

Chapter 3. Celebrities as Political Actors and Entertainment as Political Media

Regina G. Lawrence and Amber E. Boydston

(will be published in the book: Van Aelst, P. & Walgrave S. (2017) *How Political Actors Use the Media*, Palgrave, London/New York)

The aim of this book is to bring a diversity of scholarly perspectives to bear on the question: How do political actors use the media? In this chapter, we advocate a fuller, more diverse approach to how we define both “political actors” and “the media.” Specifically, we draw on recent literature pointing to the ways in which entertainment can function as political media in order to expand Van Aelst and Walgrave’s model of the “media arena.” Additionally, we draw on prior literature and recent events to highlight the emerging importance of celebrity entertainers (e.g., reality TV stars) as political actors, not only within entertainment formats but also within the traditional media arena. The upshot, we argue, is that the “Information and Arena” model of media and politics captures a useful but only partial set of media dynamics. As illustrated in the startling election of Donald Trump as U.S. President in 2016, politics today is increasingly saturated with entertainment platforms and values, creating unprecedented opportunities for unconventional political actors to enter and succeed in politics and underscoring the importance of entertainment in shaping how citizens interact with politics.

In this chapter, we synthesize and build on past studies to argue that entertainment formats can (and often do) qualify as political media formats, which can sometimes deepen the troubles of some political actors, but which other political actors can use to their advantage. Moreover, entertainers can (and sometimes do) qualify as political actors, often endowed with a disproportionate ability to shape media coverage precisely because of their genesis in the “not news” arena. We extend this work, providing an updated way to think of “political actors” and “the media” in today’s entertainment-saturated information environment, where the wall between politics and entertainment is highly porous. We close with a snapshot analysis and discussion of media coverage of Donald Trump’s primary campaign.

Expanding the Media “Arena”

Van Aelst and Walgrave’s Information and Arena (I&A) model offers an “actor-centric” model of media and politics, highlighting how politicians attempt to use media to further their political goals. The actor-centric focus is valuable but, we argue, may be limited by its conventional approach to defining “political actors” and “news media.” We’ll return below to the crucial question of who counts as a political actor and how non-traditional political actors may exploit the media arena differently than the traditional politicians the I&A model focuses on. Before taking up that question, however, we examine what counts as “the media” in the I&A model.

The I&A model “treats the media as a resource that can be used by politicians in the struggle over political power with other politicians. For instance, by attaining media access, anticipating media attention, or rhetorically using media coverage, politicians can improve their position in the political process” (Van Aelst & Walgrave, p. xx). The model focuses on “whether and how media affect the balance of power *amongst* politicians, which probably is

the main question political scientists deal with—namely: who gets what, when and how” (ibid, p. xx). The model offers a useful schema for organizing our understanding of how (traditional) political actors interact with (traditional) media. Presumably, the model is intended to apply to the array of news outlets that in the contemporary era produce news in print, broadcast and digital formats, including social media. Yet other than general references to “the mass media,” the model does not specify which media it applies to, potentially limiting its scope. This absence of detail presents an enormous theoretical and empirical opportunity—and a challenge, too—because although “the mass media” have always been complex, and the boundaries between “news” and “entertainment” have always been porous, these complexities and porosity have increased over time. The very notion of the media as an arena for political action is expanded when we consider the continued dissolution of boundaries across types of media that used to be considered as distinct genres.

Van Aelst and Walgrave acknowledge that a key dynamic in media arenas comes from the structure of media and political systems cross-nationally. The U.S. President, for example, is likely to face a different set of opportunities and constraints than a back-bench Member of the British Parliament, given not only their different levels of political authority but also the different media systems within which they operate. This acknowledgement can be expanded to a wide range of variation across systems, but also to accommodate a more complex understanding of “the media arena” within any one country. The United States in particular, with its highly developed yet highly fragmented and competitive news media marketplace—and as the world’s primary source of Hollywood-esque entertainment—may present the most dynamic and complex media arena for politicians to navigate and for scholars to understand.

Recognizing the growing complexity of media systems around the world, the I&A model can benefit from a more complex and nuanced treatment of media that are relevant to politics. Groundbreaking recent work by other scholars who have attempted to theorize the new media environment include Chadwick’s work on the “hybrid media system” (Chadwick 2013). “Hybridity” is a hallmark of today’s media, he argues, as rapidly evolving media systems layer new technologies and possibilities upon old, yielding media systems that cannot be described as “either/or” but rather in terms of “not only/but also.” Hybrid media systems are marked by fluidity, constant reformulation, and processes of simultaneous integration and fragmentation. Thus, Chadwick contends, “Political communication is in transition. While broadcasting still remains at the heart of public life, the nature of mediated politics is evolving rapidly and is being pushed and pulled in multiple directions by multiple actors” (2013, p. 59). As political communication increasingly flows not just from the top down but from the bottom up and laterally across a wide array of media platforms, political actors gain multiple platforms for political action and must constantly assess and adjust strategies accordingly.

Thinking in terms of *media regimes* can also enhance insights from the I&A model. Communication scholars Williams and Delli Carpini (2011) argue that dominant empirical and normative models of the media are products of a bygone era—the Age of Broadcast News. “Over the last two decades,” they write, “economic, cultural, political, and technological changes have challenged the stability of the [previously] existing [U.S.] media regime,” encouraging us to consider “the relative merits of *Saturday Night Live*, *CBS Evening News*, Fox News, Twitter, Facebook, the *Huffington Post*, and the *New York Times* as sources of political information” (2011, 19). In other words, traditional public affairs news delivered through authoritative media outlets is on the decline. Several scholars argue that in many countries, news outlets are producing less “serious” news (Gunther and Mughan 2000; Zaller

1999), and doing so for shrinking audiences (Benson 2010; Stroud 2011).¹ The blurring of lines between information and entertainment and between fact and opinion are the hallmarks of the new media environment. Today's media regime is also characterized by *hyperreality*—the blending of media rituals, such as popular selection of winners in TV reality shows with the simultaneous public election of an actual president—and by *multiaxiality* in communication flows, meaning that many far-flung platforms can serve as sites of politically-relevant information and action.

Drawing upon these models, we can see that in the U.S. and elsewhere, the “media arena” has increasingly become a dynamic, multi-level system—an array of arenas, each interconnected strongly or indirectly with the others, in which various arenas are structured by somewhat different logics and incentives, but all with the same end goal of attracting public attention/support. Information is quickly and widely shared but also easily de-contextualized or re-contextualized to fit the incentives and logics of various media outlets, including citizen-generated social media, partisan media, and also, importantly, entertainment media. Politicians' messages and performances that “work” on one stage (e.g., by going viral) may fall flat on other platforms, and will most certainly be re-purposed on others. And, as we highlight in the next section, these various forms of media are increasingly shaped by the values, incentives, and expectations of entertainment.

The “Not News” Arena: Entertainment as Political Media

The increasingly complex array of media arenas is deeply shaped by values, expectations and behaviors borrowed from the realm of entertainment. As Altheide and Snow (1979) recognized some time ago and scholars like Altheide (2004), Baum (2002), Bennett (2005) and Williams and Delli Carpini (2011) have updated for an evolving media regime, although “news values” (i.e., the traits that make one news item more publishable than another) have always overlapped with “entertainment values” (e.g., sensationalism, drama, celebrity), today's news values are more entertainment-driven than ever before. Today, traditional news commonly features stories and figures from the entertainment world, and in many ways is driven as much by entertainment values as by informational values. It has become increasingly difficult to speak of the “news” media as something distinct from the larger entertainment-industrial complexes in which they are enmeshed, not to mention the general cultural shift toward entertainment values observed by Boorstin (1962), Postman (1985), Gabler (2011) and others. Entertainment influences politics today not only because entertainment values have increasingly seeped into media that used to (at least avowedly) eschew “entertaining” their audiences, but also because audiences for various forms of entertainment have multiplied as the options for entertainment media have proliferated, allowing increasing numbers of citizens to opt out of traditional news entirely (Prior 2007).

Indeed, entertainment so thoroughly infuses today's multiaxial media environment that it demands a rethinking of the “arenas” on which political actors act, the “actors” whose actions must be accounted for, and the “information” that shapes and results from that action. The importance of rethinking our understanding of arenas, actors, and information becomes especially acute when considering the declining trust that citizens around the world have in

¹ The shifting media landscape is, of course, not the same around the world. Garden (2010), for example, finds that newspapers in Australia are faring better than in the U.S. and U.K.

media, a distrust that extends to social as well as traditional media (Media Intelligence Service 2016; Swift 2016).

In terms of information, including entertainment in our models of politics helps to account for an already well-advanced development highlighted by Williams and Delli Carpini (2011): Rather than rely on the crumbling categories of “real news” versus “entertainment,” we need a new orientation toward the wide varieties and forms of information citizens now encounter. In place of the old news/entertainment dichotomy, Williams and Delli Carpini suggest the concept of “politically relevant information.” No matter its form or source, politically relevant information includes any media content that “shape[s] opportunities for understanding, deliberating, and acting on (1) the conditions of one’s everyday life, (2) the life of fellow community members, and (3) the norms and structures of power that shape these relationships” (p. 122).

By this definition, movies or pop songs or reality TV shows may be as politically relevant as the morning newspaper or the evening TV news (Teneboim-Weinblatt 2013; van Zoonen 2005)—the traditional information sources closely studied by political scientists—particularly to the extent that traditional news consumption is declining as more people opt for entertainment fare over public affairs (Prior 2005). Indeed, Hollywood interpretations of politics can affect citizens’ perceptions. For example, when Pautz (2015) showed study participants one of two movies—*Argo* or *Zero Dark Thirty*—she found that one-quarter of participants changed their opinion of the government after watching the movie.

In terms of the media arena, the growing pervasiveness of entertainment media—and the many hybrids of entertainment and news—creates opportunities for nontraditional media formats and nontraditional political actors to wield considerable political influence. Put simply, entertainment media offer resources (and pose challenges) for political action in addition to those presented by traditional media.

Thus, we need to include in our definition of “the media” all those entertainment formats that serve to deliver politically-relevant information to citizens, from talk shows to infotainment programs to late-night comedy and beyond (Baum 2005; Jones 2010). Satirical political shows like *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show*—and their counterparts across the globe such as the UK’s comedy quiz show *Have I Got News For You?*—give entertainers like Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart a level of political influence that would have been unimaginable for entertainers fifty years ago. Likewise, ostensible entertainment programs like Amy Schumer’s show on Comedy Central and Garfunkel and Oates’ videos on YouTube broadcast policy signals about issues like feminism, gun control, and religion cloaked in raunchy, humorous skits.

To envision the importance of including entertainment media in our definition of “the media,” consider the sex scandal of U.S. Representative Anthony Weiner in 2011—a scandal made possible by Wiener’s own social media proclivities. In this case, celebrities like Jimmy Fallon (who parodied Weiner on *Saturday Night Live*) and Jon Stewart (who, despite being Weiner’s personal friend, covered the scandal repeatedly on *The Daily Show*) served in dual roles—whether intentionally or not—as both entertainers and as political actors, shaping the discussion of the scandal by “real” political actors and news media alike, and undoubtedly influencing public reaction. And *Saturday Night Live* and *The Daily Show* served as both entertainment and political media formats, providing venues outside the bounds of traditional news media in which to dissect and interpret the scandal, though certainly not to Weiner’s

advantage. The entertainment-based negative media coverage of Weiner's social media actions helped put an effective end to his political career.

Traditional political actors have long been able to use entertainment media for their own ends; just think of U.S. Presidential candidate Bill Clinton playing the saxophone on *The Arsenio Hall Show* in 1992. And with the evolving media landscape, it stands to reason that traditional political actors increasingly *must* use entertainment for political aims; think of Sarah Palin appearing on *Saturday Night Live* in the final month of the 2008 U.S. Presidential race, presumably in an effort to counteract the fallout from impersonations of Palin by SNL's Tina Fey; Barack Obama's multiple discussions with Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show* during his presidency; and former French president Nicolas Sarkozy's orchestration of a "meet the public" television show in 2010 prior to key regional elections, hosted by a popular TV anchor whose show typically featured "regional issues like saucisson-making" (Samuel 2010).

Entertainment platforms, in other words, help constitute the media "arena" in which political actors act. By making these appearances, political actors can hope to reach a broader audience than would normally tune in to hear a dry political speech and, crucially, to improve their image by showcasing their likeability and humor, thus engaging in the more personalized and intimate style of communication demanded in an era of personalized, "intimized" politics (Holtz-Bacha, Langer, & Merkle, 2014; McGregor, Lawrence and Cardona 2016; Stanyer 2013; Van Aelst, Sheafer & Stanyer 2012).

Incorporating entertainment into our definitions of "the media" also takes account of the pervasive role—for better or worse—that the entertainment industry plays in society's political expectations and perceptions. From the social media escapades of Anthony Weiner to the reign of Silvio Berlusconi, traditional news coverage is surely influenced by news outlets' understanding of their audiences' taste for entertainment. Around the world, the modern entertainment backdrop of reality shows like *Big Brother* and fictional shows like *Game of Thrones* sets a higher bar for news outlets to satisfy their audience's thirst for the juiciest parts of politics. Moreover, the salacious nature of such high-drama politics fits perfectly with the format of infotainment and entertainment shows—more easily, in fact, than with traditional journalism, which is constrained by professional standards of objectivity and good taste. And in a broader sense, pervasive entertainment may shape the scripts by which publics understand and interact with political stories. Around the world, political actors seem to understand the evolving (and largely entertainment-based) media landscape. Some (like Berlusconi) use it to their advantage (Campus 2010). Others (like Wiener) find it their undoing.

Celebrities as Political Actors and Political Actors as Celebrities

For all these reasons, we must account for the role of entertainment media in the evolving media landscape to fully understand how political actors interact with media to achieve their goals. We must also go a step further to account for how the evolving media environment is creating opportunities for nontraditional actors to play significant roles in political life. An important question when considering hybrid media systems, Chadwick asks, is, "Who is emerging as powerful in this new context?" (p. 3). Today's hybrid media system, shaped by entertainment values and blurred boundaries between "news" and "not news," has given rise

to unprecedented opportunities for nontraditional political actors, particularly those who can deliver performances with high entertainment value.

In describing their A&I model, Van Aelst and Walgrave limit their discussion of “political actors” to political elites/politicians but note that additional research should focus on “distinguishing kinds of politicians while examining how and why they differently employ the media’s information as well as arena function” (p. xx). One important dimension of variation is between traditional and non-traditional political actors, particularly those that hail from the world of entertainment.

Although celebrities are rarely mentioned in political science literature, they can have enormous political sway. Perhaps best recognized is the role of late night satirists Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, around whom a mini-cottage industry of research has grown. Though scholars disagree on the extent to which these kinds of TV shows can actually educate viewers (e.g., Hollander 2005; Prior 2003; Young 2004)—and the extent to which they may merely feed cynicism and political disaffection (e.g., Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Becker 2011; Elenbaas and De Vreese 2008)—it seems increasingly apparent that celebrity satirists cannot be ignored in the study of political communication.

Focusing only on these explicitly political entertainers, however, overlooks the variety of actors who move across the boundaries of entertainment and news, and the variety of paths traversing those increasingly porous boundaries. For example, a growing literature traces the rise of “celebrity politics.” Marked by “concerted attempts to mix renown with commonality” (Wheeler 2013, p. 62), celebrity politicians “‘perform’ across a range of media to define their personas, demonstrate their fortitude and enhance their appeal to the electorate” (p. 87). Indeed, they “have incorporated matters of performance, personalization, branding and public relations into the heart of their political representation” (p. 87). Importantly, celebrity politicians are attuned to and incorporate the products and tastes of pop culture, thus broadening their appeal.

Celebrity politics is not new. Particularly if one employs an expansive definition, celebrity politicians go back at least to U.S. President John F. Kennedy (Wheeler 2013). Over 30 years ago, Neil Postman (1985) among others observed that politicians were being “assimilated into general television culture as celebrities” (p. 135). At the turn of the present century, political scientists West and Orman (2013) argued that the celebritization of politics was displacing traditional political skills of bargaining and compromise and putting a new premium on media management that trivialized politics. In the U.S., Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger (among others) preceded Donald Trump as entertainers who entered politics. And dyed-in-the-wool politicians from at least Kennedy on have long understood the importance of entertainment. Bill Clinton is widely seen as having blazed a contemporary celebrity-politician path in the early 1990s, a path Barack Obama and his campaign team skillfully extended in 2008—the year that also saw “the apotheosis of a celebrity-driven campaign” in the vice presidential bid of Alaska governor Sarah Palin (Wheeler 2013 p. 88).

But scholars of the phenomenon seem to agree that celebrity politics has become more pervasive, tied to the rise of public relations, marketing, and mass communications (and now, social media) technologies and the mass public’s declining attachment to and identification with formal political institutions. Indeed, celebrity politics are just one expression of the larger phenomenon of “celebrity power,” in which “the disciplinary boundaries between the domains of popular culture and political culture have been eroded through the migration of

communicative strategies and public relations from the entertainment industries to the organization of the spectacle of politics” (Marshall 1997, p. xiii).

In response to these developments, pop culture scholar John Street (2004) has distinguished between two types of celebrity political actors. The “celebrity politician” (or “CP1”) is someone who hails from the world of politics but apes the strategies and performances of entertainers. By contrast, the “CP2” is an entertainment figure who “pronounces on politics or claims the right to represent peoples or causes” without seeking formal political office, but “with a view to influencing political outcomes” (2004: p. 438). To put the distinction bluntly, a CP1 is at core a politician who employs entertainment tactics, whereas a CP2 is at core an entertainer who dallies in politics. Street’s model of these two types is profoundly useful but, as we argue below, insufficient for understanding a political actor like Donald Trump.

Street describes the CP1 as “the legitimately elected representative (or the one who aspires to be so)—who engages with the world of popular culture in order to enhance or advance their pre-established political functions and goals” (p. 437). Citing the examples of actors Clint Eastwood, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Ronald Reagan along with former pro wrestler turned governor of Minnesota, Jesse Ventura, Street also included in this CP1 category the “elected politician (or a nominated candidate) whose background is in entertainment, show business or sport, and who trades on this background (by virtue of the skills acquired, the popularity achieved or the images associated) in the attempt to get elected.” In short, CP1s are elected or would-be politicians who use entertainment toward being or remaining politicians, either by trading on their background in the realm of entertainment or by associating themselves with that realm in order “to enhance their image or communicate their message” (p. 437).

The CP2 is instead not a politician first and foremost but, rather, an entertainer who hopes to reach into the world of politics and cast some influence. Examples are numerous today: Think George Clooney, Bono, the Russian girl band Pussy Riot, and a number of other emissaries from the world of pop culture who become high-profile political activists.

In describing both the CP1 and the CP2, Street aims to blur the accepted categories of “politician” and “entertainer”—and defend the democratic capacities of pop culture—by showing how the roots of politics are found as much in aesthetics and performance as in policy rationality. Successful politicians succeed in part—perhaps in large part, he argues—because of their ability to *aesthetically* appeal to publics. Paraphrasing Corner (2000), Street (2004) argues that “through a mediated public performance, politicians try to demonstrate certain political qualities and connect them to political values” (p. 446); “adoption of the trappings of popular celebrity is not a trivial gesture towards fashion or a minor detail of political communication, but instead lies at the heart of the notion of political representation” (p. 447). Representative politics, in Street’s view, is as much about affective as instrumental relationships between publics and their leaders. In contrast to the conventional view that politics should not be tainted by entertainment values, Street ultimately argues that “all politicians are celebrity politicians” (p. 447) because politics inherently involves the art of representation.

Street’s argument adds to the I&A model by expanding the category of “political actors” who may use the media arena to achieve political goals. Beyond that observation, we argue that the demands and opportunities for entertainment-infused political performance in today’s hybrid media system are enhanced and, arguably, qualitatively different.

Which bring us back to the case of Donald Trump. Is he a CP1, a CP2, or something else?

Entertainment, Politics, and the Rise of Trump

Many factors undoubtedly contributed to Donald Trump's rise and unexpected victory in the 2016 US presidential election, including a sluggish economy, a growing populist sentiment, and Trump's skillful evocation of racist and xenophobic tendencies. But it is also crucial to theorize the role that entertainment played in his campaign.

At first blush, we might put Trump squarely in the category of a CP1. He is, after all, President of the United States, and thus a legitimate politician. But when we dig more into Street's distinction between the CP1 and the CP2, categorizing Trump becomes more difficult. Despite Street's observation, noted above, that politics and entertainment are deeply intertwined, his typology of "CP1s" and "CP2s" is still premised on a fundamental boundary—a divide, however thin—between politics and the entertainment world. We believe this boundary is now so porous as to effectively no longer exist.

So much about Trump's candidacy and presidency thus far has been premised on what Street called the "gestures associated with celebrity politics" (2004: p. 444) that one wonders where the entertainment leaves off and the politics begins. Street distinguishes between CP1 and CP2 primarily based on whether the actor holds or seeks formal political office. If they don't, and if their professional roots lie in the entertainment realm, they are necessarily a "CP2". Thus, according to Street's typology, Trump is merely a CP1, since he clearly desires and has achieved political office, now holding levers of real political power. However, in implying a clear distinction between the "serious" politics of a CP1 and the entertainment identity of a CP2, Street's model rests on a quaint notion that there is a clear cut-off between "real" politics and entertainment. As Trump's candidacy demonstrated, Street's categorization system does not account for the very real interplay between politics and entertainment that has always existed but, arguably, is on sharper display than ever before in today's political system. Donald Trump's candidacy seems to have transgressed the boundaries between those two realms: Politics as performance art.

In order to understand Trump's political rise, in other words, we must think of him as fundamentally an entertainer (the intuition behind the CP2 category from Street's model) who has used his entertainment status to his advantage in his (CP1) aims to enter the "real" world of politics *but has continued to operate by the rules of entertainment* more than those of politics. Street's typology suggests that CP1s will at some point gain the aura of "legitimate" politicians, as did entertainers-turned-politicians like Reagan and Schwarzenegger, who rebranded themselves as more or less conventional politicians. In contrast, Trump (thus far, at least) continues to behave in many ways as an entertainer, from his early morning Twitter rants to his *Bachelor*-like reveal of his Supreme Court nominee (Silman 2017). Thus, what remains to be explored is the gray area between the categories of entertainment and politics. In an entertainment-saturated media environment, what counts as "legitimate" politics today?

Trump's transgressive performance of politics suggests giving serious consideration to the way in which he traversed the porous boundary from entertainment to politics and how his entertainment roots may have eased his reception into the political realm by citizens and journalists, laying the ground for his ultimate electoral victory. We can theorize at least two

potential ways of thinking about how Trump’s dyed-in-the-wool status as an entertainer may have furthered his successful efforts to become a “legitimate” politician—yet have allowed him (for the time being, at least) to still operate according to the norms and expectations of politics as much or more than the rules of conventional politics.

First, we explore the idea that Trump’s established brand-name status served as a springboard for his 2016 campaign, allowing him to start well ahead of (most of) his Republican opponents in the twin goals of gaining media attention and gaining votes in the primary race. Second, we explore the idea that Trump’s entertainment status served as a kind of Trojan Horse, allowing his political candidacy to slip into media attention and voters’ considerations in a way that a traditional politician with equally inflammatory rhetoric would not have been able to. These two ideas are neither mutually exclusive, nor are they an exhaustive set of options for understanding Trump’s journey from entertainer to politician. But considering both ideas may help us better understand not only the success of Trump’s candidacy but also the evolving relationship between entertainment and politics.

The Benefits of Brand Status

The first of these two ideas is deeply intuitive: One reason that Donald Trump’s entry into the race for the 2016 U.S. Republican primary was met with such media hype and public attention was because he was already an entertainment household name (think: 14 seasons of *The Apprentice*, a very popular reality TV show). Even though Trump was one of the last Republican primary candidates to announce his candidacy, a Gallup survey of registered Republicans in July 2015, found that 92% recognized the name Donald Trump. Compare that number to the percentage of Republicans who recognized the name Jeb Bush (son and brother to two former U.S. Presidents, at 81%), not to mention Ted Cruz (at 66%), and Marco Rubio (at 64%) (Dugan 2015).

The fact that Trump already had brand status when he announced his candidacy on June 16, 2015 surely explains some if not most of the media and public attention he received. Indeed, the *New York Times* (Confessore and Yourish 2016) calculated that, as of March 15, 2016, Trump had received nearly \$2 billion in “free media” (i.e., news coverage beyond the \$10 million he had spent on advertising)—five times that of the Republican candidate with the next-highest amount of news coverage, Ted Cruz, with \$313 million in free media (Cruz had spent \$20 million on advertising).

We wanted to see for ourselves how much news coverage Trump received relative to the other 2016 Republican primary candidates. We compared snapshots of U.S. newspaper coverage at three different stages in the primary campaign: From July 15 to August 15, 2015 (the second full month after Trump announced his candidacy); from January 15 to February 15, 2016 (spanning news coverage of four Republican primary debates, three of which Trump attended); and from April 15 to May 15, 2016 (covering approximately two weeks before and after Trump became the presumptive Republican nominee on May 3).² Like Confessore and Yourish (2016), we found that Trump certainly did receive the lion’s share of U.S. news coverage in all three time windows (Figure 1).

² Using these three time ranges, we searched all U.S. newspapers archived in LexisNexis for articles that included the full name of each candidate in quotation marks and either the word “president” or “campaign.” For example, for Trump we used the following keyword search string: “Donald Trump” AND (president OR campaign).

<FIGURE 3.1 ABOUT HERE>

What Figure 1 (and the *New York Times* analysis) does not account for is the fact that not all this media coverage was positive, as Patterson (2016) has shown. To examine the amount of positive versus negative coverage for ourselves, we took a random sample of 10% of the articles shown in Figure 1 and coded them according to the tone of the coverage for each candidate: positive (e.g., explicitly supportive editorials, objective news about high points in the candidate's campaign), negative (e.g., explicitly critical editorials, objective news about struggles in the candidate's campaign), or neutral. As Figure 2 shows, the media hype surrounding Trump was not all good news for his campaign; he received more negative news coverage (calculated as the percentage of negative articles out of all articles sampled) than any other Republican candidate in all three time windows. Figure 2 suggests that Trump's rise did not depend on positive coverage, though it was almost certainly aided by the sheer volume of coverage he received.

<FIGURE 3.2 ABOUT HERE>

Indeed, the nature of the news coverage about Trump was not always in line with what we would expect of a traditional politician (or even a CP1). In Figure 3, we present data from keyword searches that track the relative frequency of news articles that contain the term "Donald Trump" as well as terms signaling entertainment, fascism, sexism, racism, and Trump's non-presidential-ness, monthly from May 2015 to April 2016. These data suggest that even as Trump's coverage was growing less negative overall, references to highly problematic features of his rhetoric increased, though fitfully.

<FIGURE 3.3 ABOUT HERE>

These data suggest that, just because Trump's brand name may well account for how much coverage he received, it does not necessarily mean he was considered a "serious" politician, at least at the beginning. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many journalists did not consider him as such. For example: "David Remnick, editor of *The New Yorker*, told his readers last summer that Donald Trump was running for president to promote his own brand and that the 'whole con might end well before the first snows in Sioux City and Manchester'" (quoted in Gold 2016). That verdict was, it seems, practically unanimous: "The chance of his winning [the] nomination and election is exactly zero" (James Fallows of *The Atlantic*); "Trump is absolutely a joke" (Bob Garfield, host of NPR's "On the Media"); "Donald Trump is not going to be the Republican presidential nominee in 2016" (the Washington Post's Chris Cillizza) (all quoted in McPhate 2016). Or consider the July 2015 decision by *The Huffington Post* to put all its coverage of the Trump campaign in its Entertainment section (Grim 2015). "If you are interested in what The Donald has to say," the Post wrote, "you'll find it next to our stories on the Kardashians and The Bachelorette." (By December 2015, the tone and tenor of the coverage had changed. In a piece titled "We are no longer entertained," Ariana Huffington described Trump's campaign as "an ugly and dangerous force in American politics" and vowed her outlet would put Trump back in the "politics" category [Huffington 2015]).

This brings us to the second idea we want to examine about the blurred distinction between entertainment and politics in Trump's case, namely the idea that Trump's entertainment status gave him a grace period in which news outlets and voters did not evaluate his political

candidacy with the same level of serious scrutiny that a traditional politician would have received.

The Stickiness of Categories

Beyond the fact that Trump's brand status might have fueled the level of news coverage he received and the readiness with which citizens recognized his name, a second idea is that Trump brought the entertainment arena with him into the political arena in ways that confound distinctions between the two and thus confounded the judgments applied to him. Specifically, Trump's genesis in the entertainment arena may have allowed his political candidacy to sneak up on journalists and voters. Coming from the world of entertainment may have given Trump a real advantage, allowing him (at least initially) to be treated more like a celebrity than like a politician, and thus subject to less—or at least a different sort of—scrutiny.

Put simply, crucial to understanding Trump's political success is understanding the *kind* of political actor he appears to be. Because Trump came to the political scene from the world of TV entertainment, many people (initially, at least) may not have seen Trump fundamentally as a politician but, rather, as an entertainer. We might even wonder if, because they conceptualized him as an entertainer, both citizens and media may have given him a greater license for incendiary comments and unconventional behavior.

A long literature in social psychology points to the “stickiness” of human thought, telling us that once we conceptualize an object in a certain way, it can be quite difficult to *re-*conceptualize it in a different way (e.g., Dunker 1945). For example, once we conceptualize a cubic shape on the wall as a shelf, it is difficult for us to re-conceptualize the cubic shape as a box in which to store things, and vice versa. This notion of “functional fixedness” can, we argue, apply to political candidates as well as objects. Once conceptualized as an outlandish reality TV host, it was difficult to re-conceptualize Donald Trump as a politician—let alone, as a serious politician who might become America's next president. Thus, when he said outlandish things in the political space during the 2016 Republican primary (and perhaps even extending through the general election, and perhaps even today), journalists, pundits and voters may have been cognitively less jarred, because we are already quite used to entertainers saying outlandish things. Citizens who disagreed with the content of Trump's messages may have been just as outraged by Trump's rhetoric as they would have been if Trump were a traditional politician. However, citizens who agreed with the content of his message may have been able to align with Trump more readily than they would have been with a traditional politician, because if it had been a traditional politician making the same statements, supportive citizens would first have had to get over the confusion of a politician acting so un-politician-like.

This point is crucial, because Trump's successful entry into politics can in part—perhaps in large part—be attributed to how he communicates in ways that traditional politicians generally have not done. Most notably, perhaps, was Trump's heavy reliance on controversial statements throughout his campaign; an approach he seems to have carried into the White House. Undoubtedly one of the main reasons news coverage of Trump overshadowed that devoted to other candidates in the 2016 primary was that Trump repeatedly said things that were salacious and sometimes outright sexist, racist and xenophobic, allowing him, as one leading political strategist put it, to own the news cycle day in and day out (Greene 2016). Of course, Trump is hardly the first politician to rely on controversy. As Van Aelst and Walgrave say, one of political elites' tried and true “access strategies...is making a

controversial statement” (p. xx). But Trump perfected the strategy by saying things so jaw-dropping that media of all kinds could not resist covering him. Indeed, the president and CEO of CBS, Les Moonves, “told a recent investor conference that the Trump-dominated campaign ‘may not be good for America,’ but ‘it is damn good for CBS....The money’s rolling in and this is fun.... Bring it on, Donald. Keep going.’” (quoted in Crovitz 2016).

These blurred boundaries between entertainment and politics, and the antics of unconventional political actors who hail from outside of traditional politics, are certainly not U.S.-only phenomena. Italy’s Silvio Berlusconi is but one other example of a political actor whose entertainment roots seemed to endow him with heightened media attention and a more lenient public. Lest we think Donald Trump is unique in his ability to rile up a nation’s media with inflammatory comments, we need only remember Berlusconi’s declaration that “I am the Jesus Christ of politics. I sacrifice myself for everyone” (Jebreal 2015). No, Trump is not unique. And given the increasing porousness between entertainment and politics around the world, it is likely that we will see an increasing array of political actors like Trump and Berlusconi in the future.

Conclusion

We have argued that today’s blurred boundaries between “entertainment” and “news” have opened a variety of pathways for those from the entertainment field to enter and shape the political field, and for political actors of all stripes to use (and be used by) entertainment media. In order to understand how political actors use the media, as the Information and Arena Model attempts, we simply must account for entertainment—that is, for forms and formats not usually understood as “news.” Moreover, we must account for the rise of unconventional political actors who may transgress boundaries between entertainment and politics. Finally, we have argued that the common currency across media platforms today are often the postures, performances, and self-presentations of entertainment and celebrity.

References

- Altheide, D. L., & Snow, R. P. (1979). *Media logic*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Altheide, D. L. (2004). Media logic and political communication. *Political Communication*, 21(3), 293–296.
- Baum, M. A. (2002). Sex, lies, and war: How soft news brings foreign policy to the inattentive public. *American Political Science Review*, 96(1), 91-109.
- Baum, M. A. (2005). Talking the vote: why presidential candidates hit the talk show circuit. *American Journal of Political Science*, 49(2), 213-34.
- Baumgartner, J., & Morris, J. S. (2006). The Daily Show effect: candidate evaluations, efficacy, and the American youth. *American Politics Research*, 34(3), 341–267.
- Becker, A. B. (2011). Political humor as democratic relief? The effects of exposure to comedy and straight news on trust and efficacy. *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 19(5), 235-250.
- Bennett, W. L. (1990). Toward a theory of press-state relations. *Journal of Communication*, 40(2), 103–125.
- Bennett, W. L. (2005). News as reality TV: Election coverage and the democratization of truth. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 22(2), 171-177.
- Benson, R. (2010). Futures of the news: International considerations and further reflections. In N. Fenton (Ed.), *New media, old news: journalism and democracy in the digital age*. London: Sage Publications. 187-200.
- Boorstin, D. (1962). *The image: a guide to pseudo-events in America*. New York: Atheneum.
- Campus, D. (2010). Mediatization and personalization of politics in Italy and France: the cases of Berlusconi and Sarkozy. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 15(2), 219-235.
- Confessore, N., & Yourish, K. (2016, March 15). \$2 billion worth of free media for Donald Trump. *New York Times*. <http://nyti.ms/1R07jzR>
- Chadwick, A. 2013. *The hybrid media system: politics and power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crovitz, L. G. (2016, March 13). Donald Trump, celebrity politician. *Wall Street Journal*. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/donald-trump-celebrity-politician-1457907805>
- Dugan, A. (2015, July 24). Among Republicans, GOP candidates better known than liked. *Gallup*. http://www.gallup.com/poll/184337/among-republicans-gop-candidates-better-known-liked.aspx?utm_source=genericbutton&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=sharing
- Duncker, K. (1945). On problem-solving. *Psychological Monographs*, 58(5), i-113.

Elenbaas, M., & De Vreese, C. H. (2008). The effects of strategic news on political cynicism and vote choice among young voters. *Journal of Communication*, 58(3), 550-567.

Gabler, N. (2011). *Life the movie: how entertainment conquered reality*. New York: Vintage.

Garden, M. (2010). Are predictions of newspapers' impending demise exaggerated? *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 20(1), 37-51.

Gold, H. (2016, March 1). The media's Trump reckoning: everyone was wrong. *Politico*. <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/03/donald-trump-media-response-220033#ixzz41jhzX5bj>

Greene, D. (Narrator). (2016, May 24). Former rival contemplates Trump's recipe for success. [Radio broadcast episode.] *Morning Edition*. Washington, DC: National Public Radio. <http://www.npr.org/2016/05/24/479274185/former-rival-contemplates-trumps-recipe-for-success>

Grim, R. (2015, July 17). A note about our coverage of Donald Trump's 'campaign.' *Huffington Post*. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/a-note-about-our-coverage-of-donald-trumps-campaign_us_55a8fc9ce4b0896514d0fd66

Gunther, R., & Mughan, A. (2000). *Democracy and the media: a comparative perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hollander, B. A. (2005). Late-night learning: do entertainment programs increase political campaign knowledge for young viewers? *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 49(4), 402-415.

Holtz-Bacha, C., Langer, A. I., & Merkle, S. (2014). The personalization of politics in comparative perspective: campaign coverage in Germany and the United Kingdom. *European Journal of Communication*, 29(2), 153-170.

Huffington, A. (2015, December 7). A note on Trump: we are no longer entertained. *Huffington Post*. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/arianna-huffington/a-note-on-trump_b_8744476.html

Jebreal, R. (2015, September 21). Donald Trump is America's Silvio Berlusconi. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/09/21/donald-trump-is-americas-silvio-berlusconi/>

Jones, J. P. (2010). *Entertaining politics: satiric television and political engagement*. Rowman & Lanham: Littlefield.

Marshall, P. D. (1997). *Celebrity power: fame in contemporary culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

McGregor, S., Lawrence, R. G., & Cardona, A. (2016). Personalization, gender and social media: gubernatorial candidates' social media strategies. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(1), 264-283.

- McPhate, M. (2016, May 5). Trump naysayers: how wrong they were. *New York Times*. <http://mobile.nytimes.com/2016/05/06/us/politics/trump-naysayers-how-wrong-they-were.html>
- Media Intelligence Service. (2016). Trust in Media 2016. *European Broadcasting Union*. <https://www.ebu.ch/files/live/sites/ebu/files/Publications/EBU-MIS%20-%20Trust%20in%20Media%202016.pdf>
- Patterson, T. E. (2016, June 13). Pre-primary news coverage of the 2016 presidential race: Trump's rise, Sanders' emergence, Clinton's struggle. *Shorenstein Center*. <http://shorensteincenter.org/preprimary-news-coverage-2016-trump-clinton-sanders/>
- Pautz, M. C. (2015). Argo and Zero Dark Thirty: film, government, and audiences. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 48(1), 120-128.
- Postman, N. (1985). *Amusing ourselves to death: public discourse in the age of show business*. New York: Viking Penguin.
- Prior, M. (2003). Any good news in soft news? the impact of soft news preference on political knowledge. *Political Communication*, 20(2), 149–171.
- Prior, M. (2005). News vs. entertainment: how increasing media choice widens gaps in political knowledge and turnout. *American Journal of Political Science*, 49(3), 577-592.
- Samuel, H. (2010, January 26). Nicolas Sarkozy woos French public with TV show. *The Telegraph*. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/7076020/Nicolas-Sarkozy-woos-French-with-live-TV-show.html>
- Silman, Anna. (2017, January 31). Trump is basically holding a final rose ceremony for his Supreme Court picks. *New York Magazine*. <http://nymag.com/thecut/2017/01/trump-is-holding-a-rose-ceremony-for-his-supreme-court-picks.html>
- Street, J. 2004. Celebrity politicians: popular culture and political representation. *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 6(4), 435–452.
- Stroud, N. J. (2011). *Niche news: the politics of news choice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Swift, A. (2016). Americans' trust in mass media sinks to new low. *Gallup*. September 14. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/195542/americans-trust-mass-media-sinks-new-low.aspx>
- Tennenboim-Weinblatt, K. (2013). The path to political substance: exploring the mediated discourse surrounding controversial media texts. *Political Communication*, 30(4), 582–601.
- Van Aelst, P., Sheafer, T., & Stanyer, J. (2012). The personalization of mediated political communication: a review of concepts, operationalizations and key findings. *Journalism*, 13(2), 203-220.

van Zoonen, L. (2005). *Entertaining the citizen: when politics and popular culture converge*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

West, D. & Orman, J.. (2003). *Celebrity politics*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall.

Wheeler, M. (2013). *Celebrity politics*. Cambridge: Polity.

Williams, B. A., & Delli Carpini, B. X. (2011). *After broadcast news. media regimes, democracy, and the new information environment*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Young, D. G. (2004). Late-night comedy in election 2000: its influence on candidate trait ratings and the moderating effects of political knowledge and partisanship. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 48(1), 1-22.

Zaller, J. (1999). Market competition and news quality. *Annual Meetings of the American Political Science Association*, Atlanta, GA.

Figure 3.1. Levels of U.S. News Coverage of the 2016 Republican Primary Candidates

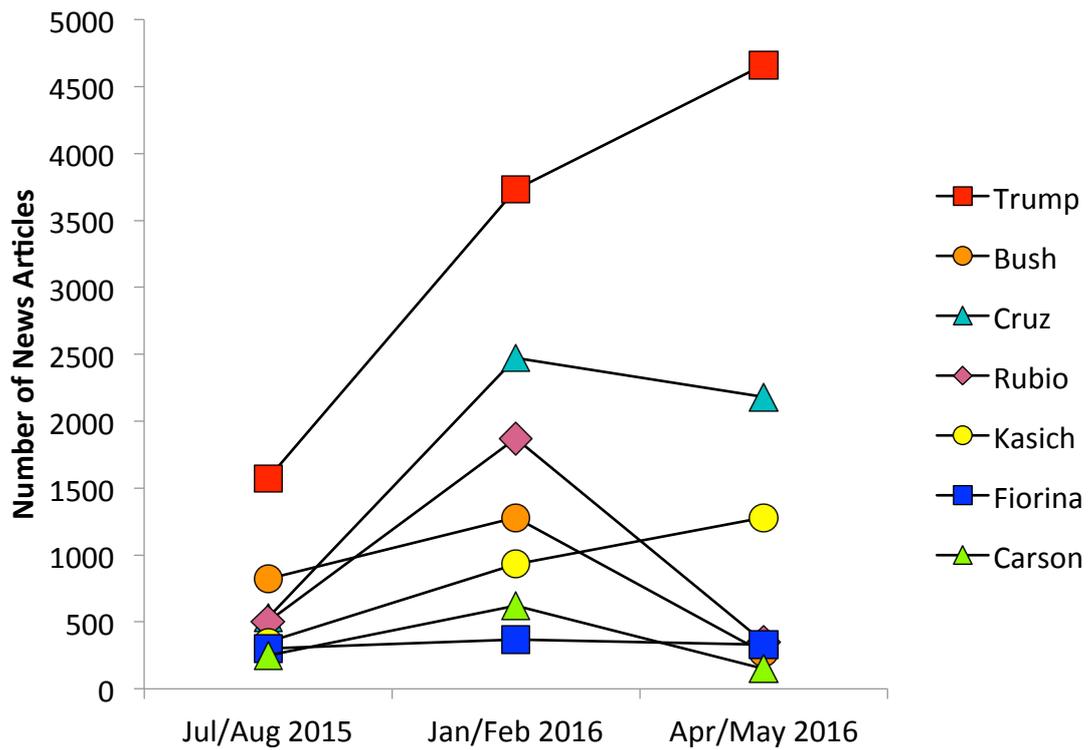


Figure 3.2. Negative News Coverage of the 2016 Republican Primary Candidates

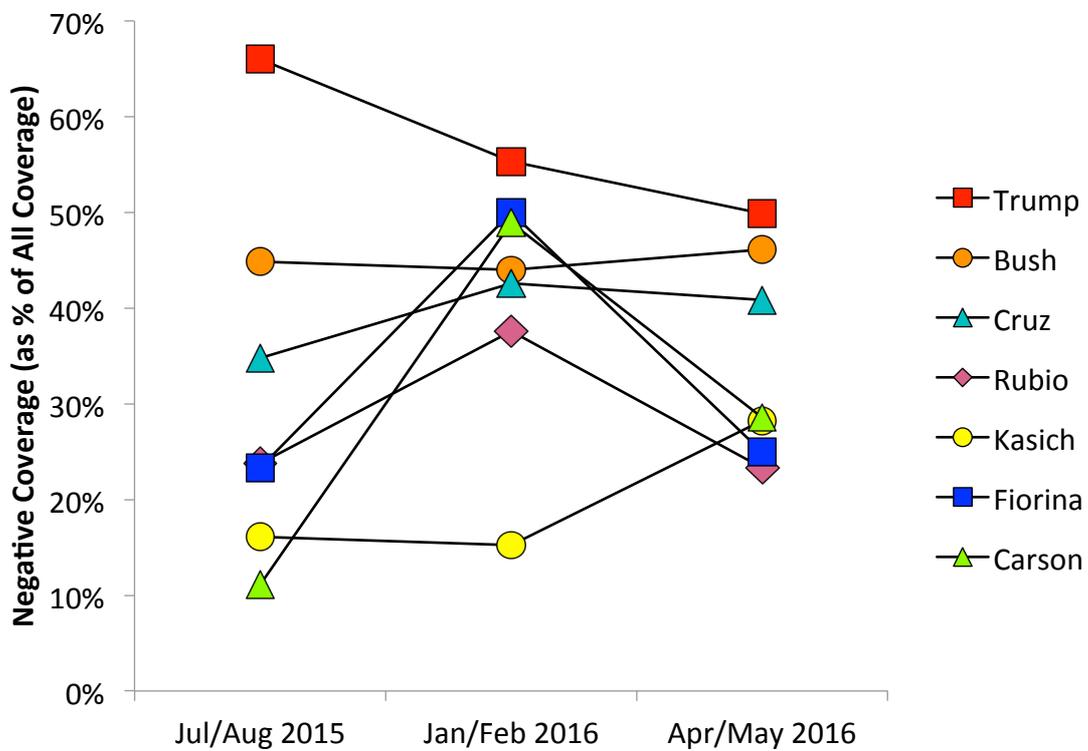


Figure 3.3. Diverse Portrayals of Trump as a Presidential Candidate (May 2015-June 2016)

