): We want honesty from you. We want fair time from you. We want you to— you the media, to represent all the people, not just a certain portion of the people (Stephanopoulos, 2010).

Other outlets similarly noted numerous instances in which Tea Party leaders or supporters expressed disdain and were “rude” to reporters on assignment.

Broader critiques that described the entire news media as an increasingly politicized institution were also a frequent theme in the media coverage. A New York Times columnist referred to the fragmentation and ideological leanings of contemporary media as the “political-media complex” (Stevenson, 2010). Politico also reported that FreedomWorks, a major Tea Party organizing group, was also a “paying sponsor” of the radio show of Glenn Beck, the former Fox News host and 9/12 rally organizer (Vogel, 2010f). Another New York Times piece claimed that the news media was into two camps: the “populist news media” (which is conservative and supports the Tea Party) and the “progressive news media” (Brooks, 2009). In this way, Shirley Sherrod’s firing was just another example of the real impact and consequences of a “rapid-fire” media environment. Another Politico writer complained that a conservative blog had written that “I should be cast off the media beat because I don't agree that the MSM, as a whole,
'hates’ the tea party movement” (Calderone, 2010), emphasizing the increasing importance of media criticism within journalistic work.

Media professionals were also used as sources and spokespersons to advance and publicize the Tea Party. On cable news, show hosts frequently interviewed journalists both as sources and as political experts. These guests not only reported on current political events, but also used them to interpret and explain the political and media landscape. On political blogs, media experts, personalities, and reporters were frequent contributors. As described earlier, Andrew Breitbart’s video was infamously used as a Fox News source; Mark Williams, a conservative radio host and Tea Party organizer, was interviewed as a Tea Party spokesperson. Dana Loesch, a radio host in St. Louis, was also interviewed as a Tea Party leader. In this way, the boundaries separating political analyst, political reporter, and journalist were regularly blurred.

In response to the increasing political activism of journalists, the increased deceptiveness of journalistic content, and inaccuracies within widely circulated political and news information, there are now many online media fact-checking groups. Watchdog groups like Factcheck.org aim to “monitor the factual accuracy of major US political players” and serve as “nonprofit ‘consumer advocate[s]’” for voters—a democratic mission traditionally attributed to professional journalists (Factcheck.org, 2012). These organizations claim objectivity; however, open challenges to powerful political groups sometimes provoke hostilities that place them at the center of political conflict, instead of outside of it. A number of fact-checking groups are partisan, though their mission statements are similar those of the nonpartisan entities. One specific example mentioned in Tea Party news texts is Media Matters for America (MMfA), a nonprofit research
group “dedicated to comprehensively monitoring, analyzing, and correcting conservative misinformation” (Media Matters for America, 2012). The New York Times has variously referred to Media Matters as a “left-wing group” and a “media watchdog.” According to Fox News anchors, the “vicious, dishonest Media Matters organization” was just another political actor that claimed authority and twisted facts to serve its own agenda:

O'REILLY: Here is back up. The Media Matters group, which Soros gave a million to in addition to the 1.8 million and we will get to that with Rove in a moment. They called today from Mara Liasson who is our Fox News analyst to be fired from NPR as well. . . .

GLENN BECK: And we also now have George Soros giving a million dollars to Media Matters to come and assault us. Assault us, take us down. It's never, ever been done before, Bill. This isn't normal. . . .

They will watch every word you say. And if it's Media Matters, they will tape everything you say and they won't stop until they drive you off the air. That's the goal here. I think it's the goal that they have toward you and pretty much everyone on Fox News (O'Reilly, 2010b).

In another example, a Newsmax piece cited statistics from a “study” produced by the Media Research Center (MRC), which it described as “a watchdog organization founded by conservative L. Brent Bozell III” (Curl, 2010). According to the MRC, the “three big television networks” “maligned” and “ignored” the Tea Party movement.

Attacks on the neutrality of fact-checking entities and disputes regarding their objectivity and the factuality of their claims imply that these groups actually function as a new form of journalism, rather than its referees. In fact, the majority of fact-checking organizations are manned by current or former journalists. For example, the director of Media Matters for America appeared on MSNBC to describe inaccuracies in Fox News reporting about the Tea Party. These appearances reflect that MMfA employees also function as political actors and professional communicators, much like the reporters they
critique. Like traditional journalists, fact-checkers aim to collect, verify, interpret, and present facts (or lies) in a subjective process that often reveals the inherent ambiguity and complexity of “truth” and the futility of objectivity, rather than reifying or affirming the existence of a neutral version of reality. Furthermore, the growth of “fact-checking” spaces within existing news outlets, such as the Politifact.com project from the Tampa Bay Times and its affiliates around the country, suggests that media monitoring is fast becoming a new category of news content—in addition to hard and soft news, there may also be a “factual” section focused on explicit evaluations of accuracy in news and political information (rather than just reporting on political and news events). Ultimately, the rise of the political actor in news has produced, and been produced by, the development of new venues for information and politics within the digital landscape—a process I will examine more closely in the next section.

There are various conclusions to draw from these examples of news reporters performing as political party spokespersons (and vice versa) and in other “extra-journalistic” roles. Rick Santelli’s role, in particular, demands a reconceptualization of the term “citizen activist” and advances the importance of citizenship as a journalistic rhetoric. Santelli’s “rant” was an instance of a professional reporter organizing and laying claim to a political movement while on the clock. His explanation about that specific moment was predicated upon a rhetoric of citizenship—he had departed from traditional journalistic norms, he claimed, because of his personal commitment to patriotism. His role as a citizen was driving his professional performance as a reporter. Moreover, this “rant” easily found an audience and instant distribution among citizen journalist networks, increased his value to his news outlet, and emphasized citizenship as a
rhetorical form in partisan news reporting. In the past, journalists who protested or participated in social movements, even on their own time, were censured or fired for compromising their “objectivity” and violating their news bureaus’ nonpartisanship guidelines. Though the Supreme Court has expressed support for news bureaus’ right to restrict the activism of their employees, only the hiring organization can enforce such codes, often based on perceptions of potential financial losses or gains. In the contemporary news environment, it appears that various media groups expect to benefit from the activism of their journalists and the incentive to police their conduct has largely subsided.

In their study of the Tea Party, Skopcol and Williams (2012) find that the conservative media establishment is much less committed to twentieth-century news values of objectivity and nonpartisanship than other news outlets. For members of the conservative news media, journalism is already a project of citizenship. Right-leaning news reporters argue that they serve the public by promoting values that will best benefit the country (or themselves). This ideological leaning is not just a return to the historically partisan reporting that marked pre–twentieth-century journalism. In covering the Tea Party, Fox News not only conveyed Republican messaging but also produced its own talking points and mobilized its audience accordingly. Skocpol and Williams (2012) also find that Fox News viewers and Tea Party participants are “heavily overlapping categories” (p. 137). This suggests that news workers there are not just producing partisan media content, but are actually constructing a new and important American constituency—Fox News viewers as a type of citizen.
Thinking of certain journalists or news media entities as brands of citizenship means that certain news media outlets are even more influential than in the past, not just providing misleading information but also in cultivating allegiances, developing constituents, distributing messages, creating political platforms, and influencing other news organizations. The digital age places an important emphasis on the content and language of journalistic reporting, rather than its source or outlet. Citizens choose news outlets based on the ways in which they conform to those citizens’ values and partisan preferences, and reporters adapt their personas to fit the preferences of their citizen-consumers. Patriotism, nationalism, and citizenship are now integral to journalistic discourse, not only in its subject matter but in the way journalists see themselves and engage with the topics they cover. Fox News, specifically, seems to wield significant influence over not only politicians but other media outlets as well. As the Washington ad example suggests, Fox takes its role as media watchdog and agenda-setter seriously, even if it means using outlets and platforms outside of its own to draw attention to a story that it is advancing. In certain ways, Fox News functions more like a political third party than the Tea Party ever did.

The coverage of the media as a political actor in Tea Party news stories suggests that this role can be productive. News is no longer considered neutral, insulated, or the final authority on political events—and journalists are less likely to use the veneer of objectivity or to pretend to be “above the fray.” This is potentially good news, particularly when it comes to covering issues of race or gender. There may be more spaces for journalists to own up to how their own viewpoints and perspectives impact the way they understand and interpret political events. This, too, may even elicit a similar
response in journalism research; scholars focused on establishing metrics to evaluate and identify journalism rarely talk about the way that race or gender biases or prejudices affect what is considered a “good” story (Shapiro, 2010).

However, there seems to be a conservative bias in embracing this reinvigorated role of journalist as political actor or activist. One news story described an incident in which the insurance company Geico fired a voice actor for harshly criticizing the Tea Party for provoking violence; Rick Santelli’s news bureau, CNBC, publicized the actor’s antics. If journalist activism is only acceptable in the context of conservative news, then political expression by journalists advocating for the rights of people of color, women, queer people, or any other marginalized group—or journalists who are perceived as members of those groups—might be excluded from the public sphere. For example, Politico recently suspended a Black reporter for saying that Mitt Romney was uncomfortable with people different than him and more at ease with “white folks” on Fox News, a comment that was immediately criticized as an accusation of racism. On the other hand, Fox News host Bill O’Reilly has repeatedly and explicitly accused the Democratic Party of orchestrating acts of Tea Party racism without any comparable fallout from Fox News or other news outlets.

What does it mean that journalists and news bureaus now imagine themselves as citizen-activists instead of the “fourth branch of government”? How does this new shift in journalists as political leaders and news outlets organizing as third parties change contemporary notions of journalism? Questions remain about the media as a political actor, as opposed to its identity as the “fourth estate.”

219
News Media as a Medium

Marshall McLuhan’s foundational thesis that “the medium is the message” helps elucidate the ways in which Tea Party news texts discussed and depicted the changing “medium” of news. For McLuhan (2002), looking at one medium’s impact on another was crucial to understanding the significance and meaning of each.

What we are considering here … are the psychic and social consequences of the designs or patterns as they amplify or accelerate existing processes. For the “message” of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs. The railway did not introduce movement or transportation or wheel or road into human society, but it accelerated and enlarged the scale of previous human functions creating totally new kinds of cities and new kinds of work and leisure (p. 18).

The airplane . . . by accelerating the rate of transportation, tends to dissolve the railway form of city, politics, and association, quite independently of what the airplane is used for (p. 19).

Tea Party news stories show how the introduction of digital technology as a journalistic medium has changed the patterns and pace of the other news mediums.

One Vanity Fair writer discussing the political news site Politico provided an apt description of this transformation:

CNN changed the nature of politics and political reporting by compressing the time it took for something to happen, for it to become widely known, and for newsmakers and the public to react to it (i.e., the news cycle) to half a day—whereas the newspaper news cycle, from next-day publication to day-after reaction, was 48 hours, and network television’s news cycle, from one day’s evening news to the next day’s evening news, was 24 hours. Politico brings the news cycle down to about 15 or 20 minutes.

Politico further alters the nature and effect of news by undermining the favorite view of old-line news organizations that news can be “platform agnostic”—a preferred phrase of New York Times publisher Arthur Sulzberger Jr. This implies that content is content and it doesn’t matter how it’s delivered—hence, existing news organizations, with their existing
content, can yet find a way to sell it. But Politico’s news is not like political news has ever been. Its Internet-focused version is some obsessive-compulsive mix of trade journal, Twitter feed, and, quite literally, real-time chat with seniormost newsmakers and leakers (Wolff, 2009).

The message of information retrieved online is both the literal meaning of the text in the message and the connotations associated with the Internet as a modern, up-to-date, democratizing, equalizing, interactive, transnational, flexible, interconnected, and intercultural institution. This understanding of online environments affects perceptions about print news, which in turn alters conceptions of cable and broadcast television, ultimately reshaping the significance of news based on the meaning attributed to its medium. The introduction of online news and digitally transmitted information has influenced the messages of other mediums by changing the approaches, content, function, form, and style of print and broadcast journalism. In examining both the content and reporting about the media within Tea Party news texts, the impact of the digital environment upon other news mediums becomes clear.

The availability of online news and information has transformed the larger function of broadcast and print news mediums. Within the digital landscape, “the roles of information producer and consumer are interchangeable—and . . . multiple voices can and do claim to be journalistic” (Hayes et al., 2007, p. 263). Yet it is difficult for the average news consumer to assess the reliability and accuracy of online sources, particularly in deciphering seemingly endless conflicting viewpoints and claims. Consequently, the brand recognition and credibility attached to traditional news organizations have become much more valuable. Drawing on an earlier example, Fox News placed its newspaper ad alleging neglect of the Tea Party story by various news
outlets despite the Tea Party’s widespread circulation, popularity, and attention within conservative online and radio outlets. The presumed reliability and professionalism of traditional mediums was vital in amplifying the Tea Party’s political significance in a news landscape flooded with digital information and stories. Jacobs and Townsley’s (2011) explain:

rather than declining in significance in the face of the rise of new media, then, the elite spaces [of mainstream newspapers and television] appear to be increasingly central to the large and densely networked public sphere we inhabit (p. 14).

Thus, as the credibility of print and broadcast news mediums has increased due to the countless perspectives, sources, arguments, and information made available by online news producers.

As digital content was able to provide interested people with real-time descriptions of political event and incidents and even the internal musings of political or media figures, the mediums of traditional news outlets also changed. Instead of focusing on investigative reporting about the Tea Party within traditional media outlets, print and broadcast journalists concentrated on contextualizing the Tea Party, covering events that required media credentials (and thus excluded many online journalists), selecting events or representatives to highlight for a national audience, and interpreting the significance of specific events or people. In short, the production of online news and information content

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34 It is also important to note that online news stories attain prominence within traditional news venues based on their digital circulation and consumption. For instance, Andrew Breitbart’s video about Shirley Sherrod did not gain national attention and an official White House response until it was covered on Fox News. But it attracted Fox News coverage because it was distributed online by a highly circulated news blog.
has increased the interpretive, agenda-setting, legitimizing, and explanatory functions of the traditional press.

While the Tea Party stories reified the authority of traditional news mediums, they also reveal how authenticity and democratic pluralism are considered attributes of online and digital mediums. User-generated information published on the Internet was seen as less fact-based but “closer to the ground,” full of the voices of ordinary people—an arena in which the “common man” could tell his or her story regardless of age, race, gender, or other marginalized identities. Online content provided space for comments; the ability to hyperlink to other sources promoted interactivity and a sense of interconnection and community-building in online content. Thus, digital information was often used as a primary source in print and broadcast news coverage of the Tea Party, rather than being treated as another journalistic medium. For example, reports from MSNBC and the New York Times cited and criticized Palin’s tweets about controversial political topics. On CNN, a political blogger was interviewed about his opinions on the Tea Party as if he were an average citizen instead of a well-known writer.

Scholarship on journalism and new media shows that the “hard news versus soft news” dichotomy can be mapped onto popular perceptions of the different news mediums. This division is a central framework with journalism and a useful categorical referent in understanding how people have historically understood news. Reinman et al

35 MSNBC reported that “Sarah Palin [was] taking up the Tea Party talking points via Twitter”; Politico noted that “Palin is the first politician to fully master the new media . . . communicating directly with her supporters via Facebook and Twitter” (O’Donnell, 2010; Smith, 2010).

36 Williams and Carpini (2011) have very aptly pointed out the arbitrary nature of these categories and the inherent difficulty in identifying what counts as “soft” or “hard news.” They argue, instead, that it might be more useful to “identify key characteristics that are assumed to distinguish politically
(2011) found that, while deployed in different ways throughout the relevant literature, the differences between hard and soft news is generally reduced to three key dimensions: topic, focus, and style. As a topic, hard news is typically seen as covering politics and the economy, and soft news relates to sports, celebrities, royal families, crimes and scandals; focus depends on whether a story is framed as of public or private relevance. Importantly, the dimension of style in distinguishing between hard and soft news depends on “whether journalists’ subjective impressions or opinions apparent in a report” (p. 231) and if it includes “verbal and/or visual emotion-arousing elements” (p. 233). Temporality is also a major factor in hard news work (Bockzkowski, 2010). According to Jamieson and Campbell (2001), hard news is news about an extremely recent event that is covered and treated as a topic of ongoing concern. While hard news is dramatic and focuses on extraordinary circumstances, it is linked to concrete events and individuals and—most importantly—is seen as objective. Soft news (or “softer news” (Baum, 2002; Reinman et al (2011); Schaefer & Birkland, 2007; Reinmann, et al, 2012)) is considered humorous, novel; it is also understood as opinionated and entertaining, a space where writers are freer and more able to editorialize (Bell, 1991; Coe et al., 2008).

Popular and scholarly understandings of new media content show that the term “new media” has connotations of “soft news.” Online news was originally understood as an arena that focused on opinion and analysis, rather than the transmission of factual information. People with virtually no professional or formal training (i.e., bloggers, vloggers, citizen journalists, online activists) have historically been the primary producers relevant from politically irrelevant media” (p. 11). This dissertation and chapter supports their argument, but also points to the importance identifying prevailing narratives about political ideas, their popular origins, and the ways in which they proliferate.
of digital news and online journalism. In its early days, online news was best known for its partisan political commentary by lay journalists unfamiliar with journalistic standards, ethics, or practices and lacking accountability. As a result, scholars have framed online content as inherently flawed and likely to violate journalistic norms, ethics, standards, structure, style, and accuracy (Carpenter, 2008; Usher, 2011). In other words, online journalism was considered less likely to be accurate and more opinionated, subjective (as opposed to objective), entertaining, and free of journalistic conventions typically attributed to “hard news”—that is, it corresponds directly to the connotations of the “soft news” label.

Traditional media, such as television and print news, have been associated primarily with hard news—they were seen as hierarchical bureaucracies managed by professionals who prioritized facts, objectivity, and neutrality in reporting. Print and television news coverage is confined by both time and space limits. The various levels of editorial bureaucracy at television and newspaper outlets and their focus on scheduled events have shaped “hard news” newsgathering processes, which cover specific occurrences that can be explained quickly, simply, and concisely (Jamieson and Campbell, 2001). As mentioned earlier, these traditional mediums have been seen as unidirectional, authoritative, and bound by routine, even more so in the face of diverse and interactive online content. Television reporters with faces and identifying graphics may even seem more authentic when compared to anonymous, detached (and possibly ghostwritten) digitized messaging. (Conversely, as Williams and Delli Carpini (2011) point out, the informal nature of digital content makes it also seem more authentic). New
media, with its more rapid, open, varied, and engaging formats, has constructed and been constructed by traditional media, seen as more official, reliable, and accurate.

The two mediums have tended toward convergence: in order to be seen as legitimate, online political news sites have grown to be more like mainstream news, while in order to compete with online audiences and promote an accessible and tech-savvy image, mainstream news have grown to be more like new media. The convergence of digital and traditional news mediums has led to an intra-outlet fragmentation—a reader who reads the *Wall Street Journal* online will have access to substantially different content than those who read the paper version. Online political news sites are expanding their readership with style and entertainment sections, and newspapers and other traditional media are now actively involved with blogging (Sklar, 2009). This shift is important. For example, while the *Wall Street Journal* published at least 20 pieces on the Shirley Sherrod incident, only three of them actually appeared in the newspaper’s printed version; the others served as online commentary. The effect of new media on traditional media has changed news, allowing opinion to dominate the information that is produced and distributed by traditional outlets.

As online journalists have diversified their presentation of news by introducing multiple perspectives and sources that speak directly to audiences without the intervention or framing of professional journalists, the “hard-news” focus of the traditional press has also changed to integrate these narrative conventions. Importantly, the Tea Party *became* a story in the “soft news” spaces of online content, cable news punditry, and newspaper editorials. Chart 1 buttresses this point by showing how even the story of the Tea Party in print media largely originated from op-ed, editorial, and guest
columns. As a media phenomenon, the Tea Party became important because of its initial circulation, discussion, and analysis within these opinion spaces. The “hard news” sections ran to catch up to the Tea Party’s dominance within opinion spaces, drawing on the tone, framing, language, details, and sourcing of the initial opinion and commentary articles. For example, the themes that focused on the Tea Party as “new,” “energetic,” “working-class,” and “tech-savvy” originated within opinion and guest columns and continued throughout the “hard news” coverage of the Tea Party (in some instances, even when demographic data dispelled such assertions).

Chart 7: News and Opinion articles

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<th>New York Times</th>
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<td>Gail Collins *</td>
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<td>Thomas Frank*</td>
<td>Paul Krugman *</td>
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<td>Glenn Harland Reynolds</td>
<td>Ben Stein*</td>
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<td>New York Times</td>
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<td>News: 0 opinion: 1</td>
<td>News: 0 opinion: 3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Authors</td>
<td>DeWayne Wickham*</td>
<td>Gerald F. Seib*</td>
<td>Bob Herbert*</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>David Brooks *</td>
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37 This chart is based on articles in which the Tea Party is mentioned more than once outside of quotes, is included in a top graph, and/or is a central topic in the article. Also, one article that is a “fact-check” on a political ad that was run against Rand Paul is also excluded since the content is not an actual story (Korte, 2010). The asterisks indicate employees of the respective news outlets.
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<td>Sarah Palin</td>
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<td>John Steele Gordon</td>
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Tea Party news coverage shows that the growth of digital media has not only affected newsgathering practices and routines, but also altered the language that professional journalists use in their reporting—specifically, the language and stylistic influences that previously characterized each of the mediums. The fact-based presentation style of hard news and the more accessible and persuasive language used in blogs, editorials, and other opinion spaces have begun to blend. Opinion columns included direct quotes from tea partiers and experts, cited hard data and statistics, and covered specific events, similar to hard news coverage. Various hard news stories, on the other hand, drew clear opinions and used informal and colloquial phrasing. For example, a Wall Street Journal “hard-news” reporter covering the Tea Party and the midterm
elections wrote that “Republicans on the campaign trail are bashing the president and his agenda and some are vowing to shut down Washington if they don't get their way” (Bendavid, 2010a). A USA Today reporter argued that:

The only solutions capable of raising enough money are politically dangerous for the president and Congress: tax increases and major reductions in Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security (Wolff, 2010).

Notably, while Wolff does not mention the highest federal budget expense at the time, he does include the items mentioned most frequently by tea partiers. In the New York Times, one reporter covering the Breitbart story concluded that “pretty much everyone else had egg on his face”; another opened a piece about Santelli with “once upon a time” (Stelter, 2009; Stolberg et al., 2010). In the words of Jacobs and Townsley (2011), “serious,’ ‘entertaining,’ ‘fact-based,’ and ‘commentary-based’ styles of journalism are . . . increasingly being combined in new ways” (p. 10).

Tea Party stories in print news outlets show that it is particularly challenging to draw textual and stylistic distinctions between opinion articles and hard-news reporting because of placement and language. Images 1 through 4 show how even the placement of articles within the newspapers makes it difficult to identify them as opinion or non-opinion news. For example, Gerald Seib’s op-ed column (Image 3) in the Wall Street Journal is listed under the label “News,” but the word “Opinion” is the heading for another page of columns (Image 2) (Kohut, 2010; Seib, 2010). Andrew Kohut’s article about polling data falls under “Opinion” in the Wall Street Journal, but Megan Thee-Brennan and Marina Stefan’s article on a New York Times/CBS poll is considered “news” specifically, the articles titled “Wielding Two-by Fours Instead of Talking Points,” “Paladino’s Accidental Running Mate is Also His Mop-Up Man,” and “Tea Party and the Path to Power” (Barbaro, 2010; Harwood, 2010; Kohut, 2010; Page, 2010b; Seib, 2010).
in the *New York Times* (ibid; Thee-Brenan & Stefan, 2010). It still remains difficult to
assign “hard news” or “soft news” categorization to the “Caucus” article written by
Michael Barbaro or John Harwood’s piece about gubernatorial candidate Carl Paladino
(Images 4 and 5) (Barbaro, 2010; Harwood, 2010). These difficulties reflect the fading
significance of differences between opinion and hard news.
Military Commissions: The Right Venue for KSM

By Keith A.Homepage

Military commissions are an ineffective substitute for a full judicial process. The Senate should insist that Congress provide the kind of due process that the Constitution requires.

A military court martial is an ineffective substitute for the kind of due process that the Constitution requires. The Senate should insist that Congress provide the kind of due process that the Constitution requires.

Americans Are More Skeptical of Washington Than Ever

By Andrew Katlow

The American public is increasingly disillusioned with government. The public's trust in government has declined, and a growing number of people believe that government is having a negative impact on the country.

Mideast Peace, One Brick at a Time

By Robert McFarlane

The United States should focus on building trust and creating a framework for negotiations. By working with the Israelis and Palestinians, the United States can help create a lasting peace in the Middle East.

Notable & Quotable

"Peace Now, Chief Nagel and Other Names"

The release of detainees will be a crucial step in the process of normalizing relations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. By working together, both sides can achieve a lasting peace in the region.

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Tea Party and the Path to Power

By Gerald F. Seib

Investigation of Spy Ring Nets a 12th

U.S. officials say June 50er stage a night-stand scene.

12/360... 12/360... 12/360...

CORRECTIONS & AMPLIFICATIONS

INVESTIGATION OF SPY RING NETS A 12TH

U.S. officials say June 50er stage a night-stand scene.

12/360... 12/360... 12/360...
The Caucus

THE 2010 CAMPAIGN

In Washington, a Senator Fights to Keep Her Seat

By WILBUR L. VANDERBILT


Wielding Two-by-Fours instead of Talking Points

The Caucus

WASHINGTON, D.C. — In December 2009, Senator Meri-


...
An Outsider, Or Merely Outlandish?

Michael R. Bloomberg, New York Times, October 21, 2010

Paladino’s Accidental Running Mate Is Also His Mop-Up Man

By Michael R. Bloomberg

Paladino’s accidental running mate is also his mop-up man. In August 2010, the Republican candidate for governor of New York, Carl Paladino, met a man named John Faso at the state Republican convention in Rochester. Faso, a recently appointed state Senate majority leader, had been a late entry to the convention and had assumed a supporting role. Paladino, who had been a near certainty for the Republican nomination, did not see much purpose in Faso’s presence. But Faso was determined to make an impression, and he approached Paladino with a confident air and a winning smile. He offered to help Paladino with his campaign, and Paladino, seeing no harm in the offer, accepted.

Faso quickly became Paladino’s right-hand man, always available and eager to help. He was a master of public relations, skillfully navigating the media and the political landscape. Paladino, who was known for his sometimes erratic behavior, could rely on Faso to keep things on track. Faso was a calming influence, a steady force in the chaotic swirl of campaign politics.

One Place Where Spitzer Isn’t Forgotten: Harvard Club

Spitzer’s legacy lives on at Harvard Club. The former governor joined the esteemed club in 2010, and his presence was a surprise to many. He was out of politics for a while, but his connection to Harvard Club never wavered. Spitzer was a standout student at Harvard, earning a degree in economics. He later went on to become a successful lawyer, and his political career began with a bang when he ran for governor in 2006.

At Harvard Club, Spitzer is still a figure of respect and admiration. He attends events and meets with members, often inviting them to his law office for a chat. He is a frequent visitor to the club, where he enjoys the camaraderie and the intellectual stimulation. Spitzer is a true Harvardian, and his presence at the club is a testament to his enduring connection to the institution.

The Harvard Club of New York City is known for its many members and their diverse interests. Though Spitzer is a prominent member, he is not the only notable person associated with the club. Many other successful people have also been members, including politicians, business leaders, and academics.

The Harvard Club is a symbol of success and accomplishment, and Spitzer’s presence is a reminder that even the most successful people can still find a home at Harvard Club.
The Tea Party’s prevailing emergence from opinion spaces also suggests that the use of opinion spaces increases when journalists do not have concrete facts about a political event or phenomenon. The absence of facts leaves open space in which guest columnists and contributors can spread misinformation, propaganda, and partisan political agendas. Journalists still feel pressured to “break a news story” (meaning to be first to report on it). Competing with the instantaneity of the Internet means providing news coverage on a topic immediately, even if it is primarily editorial. As seen in the Tea Party stories, themes constructed early in the life of a political story can permanently influence its media narrative, despite later corrections to misperceptions. Moreover, digital news aggregators like Google and Bing guarantee the perpetual online availability of inaccurate stories and facts.

Ultimately, the Tea Party coverage exposes convergences in the platform, style and structure of online, broadcast, and print news mediums, which undermine, set aside, refute, and/or negate the utility of both the “hard versus soft news” and “old versus new media” dichotomies. There are various implications for the changes described in the converging trends of news and information transmitted by new and traditional mediums. First, the platform, style, and content of online and news information is becoming increasingly standardized. In some ways, this is a positive change. It is now easier to spot discrepancies or errors regarding information within stories on the Internet because there are more sources for the same story, even in alternative media. Moreover, as the presentation of news information becomes standardized, the news media and its employees may return to prioritizing the implementation of journalistic standards over
staying ahead in technological innovation and content diversification. Scholars looking at the effects and influence of the news media on consumers’ beliefs and civic participation must also take into account the different forms, functions, and platforms that traditional outlets assume in the current media environment and the orthodox turn of online content.

Conclusion

On a recent Sunday-morning news show, a gay Newsweek columnist fought back tears as he expressed his feelings about President Obama’s recent announcement supporting gay marriage:

I never understood the power of a president's words until that day, really. I thought, all that matters is the states and the Congress and the Defense of Marriage Act and I had all this in my head and suddenly this man saying, “I'm with you, I get it, you're like me, I'm like you, there is nothing between us, we are the same people and we are equal human beings and I want to treat you the way you treat me.” That—that was overwhelming. That's all I can say. I was at a loss for words (“Sullivan On Obama Support Of Gay Marriage: He's A ‘Father Figure,’” 05/13/12).

This quote captures, and expands upon, what numerous scholars have called “meta-journalism” or “journalism about journalism” (Deuze, 2003, p. 210)(also, meta-media (ibid) or meta-coverage (Esser and Spanier, 2005). Meta-journalism is variously described as a form of interpretive journalism (Salgado and Stromback, 2012) that places journalists as sources or experts about news, “social news” which involves disseminating and redistributing other news (Blaagard, 2010), or the coverage of the news media functioning as “political agents who participate, and shape, in political events” (Esser and Spanier, 2005, p. 30). But I am also expanding this notion and drawing attention to the ways in which the branding environment has caused journalists to talk about themselves and their own interiority as part of their coverage of the media and politics in other
mediums and platforms. Journalists openly express the ways in which their positionality and beliefs impact their reporting and understanding of the news, and other reporters cover and feature these expressions and outbursts as news. It is, in fact, a meta-meta-journalism, journalism about the feelings and beliefs that reporters express about the news and events that they cover.

Tea Party news stories show that in this current journalistic period, veneers of objectivity have been stripped and members of the news media are more transparent in regards to their adversarial stances. Not only do journalists compete for ratings and circulation, but they do it explicitly through ideological, philosophical, professional, political rivalries, and branding/marketing practices. While Gans (1980) and Gitlin (1980) describe how journalist often chose to avoid covering events that are staged for publicity, the activism of journalists and reporters in a meta-journalistic period provides more ways to garner coverage from a generally suspicious press. These newsmakers, particularly in the conservative press, do not just choose what news to cover and set the news agenda – they intentionally manufacture the events that inspire news coverage.

This analysis of the Tea Party news stories show that opinion and commentary journalism increasingly set the terms and agenda for hard news coverage, instead of the other way around. Additionally, the growth of online fact-checking groups has amplified media self-criticism, making explicit media analysis a regular news topic and pushing broadcast, print, and online journalists to function as media critics and analysts. In this new phase of journalism, objectivity has given way to transparency, and neutrality has

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39 By “positionality”, I borrow from Maher and Tetreault (1993) who define this concept as the way that “gender, race, class, and other aspects of our identities are markers of relational positions rather than essential qualities” (p.118).
transitioned into reflexivity. This draws a stark contrast to the emphasis on the general antipathy given to news reporters who were topic specialists that Herbert Gans (1980) observed of the news media four decades ago and even differs from the sympathetic “advocate journalist...[who] constitute the issues raised by the group as new topics (p.134)” described by Gaye Tuchman. The media not only reports on itself as a political actor, it explicitly acts accordingly. The Tea Party’s rise in the news media captures a particular moment of journalistic meta-criticism, fragmentation, and unchecked political agitation.

Additionally, the increase of online fact-checking groups has amplified media criticism, making explicit media analysis a regular news topic and pushing broadcast, print, and online journalists to function as media critics and analysts. The media reports on itself as a political activist and acts accordingly. Debates over identity and ideology function as a way of locating the boundaries of media and politics in a digital landscape. The Tea Party’s rise in the news media captures a particular moment of journalistic meta-criticism, fragmentation, and unchecked political agitation.

Scholars like Robert Entman (2005) remain concerned about the changes that define the meta-journalistic moment and the function of the news within its own reporting. According to Entman, the constant debates between pundits and newsmakers that frame (and reframe) reality also shield politicians from accountability and undermine the news media’s role in constructing a party-competitive, mediated democracy. Entman argues that the “less-than-clear” boundaries between fictional and nonfictional news produce ill-informed and less politicized citizens who are more susceptible to political manipulation. This leads to confusion, political apathy, and disengagement among voters.
He adds, convincingly, that this “ambiguity empowers leaders, freeing them from feeling tightly constrained by news narratives, which they can treat as no more valid than fiction” (p. 264). Moreover, as Jacobs and Townsley (2011) suggest, “to the extent that these kinds of narratives . . . encourage those viewers to see the opposing party as morally weak or even evil, then it becomes more difficult to organize public dialogue built around mutual respect, trust, or openness” (p. 238).

My own analysis of the media’s representation as a topic, political actor, and medium within the Tea Party news also yields concerns about this particular media moment. In a digital environment, the race to provide up-to-date and breaking news allows political pundits easy access to space within traditional news outlets; messaging precedes critical analysis, research, or reporting. Furthermore, Tea Party narratives show that the conservative media is highly competent in distributing cohesive political messages in a fast-paced media system, significantly amplifying the messaging of right-leaning political ideologies over others. While “raising the volume” may increase the profile of news outlets and give journalists a marketable brand, does it serve the audience? In returning to the metaphor of headphone culture: does “raising the volume” make people plug into democratic engagement or tune out of politics altogether?

Still, there are some ways in which the meta-journalistic moment and the changing role that journalists play within news stories also benefit American democracy and politics. As Jacobs and Townsley explain, in order “for mediated deliberation to be successful, it doesn’t have to be perfectly balanced, neutral, or free of bias” (p. 9). High-stakes, competitive political reporting is likely to engage people in political participation. My findings also buttress the arguments of Deuze (2003) and others who contend that
meta-journalism, which “particularly flourishes online” (p. 210), has actually enhanced the professionalism of the media and reinvigorated the role of journalism in amplifying citizen voices. Creating room for dissent within and against media narratives displaces the authoritarian tendencies of the press and advances subjectivity and transparency as important professional values for journalists. The process of media dissent and analysis may actually increase media accountability, making it less likely that inaccurate stories or invalid claims will run without speedy correction or criticism. There seems to be an increasing emphasis on accuracy and factuality in news reporting that has displaced the misleading façade of “objectivity” among journalists.

Particularly online, political reporting focuses even more on meaning-making—not just describing what happened, but what it means, where it comes from, its historical and social context, and the significance of a political brand’s appeal and effect. Moreover, the rise of fact-checking groups can better aid citizens in navigating and identifying misleading frames and narratives. The news today aims to inform, is easier to circulate, and is, indeed, more entertaining (Bird, 2010); perhaps these features can produce a populace that is generally more informed about public affairs and that has a different understanding of the role of journalists. If anything, the continued deterioration of the line (or spectrum) dividing hard and soft news in online content (Vespri, 2010) based on style and temporality has clearly affected the presentation of news in traditional mediums - perhaps signaling the future trajectory, and forms, of all news media.

Beyond its specific contributions to theories and literature on news media meta-coverage and analysis, the findings that emerge in examining the Tea Party news stories also confirm Peter Dahlgren’s (2009) theory about contemporary political engagement.
Dahlgren disagrees with the prevailing idea that America is currently experiencing a decline in political participation and argues that the nature of American politics has changed. Activism has moved outside the realm of formal politics into “other modes of political engagement.” He writes:

Some activists are even in the process of redefining just what constitutes politics, guided more by personal values than traditional ideologies. . . . The boundaries between politics, cultural values, identity processes and collective self-reliance become fluid; politics becomes not only an instrumental activity for achieving concrete goals, but even at times an expressive and performative activity, entwined with the development of the self (xi).

As a form of both self-discovery and self-development, Tea Party narratives reflect this evolution of American politics today. The stories that journalists write about the Tea Party reinforce scholarly arguments that contemporary political actors are now blurring the lines between interest group and political party, challenging these divisions, and shaping political phenomena in ways that defy the traditional and scholarly notions of social movements, branding, political parties, and political events. By allowing the Tea Party to serve as means to interpret and make meaning of their own roles in their news narratives, journalists drew attention to the specific forms and locations in the erosion of these lines.
Conclusion: Boundaries Blurred

This past January, Republican presidential primary candidate Herman Cain delivered the Tea Party’s second State of the Union response speech at the National Press Club. This time, the “journalists” of the now-defunct Tea Party HD did not produce the speech and no broadcast network chose to air it (online or on TV). Instead, the Tea Party Express filmed and streamed Cain’s speech live on its website (“Herman Cain Delivers Tea Party Response to SOTU Tonight!,” 2012). The group previously known as the Our Country Deserves Better PAC had not only rebranded itself to become the largest Tea Party political action committee, it seemed to have become the primary means of Tea Party branding, marketing, organizing, and publicizing on the national level. In the year following Bachmann’s historic rebuttal, the spectacle of Tea Party rallies having largely subsided, its message became more centralized and institutionalized within established political organizations and the national media paid little attention to Cain’s State of the Union remarks. Much has changed in the Tea Party’s story, but its influence on American politics, rhetoric, and media still remains.

As a case study, this project took a close look at the Tea Party’s emergence and portrayal in national online, cable, broadcast, and print news texts as a way of assessing the cultural, political, and media landscape at the beginning of the Obama era. This ethnographic approach and “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of Tea Party news stories revealed a meta-narrative in which reporters portrayed, deployed, and debated a range of American identities, particularly those related to race, gender, journalism, and
citizenship. Reporters, pundits, and commentators in the news media framed the Tea Party as a populist protest of the Obama administration, primarily through its branding (promotion, organization, publicity, advocacy, and support of) by conservative news outlets and journalists. While very little about the Tea Party as a protest, group, or event was new -- Tea Party–style demonstrations have occurred many times before in American history, white conservative populism based on social and libertarian values developed in the Reagan era, and the national reports of the most recent Tea Party–inspired tax protests on local and state levels began during the end of President Bush’s final term — the construction of the Tea Party as news highlights its particular significance at a specific sociopolitical moment. The contemporary era is not just an age of race and new technology, but an age of branding, performance, media inaccuracy, and strategic spectacle.

Indeed, this dissertation shows that the Tea Party functioned much more like a political brand than a social movement in its political news coverage. Traditionally, social movements are understood as passing through distinct phases – moving “from informal groups or networks to complex voluntary organizations able to lobby corporations, unions, and legislative bodies” (Tuchman, p. 134). The coverage of social movements often include statements from opposing political actors, the numbers of the attendees are typically mentioned, and they focus on a specific policy or issue. For example, in the anti-Reagan frame of leftist protests in the 1980s “center[ed] on the issue of peace” (Gerhards and Rucht, 1992, p. 580). The Tea Party’s antigovernment focus, however, did not result in an expansive coverage of specific issues – rather, it resulted in a multi-
faceted presentation of Tea Party identity that rapidly (and perhaps preemptively) evolved from social movement to brand.

This dissertation tracks a number of trends in the news media and contemporary American society. The expansion of news coverage across multiple platforms has increased journalists’ reliance on polling and data opinion spaces to tell more complex stories and diminished the resources available for investigative journalism. News organizations reported on other media outlets in instances of misinformation, alignment, and deliberate provocation from other media outlets. In this environment, the Tea Party movement became a story because it featured scheduled events, attracted (and solicited) news coverage, and relied on visual spectacles that made room for simple interpretation.

In all, the Tea Party was a product of what I call “headphone culture”: a story produced by conservative leaders, reified by media echo chambers, shaped by competing non-professional media narratives, intentionally promoted and given meaning by the national news media (and significance through its spotlight). “Headphone culture” refers to a set of factors (i.e., news media consolidation; advances in digital technology; the growth and accessibility of mobile media; the popularity of user-generated content, social media, and alternative media; and their challenges to mainstream media) that have made old, familiar categories in journalism (and debates in journalistic scholarship) increasingly outdated and irrelevant. Why should journalists care about the difference between “hard” news versus “soft” news when what they really want is for their story to be “most read,” “most emailed,” or “most commented” online? If Politico started as a political news blog and then produced a print edition, is it “new media” or old? These delineations are not easy to draw, altering understanding of what journalism is and the
importance of its function. In this context, journalists’ attempts to “raise the volume” and draw attention within a crowded media environment have produced a meta-journalistic moment, a period in which it is increasingly routine (and even lauded) for news media and individual journalists to become characters, political players, and, perhaps even publicists, in their own stories.

Journalists and news reporters used drama, sensationalism, meta-journalism, and activism to “raise the volume” of Tea Party news coverage and expand their audience and media presence. These news narratives provide insight into American culture and expose the function of the press in an era marked by advances in digital technology. Ultimately, the Tea Party narratives track six dominant strategies that major national news outlets and journalists used to garner attention, put themselves at the center of political news stories, become major political actors, and attract audiences in a “headphone culture”:

- **Maximize platforms**: Producing multimedia content across multiple platforms;
- **Dependent Sourcing**: Depend heavily upon free or lay journalists, polls, opinion news, and coverage of the media to produce more content and purport its value;
- **Exclusive Access**: Emphasize their ability to provide exclusive and elite content, such as access to events involving politicians or political celebrities, that require privileged credentials and distinguishes them from citizen journalists or other mass media producers;
- **Provocation**: Explicitly challenging other media outlets to cover or respond to certain stories;
• **Identity Debates:** Focus on issues of identity or tensions related to identity as political controversy—particularly race, gender, and class—in order to enhance it as another realm of political competition; and

• **Branding:** Prolific use of branding mechanisms, including activism and advocacy, revelations of interiority, emotional performances, and cross-media contributions to cultivate themselves in ways similar to political parties and their audience as consumer-citizens.

While some form of these practices have always been present in journalism, the Tea Party news stories suggest that these strategies are much more amplified in the digital era. In particular, the findings from this case study suggest that expansive information feedback loops, media branding through journalists’ revelations of interiority, and a heavy reliance on provocation, dependent sourcing, and platform maximization have opened up even more new ways for branding and political branding mechanisms (such as race, gender, and class identities) to dominate news storytelling.

Digitally based and traditional news outlets have tended toward convergence in both style and multi-platform production, rapidly dissolving the boundaries between the mediums and the content they produce. At the same time, the regular discussion and critique of coverage within traditional news outlets indicates that their prevailing value lies in their agenda-setting and legitimizing functions, particularly in light of so many competing multimedia narratives. The Tea Party news stories show that instead of adhering to norms of objectivity and functioning as “the fourth estate” in American democracy, the news media often leveraged its national spotlight and reputation in other ways—journalists were activists and journalism was a service to provide information on
topics audiences wanted to hear. Journalism seemed to function less as a way of holding politicians accountable than as a way of providing access to high-profile political celebrities.

As journalists are prized for their intimate knowledge of political elites, they have become commentators and sources in their own news stories and, as a result, have produced a *meta-journalistic* moment in which they are considered just another extension of the branded political establishment instead of the group that holds it accountable. At the same time, the Tea Party stories also revealed a news media capable of acknowledging its own biases, journalists connecting personally to audiences, and the power that new media offers average people to subvert traditional mass media marginalization, trivialization, and dependency.

In the news coverage, the Tea Party was a touchstone narrative device that depicted the deterioration and reformulation of American identities while emphasizing the individual’s role in determining his or her own success (and failure). The election of the first African-American president and the competing identities represented in the 2008 presidential campaign signaled a major transition in American politics and increased national focus on racial and gender identity as an indicator of American progress. As a result, Tea Party news stories provided novel spaces for journalists to continue to raise questions about identity and authenticity. In portraying the Tea Party, race, gender, and class became important topics. Tea Party events and handmade signs were used as authentic evidence of the Tea Party’s demographic makeup, its political beliefs, and the pervasive presence of American racism.
In news stories, the tendency to simplify discussions of race, gender, and class identity often resulted in subtexts that bolstered notions of American meritocracy and progress. These discussions did little to address or investigate the continued oppression of women or people of color, but rather made the Tea Party a brand that Bell (2011), “obscures the incongruous paradoxes of poverty and wealth, individualism and collectivity, race and imperialism” (p. 164). In its description of Tea Party class identities, the news narratives portrayed Tea Party women symbolized the advancement of women and the newfound inclusiveness of conservative ideology, even as the women were dismissed as viable candidates and traditional conservative rhetoric was invoked. Discussions of race and racism helped to locate and minimize white supremacist logics and disappear racial disparities—the problem of race, according to some news texts, was the discussion of and belief in structural discrimination based on any racial identity. In other news texts, the Tea Party functioned as a way of identifying and defining racism through its spectacle. Locating the racist “out there” eliminated the possibility of the racist within.

The news texts also lacked focus on issues such as social or class inequality or the effect of class and economic disparities on citizens, but instead framed citizens as shareholders disappointed with its returns and investments and the government as a business in need of new management and executive leadership. This is a very different understanding of the government as an extension of the people’s own ideas, values, and beliefs. The press’s tendency to use business, labor, and economics as a central way of assessing American well-being has not just shaped the agenda and focus of the press, but
has produced rhetorics that construct Americans as consumers, not citizens; taxpayers, not contributors; voters, not actors.

Additionally, the language in news texts that discussed Tea Party identity relied on questions of authenticity and national belonging. Terms such as “real working men and women,” “real doctors,” and “real Americans” functioned as rhetorics that produced binaries that set the parameters of “real America” around white working and middle-class bodies. If news narratives depicted white working and middle class Americans as “real,” then implicitly there must be an “unreal” America full of “unreal” working men and women whose voices, values, and concerns are not as authentically American.

At its core, the Tea Party news story was a narrative depicting the tensions related to authenticity, a cultural text indicative of a period marked by skepticism, terrorism, anxiety, and doubt about both the virtual and physical worlds (and their interplay). This project shows that tensions related to authenticity and identity were often central to the Tea Party news coverage. Authenticity was a constant theme in debates over the Tea Party as a social movement; in the descriptions of tea partiers as “real Americans”; in the ways that political and media personalities justified their actions; in the use of Tea Party branding; and even in the way the news media struggled to define journalism and their own identity in a digital news era. The increasingly staged nature of media and politics leaves little room for something truly unexpected or unplanned to unfold.

The Tea Party news coverage suggests that authentic communication in this media environment is not only rare, it is actively sought after and invoked in news technologies and textual spaces. According to Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012),
“Cultural Spaces that we like to think of as “authentic” – self-identity, creativity, politics, and religion – and the ways these spaces are increasingly formed as branded spaces, structured by brand logic and strategies, and understood and expressed through the language of branding. This transformation of culture of everyday living into brand culture signals a broader shift, from “authentic” culture to the branding of authenticity.” (p. 5).

Like the Tea Party, authenticity is a floating signifier in a digitally enhanced media system no longer confined by time or space. Livestreaming technology, Tumblr, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram all represent ways in which people are regularly bypassing mainstream news and experiencing news firsthand through their own select framing and in attempts to seek out real connections in a performative media environment.

Understanding and construction of online news as authentic has even affected the way that the news is trusted and received by audiences today. People now trust online news from a news bureau as more believable than the news organization itself. For example, one recent study showed that 29% of people found ABC News believable while 40% found ABC News online believable (Rantanen, p. 121). The branding of the news content is now redefined by its medium-dependent perceptions. Increasingly, the business of news and information is becoming the business of mediums, rather than the business of journalism.

Metaphorically, the question of whether or not the Tea Party was real gestured to a larger concern about the anonymity of the Internet and the scriptedness of almost all media that purports to portray “reality.” It speaks to a larger societal inability to distinguish between the fact and fiction that make up the interconnected and intertextual nature of our everyday lives. Was the Tea Party a real movement or a massive publicity stunt put on by a weakened Republican Party and corporations blamed for a global
economic crisis? Was it a serendipitous and opportunistic effort in which Republican leaders and strategists were able to help organize a variety of grassroots protests into a massive social movement? Was it the development and spontaneous growth of local citizens connecting with and mobilizing one another using new technology? Or all of these at the same time?

While the scope of this dissertation does not provide a definitive answer to these questions, this close examination of early Tea Party press coverage clearly shows that:

1) Nationwide protests of state and income tax increases that drew on Boston Tea Party rhetoric happened prior to President Obama’s presidency.

2) The national press coverage of the Tea Party as a movement was initiated, facilitated, organized, and provoked by conservative media pundits and news reporters employed by news organizations.

3) The Tea Party’s agenda and goals in the national news media were overwhelmingly constructed by established Republican politicians and strategists.

4) The people whom the press most often cited as Tea Party spokespersons typically managed major political fundraising operations that provided money to Republican candidates and organized Tea Party events covered in the media.

5) Activists and politicians across the political spectrum credit a business news reporter with starting the Tea Party movement.


If the Tea Party was an “AstroTurf” publicity campaign sponsored by conservative political and business leaders, then this project serves as a detailed account
of how to strategically manufacture a coherent protest movement through national news publicity and new media technology. If it was a grassroots movement, it speaks to the power that digital media gives people to organize events, develop alliances across massive distances, and draw the support of political and media elites without the intervention or publicity of the news media. In short, regardless of the narrative one believes about the identity of the Tea Party or the veracity of its grassroots origins, the activist tendencies of the news media’s contemporary circulations and configurations are at its center.

Through a close empirical analysis of the Tea Party’s news coverage, this dissertation ultimately shows that in the current media environment, the distinctions between the press, publicists, activists, politicians, celebrities, and businesses are more symbolic than concrete. As indicative of a political brand culture, the news branding of the Tea Party leaves no “clear demarcation between marketer and consumer, between seller and buyer” (Banet-Weiser, 2013, p. 7). Indeed, as the text has discussed, a veteran news reporter kicked off the Tea Party and triggered its national mobilization. Part of this conclusion, then, is that not only can the media be the point of origin for contemporary social movements, but that its branding may figure more significantly than its on the ground mobilization in regards to its political influences. Furthermore, these shifts in journalism and political participation has even further muddled the 20th century categories of “hard” versus “soft” news; newspapers reporting on the Tea Party frequently emphasized celebrity figures more often than political candidates, rarely discussed concrete policies proposals, was preoccupied with scandal, and drew little (or
no) distinction between opinion and non-opinion based reporting and instead emphasizing the importance of “facts” over genre.

Significantly, this does not just depict a return to a “party-press” era of American news. While numerous paid journalists, reporters, and pundits advocated, promoted, and made appearances for the Tea Party, they rarely declared themselves Tea Party members. They framed their work as fulfilling the public service requirements expected of a free press. Moreover, if the news media covering the Tea Party is indeed a reprisal of 18th century journalism, it is one that carries the moral, political, and professional authority that US journalism has accrued over the last 250 years.

In a recent HBO docudrama about the Sarah Palin’s rise during the 2008 presidential campaign titled Game Change, a chief campaign strategist delivers a portentous line: “News is no longer meant to be remembered—it’s just entertainment.” The strategist is, of course, both right and wrong. In a rapid media environment, details about political gaffes and scandals are quickly forgotten. But, as the film shows, certain issues and narratives continue to stand out despite the heterogeneity and fragmentation of the news media. While the details may be lost, the framing of political institutions, leaders, and phenomena is often pervasive. This dissertation examines the Tea Party precisely because of its ability to get attention, develop, and gain steam under the deliberate spotlight of the national news media. Perhaps “docudrama” is a fitting term—not just for films that splice real-life footage into a dramatic political reenactment, but for the state of a news media that produces endless narratives that often split the difference between fact and fiction. As a docudrama, the national emergence of Tea Party news
stories produced a narrative that depicts the complexity (and, perhaps, the impossibility) of citizenship and journalism in modern American culture.


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263


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Endnotes