Sleevegate: Print Media Coverage of First Lady Michelle Obama and its Ethical, Theological, and Social Ramifications

Leah Henrickson

By determining what is newsworthy, communications media producers influence what media consumers think about. The risk in this is that “often... media [overlook] what is genuinely new and important, including the good news of the Gospel, and [concentrate] on the fashionable and faddish.”¹ Media producers do not always support holistic understandings of reported matters, and they can compromise people’s dignity through misrepresentation. This is exemplified by the attention given to the First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama, and, more specifically, her arms. Obama’s tendency to wear sleeveless outfits has earned the title of “Sleevegate” in media. This article examines the ethical, theological (Catholic), and social ramifications of the print media coverage of Sleevegate. It concludes that media concentration on Obama’s arms detracts from her social and political achievements by instead emphasizing her physical appearance as a focal point. This is evidence of a societal shift from considering the body as a site of religious Spirituality to considering the body as a site of exhibition. In perpetuating this societal shift, print media deviate from the Church’s² teachings about maintaining the dignity of persons.

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² This paper uses the word “Church” to refer to the Catholic Church as it is represented by the Vatican and by Vatican-authorized documents.
Modesty factors heavily in this discussion of the body as a site of exhibition. However, the notion of modesty is subjective; individuals have contradictory, and sometimes ambiguous, ideas about what modesty is and why it is important. This paper yields to the notion of modesty articulated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The *Catechism* outlines modesty as:

An integral part of temperance. Modesty protects the intimate center of the person. It means refusing to unveil what should remain hidden... It guides how one looks at others and behaves toward them in conformity with the dignity of persons and their solidarity... Modesty is decency. It inspires one's choice of clothing. It keeps silence or reserve where there is evident risk of unhealthy curiosity.4

The Church teaches that modesty shows respect for self and respect for others. It promotes human solidarity and understanding by adhering to social expectations of public decency. Modesty implies not dressing provocatively to provoke “unhealthy curiosity,” sexual or not, within others, thereby tempting them to sin. It is humility in dress and humility in person.

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Michelle Obama's physical appearance adheres to the Church's definition of modesty. She is rarely photographed wearing jewelry other than a pearl necklace and earrings. Her outfits are typically monochrome, and they are generally conservative in their design, almost never revealing thigh or cleavage. Indeed, Obama's outfits are not inherently controversial; rather, media reactions to her outfits provoke debate. For this reason, media reactions to the exposure or concealment of particular body parts can reveal underlying societal attitudes about the female body. For example, when women began to expose their legs in the twentieth century, the legs became the most erotic part of the body. They were a new and previously hidden treasure that provoked an “unhealthy curiosity” among spectators. Similarly, Michelle Obama's absence of cleavage - in a time when cleavage has become so commonplace that it is practically expected from public females - may contribute to the media's sexualization of her arms by provoking an “unhealthy curiosity” about her hesitancy to adhere to social expectations of dress. Breasts are often considered the embodiment of femininity; contemporary Western society often seems to have an obsession with them. However, when Obama keeps her breasts concealed, attention drifts to others parts of her body that are distinguishable. Her muscular arms, already defying ideal female delicacy, when uncovered come to draw attention away from her covered breasts.

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6 The expectation of public females to show cleavage manifests itself in news stories that celebrate cleavage, suggesting that it illustrates “that a woman is content being perceived as a sexual person in addition to being seen as someone who is intelligent, authoritative, witty, and whatever else might define her personality”: Robin Givhan, “Hillary Clinton's Tentative Dip Into New Neckline Territory,” The Washington Post (Washington), July 20, 2007, AL3.
7 Western society's obsession with breasts is articulated by Gary Mason in his commentary on the increasing number of breast enhancement surgeries: Gary Mason, “Exposing a dangerous obsession,” The Globe and Mail (Toronto), April 22, 2006, C1.
8 Western notions of female beauty often emphasize slimness and delicacy – this is illustrated in women's interest and fashion magazines such as Cosmopolitan and Vogue, which may influence conceptions of what women should look like and what they should wear.
Michelle Obama does not seem to consciously present herself as a sex symbol, however the media have focused so heavily on her arms that her body is regarded much like one.

In becoming a focus of media attention, Obama's arms provoke an “unhealthy curiosity” among media consumers, and they have thereby become a potential occasion of immodesty. Print media thus do not comply with the Church's teachings about maintaining the “dignity of persons” through media. In 2000, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications summarized the Church's teachings when it wrote:

> Media are called to serve human dignity by helping people live well and function as persons in community. Media do this by encouraging men and women to be conscious of their dignity, enter the thoughts and feelings of others, cultivate a sense of mutual responsibility, and grow in personal freedom, in respect for others' freedom, and in the capacity for dialogue.9

When representing Michelle Obama, print media do not often frame her as an upstanding citizen or as a humanitarian model for women. Rather, they focus on the physical rather than the internal. Media producers neither portray Obama as being conscious of her own dignity, nor do they “cultivate a sense of mutual responsibility” among readers to uphold a dignified image of her. Obama's body is instead treated as a public conversation piece and, as such, she is dehumanized, and her body is displayed on a grand scale for media consumers to judge.

Christianity explicitly recognizes human bodies as sacred, and the body is often used as a site of theological reflection. 1 Corinthians 6 asks: “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you

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were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies.”\textsuperscript{10} The body and the spirit are not considered isolated entities; the body serves as a vessel for the Holy Spirit, and taking care of the body is essential for spiritual refinement and flourishing in accordance with Biblical teachings. All Christians are expected to heed this message. Catholics distinctively, though, adhere to the practice of sacramentality, wherein “material things - people, objects, places, the cosmos ... carry, so to speak, the presence of God.”\textsuperscript{11} God is seen in his creations, which include male and female bodies. One of the most prominent examples of a sacrament of the body is the Eucharist, in which participants consume blessed bread and wine the transubstantiated body and blood of Christ. A less ceremonial example of sacramentality is the Medieval Christian practice of fasting, which was believed to prove the strength of one’s spirit at the expense of one’s body,\textsuperscript{12} because the wellbeing of the spirit was privileged over the wellbeing of the body. Historically, sacraments have been formulated around the modesty and dignity body, and to commodify the body in a way that is immodest contradicts the notion of it as a material presence of God.

While the body is sometimes seen as a site of grace, it can also regarded as an impediment to one's relationship with the Divine. Women's bodies in particular are perceived as sites requiring protection from offense. As is written in 1 Timothy 2, “Women [are] to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, adorning themselves, not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.”\textsuperscript{13} Dressing modestly is regarded as an outward expression of internal decency and

\textsuperscript{10} 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 (New International Version).
\textsuperscript{12} Svendsen, “Fashion and the Body,” 75.
\textsuperscript{13} 1 Timothy 2:9-10 (NIV).
purity, and even an illustration of the strength of an individual's relationship with God. A woman's appearance symbolizes her internal character; a responsible woman should display her propriety outwardly by means of her appearance. Applied to today's context, a woman should dress “with decency and propriety” despite contemporary pressures, stimulated by the increasing sexualization of women’s bodies in media, to do otherwise. Sexualization is evident in such instances as when, in 2009, Maxim magazine listed Michelle Obama as the ninety-third hottest woman in the world, stating that she was the “stimulus package America really need[ed].”\textsuperscript{14} This is the ultimate commodification; Obama is referred to not as a person, but as a package. Through a “deformed outlook on life... that does not respect the true dignity and destiny of the human person,”\textsuperscript{15} she is reduced to a novelty for onlookers while her personal dignity and intellectual, social, and political contributions are discounted. Maxim’s promotion of superficial gratification for its readers is, thus, fundamentally at odds with the representation of Obama as an individual who deserves respect and dignity. This example illustrates a societal reconsideration of the value of the body as a spiritual site that speaks “to the presence of God”, and a cultural shift towards valuing the body as a physical object that is intended to please one’s own eyes and the eyes of others.

In the midst of President Barack Obama's reelection campaign, the New York Times printed an article by Joyce Purnick not on President Obama's platform, but on a topic that


Purnick “had expected to keep mum about... until after the election.” That is, Michelle Obama's arms. “The first lady has made it unacceptable for women to appear in public with covered arms,” Purnick writes. “Bare arms now often trump cleavage, have you noticed?”

Purnick then particularizes her own attempts (and failure) to achieve the “toned and elegant” arms that she frames Obama as being one of the few lucky enough to have. If female readers were not previously aware of how their arms looked when exposed, they undoubtedly considered it after they read this article. Moreover, they were likely left feeling insecure about their arms’ appearance, given Purnick's pessimism.

Similarly, an article by Liz Jones in the Daily Mail leaves female readers with the impression that toned arms symbolize more than just adherence to an intense fitness regime; indeed, one must “surrender one's soul” to achieve these assets. The piece reads:

They are the ultimate high maintenance, must-have accessory, as ubiquitous for women of a certain age and income as a Birkin handbag. Toned arms, like Michelle Obama's, are shown off as proudly as the interlocking Gucci Gs. Aerobicized arms are better than any logo because you don't get them by handing over your wallet; you must surrender your soul. Such arms are the new breasts, stomachs, buttocks, lips, hair, and eyes rolled into one.17

This view of the body as a commodity intended for exhibition depends on one's commodification of oneself. The body is then exalted as tangible evidence of hard work, just as a Birkin handbag may be evidence of hard-earned pay. Further, Jones' comparison of the body to designer brands shows how toned arms are as exclusive and as expensive as “a Birkin handbag” or “interlocking Gucci Gs.” However, arms like Obama's cannot be readily purchased; they must be worked for by means of a somewhat spiritual commitment to achieving physical perfection. The historical

notion of the body as an outward manifestation of spiritual growth, as illustrated by the Medieval practice of fasting, has been altered to accommodate a new spirituality that is not religious, but vainglorious. Ephemeral physical appearance is emphasized rather than personal dignity, religious prosperity, or mental wellbeing. The body has become an outward expression not of religious purity but of dedication to social preconceptions of beauty.

Joyce Purnick’s article also tells of the fashion trends set by other First Ladies throughout history. She lists “Mamie Eisenhower's bangs, Nancy Reagan's favorite color (red), Hillary Rodham Clinton's headband (and senatorial pantsuits) and, of course, Jackie Kennedy’s everything.” While the First Lady’s role is not outlined in the Constitution, the position is inherently visible due to its holder's association with the President. In her almost exclusively exhibitive role, the First Lady has historically served primarily to bolster her husband’s public reputation, and her clothing has served as a popular subject of public conversation. Historical precedents therefore demand the First Lady to be attentive to her physical appearance. Even though “the role of the First Lady... has evolved from fashion trendsetting and hostess of White House dinners to a more substantive position,” the activities in which First Ladies partake are usually highly visible. Michelle Obama illustrates this shift “to a more substantive position” through her founding of, and her active involvement in, her Let's Move! campaign, “so that children born today will grow up healthier and able to pursue their dreams.” Yet this campaign is still heavily dependent on visual marketing, which in this case features pictures and videos of

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18 Purnick, “(Psst: We Feel Bad).”
Obama being active. Throughout this marketing campaign, Obama manages to maintain her poise; she promotes a fashion trend of practicality in which women are implicitly encouraged to exercise like Obama while still striving to look attractive.

![Figure 2: Michelle Obama at her husband's address to joint Congress in 2009.](image)

Michelle Obama’s status as a style icon, like the First Ladies before her, means that her fashion choices are frequently scrutinized. In 2009, style columnists were quick to comment on the appropriateness of Obama’s sleeveless dress worn to the President’s address to joint Congress. “She looked fantastic, but in an environment where women traditionally ‘suit up,’ was she dressed appropriately?” asked Judith Timson. Former First Lady Jackie Kennedy’s social secretary Letitia Baldridge responded by noting that sleeveless outfits have been worn by First Ladies throughout history. “It’s not like Mrs. Obama was going to see the Pope,” she stated, “or like she had her bosom popping out - that would have been immodest. There’s nothing immodest

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about showing your arms.”

While breasts are unanimously deemed immodest body parts, arms remain a point of contention, especially when they are the arms of Michelle Obama.

Figure 3: The First Lady and her husband meet Pope Benedict XVI.

Despite Baldridge's declaration that “there's nothing immodest about showing your arms,” Michelle Obama evidently did not think that the Pope would agree. When she and the President met Pope Benedict XVI in 2009, Obama wore a long-sleeved black dress and mantilla, although it did not go unnoticed that her outfit comprised pieces by Moschino, Michael Kors, and Azzedine Alaia. Such scrutiny reveals the power of the spectator over the viewed subject. While images of the Obamas meeting Pope Benedict are limited to photographs commissioned by the White House (few witnessed the meeting as it occurred), the public's critical interpretations of these rare photographs are unlimited and ever changing. The audience is in a privileged position as they gaze upon Michelle Obama, as she is unable to respond to individual critiques. Online


comments such as “I totally disapprove of Michelle Obama’s dressing to please a pope. I think this sets back women by a 100 [sic] years”26 are debated by commentators who may not understand the situational context. However, the comments are not, and cannot be, directly addressed by Obama herself. While the conversation may be about her, she is unable to be part of it. Her “capacity for dialogue,” as advocated by the Church, is limited due to her position’s visibility, her role’s required self-composure, and her duty to help maintain favourable public opinion of her husband.

The media’s attention to that which is “fashionable and faddish” - such as ephemeral physical beauty - deviates from the Church’s teachings which promote individual flourishing though mutual respect and protection of individuals’ dignity. Females are not often represented holistically in communications media. Analysis of portrayals of public female figures, such as Michelle Obama, provide opportunities for serious consideration of social attitudes towards the female body as they are shaped and perpetuated through print media. Because communications media influence conceptions of the body on a grand scale, it is important that media consumers understand the limited picture that communications media provide. There is more to Michelle Obama than her physical appearance and, as the Church suggests, perhaps it is time that we use our intellect as consumers to encourage recognition of Michelle Obama’s true character in media representations.

Bibliography


