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What the Arrival of the Celebrity Politician Means for Politics and Media

Ronald Reagan was most famously quoted for saying, “Politics is just like show business” (Postman, 128). The phenomenon of politics and Hollywood being closely intertwined has been present in the history of the United States for quite some time. This trend toward celebrity politics has existed throughout American history, producing presidents who were well-known prior to entering public service and politicians who came from celebrated and politically prominent families. Darrell West and John Orman are often cited for their comprehensive overview of the political celebrity through their system of categorization of identifying five types of celebrity. These include politicians who have experience with vigorous self-promotion, those who receive celebrity status through family relations, those who move from careers in popular culture to politics (elective office, lobbyists, issue spokespersons) and those who gain notoriety overnight due to an event (West and Orman 2). While all five categories are pertinent to the study of celebrity politics, the phenomenon in recent years has come to center around the category of the elected politician or candidate as a celebrity – those with careers in politics who make use of the tools, icons and knowledge of popular culture. President Obama and his recent appearance on “Between Two Ferns” demonstrate this trend as a natural progression. It is to be argued that the celebrity politician has come to dominate the political and entertainment spheres due to the evolution of media with the creation of the internet and social media as a new medium as well as the increasing importance of entertainment programming in politics and the continued existence of blurred lines between politics and entertainment.

The celebrity politician can be divided into two categories. The celebrity politician can refer to an elected politician or a nominated candidate whose expertise or past career was in entertainment, show business or sport and uses this background in attempt to get elected. The second type is becoming increasingly relevant. The celebrity politician can be an elected politician or candidate who uses the tools and associations of a celebrity to strengthen their image and communicate their message. These celebrity politicians use a number of methods that further draw attention to their status as a celebrity. These methods include: the use of photo opportunities staged to link entertainment stars with politicians or using household names in campaign advertisements; the adoption of the techniques and expertise of those who promote celebrities; and the exploitation of non-traditional platforms or formats to promote the politician (Street 437).

The celebrity politician that Street describes is not from a recent development. The idea of viewing politicians as celebrities was discussed by Neil Postman over 20 years ago. Postman wrote: “Political figures may show up anywhere at any time, doing anything, without being thought odd, presumptuous, or in any way out of place. Which is to say, they have become assimilated into general television culture as celebrities.” The start of the concept of the celebrity politician is most popularly associated with Ronald Reagan. Prior to his political career, Reagan was a radio, film and television actor (West and Orman 45). As Street stated, the celebrity politician with a background in another sector could use skills and experience to get elected. As

an entertainer, Reagan had experience with the media, which proved to be successful for his political career. Reagan combined use of television and radio, photo opportunities and movie sound bites in his own addresses to create his image as a politician. Bill Clinton is often mentioned for his various media appearances. Reagan has been considered to have marked the beginning of the age of celebrity politics, and then Bill Clinton crafted media skills to become a form of art (Marks and Fischer 377). Appearing on *People* magazine and playing the saxophone on *The Arsenio Hall* program are some examples of Clinton engaging with popular culture as a celebrity politician. However, it is Barack Obama who has gone far beyond Clinton. Obama has utilized new technology in innovative ways during his campaign and his time in office. His consistent use of media tools associated with celebrities (blogs, websites, appearances on popular television shows, personalized websites, social media accounts, etc.) to communicate with the general public has played a pivotal role in his success (March, Hart and Tindall 329). Use of these tools has increased his own celebrity image but has also managed to garner him support from Hollywood. Obama has had countless of celebrity endorsements over the years and continues to build relationships with entertainers to gain more support from Hollywood as well as creating an image of himself that is accessible to the public.

Politicians have become celebrities during this “age of show business” as Postman observes (Postman 98). Given the progression from Reagan to Obama, it is clear that the medium is important to the rise of celebrity politics and celebrity politicians. Reagan, Clinton and Obama used the tools that were available to them at the time to promote their image. Reagan used radio and television, Clinton appeared in entertainment magazines and on talk shows. Obama is considered the culmination of the idea of a celebrity politician. Obama and his use of several different platforms and mediums simply created more outlets for him to showcase his image as a politician and as a celebrity. The development towards the phenomenon of celebrity politicians appears to be a natural progression due to the sheer number of outlets available to politicians at this moment. There are more entertainment magazines and shows, social media and blogs to report on politicians – politicians can reach a wider audience with a variety of outlets to choose from. The progression of the internet, social media and the demand for instant news has facilitated the ease of accepting the culture of celebrity politics.

The use of media by politicians, namely Obama, outlines the dilemma that faces politicians today and is at the heart of celebrity politics: occupying both entertainment and political spheres. This concept is essential in the development of celebrity politicians. As politicians become increasingly accepted as celebrities, politicians must learn to balance their occupancy of both spheres. Liesbet van Zoonen notes that politicians have to balance the work between the different requirements of politics and entertainment. This is essential in maintaining their position and status in the political field as well as their relevance to the everyday culture of their constituents (Zoonen, 69). This may appear as the politician having to switch with ease from his position as a politician to his status as a parent, spouse, or sports fan and has to also be capable of explaining political, social and economic concepts for the general public understanding. Existing in both spheres and the ability to interchange enforces the politician to put on a performance – further emphasizing the celebrity component of the profession.

The performance aspect allows for the public to consider politicians more for their appearance, image and personality rather than the actions or policies he or she endorses. Politics

has become a performance of putting together the perfect image of a person and placing that above everything. In many respects, contemporary politics has become thoroughly intimate. The public has access to personal information about politicians and there becomes a demand for this information, mirroring the demand for details about entertainers or athletes. Zoonen declares that politics has become too “personal.” Zoonen suggests that politicians and citizens have become too preoccupied with the behaviour and individual capacities of politicians at the expense of expressing opinions about issues. This has become the essence of politics (Zoonen 69). For example, politicians appear on talk shows for the benefit of enabling them to perform a more diverse and complete persona built from the performance requirements that emerge from the political and private stage. The idea of a performance and putting forth an idealized version of themselves mirrors the job of an actor in Hollywood, further emphasizing the celebrity role for politicians. Actors play characters in films and television, as do politicians in front of the public in the media.

In this regard, celebrity politicians have a massive effect on the entertainment and political spheres. The concept of a performance brings forth the possibility of the argument that the negative aspect of this is that celebrities and politicians are commodities sold to audiences (Drake and Higgins, 88). The crafted image of a celebrity or a politician becomes highly in demand. The concept of personalized politics as introduced by Zoonen leads to an enhancement of the concept of the “cult of personality” (Simons 189). There is a certain level of persuasion and branding that is involved in this age of media and consumer culture. Politicians as celebrities become involved in similar tactics as other celebrities to create a suitable image that is a balance of politics and personality. For example, the Clintons were featured in *People* magazine discussing parenting and hobbies while being photographed as a family. In between the personal tidbits, snippets of politics, such as views on racism, current affairs were added to create the image of a well rounded person – a politician while being an ordinary citizen with similar concerns (Simons 191). This strategy of a performance is simply perfected and adapted to communicate through the evolution of media, such as radio, television and now social media. A performance at this point has been discussed through the printed publications and television. However, with the advent of social media, the personal and intimate details go much further. Social media allows for a more intimate relationship between followers and the celebrity. For example, posting a candid photo attached with a short description appears to be more casual and less rehearsed compared to an interview. Using social media to reach the public appears to be more personal due frequency of the updates. Especially with photos, it appears as an insider view of the private lives of politicians. In addition, access to celebrity politicians has never been easier. Before, access was limited to arbitrary interviews here and there. However, the perpetuation of the perfected image of a politician can now be easily accessed more often through the internet. For example, a photo of Obama and his dog produces an idea and image of “man and his dog” which can be seen as relatable to the average citizen. This photo can be discussed and promoted through various outlets – blogs, entertainment programming, websites and other social media accounts. The ability for information to cut across numerous outlets fuels the cult of personality, media and consumer culture.

While personalized politics may be seen as positive due to the easy access to politicians, personalized politics can have negative effects as well. This style of politics creates issues for citizens, especially those that are uninformed and otherwise politically unengaged. Personalized

politics promotes the view that one should be elected on the basis of their personal attributes or appearance. One might argue that this might have some bearing on electing an official. However, appearance, personality and image become the most important reason for voting for a candidate (West and Orman 52). The politician's policies and views on significant topics become an afterthought. The number of outlets and platforms available to politicians allow them the power to broadcast their policies and help uninformed citizens become knowledgeable about current affairs. However, it would seem that these opportunities are being spent on image dissemination. This current method of use of media and to promote an image has made it difficult to discern who is most capable in the realm of politics (Davis and Owen 99). Skills and experience are minimized in interviews. In many respects, this trivializes politics. It could be argued that with the rise of celebrity politics, there has been a displacement of traditional political skills and is instead replaced by skills of media management and public relations – skills more pertinent to entertainers, athletes, etc. Voters will have more information to support and vote one candidate for their style, appearance and personality quirks rather than their stance on certain issues (West and Orman 112).

This trend toward personalized politics has its roots in the evolution of media. Radio offered famous individuals an opportunity to communicate with the public in ways that were both personal and intimate. Television contributed to this trend even more clearly by joining the intimacy of radio with the visual power of television (West and Orman 8). West and Orman argue that the television radically altered perceptions about celebrity status (West and Orman 43). Television opened up the doors for personalized politics. Television had the ability to create intimacy through close-up shots of celebrities and airing one-on-one interviews that brought attention to the personal qualities of politicians (Wheeler 64). Television managed to expand on the power of radio and now the internet has amplified the power of television. With the internet, access to any and all information is easily available. News sites, political blogs, entertainment/gossip websites, network websites, social media accounts all cover politics, politicians and entertainment. The internet allows the public to view things at any moment and for several times if desired. The internet builds upon the power of television with the addition of exclusive content. One can watch the interview of Obama on *The Late Show with David Letterman* on several different platforms online, but also have exclusive clips available to them that did not make it to air on television. Listening to the radio and watching television was a way to understand politics and learn about current affairs. One could discuss with their neighbours on what was seen or heard. However, with the internet, one can not only understand world affairs and get instant updates, but also be able to connect with millions around the world and engage in discussion. The internet has allowed politics to truly become international. In addition to that, the rise of social media and the internet has allowed a sense of intimacy to grow with the feature of instant and more constant updates. The development of the internet provided new opportunities for the glorification of celebrities. Once again, the evolution of mediums has assisted in the phenomenon of celebrity politicians.

Celebrity politics, celebrity politicians and personalized politics are demonstrated with the recent appearance of Obama on *Between Two Ferns*. Found on Twitter, the article compares the appearance of Obama on the comedian Zach Galifianakis' web-based show to FDR's fireside chats during the 1930s and 1940s. The appearance demonstrates the dependency on new forms of media to promote the politician as a personality rather than a policy. As Julia Azari pointed

out, previous guests on the web show have been celebrities, such as Charlize Theron and Justin Bieber. The web show caters to a certain audience as a comedy show with celebrity guests. Azari notes that the appearance was to challenge “ideas of strong, distant leadership.” This has been challenged before with FDR and Reagan. FDR and Reagan both promoted the idea of a strong united nation while attempting to add in a personable feel in terms of leadership. Obama on *Between Two Ferns* told several jokes, made references to popular culture and tried to create an air of intimacy while aiming to further emphasize the image of Obama as a regular, ordinary person. The article draws upon FDR’s “Fireside Chats” as an example of reaching out to the public through the radio which is comparable to Obama and his use of new media on the internet. The claimed reason for the appearance was to promote HealthCare.gov but the website was only mentioned at the very end of the interview. It is apparent that the appearance was a standard ploy to change the perspective of how the public views presidency and leadership.

Appearing on *Between Two Ferns* is not surprising for Obama and in this era. Throughout his campaigns and during office, Obama employed “telegenic” imagery in relation to the culture blend of entertainment, Hollywood and politics (Wheeler 61). Obama has employed social networks such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and his own website to amass political support. In addition, his image became available on a host of magazine covers, an official endorsement from *Rolling Stone* and had celebrity endorsements, namely Oprah Winfrey (Wheeler 67). Obama had managed and still manages to effortlessly mix with politics, celebrity and popular culture. Obama has appeared on a number of talk shows to appeal to a wider range of people. For example, Obama appeared on *The Daily Show* in hopes of appealing to the younger, liberal members of the electorate (Wheeler 68). This action seeks to connect to the electorate by consistently demonstrating a critical awareness of popular culture. The relationship between entertainment and politics has continued to thrive with Obama. A more recent example was his appearance on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* last month, which was to also promote HealthCare.gov. Obama joked with DeGeneres about her recent stint as a host for the Oscars and also mentioned his favourite political television shows (Lavender). Obama continues this pattern of using new media and popular culture with his appearance on *Between Two Ferns*. This method continues to emphasize the relationship between entertainment and politics, which lends itself to the phenomenon of celebrity politics. Obama is using the same tactics as previous presidents but it appears to be more consistent and aggressive due to the number of outlets that cover stories about Obama. Increasingly, more entertainment based programs and media are reporting on politicians.

Between Two Ferns mimics the interview format of a late night talk show, which has become a staple for politicians to promote themselves and their message. Late night talk shows showcased the trend toward blending entertainment and news together as politics and current affairs are topics that are covered on a superficial basis (Davis 100). This format of programming was an effort to appeal to voters (McKernan 195). The talk show format combines journalism, fiction, criticism, politics, research and Hollywood films (Simons 189). This lends itself to the idea of a performance. Politicians have to be careful not to overplay their ordinariness or else they risk losing the distinctive qualities that attracted the supporters in the first place (McKernan 193). In many ways, the entertainment talk shows were where real social and political interactions could occur. It could be argued that this pervasive electronic media is necessary to sustain public interest in the figures and the political message (Marks and Fischer 379).

Late night talk shows serve as an outlet of entertainment media to influence American audiences. Matthew Baum discusses the impact of politicians using entertainment talk shows to present themselves and their message. Entertainment talk shows showcase the mutually beneficial relationship between entertainment and politics. Talk shows desire to entertain their audiences by offering fun and entertaining interviews with famous individuals and candidates covet an opportunity to present themselves in a positive light (Baum 215). In addition, politicians seek out entertainment talk shows to reach to a wider audience. More people watch talk shows than the traditional nightly news programs. Entertainment talk shows contribute to the concept of personalized politics by presenting and emphasizing the personal qualities of politicians. Similarly to Obama's appearance on *Between Two Ferns*, a politician may make an appearance on the talk show to promote a message but ultimately the message becomes lost under the promotion of the image of the politician. The entertainment portion overtakes the political side of the interview.

However, while the entertainment talk shows have cemented the relationship between Hollywood and politics, the programs have a deeper impact on the public and the audience viewing the program. Entertainment talk shows are becoming the popular program for information regarding politics and current world affairs. These talk shows make political information more accessible to the average citizen (Baum 216). While there are many critics that are against the celebrity politics culture, there are also critics against entertainment talk shows, citing negative effects of the programs. Entertainment talk shows present politics, news stories and current affairs with an underlying tone of entertainment. Entertainment programming follow the "now this" model as discussed by Postman. These programs present information and topical news stories very quickly without placing them in a broader context (Postman 90). Obama's appearances on *Between Two Ferns* and *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* exhibit this. Healthcare.gov is very briefly discussed and only at the end of the appearance before the commercial break and does not give the viewers a clear understanding of what the website is or the specifics of Obamacare.

The viewers of entertainment talk shows are generally members of the public who do not seek out political information. Since talk shows are rising in popularity as outlets for political information, the information must be presented in a way that appeals to the tastes of the general audience. Baum notes that low-awareness individuals are less likely to pay attention to the political messages presented by traditional news programs and so entertainment talk shows simply present the information as "fun" to combat this (Baum 216). It could be argued that the way in which the political information is presented as entertaining is detrimental to the political system as well as the citizens. Tailoring political messages and the way in which they are presented to entertainment talk show audiences must mean that the message is either incomplete or overly simplified. Entertainment talk shows presenting politics could be beneficial in that individuals that are less likely to be politically active are at the very least exposed to some political information. However, is it enough to simply be exposed? The plug for HealthCare.gov was brief and at the end of the interview segment. It could be argued that that is simply not enough information for people to be interested in the website or take the time to do further research online. Also, if information is simply stated without context, the information can be rendered useless to the viewer.

Academic literature and research have presented a positive view on infotainment programs. Paul Brewer and Xiaoxia Cao present their research that suggests that even the slightest exposure to these programs can foster at least some public attention to world affairs among the otherwise politically unengaged citizens. It is implied that being exposed to an infotainment interpreted news story is better than being entirely unaware of news and politics (Brewer and Cao 18). However, this would only be considered beneficial if the citizens became politically engaged and not only slightly aware of the issues at hand.

Receiving political information from talk shows can be detrimental to the voting patterns of citizens. In addition to political messages being presented as entertainment, the politician or candidate is also presented as a personable human being. As mentioned above, politicians present an image of themselves. The emphasis on personal attributes and characteristics of the candidates allow the public to make their decisions about candidates based on personality rather than public policy issues. Obama appearing on magazine publications, talk shows, and social media only enhances his position as a celebrity politician in the eyes of the low-awareness individuals. From his appearances on various talk shows, one does not know his stance on important issues plaguing the country. The relationship between entertainment and politics becomes an interesting topic when discussed in the position of the public. Is it enough to garner support from people simply based on personality? Should people not vote or be informed when voting about policy issues? Baum notes that the viewers who receive entertainment talk shows saw candidates as more likeable (Baum 230). Consistently appearing in media can enhance the image of Obama especially with his working relationships with celebrities, but if looked at critically, this becomes simply superficial. There is a danger to simply evaluating the aesthetics. The performance nature of politicians and entertainment fabricates an image that is different than reality. The simple question that is raised as a result of this is: How do we trust the image that is presented before us? There is simply too much emphasis on the image, which cannot account for skills, experience or opinions on policies.

Obama and other politicians appearing in different media contribute to the blending of celebrity and politician as well as news and entertainment. As more and more entertainment programs cover politicians, the line continues to become less distinct between news and entertainment. This has a significant impact on the public as the viewers begin to lose their ability to distinguish one from the other if mainstream news organizations and entertainment news media continue to cover the same stories. It becomes increasingly difficult to discern the difference between which programs are presenting information that should be regarded as significant. Postman deals with this discussion by observing that the blurred boundaries are not only due to the stories being covered but also due to the format, languages, and practices that were once specific to each realm are now heavily borrowed and used in various combinations (Postman 87). With the rise of the internet, an abundance of television programs and news publications, it becomes easier to miss or simply avoid certain programs. Earlier on, it was quite possibly easier to be exposed to traditional news programs and therefore still being exposed to conventional news programs. In this era, it is easy enough to simply dwell in the sphere of entertainment programming and be subjected only to short bursts of news with an underlying tone of fun and entertainment that focuses more on appearances and superficiality.

It is alarming to observe the increasing rate at which entertainment overtakes politics in importance. However, the examples provided above seem to indicate a natural progression toward a culture centered on celebrity politics due to the evolution of media. Perhaps politics is not tarnished at all by the trivial and serious spheres coming together. In some respects, infotainment and celebrity politicians can be viewed as the structures of old political communication becoming obsolete. Society has come to demand a certain intimacy between politicians and citizens and the way in which to receive that information is through the media, namely the internet and infotainment programming.

Society has been celebrity focused for quite some time as witnessed by the examples of past presidents Reagan and Clinton. Blossoming of modern forms of communication (radio, film, television, internet) has seen a continuous evolution of the roles occupied by the stars of these media (Marks and Fischer 379). To dismiss as a mere symptom of the trivialization of politics would be to fail to recognize its significance as a means of contemporary political engagement. Perhaps celebrity politics and the cult of personality that it embodies is simply a product of the transformation of political communication. The focus shifts on to the individual and politics becomes personalized. This trend is accentuated by mass media that favour this form of politics. It's simply the breakdown of traditional social structures under the strain of modernization. It appears that the interchangeable nature of politics, entertainment, politicians and celebrities will not disappear in the near future. There are potential benefits as well as consequences of this celebrity politics culture. Perhaps it is simply time to embrace the progression of political communication and become accustomed to seeing politicians occupy all outlets of media.

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