

Beyond Pseudoevents Election News as Reality TV

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This analysis examines the rise of reality TV formats in news reporting. These formats put journalists in active roles in the dramatic framing of events, thus, moving news logic beyond the passive documentation of pseudoevents. Pseudoevents are made-for-media fabrications designed entirely by newsmakers to be reported as reality with little news value added by journalists. By contrast, journalistically driven reality TV formats are either coproduced actively with newsmakers or spun entirely by journalists. Coproduced reality news generally involves journalistic decisions to underplay or not report known facts or contradictory evidence that conflicts with the dramatic impact of staged events. Reality news that is initiated by journalists typically involves rumors or challenges thrown at political contestants to see who can survive the hostile media game, and who, in the case of elections, will be voted off the program.

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Election coverage makes it increasingly clear that reality TV is one of the infotainment formats that journalism has adapted from the entertainment media. News reality framing often involves journalists actively constructing news drama, while downplaying known evidence that might complicate the impact and simplicity of a news reality frame. In the case of election coverage, reality journalism goes beyond the passive reporting of routine (campaign stop) pseudoevents to include more active coproductions and unilateral productions of news frames on the part of the press. For example, to play up the candidate challenge of the so-called Swift Boat Veterans who disputed Kerry's war record, news organizations had to become coparticipants by making strategic choices to downplay the dubious factual content of the ads, thus, enabling the ads to become overburdening challenges to Kerry. A different set of journalistic decisions might have turned the ads into a very different news story framed on dirty campaigning, or dubious strategic connections to the Bush campaign, or both.

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In other cases, journalists construct candidate challenges almost entirely on their own. These challenges come in the form of journalistically driven rumor, spin, and speculation-based stories that are tossed at politicians for reaction. After these constructed issues and challenges have been framed as news stories, TV audiences typically receive heavy input—resembling a sort of audience spin—from journalist-pundits who serve as color commentators on the political sport in which they increasingly participate.

Active journalistic construction of free-floating news realities has been attributed to the gaping news hole created by the evolution of a 24/7 news cycle, with proliferating cable channels and Internet sites that need to keep buzzing (Kovach & Rosensteil, 1999). The transformation of the business and production models operating in news organizations may well be a root cause, but a contributing intermediate factor involves a palpable shift in journalistic standards. An emerging reality news standard (RNS) favors the construction of dramatic political scenarios that minimize underlying facts and evidence that might support entirely different—but more complex and audience-challenging—news frames. Such a standard has long been in play in TV news magazines but now appears to be spreading to the daily news, as evidenced in the reporting of Bush administration fabrications leading up to the Iraq War. By their own admission, the nation's top news organizations favored dubious Bush administration claims about weapons of mass destruction and 9/11 connections and actively downplayed considerable evidence to the contrary. The weapons of mass destruction and 9/11 frames for the Iraq War were dubious at the time they were issued, and their persistence during the election campaign in statements by the vice president went largely unchallenged by the press. This example of how the RNS operates to make it easier for the press to dramatize than to challenge shaky evidence is elaborated later in the analysis.

The remainder of this article addresses the questions, Just what kind of reality is a news reality frame? How do these news realities come about? and What do they imply for journalism, politics, and ultimately, the public insofar as facts (those things that journalism is supposed to sort out, or at least stir up) may matter in democratic discourse?

The Candidate Challenge as Preeminent Election News Reality Frame

The most familiar news reality frame in elections is the candidate challenge. The challenge often begins with journalists' raising unsourced "concerns" about a candidate or campaign. The ensuing pundit-journalist buzz then leads journalists to become the sources of reported rumors as real and important campaign developments. For example, at the start of the Democratic National Convention, ABC's Mr. Insider, Mark Halperin (political director of news), posted a vague reference to a shakeup in the Kerry campaign in his Web tip sheet, *The Note*. The rumor-based story soon dominated press coverage of Kerry's convention week, to the point that the challenge for

the Kerry team became putting out the news story so they could try to get their convention messages moved to center stage in the news (Grann, 2004).

The 2004 contest was surely not the first in which journalists selectively pushed dubious plot elements into a news reality frame to create more dramatic news than the original situation would have. For example, in 2000, Gore's legitimate claims to advancing communication technology policies were lost as opponent spin and journalistic narrative turned an off-the-cuff remark about the Internet (and several other isolated statements) into a national running joke that Gore was a serial exaggerator (Kennedy School of Government, 2002).

An example of the candidate challenge reality frame in 2004 occurred when Kerry made a campaign stop at Marshall University in West Virginia on March 16. The state had been blitzed with Bush campaign ads sent electronically to local TV stations just ahead of Kerry's arrival. The ads accused Kerry of flip-flopping in his votes, first for the Iraq War and then against the US\$87 billion to fund it. A questioner in the audience asked Kerry about those votes, and the candidate launched his scripted response about the president's poor planning for the war. Then he went off script and made a meandering statement on the vote against the funding, beginning with the now infamous line, "Secondly, this is very important, I actually did vote for the \$87 billion—before I voted against it" (Wilgoren, 2004). That sound bite was inserted into the Bush campaign flip-flopper ads and run nationally within 2 days—often in the same newscasts containing stories about Kerry's remark. The news often featured the Bush ads rather than dull elaborations of Kerry's reasoning following the remark.

As far as I know, the national press did not apply the flip-flop frame to the succession of different Bush administration rationales for the war. Perhaps the reason lies with the failure of the Kerry communication team to command the same skills as the Bush team deployed in inducing press complicity in news reality construction. In any event, the candidate challenge reality frame was so much the clearer when it contained only the glaring Kerry gaffe and the echoing Bush flip-flop charge. The result is that the press and the Bush campaign coproduced (with no conspiracy involved) a challenge to Kerry that would recur throughout the campaign. Think of it as a challenge not unlike those offered to contestants on reality programs such as *Survivor*, *Fear Factor*, or *The Apprentice*, with the audience tuning in weekly to see how the challenge is being met.

If the Kerry campaign somehow ended up with less help from the press, the blame is not so much with the press but with the failure of the candidate and his media consultants to understand the coded, coproduced reality of the news. One can go back to the Clinton campaign of 1992 and see examples of effective press feeding techniques that helped Democrats win an election—only to be followed by Clinton's willful abandonment of such communication games in office, resulting in his long war with the media (Bennett, 2005b, pp. 139-140).

Like most programs in reality TV, reality news invites audiences to form vicarious personal relationships with dramatic actors in simulated challenge contests, displaying prowess or ineptitude in handling dramatic staged appearances or candidate challenges. For example, Kerry's positions on the war may have been no less flip-floppy

than Bush's, but the sustained examination of Bush positions was not the focus of that particular news reality episode. Bush issued Kerry the survival challenge of proving he was not a flip-flopper, the press turned the challenges into a running story, and the audience appears to have judged that Kerry failed the challenge and voted him (narrowly) off the program.

Media Logic: When Good News Becomes Bad Reality TV

The evolution of news formats that blur the connection with the underlying realities they represent was termed "media logic" by Altheide and Snow (1991; Altheide, 2002, 2004), who traced the diffusion of entertainment formats in news and political communication. Media logics involve larger cultural process, with active input from audience tastes, taste-making communication producers, journalists, and other information mediators.

The triumphal news form of our time is, of course, infotainment, the broad genre within which news reality frames fit. Infotainment includes many news trends: health scares, crime scares, celebrity profiles, news magazine hidden camera exposes, and more. The line between hard news and infotainment continues to blur. We have become accustomed to hearing sound tracks and seeing action movie editing in TV war news. As for the audience, a large plurality of viewers regard cops programs as news shows (Altheide, 2004; Bennett, 2005a).

The argument here is not that infotainment is inherently a bad thing. There is no reason why news cannot be both entertaining and usefully informative (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001). Indeed, if people beyond political junkies are going to watch it happily, it should be both. The problem comes if news logic is drifting toward reality formats that increasingly float freely from underlying social or political contexts.

Perhaps the postmodern turn in thinking about political and social reality would have us think differently about this. Perhaps there is no problem. After all, *Survivor* probably has little effect on how people might cope with real survival situations, and *Fear Factor* is unlikely to send audiences off to eat worms. I think that the difference between the news reality of the candidate challenge and the challenges in *Survivor* is that media representations (from TV news to e-mail ads) of elections are the elections, insofar as campaigns matter. Campaign media images shaped by the interaction of ads and news can sway votes at the margins, shifting standing partisan identifications and interest calculations based on more personalized individual identifications with candidates and their positions (Johnston, Hagen, & Jamieson, 2004). Moreover, reality news may actively suppress voter considerations about other elements of the reality outside the campaign.

These concerns notwithstanding, the turn toward reality news undoubtedly has an important basis in the emotional life of publics these days. For better or worse, people seem to form meaningful emotional relationships with characters embedded in fantasy settings. Many voters might actually prefer a campaign experience that included

facing a candidate with a Trumpish scowl and a proclaiming “You’re fired.” Although this scenario may have popular appeal, it may not serve democracy well.

The Democratic Dilemma of the RNS

As spontaneous candidate moments create grist for de-contextualized news reality frames, the campaign communication game becomes ever more control oriented and managed. The ironic result is that journalistic attention to the qualities of candidates and their ideas has become less central in campaign news as journalists cynically observe that there is little news emanating from the endlessly repeated, mind-deadening stops along the campaign trail. Under the RNS, what becomes news are the journalist insider assessments of the campaign strategic communication games and the virtuosity of candidate news management (Patterson, 1993). The shift in journalistic standard toward the RNS and its reality TV formats means that the issue and policy substance of a campaign is less subject to journalistic commentary than the reactions of candidates to contrived challenges. This trend has evolved to the point that it is not clear that journalists can create big news about the substance of candidate statements even when they are distortions or outright lies.

Consider the implicit recognition that news drama trumps fact in the following (unedited) exchange between MSNBC *Hardball* host Chris Matthews and veteran TV journalist Bob Schieffer, host of CBS’s *Face the Nation* and moderator for the upcoming final presidential debate. In a program aired 2 days before the debate, Matthews asked Schieffer how a journalist should handle a situation in which a candidate outright lied, as the vice president seemed to have done on a couple of issues in the recent vice presidential debate:

MATTHEWS: What do you think is more important? The drama of the hour and a half we watched together as a country. . . . Or the analysis later, I don’t mean about the show business, kind of John Simon theater review stuff, I’m talking about who was right on the facts. Do the facts document the facts ever catch up to what these guys say in these major prime-time performances?

SCHIEFFER: Probably they don’t. Substance is important. Content is important. But you know, Chris, as well as I do, the vote for president is much different than any other vote that we cast. . . . We vote for a president, it a gut vote. It’s a vote from the heart. It’s who we feel most comfortable with in the time of a crisis. And so I think that’s why manner, if a person appears in control, if he appears cool, collected, I think that’s a big thing for people in deciding who they’re going to vote for for president.

MATTHEWS: I know you can’t take side but let me ask you about a critical example, where those two, maybe the facts and the performance separated. Everyone agrees, I think, most people I know agreed the vice president extremely well against John Edwards. He was, I thought, overwhelming. But on a couple of issues like “I never met the guy before.” “I never suggested a connection between Iraq and 9/11.” Are manifestly not the case. Does that matter to the people?

SCHIEFFER: Well, you know . . .

MATTHEWS: I think I'm asking to you stipulate . . .

SCHIEFFER: I'll tell what you it's kind of interesting. The point that he sat besides Senator Edwards for an hour and a half at a prayer breakfast. I think that just goes to show he was obviously deep in prayer, Chris. . . . (UNINTELLIGIBLE)

MATTHEWS: He was praying he wasn't sitting next to Edwards that day. He wasn't a burning bush or anything. He didn't remember the guy. Are you worried about this? (Haddad, 2004, paras. 14-20)

Matthews (Haddad, 2004) raised the important question of whether journalists can handle outright deceptions that are not just slips or gaffes. It is clear that journalists have long considered candidate gaffes to be material for a character ritual with voters. An iconic example was Ford's gaffe in the 1976 debate when he claimed that there was no Soviet domination in Eastern Europe; Ford's fatal mistake was not correcting his error and moving on (Bennett, 1981). Yet what distinguished many of Cheney's performances in the 2004 election was the twist that he offered up *scripted* claims that contradict evidence to the contrary (sometimes followed by subsequent denials, as in the debate). The press seemed to have trouble handling those moments on factual grounds yet often gave them high marks as tough, convincing drama—hence, Matthews' question to Schieffer.

Cheney's remarks about never having met Edwards and never having said that Iraq was linked to al Qaeda in the 9/11 attacks were not bloopers. Those claims were on script; they set up important parts of Cheney's dramatic performance in the debate and in the case of the on-again, off-again 9/11 claims, echoed throughout the entire campaign. When facts get in the way of message values, the facts often bend. A long-standing public relations doctrine is to embed fact claims reflexively into staged performances to create the impression that the resulting images are realistic. Such performances validate their own facts, and good performances simultaneously cast doubt on the facts offered by the competition (Bernays, 1928; Ewen, 1996).

What is less easy to explain is the uneven role of news organizations in selectively letting factual distortions go unchallenged. There are, of course, many examples of watchdog journalism in which reporters do challenge the claims of corporations, officials, and institutions. Yet there seems to be little systematic or predictable application of the watchdog norm (Bennett & Serrin, 2005). What seems clear is that when a big story is driven by newsmakers setting the daily agenda, the temptation grows to ignore information that competes with the dominant frame. As noted earlier, a classic case of selecting the facts to fit the big story involves national reporting on the buildup to the Iraq War—reporting that spawned public images that figured prominently in voting choices in the 2004 election.

The subsequent mea culpas of leading news organizations for failing to emphasize evidence that challenged the administration framing of Iraq revealed a tendency to favor news reality frames even (or perhaps especially) for something as important as a war (Kurtz, 2004; "The Times and Iraq," 2004). Media critics and the ombudsmen for both papers added, by way of explanation, that the basis for the dubious war coverage

was not really bad journalism but just the opposite: The effort to make stories “big” front-page scoops by favoring inside sources making dramatic claims that would warrant less prominent coverage if they were qualified by counterclaims (Kurtz, 2004). The question becomes how these reality frames remain so compelling even when news organizations recognize their informational deficiencies (Entman, 2004). The *Washington Post* Pentagon correspondent explained the difficulty that reporters had in getting challenging information into front-page stories. He blamed this on the paper’s editors having joined the insider consensus that the war was inevitable, so why bother with a debate? He described this editorial mind set as, “Look, we’re going to war, why do we even worry about all this contrary stuff?” (Kurtz, 2004, p. A01). In short, privileging the administration war frame was more the result of elites within what Swanson (1992) called “the political-media complex” seeing an inevitable policy outcome (war) that had no credible elite opposition within institutional decision circles and embracing a propaganda story as a sort of “working reality.”

Yet even after the apologies by the *Times* and *Post*, journalists continued to have difficulty handling the facts. During the election, they reported Cheney’s continuing claims about weapons of mass destruction and the al Qaeda connection as though they were one valid side of a two-sided issue. In this sense, even when a news reality frame is challenged, as it was by Edwards in the debate, the factually dubious frame may remain in the news as one version of reality. Thus, many pundits awarded the debate to Cheney for taking it to Edwards on grounds of drama. For example, note Matthews’s above judgment about the debate (Haddad, 2004). Andrea Mitchell delivered a similar instant analysis to MSNBC viewers: “I think Dick Cheney did awfully well at, first of all, putting John Edwards in his place” (Hertzberg, 2004). In these views, the journalistic framing of the performance was unflappable toughness, not reliable truthfulness.

The Symbolic Construction of News Reality Frames

My analysis is not about blame or balance. It is about what kind of news we have and what it means for democracy. What seems important to understand about the 2004 election, and many other news sagas, are those occasions when public performances—whether they contain departures from scripts, deceptions written into scripts, or staged events that seem inconsistent with surrounding realities—result in journalistic constructions that transport focal elements of the event out of context into what might be called a news reality frame. A news reality frame is a de-contextualized account based on a documented element of an event that becomes journalistically repackaged in a different story frame. The resulting news reality frame blurs the connection between the news reality and its original surrounding context.

News reality frames can be distinguished from other news frames in terms of this critical relationship to underlying information. Some news frames are contested specifically in terms of competing information, with frame contests inviting more than one interpretive scheme into news discourse. In the 2004 election, for example, there were highly competitive, information-rich frame differences between the candidates

on the question of whether the economy was improving. In such cases, journalism can and for the most part did facilitate popular understanding by clarifying differences, bringing additional facts and sources into the debate, and generally providing useful reality checks on the competing claims. In other cases, a dominant frame may emerge following a productive information-rich frame contest (e.g., cigarettes cause cancer). A history of information inclusion may help a dominant frame continue to serve as a useful platform for continued journalistic expansion of knowledge about the issue.

Reality frames operate in an information-restricted dimension of symbolic space as constructions that obscure or distort the larger situations to which they refer. The precursor to the news reality frame is the *pseudoevent* (Boorstin, 1961), which is constructed by communication consultants specifically to disconnect an event from an underlying complicating or contradictory reality, requiring only passive reporting from journalists to complete the news reality. Pseudoevents are one class of news reality frames in the sense that journalists play a role—albeit a passive one—by merely screening out backstage preparations or surrounding contextual realities that would puncture the illusion of the political performance. For example, reporting on the ways in which a typical campaign stop in Iowa is staged for the local news would reveal only the obvious and leave many viewers with a “So what?” reaction. After all, the beauty of TV is the sense of being there without really being there. The campaign appearance pseudoevent is the event, and there is simply no meaningful reality outside it.

However, some backstage realities may be important enough to serve as news stories on their own. In failing to report them, journalists cross the line from passive to active participants in the creation of political illusion. For example, news reports of Bush’s top gun, tail hook, flight suited jet landing aboard the aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln on May 1, 2003 (declaring the end to major combat operations in Iraq) was successful as a pseudoevent largely by journalistic proclamation. Reporters and pundits referred to it as a Hollywood moment, as “the greatest photo op of all time” and as an unbeatable, iconic launch to the 2004 election campaign (Bennett, 2005b, pp. 36-38, 47-51). Like many Hollywood productions, the landing required considerable reality-bending staging. For example, a carrier full of military personnel eager to see home after war duty was delayed to have the presidential landing rehearsed and staged. The carrier full of sailors eager to return home to families was held circling off the San Diego horizon to sustain the white lie that a jet landing was necessary because the ship was out of helicopter range. These and other aspects of the performance were known to many in the press at the time, but the tone of the coverage was one of journalistic respect for the well-crafted news event. Journalists even acknowledged the event as a brilliant opening for the upcoming political campaign and a tough challenge for the Democrats to face. Indeed, when the war quickly turned out not to be over, the Democrats failed to shape a clear competing news framing of their own. The Kerry campaign did not successfully challenge this “mission accomplished” moment, and so it lost the reality contest surrounding the most important issue in the election.

The thing that made the top gun story something more than just a run-of-the-mill pseudoevent is that preserving its big-story qualities required active press filtering and screening out larger contextual realities that would have diminished its dramatic

impact. For example, there was little reality check on the mission accomplished claim, and there were few references to Bush's checkered service duty, which might have introduced dissonance into perfect Hollywood news scripts such as this one written by a top reporter for the *Washington Post*:

Bush emerged from the cockpit in a full olive flight suit and combat boots, his helmet tucked jauntily under his left arm. As he exchanged salutes with the sailors, his ejection harness, hugging him tightly between the legs, gave him the bowlegged swagger of a top gun. (Milbank, 2003, p. A24)

Matthews's (Haddad, 2004) earlier question about the priority that journalists give to campaign drama avoids the even more sensitive issue of whether they simply report election drama (e.g., by documenting campaign pseudoevents) or may actively create it by constructing news reality frames. In thinking about this, it seems important to make a distinction between dramatic simplification that is a normal, even welcome, part of the reporting process and active construction of a news reality frame that disconnects a story from conflicting evidence that might warrant a very different story. This distinction between understandable journalistic storytelling and reality frame shifting becomes particularly important if the chosen news reality frame happens to be the one being spun by a partisan actor in the story. For example, news reports on Kerry's statement about voting for and against the war budget fit nicely with the Bush frame of flip-flopper. Is he really a flip-flopper? There is no test beyond the reality frame. The framing makes it so.

All the Facts That Fit (the Reality Frame): News and the Democratization of Truth

The quest for big, dramatic, audience-grabbing stories is only a partial explanation for the difficulties that journalism has in handling facts in many stories. At a deeper level, the apologia from the *Times* and *Post* can be interpreted as showing that journalists have trouble fitting independent facts into a story until prominent official sources are willing to introduce the counterevidence (Bennett, 1990; Hallin, 1986). Entman (2004) called this the cascading of sourcing and framing that leads even the best news organizations to look away from available evidence that might lead to a different version of a big story. For what turned out to be misguided strategic political reasons, many Democrats (Howard Dean being a notable exception) failed to associate themselves with the evidence that the Bush Iraq story was based on suspect claims, a position that severely hampered Kerry's rhetorical choices later in the campaign and probably contributed to losing the flip-flop challenge. However, the genesis of many of the news reality frames that shaped the 2004 election cannot be traced to bad Democratic communication strategy alone. News reality is also vulnerable to strategic deceptions that support dramatic news scenarios that invite the press to actively construct the news frame.

Consider, again, the truth versus drama dilemma facing the press in the vice presidential debate. Even when there was a source of relatively equal status to introduce competing story frames—as Edwards attempted to do in challenging Cheney’s Iraq and 9/11 claims during the debate—what happens when one side is lying and the other is telling the truth? Can journalists do much better than report the two sides (i.e., truth and lie) in balanced fashion? If not, the result is a perverse version of “we report, you decide,” in which the public essentially faces an untutored democratic referendum on the truth. The result of such a news representation process is a sort of reality TV experience in which voters use gut reactions to favor a candidate and then pick the facts that best defend the personal preference, much as they might vote characters on or off *Big Brother* or react to cast performances and peer voting rationales on *Survivor*.

Consider in this light the election dynamics of the original administration story on Iraq and terrorism, as reinforced in the echoing campaign statements by Cheney and others on weapons of mass destruction and the al Qaeda connection. In many ways, the election outcome turned on the war on terrorism, to which Iraq continued to be linked. Indeed, Iraq and terrorism combined for a “most important issue” plurality for 34% of voters in Election Day exit polls, swamping the 22% who cited a moral values catchall category (Menand, 2004). Although a popular media myth persists that Christian fundamentalists tipped the contest, an analysis by Burden (2004) shows that they turned out no larger proportion of the vote in the battleground states than they did in 2000. The best evidence suggests that if there was a decisive voter bloc, it was a large number of women, dubbed “security moms,” who cited terrorism and Iraq in shifting their 2000 votes from the Democratic to the Republican column (Burden, 2004).

Not only did the decisive vote margin seem to hinge on Iraq, terrorism, and security but also voters on both sides chose selectively from available contradictory “facts” to support their votes. An interesting analysis of the fluidity of facts in a “postauthority culture” includes this summary of a well-publicized poll by the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland:

Supporters of President Bush and Senator Kerry live in “separate realities.” Three quarters of Bush supporters, for example, believe Iraq was providing substantial support to Al Qaeda, compared with less than a third of Kerry supporters, despite the findings of the 9/11 Commission that there was no evidence of significant support from Iraq. (Schwartz, 2004, p. 5)

Why did journalism have trouble framing the facts more clearly on these issues? Let us return to a pointed version of Matthews’s (Haddad, 2004) question to Schieffer: What do journalists do when one candidate side simply lies? In the vice presidential debate, Cheney continued his practice of mixing small and large untruths in an assertive style. The claim that he had never met Edwards before the debate was a nice rhetorical setup for a scripted litany of Cheney charges that Edwards was often absent from Senate committee meetings and votes. The blogosphere soon offered up ample evidence that the setup line was not true, including photos of the two sitting next to each other at a prayer breakfast. The larger deception was Cheney’s claim, “I have not

suggested there's a connection between Iraq and 9/11." This was contradicted by numerous Cheney statements and innuendoes outside of the debate context that there was, indeed, such a connection (Hertzberg, 2004).

When Matthews (Haddad, 2004) asked Schieffer what journalists could do when the truth is abandoned by candidates, Schieffer seemed initially thrown by the question, then ignored the larger Iraq deception, and finally, brushed off the smaller one with a joke ("he was obviously in deep prayer"). Matthews helped him out of the awkward situation by embellishing the joke with a burning bush reference and returned to throwing softball questions at his guest. Yet Schieffer's dilemma about handling facts when they are violated—not as gaffes, but as well-crafted parts of scripted performances—reveals a challenging issue for journalism and news. Constructing news reality frames out of context may be easier than constructing stories that might help voters separate truth from falsehood.

Even when journalists are aware of the problem, there may not be an easy solution. For example, early in the campaign, Halperin, the political director at ABC News (who initiated the candidate challenge about disarray in the Kerry campaign discussed earlier) circulated an internal memo expressing concern that covering the campaign purely as spectacle undermined the democratic role of the press in providing information to the people, particularly when the levels of distortion coming from the two campaigns were not equal. In part, the memo noted that "Kerry distorts, takes out of context and mistakes all the time, but these are not central to his effort to win"; this was contrasted to the Bush campaign that Halperin characterized as based on a communication strategy "to win the election by destroying Senator Kerry at least partly through distortions" (Schwartz, 2004, p. 5). Needless to say, the memo leaked—first to the *Drudge Report*—and then spread virally through the conservative echo chamber of blogs, lists, and radio talk programs. Finally, national media outlets such as *Fox News* and the *New York Post* jumped on it as another example of liberal bias in the media. End of discussion. In an interview discussing how journalism has become caught in the revolving door of spin, Halperin was circumspect about the incident, saying only that media reality is stronger than our ideals about how reality should be depicted: "In American political life, what *is* always creeps what ought to be" (Grann, 2004, p. 62).

None of this suggests that the truth has a partisan bias—at least not a liberal-conservative, Republican-Democratic one. (Although, this does not deny the possibility that conservatives have done a far better job of creating the dominant communication logic with which we now live.) Whether they use it well or ineptly, both sides play the reality TV game. As noted earlier, a combination of spin and opposition research by Democratic opponents was transformed by journalists into news reality frames that probably did as much to topple Howard Dean as anything he did to himself (Trippi, 2004).

The larger issue, beyond who is better at communicating with this reality TV logic, is that the news increasingly seems to employ it in representing political realities. My concern is that news reality frames do not focus audience attention outward into the social world to stimulate critical engagement with complex realities of war or economic policy. A familiar example of such reality news saw reporters traveling across

the Iraqi desert embedded in tanks yet unable to provide much more perspective on the war than camera crews riding in cop cars in police reality TV shows reveal the underlying nature of police work.

The parallel between Iraq embeds and *Cops* may be rather more direct than metaphorical. Bertram van Munster, the producer of *Cops*, successfully pitched various reality TV concepts to Pentagon officials and won contracts to produce reality programming from Afghanistan and Iraq. The Afghanistan programs were bought and run as a six-part prime-time ABC series titled *Profiles From the Front Line*. Perhaps it is fitting that this news about reality producer contracting with the Pentagon was reported not as political news but in *Daily Variety* as a Hollywood story (Crabtree, 2003) and in the *Washington Post* TV review section (Gillies, 2003).

The Emotional Life of Publics: Why Reality TV Trumps Political Reality

The evolution of reality news is not explained just by market-driven journalism or by win-at-any-cost communication consulting. It is also a function of large numbers of people being receptive to such representations of politics. To understand the evolution of media formats, we cannot look just at communication consultants, journalists, and politicians; we must consider the popular response to media formats as well (Altheide, 2004; Eliasoph, 2004; Gitlin, 2002, 2004; Richards, 2004).

What constitutes truth for many may be more an emotional truth than something caught up in complex, endlessly debatable facts. As Richards (2004) argued,

Since popular culture is substantially about feeling, and about the expression and management of emotion . . . the incursion into political experience of the values of popular culture means that we now see certain kinds of emotionalized experience from politics that we have not done in the past. (p. 340)

Richards went on to suggest that we assess politicians much the way we do characters on TV dramas, with the result that

the democratic process is now played out on a stage where—alongside traditional sources from ideology, ritual, and the values of older civic cultures—there are scripts, actors, and props which could be seen as “borrowed” from popular culture (though in fact they soon become part of the political fabric itself). (p. 342)

This emotional audience shift makes the reality TV element of news useful for filtering abstract policy debates (including war) through personal emotional readings of political characters: “Policy alternatives come with persons attached to them, and the public are quite legitimately interested in the emotional qualities of these persons. At root here is an old question, that of trust: Can this person be trusted?” (Richards, 2004, p. 343) It is interesting that trust is one of the considerations at the core of many reality programs—from struggling housemates on *Big Brother*; to conspiratorial teammates

on *Survivor*; to the search for a genuine, trustworthy prince charming on *Bachelorette*; to the adopted woman's struggle to decide who her real birth father might be on *Who's Your Daddy?*

It is clear that what reality TV offers is an instant connection with feelings about people who are either like us or appallingly not like us—connections that are somehow therapeutic and useful for sorting ourselves out in highly personalized yet isolating social worlds (Giddens, 1991). Contemporary media logics such as reality TV put emotional arousal and judgment at the center of the audience effects equation. It is not surprising that people turn away from politics and politicians when they are not emotionally satisfying in the ways popular culture productions are.

Although politics may be increasingly like reality TV, it is still probably a poor facsimile. A now legendary example of the inferiority of politics as popular culture is the factoid that more young people voted on the *Big Brother* TV program in 2001 than in the British general election that year. Stephen Coleman (personal communication **PLS PROVIDE APPROX DATE**) cautioned that the voting turnout on *Big Brother* may have been inflated as the TV program allowed multiple votes, and insofar as we know, the British election did not. However, the greater popularity of a reality TV show as opposed to a national election campaign bears scrutiny. Coleman (2004) conducted a national survey of *Big Brother* fans and political junkies (Hansard Society, 2003). What he found suggests that the *Big Brother* fans (generally young and turned off to politics) regard politics and politicians as some alien presence in their midst, devoid of the emotional credibility displayed by the empathic characters on their favorite reality program. By contrast, the political junkies had little use for the loose reality of popular culture and generally put the *Big Brother* fans down as inferior. Coleman concluded that political reality is still far from satisfying the emotional requirements of young citizens. The dilemma, of course, is whether those requirements can be satisfied short of deception and journalistic gravitation toward the side with the best story to tell.

Conclusion

The popular culture basis for the explosion of reality TV programs may tell us a good deal about why the democratization of truth is politically acceptable for large numbers of citizens, politicians, and communication professionals. Adding the public to our analysis begins to shift the burden of proof solely from journalists or politicians to a larger cultural sphere in which publics seek to consume political information in reality formats that touch personal emotional concerns better than conventional fact-driven, descriptive news reports. Yet entertainment still trumps politics programming, particularly among young citizens. Perhaps, even when politics becomes reality TV, the human relations on display are not as genuine as in the entertainment genre.

Even if reality news formats become more appealing, the question becomes how to adapt them in ways that do not result in outright departures from truth, with journalists caught spinning drama at the expense of facts. The idea that Hollywood producers

contracted with the Pentagon to produce reality war programming or that the Pentagon cooperates with Hollywood in glorified film projects is not new. Hollywood and the government have worked closely together in past wars. In more recent times, Jerry Bruckheimer received special access to produce blockbuster films such as *Top Gun* and *Blackhawk Down*. He also partnered with van Munster in the aforementioned reality series on the war that was bought and aired by ABC. My concern is that we are witnessing a time in which such propaganda collaborations are not reserved for “just wars” and heroic national struggles but have become means of legitimizing far murkier, more dubious conflicts while preempting serious debate in national election forums.

Above all, it is not clear if the reality genre can support the monumental issues of politics, such as whether the president and his top advisors authorized the torture of prisoners in the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts. For all the candidate challenges on the war, the torture/abuse scandal did not become a campaign issue at all, even though it was a moral and political global fiasco. One observer conjectured that the public could not handle such a profound moral issue in the context of the campaign (Sullivan, 2005). Some cultural and emotional issues may simply be too big for reality TV. When popular culture begins to define politics and vice versa, the result may be the shrinking of sharable human emotion and comprehension.

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