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Performing Ordinary: Politicians, Celebrity, & the Politics of Representation on Entertainment Talk

SUE COLLINS

The politician could be authentic but he prefers artifice, simulating to the point of dissimulating. He creates for himself a persona that gets attention and strikes the imagination. He plays a role. Thus we often speak of politicians in a vocabulary borrowed from the theater, referring to ‘stars’ on the ‘political stage’ who captivate the ‘public’ with their ‘act’ (Gérard Schwartzberg 8).

Entertainment celebrity is an imperialist phenomenon, moving into new arenas and making them over in its own image (Gamson 191).

During the 2012 U.S. presidential election, incumbent Barack Obama’s Republican challenger, Mitt Romney, took the path less traveled by avoiding the talk show circuit. He did, as we might expect, send his surrogates: his wife, Ann to do his bidding on *The Tonight Show*, *The View*, and *Good Morning America*, and his five sons who chatted with Conan O’Brien on *Late Night*. In actuality, Romney had been scheduled to appear with Ann on the all-women daytime talk show *The View*, but canceled, leaving his wife to diffuse his conspicuous absence by telling a joke. During the now infamous private fundraiser dinner (the 47% video released by *Mother Jones*), Romney said that he did not want to appear on *The View* because the hosts were “high risk and sharp tongued.” When

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Barbara Walters opened the discussion by questioning Ann on this comment, she quickly retorted, “No, he said ‘sharp and young!’ ”

Undoubtedly, Romney’s handlers could anticipate that such clever word play would do double duty by winning Ann a disarming laugh from the hosts and audience alike, as well as by fending off the actual question. Romney also turned down the requisite invitation to appear on *Saturday Night Live* (SNL). He explained that while it was desirable to appear as a “fun” and “good person,” being part of the late-night sketch comedy television show was risky because of the “potential of looking slapstick and not presidential.” More to the point, Romney’s comments that evening were in response to the suggestion made by one of his dining benefactors that he should appear on talk shows more often so that he could “reach a lot of people,” and they, in turn, could see how he “*really*” was (*Mother Jones Videos*). However, Romney did not lose the presidential election because he refused to appear on entertaining television. Instead, he lost, in part, because he failed to present himself as someone who could appear on entertaining television.

In twenty-first century US electoral politics, campaign stops on shows such as *The View*, *The Tonight Show*, *SNL*, *The Daily Show*, have become practically mandatory, even for incumbents. For example, Obama set the greenroom precedent by becoming the first sitting US president to take the entertainment talk show appearance in stride.¹ In addition to simply appearing on soft news and entertainment talk formats, some politicians have also participated in the shows’ signature skits, delivered punch lines, or subjected themselves to the brunt of jokes. Some have also used these entertainment platforms to announce their presidential candidacies, as Rick Santorum and Ron Paul did on *Good Morning America* in 2012, and as John McCain did on *Late Night with David Letterman* in 2007.² Notwithstanding recent noteworthy examples, Romney’s decision to evade televisual soft political formats illustrates the predicament national electoral politicians must overcome in contemporary politics. Candidates

must seem both presidential, or *extraordinary* and thus deserving of executive office. Additionally, they must appear as familiar and authentic, or *ordinary*, that is, as they “really are,” and thus not too far removed from the popular electorate from which they are seeking to win votes.

Downplaying formality and socio-economic distance through mediated talk, body language, and dress reframes the candidates’ class privilege. The folksy style of George W. Bush, for example, linguistically marked him as more of a Texan, and common man, instead of an elite Washington insider. Similarly, Romney’s disclosure to the press that he purchased his shirts at Costco can be seen as an effort to show that he is in touch with the so-called 99%. Another way to shrink the perceptual distance between elites who run for national office and the common populace who elect them is to employ the devices of celebrity production, or what Graeme Turner calls the “celebritisation of politics,” to help win elections and forward political agendas. It is “probably a commonplace observation,” Turner remarks, “to point out that the systems used to produce celebrity in the entertainment and sports industries are very similar to those now used to produce the public persona of the politician” (130). Indeed, by virtue of the fact that established politicians move easily through the celebrity infrastructure of cultural production, they are commonly perceived as celebrities in both popular and academic presses.

With this in mind, in this article, I examine the politician *performing ordinary* in what appears as a benign cultural dimension to politics—that is, the entertainment talk show format. As I have argued elsewhere (“I’m Not a Celebrity”), what politicians do when they inhabit spaces of celebrity production should not be perceived merely as opportunities for the candidates to personalize their style or for constituencies to discover the authentic self behind the candidate. Instead, it should be considered foremost, as strategy that has become critical to electoral politics in mediated popular culture. I wish to show how these appearances on entertainment talk work to aestheticize political representation by

foregrounding ordinariness as a troupe of authenticity. I will discuss how politicians, when appearing on these televisual formats, mark themselves as ordinary in three interconnected ways: (1) by appropriation of the spaces of celebrity production wherein the individual's relation to the real self is "revealed" through mediated intimacy; (2) by positioning the self as public servant who represents (as in speaks for) the democratic electorate; and, (3) by signifying affiliation to the same socio-economic class as the one spoken for.

That politics and political information are inextricably linked with popular culture is not at issue here. Whether one sees politicians' relation to celebrity culture as signaling a "politics of distraction," as Timothy Weiskel (393) charges, or the potential for more "intuitive, expressive, and holistic" ways of gleaning political information, as Dick Pels (51) counters, the mechanisms of representation in entertainment talk conspire to leave unexamined one mode of cultural power at play. The politics of representation on entertainment talk works to negate these appearances as political propaganda by mixing popular culture with performative politics to obfuscate not only the distance between powerful politicians and their powerless constituencies, but also the material stakes of the electoral process.

There's no business like political show business

The deployment of personal political style, as a campaign strategy, became especially noteworthy when US politicians began to use it to challenge the balance of control over the televisual delivery of political messages in the 1992 primaries (Diamond and Silverman 4-5). Candidates started appearing more prominently on what I call *soft political formats* (SPFs), which according to journalists covering the campaign, allowed the politicians to circumvent serious interview segments in print or on broadcast channels with traditional (professional) journalists covering

political news (Dooley and Grosswiler 39). By SPFs, I refer to televisual or audio programming wherein candidates appeal to select audiences that are tuning in for entertainment or light political talk. These include daytime talk shows, entertainment radio interview programs, late night entertainment shows, television magazine news shows, fake news or satire television, various prime-time appearances and cameos, reality television, MTV, as well as any vehicles of new media whose uses are coded for entertainment.³ A familiar crossover point that marks the “personalization of politics” is exemplified by Bill Clinton’s infamous saxophone performance of “Heartbreak Hotel” on *The Arsenio Hall Show*, and later that same month, his town hall appearance on MTV (during which he was asked whether he preferred boxers or briefs).

In the UK, Clinton’s generational counterpart, Tony Blair, soon employed his own popular cultural capital to exhibit his “cool” style (and his hip background as a former rock-n-roll musician) by appearing on more talk shows than any of his predecessors (*Intimate Politics* 52). But Clinton’s strategic appearances had the effect of inverting election news coverage because the appearances became news highlighted on traditional television news programs, and in the prestige press and print news weeklies. His successful use of SPFs to side step the press corps opened the floodgates for other US candidates to follow suit, making appearances on daytime talk and late-night variety or comedy shows a routine tactic for reaching youth voters (Cogan and Kelso 106).

The celebrity politician does not begin with Clinton or Blair. However, their attention to the mediation of their political style illustrates John Street’s contention that political communication’s longstanding emphasis on the commercial marketing metaphor (as in “packaging the presidency”) might be misplaced in the contemporary moment. The metaphors of show-business in which “the currency is celebrity and fame, and the products are stars and performances,” provide a competing (and compelling) perspective to explain mediated politics (“The Celebrity Politician” 86).

For Street, the celebrity *politician* is “the traditional politician who emerges from a background in show business or who uses the techniques of popular culture to seek (and acquire) elected office” (“Do Celebrity Politics” 347).⁴ In contrast with entertainment professionals who run for public office (*celebrity* politicians), political candidates become celebrity politicians when they indulge in staged photo ops designed to associate themselves with entertainment celebrities, or when they rely on techniques and industry professionals from the cultural industries to control, limit, or otherwise enhance their exposure to the public.

There are wider processes that help explain the context out of which the celebrity politician emerges and makes sense. These processes include structural changes in the media environment affecting broadcasting and conventions of journalism (e.g., consolidation, deregulation, narrowcasting, tabloidization or infotainmentization of news, mediatization of political campaigning, media convergence, etc.). “The ‘styling of the self’ in politics, the projection of political persona,” as Corner and Pels argue, “is partly a matter of choice (a conscious ‘branding’ exercise designed to sharpen profile) and partly a required action to the terms of media visibility that now frame and interpret political action in many countries” (10). At the same time, politicians in liberal democracies are restyling their strategies of representation in response to what Henrik Bang identifies as conditions of governance in late modernity: shifting modes of governing and party politics; changing forms and conceptions of what counts as political participation; more fluid understandings of the nature of identity; newfound attention to the importance of the discursive as a representational mechanism for shaping opinion and policy (Marsh, ‘t Hart, and Tindall 326). Politicians would be remiss not to address the electorate in ways that are amenable to these structural changes in politics as well as the mediated nature of political representation across various platforms of self-presentation, message delivery, and celebrity journalism.

Politicians then, like Hollywood celebrities, construct personas for the management of their political performances across various media platforms. For example, US political conventions function as live media events that invoke a rock concert/star aura. This is supported by a coliseum spectacle which includes professional staging, lighting, and sound design; Jumbotrons; and a mass of screaming fans in the audience. In a similar way that the rock star produces solidarity with the adulating crowd, the politician's aura is constructed from the privileged center of the stage. She is visible, but not accessible, to the chosen delegates whose volume and emotive fan-like behavior signifies for the audience at home the charismatic leader's extraordinary qualities, as well as her right to represent the people. For P. David Marshall, the convention is guided by a mode of "affective power" that connects the leader and the people at the core of the legitimating process for political leadership, and in which the former houses (or embodies) the democratic sentiment of the latter, much like the popular music celebrity houses the affective sentiments of her fans.

The entertainment talk show, conversely, serves as a location in which politicians situate themselves as celebrities in order to benefit from what Marshall calls a "politics of familiarity" (214). These performances are of the front stage, to borrow from Erving Goffman, but they are constructed as ordinary in contrast to the politician's more formalized performances as political leader (such as the spectacle of partisan conventions, public addresses, or political advertising that emphasizes the politician's extraordinary qualifications for leadership). On the entertainment talk show, politicians project themselves as qualified candidates, but also as ordinary people who work in politics and also have commonplace interests, hobbies, responsibilities, and vices (as spouses, parents, weight-loss participants, sports enthusiasts, music lovers, etc.). Similar to the reproduction of celebrity, one's political performance promotes a potential audience subjectivity well cultivated by the commercial entertainment

industries—that is, the positioning of audiences in terms of fans seeking the pleasurable activity of discovering the real or ordinary person behind the celebrity image.

Upon first glance, the idea that celebrities incorporate a sense of their ordinary lives into their commodity form may seem counterintuitive. After all, it is the passage into the mythic “mediated center,” to borrow Nick Couldry’s notion, that marks entertainment celebrities, or “media people” as extraordinary in some context (whether in formal performance on the filmic or televisual screen, or on the mediated coliseum stage, etc.). The “non-media person,” on the contrary, is marked by being “*merely* ordinary” (56), or unmarked which means that he or she is undeserving of attention outside of habitual and routine patterns of everyday life. For Couldry, the media/ordinary distinction is a case of misrecognition that is made possible through the naturalization of a symbolic hierarchy in media framing. Nevertheless, celebrity’s commodification processes rely precisely on the pleasurable tension (and paradox) produced in mediation of being both extraordinary and ordinary. Simultaneously, it is also an authenticating form of play critical to celebrity’s reproduction and one that also benefits the celebrity politician who understands this relationship.

Elsewhere, I have explained mechanisms of celebrity reproduction by referring to the celebrity distribution infrastructure as *celebrity place*. By this I mean the aggregate of media space that is devoted to celebrity coverage by the cultural industries (“Making the Most”).⁵ For example, the seat next to Jay Leno, or opposite Jon Stewart, and the feature story in celebrity print and online publications signify and reproduce celebrity in symbolic and material senses of the commodity form. These sites are critical to the reproduction of celebrity because they are where celebrities promote current projects (the cultural commodities or texts that house celebrity in formal performance such as films, television shows, live appearances, all of which constitute celebrity as part of a product). They also function to constitute celebrity as a product in and of itself—wherein

the extraordinary/ordinary paradox of star authenticity theorized in cinema studies (Dyer 49) is played out. Put another way, celebrity place is the infrastructure that gathers audiences for ostensible authentic exposure of the individual behind celebrity as “real,” such as celebrity presses or fan sites, intentional televisual or live appearances, or unintended news about celebrities, including sightings and scandals.

Celebrity journalism happens here, but so does media exposure not expressly produced for this purpose (e.g., prestige press news, televised news by mainstream outlets, internet sites and social media outlets, etc.). To be sure, the measure of good celebrity journalism across media outlets is based on uncovering the private or behind-the-scenes truth of the star. This may appear as real and ordinary, and sometime perhaps scandalous. But celebrity reproduction also depends on an assurance that celebrity’s status is warranted by formal (professional) performance, so that the ordinary image is re-constituted continuously as extraordinary, and thus affirming for the fan that the performer is authentic and deserving of stardom.⁶

Although celebrity is constructed differently across distinct sectors of the cultural industries (e.g., film, television, music), the play around identity and authenticity—that is, the search to discover the celebrity’s real self—is consistent as a system in relation to celebrity from its historical manifestations to its contemporary ones. It is the circulation of meaning around celebrity, Marshall argues, “the connections between celebrities ‘real’ lives and their working lives as actors, singers, or television news readers” that essentially “configure the celebrity status” (58).⁷ Through their various reception practices, audiences make sense of all the ways celebrity is circulated, whether in terms of pleasure or distaste, as distracted viewers or affectively playful, or in sociality. These processes influence celebrity’s exchange value, which suggests that celebrity’s value can also be measured in terms of gathering audiences whose attention ultimately determines the reproduction of celebrity status.

If, broadly speaking, celebrity is a “mediating frame” through which a public persona is created, distributed, and upon which the public’s recognition depends, as Drake and Miah suggest (51-52), then the entertainment celebrity is a mediating process. This process involves a host of industry professionals performing an array of functions designed to enhance such recognition as a perceptual relation between the real and the image of the person, held in tension by the individual’s constructed persona. For audiences, a good measure of the pleasure in celebrity consumption involves access to an intimate sense of who the true person is, even if such a realization invokes a certain *schadenfreude* or a love-to-hate-celebrities form. Pleasure comes from authenticating that the celebrity really deserves (or does not deserve) his or her fame for being extraordinary.

The point of this brief foray into celebrity production is to propose that the play around authentication for the politician in the context of entertainment talk is similar to that of the entertainment celebrity, as is the symbiosis of the exchange. That is, when politicians show up on SPFs, they enter into an existing infrastructure critical to celebrity’s reproduction. As they abide by the conventions of the format, they benefit from the structure of the exchange by personalizing their style of self-display in ways expected from entertainment venues. Moreover, just as politicians need SPFs to target certain demographics of their constituencies, the television entertainment business needs bookings to fill broadcast schedules.⁸ Political candidates, particularly national ones, attract audiences, although from the producers’ point of view, their value as talk show guests is stratified (as is entertainment celebrity’s) and based on the guests’ national profile and media expertise, as well as the current headline news. Politicians who get media attention because they are newsworthy are also talk show-worthy to varying degrees.

Personalizing political style on entertainment talk

The entertainment-style talk show has long been a site for celebrity watching. The earliest discussions concerning its cultural significance in this respect highlighted its role in television's construction of its own "personality system." John Langer, for example, positioned television against film to show how the former constituted a condition of intimacy with its own ideological effects. If "stars" and the star system belonged to the domain of cinema, then television produced its own personalities whose mode of being is situated in the everyday and coded to produce immediacy, familiarity, regularity, predictability, and ordinariness. News-readers, moderators, talk show hosts, and program characters make up television's personalities, while outsiders (celebrities from non-entertainment fields, experts, politicians, and ordinary people) are recruited as personalities into the medium's formats.

The talk show provides a forum constructed through its "carefully orchestrated informality, with its illusion of lounge-room casualness and leisurely pace" for the host to chat with guests. The guests are "predictably 'drawn in' to making certain 'personal' disclosures," so that audiences perceive that they are seeing celebrities as they really are (J. Langer 360). In other words, it is the televisual equivalent of the fan magazine, whose historical function has been to invite authenticating play with stardom. The format and the medium's properties also promote what Horton and Wohl (1956) coined "para-social interaction," or the illusion of face-to-face communication such that audiences relate to television as if it is a mode of interpersonal communication.

The various lounge/living room settings and camera techniques are designed to blur the line dividing the studio and access to it from the audiences at home. They function, in effect, to shrink the social distance between performer and audience such that the so-called ordinary person behind the celebrity is revealed. To be distinguished from the political

interview, Bell and van Leeuwne describe the talk show as involving “the talker in a performance of his/her cultural role or status, albeit a performance marked as ‘real’ or revealing in ways that invite audience members to see the celebrity [politician] as like themselves” (189). The talk show, through the production of mediated intimacy, sets up the conditions for an audience subjectivity that responds to a media person or celebrity as if the relationship is a familiar one; that is, as if they “know” the celebrity as one does a friend or close acquaintance (Meyrowitz 120).

For politicians versed at personalizing their political style, appearances on entertainment talk shows are useful. First, these shows are part and parcel of a media environment through which candidates must navigate, and which is characterized by an entangled nexus of politics, news, and popular entertainment. As previously mentioned, it is not only structural changes in journalism and broadcasting that explain the terrain of mediated politics that now dominate television schedules. New perceptions of governing and political participation that privilege the cultural dimensions of citizenship have come to fore. Politicians (or their political handlers) are responding to the contemporary ways in which people engage with politics. These engagements are increasingly perceived as discursive, fluid, and connected to other concerns, pastimes, and pleasures in the everyday. Jeffrey Jones, for example, in his analysis of what he calls “new political television” (e.g., *The Daily Show*, *Real Time with Bill Maher*), argues that this genre functions, in part, as a forum for political knowledge and civic activity. By mixing entertainment celebrity guests with politicians, academics, journalists, and popular writers, such shows trade in humorous and serious subjects by moving between popular culture and politics.

To recognize that politics happens in a multitude of televisual sites, where fact and fiction are blended, is to also acknowledge that people’s relationship to politics includes ways of seeking pleasure. Delli Carpini and Williams show that when people talk about politics and political

opinion, they draw from their store of political knowledge, which includes references to popular culture. SPFs more generally, offer viewers politically inflected content not drawn from conventional news and political talk. This allows SPFs to be more appealing and accessible. Hence these shows reach a potentially large segment of the public that is less likely to tune into traditional political talk and news to learn about political candidates. Such changes in the cultural boundaries of what counts as political have led to “more personalized forms of democratic representation and participation” (A. Langer, 47).

Second, as John Corner argues, politicians must operate out of different domains of action in the construction of their political personas, which then require appropriate strategies. Corner describes these overlapping spheres as: 1) the sphere of “political institutions and its processes” where politicians perform the official procedural duties and exercises of political office; 2) the sphere of “public and popular” where political identity is performed to be mediated across media platforms, formally and strategically; and, 3) the “private sphere” where a politician’s private life is put on display as a peek into the backstage region deliberately, or as a “journalistic revelation” when it is framed as scandal or gossip. With respect to the public and the popular, the identity of the politician, as a person of qualities, is most emphatically and strategically put forward, with inflections towards what are perceived as the contours of popular sentiment or sectional value (for example, the youthful, the ordinary, the thoughtful, the cultured, the funny) (75). The candidate’s optimal political self masters a certain fluidity among these behavioral domains. This suggests that the popular is no less important than the public and formal insofar as it is also an unavoidable space of building or breaking a reputation and political career.

Third, if electronic media have challenged the nature of publicness by dissolving barriers between public and private/personal as well as fundamentally changed how political leaders manage their visibility, as

Meyrowitz and Thompson have argued, then entertainment talk involves what Ana Inés Langer notes as “strong incentives and opportunities in contemporary politics to make strategic use of the personal” (52). Although personalization of politics discourses situate this cultural transformation in broader terms than the technological, the role of electronic media is significant. The entertainment talk show illustrates some of the ways in which performance of personal style is instrumental to electoral politics. Thompson uses the term “mediated quasi-interaction” to describe the form of self-presentation that occurs in this context: when “some individuals are engaged primarily in producing symbolic forms for others who are not physically present, while others are involved primarily in receiving symbolic forms produced by others to whom they cannot respond, but with whom they can form bonds of friendship, affection, or loyalty” (*Media and Modernity* 84-85). Put another way, electronic media produce opportunities for mediated intimacy because self-disclosure as a form of self-presentation does not rely on the co-presence of the communicators.

This projection of the self on entertainment talk, despite its back region impression, is performance of the front stage constructed as ordinary. Such a space allows politicians to “present themselves not just as leaders but as human beings, as ordinary individuals who [can] address their subjects as fellow citizens, selectively disclosing aspects of their lives and their character in a conversational or even confessional mode” (*Political Scandal* 40). Personalizing one’s politics as a defining feature of contemporary politics constructs not only the personal lives and character traits of politicians, but arguably broader conceptions of leadership. As Langer suggests, the extent to which “going personal” underscores a politician’s humanness (as when one’s normality is on display as vulnerable and emotionally reflexive) may work to authenticate one’s political and policy positions as “*more real, more genuine* if related to personal experience” (A. Langer 54, emphasis in the original).

Lastly, appearances on entertainment talk shows take advantage of a mutually beneficial arrangement. The shows entertain their audiences with celebrity guests in a manner consistent with the conventions of the genre, while candidates have opportunities to reach audiences outside of traditional political locations by showcasing their personal styles and selves in a “positive light, without having to face hostile questioning from jaded political reporters” (Baum 215). As Baum concludes from his analysis of entertainment talk shows during the 2000 US presidential election, entertainment talk show hosts are less likely to alienate either their political guests (whose bookings are desirable) and their viewers (who are tuning in for entertainment), so hosts tend to interview candidates in a far less critical or partisan style. Lauerbach points out that interviewer style on “celebrity talk shows” differs significantly from more traditional “hard” news or current affairs programs by tending to be more deferential toward the guests, and because they are designed to produce a “feelgood” atmosphere in which the hosts’ role is to elicit “biographical detail in a series of narratives, anecdotes, jokes, and gossip” (1394). Similarly, Eriksson argues that these hosts skillfully manage the talk itself such that its performative character is highlighted through the dramatization of personal narratives and its potential for humor (545)

Politicians also stand to gain from reaching a much larger audience share that is also less likely to tune into traditional political talk and news. Demographically, viewers of entertainment talk tend to be less attentive to politics in general, less educated, typically younger, and female. Such viewers also tend to find opposition party candidates more likeable. They are also more likely to cross party lines than their political “hard” news viewing counterparts who are more likely to react to candidates in ways that reinforce existing attitudes (Baum 230-31).⁹

This is not to suggest, however, that the performance of self on the talk show is necessarily uncomplicated, easy, or without risk. Because politicians are not trained in performance in the same way that

entertainment professionals are, engaging in small talk or banter may result in verbal gaffes or embarrassment. Going personal or performing cool can backfire if audiences perceive performance as disingenuous or awkward. The risk of appearing un-presidential can outweigh the points earned for good humor, as Romney himself noted, particularly when stretching the candidate's aptitude for such forms of play. In their study on Dutch and German politicians appearing on talk shows, van Zoonen and Holtz Bacha suggest that such guests "speak" from different social locations (as politicians or personal selves) using different types of language appropriate to the specific (public or private) domain. To "construct themselves as likeable," which is requisite to how their political personas are perceived, the politicians must use personal discourse skillfully. Only those politicians who effectively maneuver across these registers can shift the personalized discourse expected of talk shows toward "personalized political discourse" in such a way as to highlight one's policies and personality (55).

For female politicians, the convergence of political and personal on entertainment formats poses an additional challenge because "the celebrity treatment of the private lives of female politicians tends to exacerbate the public-private dimension on which women's marginal position in politics is built" (van Zoonen 91). Celebrity politics privileges males with an easier possibility of mixing occupational and private domains. Conversely, female politicians are represented as if their political lives must be at odds against their personal lives. Opportunities for women to develop political capital are stunted by celebrity culture because they are overwhelmingly framed as outsiders and thus relegated to the private or domestic sphere. If performing ordinary calls attention to a non-conventional occupational choice for women—that is, the private rejection of traditional gendered domesticity in favor of public service—then women risk being perceived by the public as "as 'others' to dominant images of femininity while

remaining ‘others’ in the political sphere, due to their minority position” (van Zoonen 298).

Perhaps most threatening to political candidates is unintended personal disclosure. For James Stanyer, the term “intimization” best describes the process in which a US politician’s “personal sphere” (his preferred term for Corner’s private sphere but further developed by spatial, relational, and individual distinctions) is publicized as a “revelatory process,” either by consensual or nonconsensual means (*Intimate Politics* 14). Such mediated intimacy, in the case of political embarrassment or scandal, poses problems for politicians who perform ordinary under conditions that are not of their choosing. Because transgressions, treated as scandal, tend to have an “open-ended narrative structure” as they undergo continuous narration across a variety of media outlets (including late-night entertainment talk/comedy shows), politicians may try to use the media to reframe their stories in personal terms in order to influence public opinion directly (Thompson 76-77). Typically, in the US, this has been done on such programs as *60 Minutes* or Sunday morning news talk, as Gronbeck illustrates with the Flowers-Clinton scandal. On SPFs, we are more likely to find damage control for embarrassing situations, such as Sarah Palin’s appearance with Tina Fey on *SNL*, after her disastrous Katie Couric interviews, or John McCain’s plea for forgiveness to David Letterman who made him a late-night joke after the candidate lied about why he abruptly canceled a previously scheduled appearance. In these situations (as with news formats dealing with scandal), politicians appeal to commonalities such as human fallibility to frame media exposure. Getting in on the joke suggests that one is not too far removed from being able to take a joke.¹⁰

To be or not to be ordinary: that is the question in (re)presentation

Just as talk show hosts promise audiences a peek into the supposed ordinary lives of entertainment celebrities, the format also affords politicians the same strategic space to enhance their visibility. However, when politicians appear on entertainment talk, they are not there to publicize products of the cultural industries or to maintain their celebrity status as asset capital (two ancillary conditions of celebrity production particular to celebrity place). Rather, they appear on such shows for the purpose of winning support for their campaigns through intimate, strategic and direct displays of their personalities. Entertainment talk appearances are *strategies* designed to negate the appearance itself as performance. Politicians chat and joke with the host(s) off-script, about policy and agenda (perhaps some of the time), but also, consistent with the format's conventions, about personal or family issues, habits, hobbies, and tastes, current news, popular culture, in short, the stuff of ordinary everyday life.

Also unlike the entertainment celebrity (whose personal autonomy is based on an ability to transgress or surpass his or her screen type), the politician must project his or her persona with a certain consonance across the spheres of activity defining political life such that a "natural link" is established between the individual and the office he or she seeks (Marshall 231). In other words, whereas an actor's autonomy and measure of talent are marked, in part, by the disparity between the character types he or she plays and the real person, a politician's persona must project a coherent narrative (if not also contradictory) of democratic exceptionalism in which the individual is equally situated but also naturally deserving. Thus, politicians construct themselves as people who work in and are qualified for governance, but also as individuals who are not too far removed socio-economically from the electorate they purport to represent. While the spectacle of partisan conventions and other formalized modes of public

address construct an aura at a distance, which also signifies a political candidate's extraordinary qualities and entitlement to represent the people, televisual codes of entertainment talk provide an alternative venue by which to construct a familiar sense of an ordinary self. Politicians on entertainment talk are not unlike celebrities because they "simultaneously celebrate effort and achievement as the open democratic routes to success and hold up for admiration the celebrity elite, successful because of inborn, extraordinary qualities" (Gamson 195).

In effect, politicians mark themselves as ordinary in the idealization of democratic participation, which belies the restricted nature of American electoral politics along socio-economic class lines. By this I mean to say, in the first place, that performing ordinary functions ideologically to suggest that political office is accessible to all. Politicians must appear as though they represent the assurance of democratic participation at the highest levels of governance, not by de facto class privilege, but through nondiscriminatory meritocratic measures.

Second, the ideological promise of American socio-political mobility negates the uneven distribution of privilege and resources that skews American politics into a centrist two-party system favoring dominant hierarchies of institutional and elite power. C. Wright Mills preferred the term "power elite" to describe the US ruling class (corporate, political, military and social elites), which he identified as a homogeneous social type stemming from backgrounds sharing similar ethnic, social, religious, and educational affiliations. For the most part, Mills argued, the power elite derive from the upper class strata of American society and are characterized as white, male, wealthy, professional, urban, Ivy League educated—the exception in some cases being the elected "party politician" whose rise in politics may derive from more humble and self-made circumstances. But the minority figure of a professional politician is subject to the "reciprocal attraction" that such a fraternity of common values produces, which also insures "a certain unity" (281). In other

words, structures of interaction and interchangeability at the top subordinate the elected politician to corresponding values and policies among political, military, and economic domains of dominant power. “Nowhere in America is there as great a ‘class consciousness’ as among the elite,” writes Mills, and “nowhere is it organized as effectively as among the power elite” (Mills 283). For Mills, internal distinctions between political parties characterize different methods of governing in the technical sense, but such divergences are largely subsumed by the “internal discipline and community of interests” binding the political elite (283).

Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu’s discussion of political *doxa* (or habitus operating in the political field) speaks to this sociological phenomenon. To the extent that politicians “play by the rules of the game” in order to operate successfully in the field of politics, they share a political culture that structures the competencies by which they successfully compete for political capital (or the currency that affords power to say and do things in the political field). Bourdieu’s field theory, however, suggests that politicians act more in direct correspondence with the structure of the political field itself than with the interests of their constituencies. Such an “internal dynamic of self-referencing among political professionals” shapes their behavior in ways that entail “more posturing to differentiate positions or enhance their scope of representation than responsiveness to the direct interests of their constituencies” (Swartz, 148-49).

This is not to suggest that politicians can operate without any sense of shared identity and interest with their constituencies. Rather, they must deploy symbolic power (by virtue of their habitation in the political field) to enact a minimum of legitimacy in order to maintain their position within that field. More to the point, the political field, like any field, operates on the basis of how resources (forms of capital) are mobilized in struggle to produce a particular configuration of power that is accepted as legitimate, which as symbolic power imposes particular representations on

the social world. Moreover, political *doxa* works to constrain and limit political expression and representation by denying entry and access to outsiders.

Although Bourdieu makes this point with respect to the French political and intellectual elite, the empirical evidence on recruitment into the US governing class also bears out the claim (also in France, Britain, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands) For example, Aberbach, Putnam, and Rockman report that political recruitment is biased toward those from middle and upper socio-economic class backgrounds. This typically includes a university education that accompanies such privilege, although in the US, the effects of social class on education are relatively weaker than in other countries, making education more accessible to political aspirants. In the 113th Congress (2013), 93% of the House members and 99% of Senators hold bachelor's degrees (compared with 84% and 88%, respectively, in the 97th Congress in 1983). Holders of law degrees dominate 38% of the House and 57% of the Senate (Manning 4-5).

Historically, most national Congressional politicians have backgrounds in law and business, including farm ownership. The congressional tenure was limited, for the most part, to one or two terms. However, since the twentieth century, this tenure pattern has reversed; by the 1950s, over half of the representatives served for ten years or more (Nagle 97). Currently, US national politicians are predominantly from the business class, including the law profession, and public service occupations, the latter of which includes local governmental office. Representation from wage-laborers is virtually absent. In 2011, the Center for Public Integrity reported that based on disclosed assets alone, that 47% of Congressional representatives are millionaires (Biegelsen). If not in the 1% of wealthy Americans, these representatives are in the top decile of American income distribution by “dint of their congressional salaries alone” (Gilens 235).

In short, US politicians regardless of their party affiliation and policy positions belong, for the most part, to an affluent political class that is exceptionally privileged. Such membership at the national level is inscribed through personal wealth, social status, and the requisite campaign financing that further narrows the interests constituting candidacies, particularly presidential ones. Yet, politicians claim to represent, or *speak for*, wide constituencies. For the purposes of winning elections, constituencies must constitute a swath of the democratic electorate that is much larger than the constricted interests that are financing the campaign. At the same time, politicians re-present or *portray* themselves as though they are not removed from the same socioeconomic class they purport to speak for, but to which they do not belong. Such conflation between “proxy” and “portrait” (Spivak 276) finds seemingly benign slippage in popular cultural outlets lending themselves to the performance of ordinary. Candidates who can work within the rules of SPFs benefit from playful opportunities to deny the ideological apparatus that make their campaigns possible. They can appeal to popular trust on the basis of their shared concerns as ostensibly ordinary, unexceptional (un-privileged) persons.¹¹

I am not suggesting that the traditional means of party and policy representation (e.g. conventional political journalism, formal interviews, press conferences, stump speeches, convention appearances, etc.) have been displaced or somehow rendered less relevant in relation to appearances on SPFs. On the contrary, the ideological disconnect resulting from the reality of representational inequality in politics and a politician’s re-presentation as ordinary tends to be subsumed by party strategy at the formal level of managed media discourse and spectacle. We expect our political leaders, after all, to be exceptional, as evidenced by their access to the center of media power, and we know that they do not trade in political rationality without affective forms of popular appeal.

When politicians situate themselves as celebrities on entertainment talk, the strategic projection of one's authentic (ordinary) self is designed at once to (1) metaphorically dissolve the real distance that separates political leaders from their electorate, which has real (policy) consequences, and (2) to position audiences as contented fans seeking pleasure in discovering the real person behind the candidate. Such play in authentication suggests that "real unities of power, class, prestige and interest can continue relatively intact and unexamined" (J. Langer 364). What is being offered is a benign and familiar notion of meaning for the sake of audience pleasure as is expected with forms of commercial cultural consumption. Such mediated intimacy may indeed be pleasurable, even affectively productive, but it is also instrumental. SPFs are only one location where politicians conduct their campaigns—perhaps the least obvious site, and therefore one likely to be misrecognized for its mode of cultural power at play.

Notes

¹Although Obama has embraced entertainment talk as a common place campaign stop, George H. W. Bush made an appearance on *Nashville Now* back in 1988 when he was vice-president, and then again in 1992, at which time both presidential candidates Bill Clinton and Al Gore also appeared. Nearly thirty years ago, Margaret Thatcher as sitting Prime Minister also appeared several times on chat shows during her term in office.

²Notable candidacy announcements include Senator (and actor) Fred Thompson on *The Tonight Show* in 2007, Jonathan Edwards on *The Daily Show* in 2004, Arnold Schwarzenegger on Jay Leno's *The Tonight Show* in 2003, and businessman Ross Perot, who inaugurated the practice, on *Larry King Live* in 1992.

- ³ Soft political formats (SPFs) as I am using the term also includes what some have referred to as “soft news” formats, but since this argument is concerned less with rigid distinctions between hard and soft news and between information and entertainment, I use the term SPFs to cover an array of outlets that mark themselves as distinct from the traditional or “hard” news outlets that dominated political campaigning prior to the 1990s because SPFs are largely or primarily coded for entertainment. By virtue of the fact that politicians appear on them, they are or become a political outlet to showcase a campaign strategically. As I am using the concept, SPFs does not signify a genre, but rather presents itself as an organizing category helpful for thinking about how politicians, celebrity, and entertainment television converge.
- ⁴ Street designates the celebrity *politician* (CP1) in contrast to the *celebrity* politician (CP2), the latter of which he defines as the entertainment professional or star of popular culture who uses his or her fame to represent issues or groups and to impact public opinion (“Celebrity Politicians” 437-38).
- ⁵ Su Holmes’s reference to “intertextual circulation” refers to this idea similarly (157), although celebrity place is meant to denote the intertextual circulation aside from the cultural products (or texts) that house the entertainment professional as a component of the commodity form.
- ⁶ Of course, authentication processes are not a uniform proposition because celebrity value itself is highly stratified. There are A, B, C, and even D list celebrities, among whom the A-list ones are most commonly referred to as “stars.”
- ⁷ Ponce de Leon puts it similarly when he defines celebrity in its broadest sense as a person from any field (e.g., entertainment, politics, business, education, science, etc.) or non-field, such as socialite or the unremarkable person upon whom media attention is bestowed and framed in terms of an “illusion and exposure” of the person’s supposed real-self (7).
- ⁸ According to the only estimate I am aware of, some 4,500 bookings were required to fill television schedules in the late 1990s (Greg 1).
- ⁹ It should be noted that Baum’s argument is attentive to decades of media research that suggests exposure to political persuasion such as during elections tends to reinforce what people already think or believe rather than significantly change their attitudes or partisan positions. This has to do in no small part to the habits of people in tuning into or relying on media outlets and formats that produce news and editorials that are

consistent with their own standpoints for the most part. Baum's point is that audiences of entertainment talk have been a neglected demographic both in the study of political communication and in terms of formal electoral strategy by political campaigns, which suggests they may be more likely to change their opinions than viewers of more traditional political news.

¹⁰ In McCain's case, his confession to Letterman and his audience—"I screwed up. What can I say?"—was as if to say, "I'm only human." Former New York Democratic Governor and Attorney General Elliot Spitzer represents a notable exception to the historical divide between media outlets and the level of transgression. Although he resigned from political office in 2008 due to his involvement in a prostitution scandal, Spitzer's recent bid for New York City Comptroller and publication of his book lead him to appear on *The Tonight Show*, *Late Night*, and *The Colbert Report* where his newfound media skills as a talk show host himself allowed him to humorously field the (largely friendly) treatment by his fellow celebrity hosts.

¹¹ Romney's inability to mobilize perceptions downplaying his extraordinary wealth so that he might have appeared as more common-man was more significant in his campaign than the fact of his financial net worth. In contrast, we may recall that third-party presidential candidate Ross Perot, whose wealth is approximately fourteen times that of Romney's, won over a fair share of the American electorate on *Larry King Live* with his downhome demeanor and plain folks southern talk akin to his successor candidates Bill Clinton and George W. Bush.

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