REPORTING IN AN ERA OF DISINFORMATION:

Fairness Guide for Covering Women and People of Color in Politics

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INTRODUCTION

Online attacks aimed at delegitimizing, depersonalizing, and ultimately dissuading women and people of color from being politically active are **common occurrences**, often perpetrated by **trolls and bots** with total impunity.

A **recent survey** of women in elected office from all over the world found that 41.8 percent of them had seen extremely humiliating or sexually charged images of them spread through social media. Women politicians of color, LGBTQ people, and other marginalized people are at even greater risk of becoming targets of disinformation campaigns.
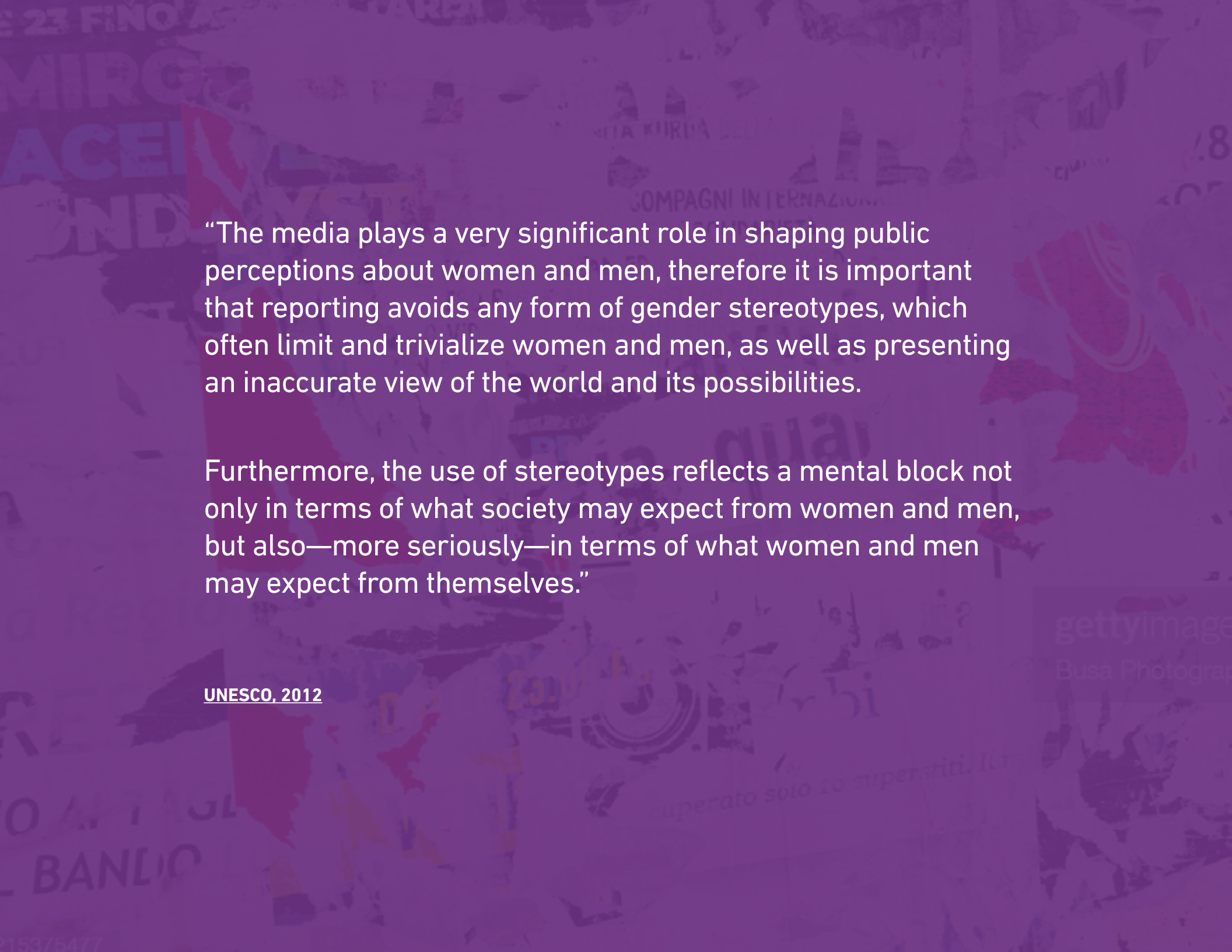
Media representation plays a critical role in how candidates of color and women are perceived by voters. Headlines, photos, social media previews, and article content can be used to spread racist and sexist ideas and encourage or legitimize disinformation. Online attacks and disinformation work to undermine women and people of color in politics.

The 2020 Democratic primary has already shown us the amount of vitriol, hate, and disinformation hurled at women candidates, and particularly women of color candidates. It has also shown that we have made little progress since 2016 in understanding how to counter those lies and harassment in a clear and effective way.

Sexist and racist language about, questions for, and descriptions of political candidates feed into negative stereotypes and disinformation. They decrease voter confidence in diverse candidates and discourage women and people of color from entering politics.

Despite a recent increase in the number of political leaders who are women and/or people of color, there's still a long way to go until our nation's elected officials truly represent the population. Women make up only 25 percent of the Senate and 23 percent of the House, despite being 51 percent of the U.S. population.[1] People of color comprise 39 percent of the population but only 22 percent of Congress.[2]

The media must play a role in ensuring that women and people of color running for or holding office are represented fairly. This guide will help journalists and platforms identify and avoid unintentional sexist and racist bias or disinformation when interviewing, writing about, or moderating content about women and people of color running for or holding political office.

"The media plays a very significant role in shaping public perceptions about women and men, therefore it is important that reporting avoids any form of gender stereotypes, which often limit and trivialize women and men, as well as presenting an inaccurate view of the world and its possibilities.

Furthermore, the use of stereotypes reflects a mental block not only in terms of what society may expect from women and men, but also—more seriously—in terms of what women and men may expect from themselves."

UNESCO, 2012

TIPS TO AVOID ENCOURAGING AND LEGITIMIZING DISINFORMATION AND BIAS

TIPS TO AVOID MIS-REPORTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA TRENDS

- Consider biases that are at play when it comes to race, gender, ability, orientation, and other protected classes—question and debunk stories and language that perpetuate bias.

- Reporting on disinformation rather than **debunking it** can help spread it. Name disinformation as unfounded, a conspiracy theory, debunked, dubious, unlikely, misleading, a lie, false, etc. in the headline if you must write about disinformation.

- Do not share links to sources of disinformation, which can drive traffic to those spaces. It is better to share screenshots with no link.

- Avoid covering "trending" topics on Twitter as reflective of broad support, even when total volume is still very low. Twitter "trends" are based on many factors, and do not necessarily mean a large number of users are participating in a conversation.

- Avoid referring to Twitter trends or data as reflective of "social media"—only 22 percent of Americans are on Twitter.

Ask yourself how this strand of disinformation is targeting Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian American and Pacific Islander, disabled, LGBTQ people, women, and other marginalized groups.

TIPS TO AVOID MIS-REPORTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA TRENDS

- Don't write articles about "movements" or "viral" content online that are only moving among a few users on Facebook or Twitter.

- Avoid overemphasizing the role of foreign actors, which can undermine the reality that a lot of disinformation is spread by domestic actors.

- Avoid overemphasizing the role of bots, rather than the reality that many things that gain traction do so as a result of both artificial and organic sentiment.

- Bad actors have sought out and do seek out opponents offline. Do not report personal information that bad actors could use to identify people who may be targets.

- Be on the lookout for signs that a photo or video has been manipulated: to impersonate, change context, or play into racist, sexist, and anti-Semitic tropes.

Resource for covering and combatting disinformation

This article states that the story had "begun to emerge on social media." In reality, the story came from a far-right news source and had received only limited attention on Twitter.

BIAS AND DISINFORMATION IN HEADLINES, PHOTOS, AND SOCIAL MEDIA

- As content is shared on social media, the headline, photo, and preview text that users see can encourage and unintentionally spread disinformation and biases that harm women, people of color, and other marginalized groups.

- Write headlines and social media posts as if it is the only thing people will read. Headlines that sensationalize disinformation and racist or sexist attacks help to spread it when it circulates on social media and news feeds.

- When choosing a candidate photo ensure that it looks professional and doesn't play into any negative stereotypes based on race, gender, or other protected class.

- If you must cover disinformation make it clear in the headline and social media preview that the information is false.
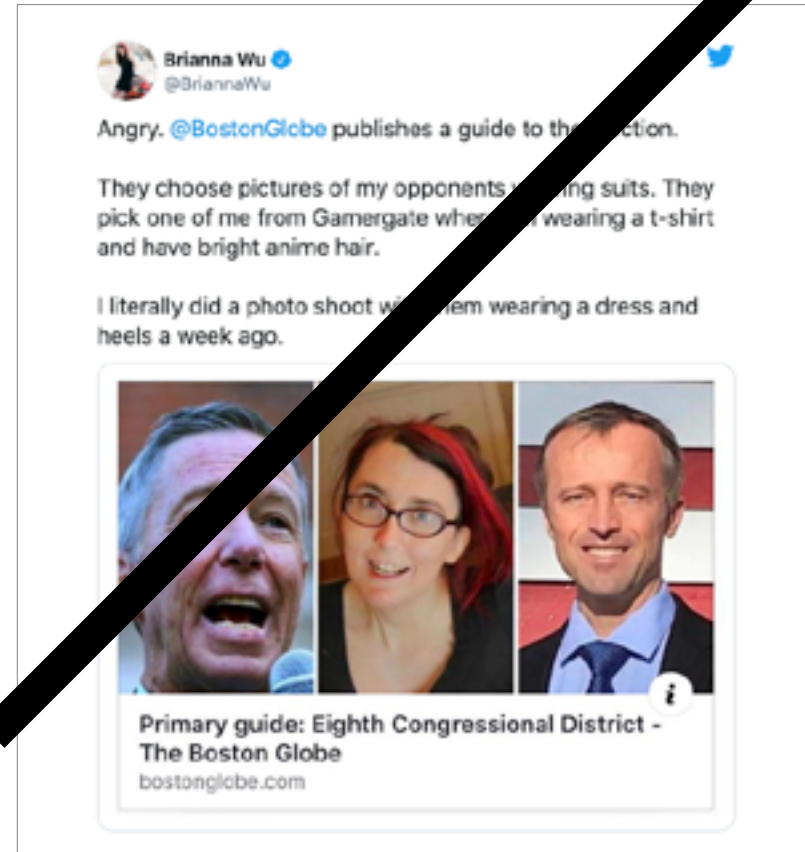
The Boston Globe published a photo of male candidates in suits next to a woman candidate, Brianna Wu, in a t-shirt.

Resource for headlines and social media

BIAS AND DISINFO IN HEADLINES, PHOTOS, AND SOCIAL MEDIA

'Trump haters are paedophiles': inside QAnon, the conspiracy aiming to put Hollywood behind bars

First Tom Hanks, then Lady Gaga and now Chrissy Teigen, QAnon believes Hollywood is involved in a paedophile ring linked to Epstein. Why?

By Maria Pope
22 July 2020 • 2:57pm

This headline paired with a featured photo of Chrissy Tiegen reinforces the false narrative that she is part of a politically-linked trafficking ring.

Wayfair denies internet rumors of child trafficking, CEO resignation

A company spokesman said " there are so many more important issues that matter to our employees and our customers."

This headline helps spread and legitimize this QAnon conspiracy theory; it should be identified as unfounded.

VANITYFAIR.CO
Terrified Aides Say Senator Klobuchar Is Just Like Trump

This social media preview of an article about Amy Klobuchar intentionally plays into the sexist trope of a tyrannical, mean woman boss or a "nasty woman."

CHECKING FOR BIAS

Prevent actively spreading or perpetuating disinformation and stereotypes that harm candidates

CHECKING FOR BIAS

Disinformation campaigns often target marginalized people—women, people of color, LGBTQ people, immigrants, Muslims, disabled people, etc.—to undermine their to undermine their success and sow hate. Accordingly, it's critical to examine the impacts of systemic racism, sexism, and other forms of implicit bias in conjunction with disinformation.

Disinformation campaigns draw on negative stereotypes about marginalized people to lend a sense of credibility while attacking the intended target. The Pizzagate conspiracy that spread across social media relied on the narrative that Hillary Clinton was unlikeable and untrustworthy —insults that are frequently lobbed at women running for office. The birther conspiracy theory used to discredit President Obama relied on both racist and Islamaphobic ideas. Conversely, disinformation can be fueled by a sensationalized headline, a debate question with sexist undertones, or a photo that plays into stereotypes.

It's critical that journalists understand the ways that implicit bias can show up in politics, to both avoid perpetuating personal biases and debunk and question disinformation meant to harm diverse candidates and political leaders.

SEXIST TROPES AND STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD BE QUESTIONED AND DEBUNKED

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Associating a woman candidate with men as a means of legitimizing

Historically, women required permission from their husband or father before most actions. Today, women are still often identified by their relationship to or comparison with men as a means of lending them legitimacy, but this implies that the woman cannot stand on her own experiences and accomplishments.

- Wife of, mother of, female version of, etc.

- Don't qualify gender when it's not necessary ex. A woman doctor, a woman attorney, a woman senator.

- Asking questions like "What does your husband think of you running?"

Politics & Policy

The 'Female Obama' Tries to Be Just Familiar Enough

Ohio Democrats ask, is Kamala Harris more than an ambitious freshman senator? Ring any bells?

By Albert R. Hunt
October 9, 2019, 6:00 AM EDT

Photographer: Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images North America

It's deja vu for Ohio Democrats. At the state party dinner Sunday night, the star attraction was an exciting speaker who's a new generation voice for change, a person of color with biracial parents who has been in the Senate for about 20 minutes.
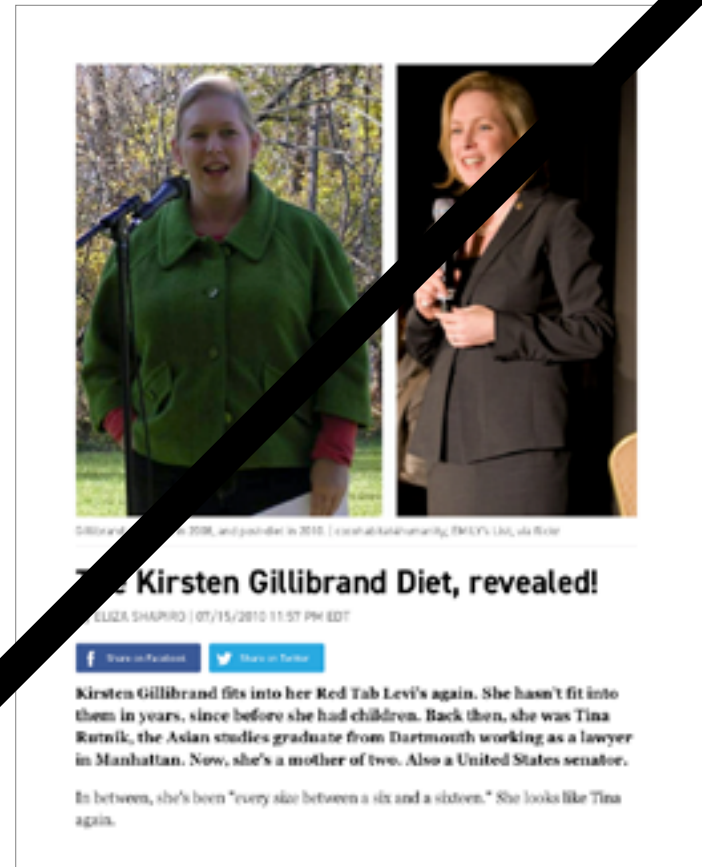
SEXIST TROPES AND STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD BE QUESTIONED AND DEBUNKED

Too much emphasis on family roles

Men are more frequently depicted in mainstream media as professionals while women are more often shown in the context of their private lives. During elections, the media tends to cover men as thought and opinion leaders over women, preferring to focus on women's roles as wives and mothers. Such coverage takes women politicians to task if they are perceived as shirking their home responsibilities.

- Asking who is taking care of the kids or how they balance work and family

- "Now she's a mother of two. And a US Senator. In between, she's been 'every size between a six and a sixteen.' " (See article on right.)

The article de-emphasized Senator Gillibrand's role as senator as an aside between mentioning the number of children she has and her dress size.

SEXIST TROPES AND STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD BE QUESTIONED AND DEBUNKED

Treating women as if ambition is a negative trait

Any candidate seeking the second highest office of the land is showing ambition, but this is only seen as negative for women: Men running for office have ambition while women running for office are ambitious. It creates a double standard that punishes women while celebrating men for doing the same.

- When Romney chose Paul Ryan as his running mate, the press called Ryan "a young, ambitious beltway insider, with a camera-ready presence" while Kamala Harris was recently labeled "too ambitious" to be vice president.

Ambition for women candidates should not be treated in a different light.

SEXIST TROPES AND STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD BE QUESTIONED AND DEBUNKED

Too much emphasis on appearance or voice

One of the most consistent findings to emerge from studies is that women candidates receive far more attention to appearance compared to men, which diminishes their perceived qualifications among voters.

- **Analyzing or focusing on clothing**

- **Focusing on weight loss or gain**

- **Focusing on makeup and hair**

- **Telling a candidate to smile or talking about whether she smiles**

- **Hypersexualizing a candidate or politician**

- **Commenting on attractiveness**

- **Focusing on tone of voice rather than substance**

SEXIST TROPES AND STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD BE QUESTIONED AND DEBUNKED

Analyzing or focusing on clothing

SEXIST TROPES AND STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD BE QUESTIONED AND DEBUNKED

Focusing on weight loss or gain

- Describing a woman's body/size

Focusing on makeup and hair

- Describing or focusing on makeup or lack thereof
- Following and criticizing changes in hairstyle

SEXIST TROPES AND STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD BE QUESTIONED AND DEBUNKED

Telling a candidate to smile or talking about whether she smiles

A brief history of female politicians [be]ing told to smile

By Jennifer Hansler, CNN
Updated 1058 GMT (0258 HKT) January 31, 2018

Sarah Sanders says Pelosi should smile more 00:48

Hypersexualizing a candidate or politician

Kyrsten Sinema Wears [R]isque Outfit That Has People Ca[lli]ng Her A Stripper

By Carmine Sabia
Published January 26, 2019 at 5[...]

Weapons of Mass Distraction: Ge[r]man Chancellor A[n]gela Merkel shows off [pl]unging neckline
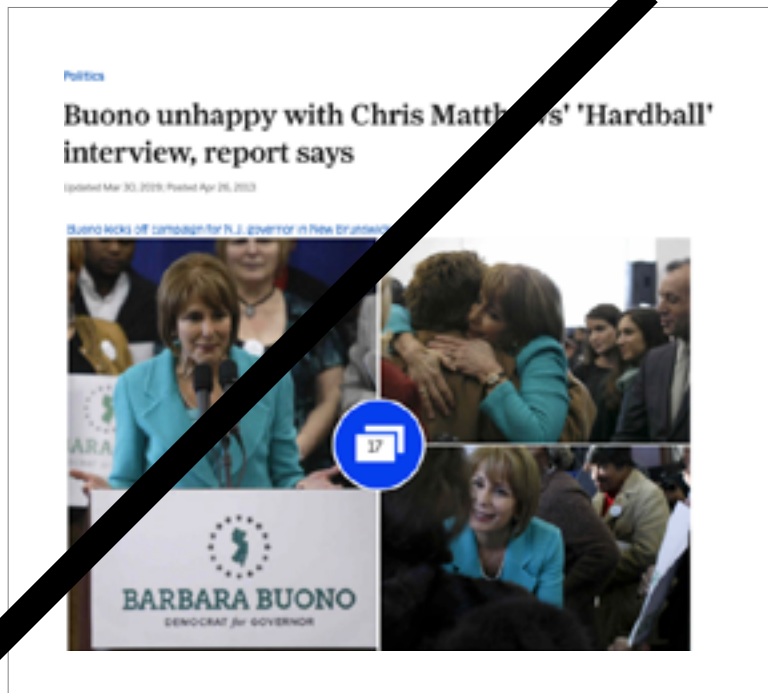
SEXIST TROPES AND STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD BE QUESTIONED AND DEBUNKED

Commenting on attractiveness

Chris Matthews asks NJ candidate if he can call her attractive

Focusing on tone of voice rather than substance

- Shrill, bitter, angry, etc.

SEXIST TROPES AND STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD BE QUESTIONED AND DEBUNKED

Avoid using terms that equate emotion with weakness or being "crazy" and stoicism with being cold

Women are often penalized as being too emotional and seen as cold if they fail to show emotion, creating a double bind that doesn't apply to men.

- Mean girl
- Ice queen
- Bossy
- Feisty
- Unlikeable

- Abrasive
- Aggressive
- Irrational
- Emotional

SEXIST TROPES AND STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD BE QUESTIONED AND DEBUNKED

Be cautious of using "unlikeable" or "unelectable"

Research has shown that voters are more likely to vote for a man candidate they don't like than a woman they don't like so discussions of likeability only help to harm women.

Why the sexist 'likability test' could haunt female candidates in 2020

Women face a double standard when it comes to public scrutiny - even as Americans say they're ready for a female president

Support the Guardian's fearless, independent journalism with a contribution.

Elizabeth Warren had a quick riposte to a tweet questioning her likability. Photograph: Andrew Harnik/AP

USE GENDER NEUTRAL LANGUAGE TO HELP STOP GENDER BIAS

- Businessperson, chairperson, first-year (rather than freshman), congressperson

- Avoid using Mrs. unless it's preferred by the candidate; use Ms. because it doesn't designate marital status. Single women have historically been seen as undesirable or unworthy.

- Use the proper title such as Honorable, Senator, Secretary

- Use the they/them pronoun as a gender neutral pronoun.

  - Ex. An independent voter in Florida said they would...

Question and debunk infantilizing and patronizing language such as calling adult women girls and calling Black men boys.

BE MINDFUL OF INTERSECTIONALITY

- These issues are compounded for candidates who hold more than one marginalized identity such as women of color, disabled women, and LGBTQ women. People may hold multiple racial or ethnic identities as well, such as Afro-Latinx.

- Indigenous women often face a Catch 22 of either being erased as a relic of pre-colonial United States or being stereotyped and objectified.

- Avoid framing candidates as masculine or feminine, especially when writing about members of the LGBTQ community.

- Using the word "minority" implies inferiority or fringe. Use more accurate, descriptive terms like LGBTQ, Black, Indigenous, people of color, underrepresented, etc.

- In general, treat candidates as the multi-dimensional people that they are and avoid essentializing them due to their race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.

- Focus on a candidate's policy without typecasting: Avoid focusing gender and civil rights questions solely on women and candidates of color.

- Ask: would you say or write this about a white man candidate?

RACIST TROPES AND STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD BE QUESTIONED AND DEBUNKED

RACIST TROPES AND STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD BE QUESTIONED AND DEBUNKED

Questioning someone's "origins," "heritage," and "loyalty."

- Questioning commitment to the United States based on racism/nativism

- Implying a connection between an Arab American and/or Muslim candidate and terrorism

- Assuming Latinx people are immigrants or using the term "illegal immigrant" or "illegal alien."
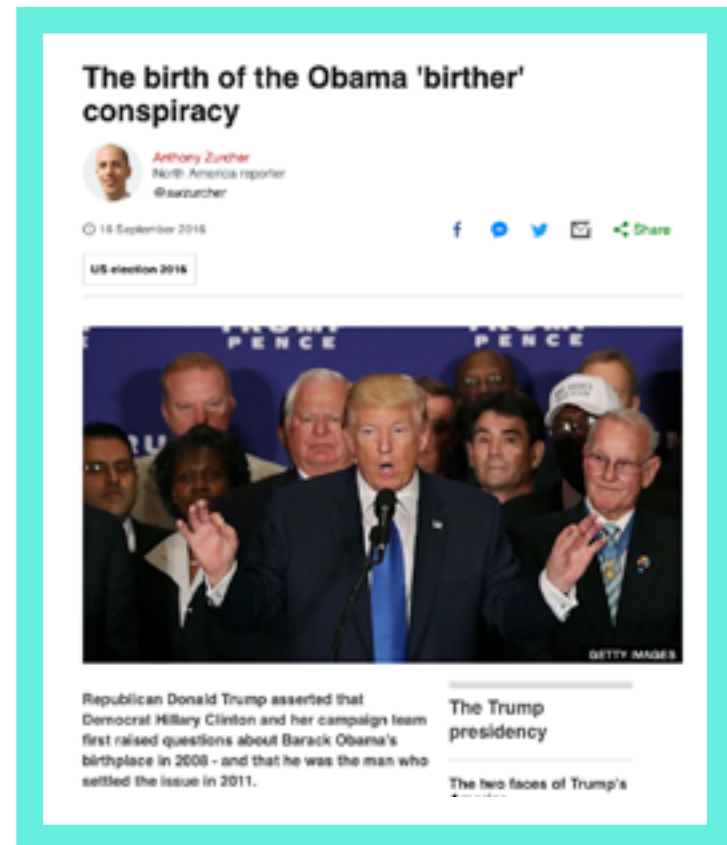
RACIST TROPES AND STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD BE QUESTIONED AND DEBUNKED

Sen. Tammy Duckworth, who lost her legs serving in Iraq, hits back after Tucker Carlson suggests she hates America
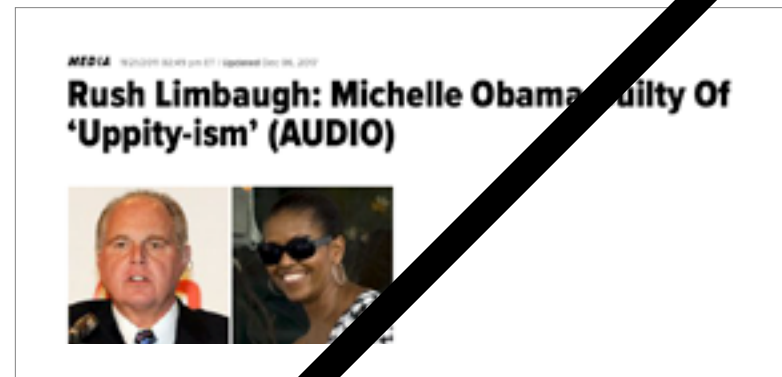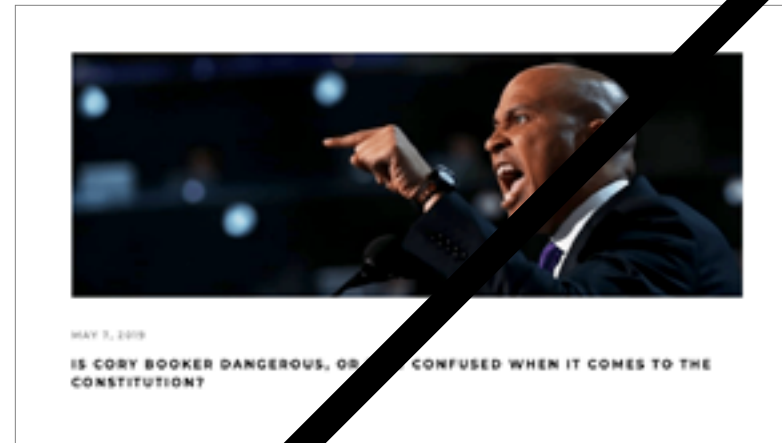

Rudy Giuliani promotes long-debunked image of Ilhan Omar 'at al-Qaeda training camp'

RACIST TROPES AND STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD BE QUESTIONED AND DEBUNKED

Equating emotions with anger and threats, cause for fear

- "Angry Black woman" trope

- Calling Black men dangerous

- Using "uppity" to describe Black people

- Associating the Coronavirus with Asian people

- Associating Latinx people with drugs and crime

MAY 7, 2019

IS CORY BOOKER DANGEROUS, OR [...] CONFUSED WHEN IT COMES TO THE CONSTITUTION?

MEDIA

Rush Limbaugh: Michelle Obama Guilty Of 'Uppity-ism' (AUDIO)

CODED RACIST TERMS TO QUESTION AND DEBUNK

- Using "urban" as code for Black.

- Describing a mixed-race person as "half," as in half Black

- Colorist stereotyping rooted in the idea that someone with lighter skin is "better"

- Reinforcing the white supremacist idea of inferiority: Using terms like articulate, well-educated, and hardworking to describe a person of color implies a level of surprise, as in "you're articulate for a Black person." It implies that people of color are expected to be inferior and that this person is an exception. Most political candidates are leaders and public servants who are obviously well-educated, well-spoken, and hardworking.

- Avoid using "non-white"; it normalizes whiteness as a standard

RESOURCES

- **GLAAD Media Reference Guide**

- **National Center on Disability and Journalism Resource Guide**

- **Native American Journalist Association Reporting Guide**

- **NiemanLab guide to investigating disinformation**

- **Media Matters resource on headlines and tweets**

- **First Draft – Essential Guide to Responsible Reporting in an Age of Information Disorder**

- **The NLGJA Stylebook**

- **NABJ Styleguide**

- **The National Association of Hispanic Journalists (NAHJ)**

- **Asian American Journalist Association**

- **The Debunking Handbook**

ORGANIZATIONAL
SUPPORTERS

- UltraViolet
- Color of Change PAC
- SumOfUs
- EMILY's List WOMEN VOTE!
- Supermajority
- ACRONYM
- NARAL Pro-choice America
- Women's March

- Planned Parenthood Votes
- Strategic Victory Fund
- GQR Digital
- #ShePersisted
- Disinfo Defense League