The Democratic Worth of Celebrity Politics in an Era of Late Modernity

Mark Wheeler

In a seminal article published in 2004, John Street argued that celebrity politics has provided a greater expression for the enhancement of democratic behaviour. Consequently, this analysis builds on Street's thesis to consider the worth of celebrity politics in an era of late modernity. To this end, it employs Henrik Bang's and John Keane's constructs of Everyday Makers and Monitory Democracy, which have emphasised the importance of 'involvement', 'voice' and 'output' in terms of representation, to provide an ideological framework to capture the value of celebrity politics. Subsequently, it may be argued that Barack Obama utilised a form of 'liquid' celebrity in his 2008 US presidential campaign to reconnect with a disenfranchised electorate. However, this article will critically assess these types of celebrity politics to contend that aggregated forms of 'input' drawn from celebrity activism may more truly affect political outcomes.

Keywords: celebrity politicians; late modernity; Barack Obama; political aesthetics

Introduction

John Street's article, 'Celebrity Politicians: Popular Culture and Political Representation', argues that celebrity politics has a given a greater expression to the representation of democratic behaviour (Street 2004, 449). To substantiate his thesis, Street makes a distinction between those celebrity politicians (CP) who have used populist techniques when seeking elected office (CP1s) and those celebrities who have employed their fame to promote political issues (CP2s). In establishing these typologies, Street provides an analytical framework through which to consider the extent to which celebrity 'performances' may affect new forms of political engagement (Street 2004, 447 and 2010, 256).

In this respect, Street's work provides a critique of the common academic criticisms of celebrity politics (Street 2004, 439). These arguments have viewed celebrity as a 'manufactured product' that has been fabricated by media exposure (Turner 2004; Louw 2005). According to Daniel Boorstin, public interest in celebrity has been manipulated through contrived, pseudo-events staged by a cynical media (Boorstin 1971, 65). Street, however, notes that with the further political engagement of celebrities drawn from across the public sphere, this literature requires a critical re-evaluation (Street 2010, 250). His analysis is part of an alternative discourse which identifies the trends towards the celebritisation of politics both theoretically (Corner and Pels 2003; Van Zoonen 2005) and empirically (Holmes and Redmond 2006) through an exploration of celebrity performance.

Consequently, as celebrities and image candidates assume the authority to promote political agendas among target audiences/citizens, it becomes necessary to reflect upon their significance in election campaigns, policy agendas and activism. Therefore, Street's concerns about the relationship between political aesthetics and democratic practice segue into a wider debate about the dynamics that are shaping post-democratic societies (Street 2010, 259). Here it is contended that traditional civic duties are being replaced by alternative forms of virtuous participation. Within this new political environment, different types of agency such as celebrity politics have become centrifugal forces for public engagement. Thus, Street demonstrates that celebrity politics is consistent with a liberal democratic ethos; his work provides a basis upon which alternative forms of political behaviour may be considered in relation to their ability to enable citizens to reconnect with their societies (Street 2010, 260).

In this respect, Street's analysis can be linked to Henrik Bang's arguments that new forms of political capital are emerging as 'Everyday Makers' utilise community-based narratives to engage with one another (Bang 2003). Similarly, John Keane's concept of 'Monitory Democracy', in which consumer-led forms of representation become the measurement of accountability, has considered how changes to the matters of 'voice' and 'output' have reformed democratic practices (Keane 2009a). In the light of these concerns, this analysis will critically assess how celebrity politics operates in reference to the post-democratic changes that have been identified by Bang and Keane.

Therefore, this article will begin by reviewing the contours of the academic debate concerning the celebritisation of politics. Critical theorists such as Douglas Kellner have argued that celebrity forms of engagement have been determined by his concept of 'media spectacle' to distort the political agenda and misdirect the public (Kellner 2009). Conversely, Liesbet van Zoonen, John Corner, Dick Pels and Street have considered how the popular aesthetics employed by celebrity politicians may be linked together with a reconfigured series of democratic practices. In turn, their work provides an analytical framework through which to consider how Bang's and Keane's propositions over reformed democratic values may be employed to define celebrity engagement in an era of late modernity. To illustrate these ideas, this analysis will include as a case study US President Barack Obama's 2008 election campaign to discuss how Obama defined himself as a celebrity politician and utilised innovations in communication technologies to re-engage with the American electorate.

Finally, the article will critically examine Bang's and Keane's arguments concerning the reconfiguration of democratic behaviour to consider whether they provide the appropriate means through which to capture the value of celebrity politicians. In this respect, it will ask to what extent celebrity politicians can 'input' aggregated forms of 'agency' to affect political outcomes. From these differing perspectives, this analysis will seek to define a normative position concerning the worth of celebrity politics.

The Traditional Paradigm: Style over Substance

Critics such as Neil Postman claim that the mass political communication process has led to a decline in rationality as televisual style dominates substantive debate.

This critique suggests that the 'Americanisation' of politics has had a negative impact on the public sphere and civil engagement (Postman 1987). Boorstin argued that under such conditions illusions were mistaken for reality and that fame has been constructed as an industrial process (Boorstin 1971). In tandem, political communications have evidenced the convergence of public relations (PR) techniques with an increase in commercial pressures drawn from the global media.

These critiques of celebrity activism reflect the values of the Marxist Frankfurt School whose critical theorists contended that the media had become a tool for the expression of dominant ideologies. Such ideas culminated in Jürgen Habermas' concerns that there has been erosion of the public sphere. Instead of the mass media providing an agora through which legitimate debate occurs, the public space between the state and the electorate has become an arena for an irrational political discourse. Therefore, distorted information has been presented as being representative when, in reality, it is controlled by powerful influences (Habermas 1992).

In such a commodification of politics, public interest in celebrity politicians has been manipulated by a cynical media to construct a myth of individual expression. The most sophisticated variation of this position has been identified by the American scholar Douglas Kellner. He has employed his concept of the 'media spectacle' to suggest that the emphasis on celebrity replaces the complexities of policy with symbolic gestures (Kellner 2010b, 123). Kellner argues that the media coverage of celebrity politics publicises issues in such a way as to 'frame' politicians and celebrities as global 'superstars'. He contends that substance has been replaced by a stylistic form of politics in which the norms of democratic engagement have been undermined (Kellner 2010b, 123).

Following upon this logic, Eric Louw has argued that there has been a narrowing in the gap between politics and entertainment (Louw 2005, 192). In his definition of 'pseudo-politics' Louw suggests there has been a PR-isation of issues 'in which celebrities are now enlisted to whip up mass public opinion' (Louw 2005, 191). By defining celebrity politics as the latest manifestation of the fame game, Louw views the media as a site of ideological control. Thus, the most common analysis of celebrity-ness has referred to the notion that the artifices of fame have distorted rational debate to sell prescriptive ideas to a disengaged public (Louw 2005, 192).

Celebrity Politics, Political Aesthetics and Representation

The interlinkage between political rhetoric and behaviour may be seen to be part of a historical continuum which offsets the modernist dismay directed to the personalisation of politics. As van Zoonen comments, the Greek Sophists contended that virtue was a matter of great performance. Moreover, Niccolò Machiavelli's writings demonstrate that it is necessary to affect the proper union of personality and performance to create a convincing political persona. Therefore, while the conditions of political communications have changed, the need to determine a persuasive political performance remains timeless (Van Zoonen 2005, 72).

But even without acknowledging this important historical context, the traditional paradigm may be criticised as it perceives political communication as a top-down

process between political elites and a passive electorate. It disregards the polysemic range of readings audiences take from political imagery. Such an approach ignores the effects of celebritised politicians in forging new or alternative social formations for engagement, and does not truly evaluate the influence of imagery on the public's decision-making processes. Instead, it is necessary to consider the changes in political aesthetics that have facilitated the opportunities through which celebrities have influenced politics and politicians have popularised themselves. As P. David Marshall comments, 'a leader must somehow embody the sentiments of the party, the people and the state ... a celebrity must somehow embody the sentiments of the audience' (Marshall 1997, 203).

Corner and Pels contend that previous partisan allegiances have been replaced by post-ideological lifestyle choices which foreground matters of aesthetics and style (Corner and Pels 2003). As voters are less likely to identify with political parties, the public has favoured 'more eclectic, fluid, issue specific and personality-bound forms of political recognition and engagement' (Corner and Pels 2003, 7). Corner maintains that through their 'mediated personas'—the individual's public image—film, television and music stars have created new forms of identification in which they attain public admiration, sympathy and authority to effect political expression (Corner 2003, 83). Thus, celebrities and image candidates command credibility through a conjunction of de-institutionalisation, personalisation and para-social familiarity to transcend other agencies of social authority:

> It is a claim that derives from a world which, says Keane [2002] ... is marked by ... [the] popular identities [which] derive from the role models provided by celebrities who inhabit this world (Street 2004, 442).

As mediated personas take greater shape it becomes necessary to investigate celebrities' integral roles in political campaigns. While symbolism and charisma have always shaped political communications, can celebrities use their reputations and charisma to invigorate politics with new ideas?

In this respect, Street's work provides a systematic attempt to analyse how the political aesthetics of celebrity politicians interlinks with their democratic worth. Street sees fame as neither an exceptional nor exaggerated form of representation, but a vital characteristic of modern political culture (Street 2003 and 2004). Thus, he is most concerned with how celebrity performance aids and abets political engagement. Street makes reference to Joseph Schumpeter's analogy between the worlds of commerce and politics to demonstrate how modern political communication has been dominated by marketing as the parties 'compete' for electoral support. He suggests that politics should be seen as a type of show business in which the currency is fame and the products are the stars' performances as:

> In focusing on the style in which politics is presented, we need to go beyond mere description of the gestures and images. We need to assess them, to think about them as performances and to apply critical language appropriate to this. ... To see politics as coterminous with popular culture is not to assume that is diminished ... The point is to use this approach to discover the appropriate critical language with which to analyse it (Street 2003, 97).

As celebrities have assumed a moral authority, it is necessary to investigate their integral roles in political campaigns. In particular, Street asks whether celebrities can use their reputations to reinvigorate politics with new ideas and an aggregated form of political agency. He is concerned about the connection celebrities can make with the public through their ability to be 'in touch' with popular sentiment (Street 2004, 447). This has been mediated through 'fandom' in which an 'intimacy with distant others' (Thompson 1995, 220) can be understood as the basis of political representation. Street contends that such a representational relationship is established by the 'affective capacity' of the celebrity's cultural performance and in such a manner stars:

> give political voice to those who follow them, both by virtue of the political conditions and by means of their art ... this is ... a matter ... of aesthetics, of creatively constituting a political community and representing it (Street 2004, 449).

The Impact of Post-democratic Theory on Celebrity Politics

David Marsh, Paul 't Hart and Karen Tindall contend that the academic debate concerning celebrity activism has been limited to a critique that has tended to focus on either a diminution or an enhancement of democratic pluralism (Marsh et al. 2010, 322). However, in their review article, these authors do Street a disservice as they fail to acknowledge his importance in placing the concerns about celebrity politics and political representation at the centre of the agenda (Marsh et al. 2010, 323). Yet, they have also undoubtedly moved the academic analysis of celebrity politics along as they have relocated the questions about such forms of representation into a discussion about the contested principles of late modernity or post-democratic behaviour. Consequently, despite such an omission, Street's ideas about the political engagement of celebrities have been placed into a broader consideration of the nature of citizenship, participation and equality (Marsh et al. 2010, 328).

Several political sociologists have defined the era of late modernism as being characterised by major transformations in democratic values (Lash 1990; Giddens 1991; Beck 1992). These ideas are comparable with but contest the notion of post-modernism, in that they suggest a self-referring modernism and fragmentation in which 'social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character' (Giddens 1991, 38). Moreover, as Zygmunt Bauman has argued, this has created a 'liquid modernism' in which individualist practices of social behaviour simultaneously create new opportunities for the self-realisation of participation and exacerbate uncertainties in the human condition. Most notably, new patterns of social activity paradoxically facilitate an increasing fluidity in people's behaviour while producing existential fears over being imprisoned by such freedoms (Bauman 2000, 8).

In terms of post-democratic activity, late modernists contend that such changes reflect a replacement of hierarchies with networks; the hollowing out of the state;

the replacement of politics policy by policy politics; a greater fluidity of identity; more reflexivity; changing forms of political participation; the rise of discursive network governance; the expansion of the media and celebrity politics; and a constantly reformed version of contemporary democracy (Marsh et al. 2010, 326). However, these characteristics have also led to concerns about the values of democratisation. For instance, Wendy Stokes notes that 'the view that democracy is a device for delivering responsible, responsive, accountable and legitimate government ... remains potent; .... [Yet] without wider and deeper social and economic equality there is radically unequal *access* to those fundamental rights, and thus unequal citizenship' (Stokes 2011, 396, emphasis in original).

The fears of inequality have been heightened by the decline of civic virtues, the dismantlement of democratic associations and the disengagement of public with politicians. Robert D. Putnam has argued that communitarian agreements upon what constitutes the common good have dissolved as trust has eroded. In the post-democratic era, the citizenry has become disaffected with mainstream parties and institutions. This has led to a profound 'thinning' of the political community and the rise of the atomised citizen who is 'bowling alone' (Putnam 1995). To fill the accompanying void, Putnam has argued for the extension of voluntary organisations or social life networks to create 'virtuous circles' to accumulate social capital. In such a manner, he contends, such norms of 'strong government' and 'thick community' may create a centrifugal force whereby citizens can agree on a set of shared aims for collective activity (Putnam 2000).

Elsewhere Bang (2003, 2004 and 2009) and Keane (2009a and 2009b) have argued that civic forms of aggregated political behaviour have been replaced by more dispersed forms of participation which are determined by 'involvement', 'voice' and 'output'. In particular, Bang contends that new forms of citizenship occur within governance networks and partnerships between private and public organisations (Bang 2009). Similarly, Keane maintains that alternative voluntary organisations achieve autonomy in a global civil society and create different types of ethical pluralism which are binded by an 'aversion to grandiose, pompous, power hungry actions of those who suppose, falsely that they are God, and try to act like God' (Keane 2003, 208). As facets of these new processes, celebrity politicians and politicised celebrities will be integral to shaping alternative discourses in democratic societies.

Henrik Bang: Everyday Makers, the Rise of Expert-Celebrity Parties and Reflexive Celebrity Politicians

Bang (2004) argues against Putnam's thesis concerning the decline of civic virtues and a revival of social capital through virtuous circles. Instead, he focuses on a discursive form of political activism in which solidarity exists but is not tied to any notion of the common good or of a particular ideology. Bang contends that new types of representation have emerged outside the mainstream political institutions as citizens have a minimal interest in party politics. Rather than aspire to the duties of citizenship, these 'Everyday Makers' want to feel 'involved' in their communities and are motivated by the beliefs that the public should:

- do it yourself;
- do it where you are;
- do it for fun, but also because you find it necessary;
- do it *ad hoc* or part time;
- do it concretely, instead of ideologically;
- do it with self-confidence and show trust in yourself; and
- do it with the system, if need be (Bang 2004).

Bang contends that this form of political engagement has combined individuality with commonality to re-establish different relations of self- or co-governance. In his view, the public no longer have pre-constituted interests, identities or policy preferences, and participate as social constructivists in a contemporary network society. Bang argues that most people are involved in small local narratives which are founded on a mutuality of interests. Therefore, as political activity is no longer based on ideology and membership, politicians need to engage on a continuing basis with citizens to persuade them to participate, as Bang:

> identifies a shift away from an input–output model of politics, in which citizens via parties etc., were negotiated and aggregated into policy outputs by governments, to a recursive one, in which the demo-elite, operating through the political system acts: 'in its own terms and on its own values, thereby shaping and constructing societal interests and identity' (Marsh et al. 2010, 329).

Consequently, in this reformulated view of participatory practices there has been a change in the relationship between citizen and the political classes. Instead of Putnam's notion of 'strong government' and 'thick community', Everyday Makers prefer 'thin' forms of political involvement in which they receive their identities from their personal capacities for self-government and co-governance. This means there should be reciprocal relations between political elites and involved members of the society. For instance, the centralised 'cartel' parties that were employed by states to realise policies have been superseded by 'expert-celebrity' parties. These organisations enact a discursive set of exchange relations with the public that are aimed at achieving good governance. Although governmental performance remains a requisite for re-election, so is presentation of the party, the government and the policy. In an expert-celebrity party, members are not sources of policy ideas but are valued by their ability to communicate the 'message' of reform to convince the electorate to cast their vote. Thus, parties have employed the media tools of celebrity such as the appearances of leaders on popular television programmes, personalised websites and blogs to communicate with the electorate.

This reflexivity has meant that politicians have 'celebritised' themselves to engage in a more personally driven and less ideological set of political communications. For instance, van Zoonen has shown how the German prime minister, Angela Merkel, in her campaign against the incumbent Gerhard Schroeder in the 2005 general election, employed 'an agreeable and especially visible private life and persona' (Van Zoonen 2006, 296). The reserved Merkel, who was childless and in her second marriage, was required to open up her private life when she was presented on a fishing trip with her husband in *Der Bild am Sonntag* (1952 onwards). Moreover, as van Zoonen notes, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) popularised Merkel by

employing the Rolling Stones' song *Angie* (1973) despite the inappropriateness of the lyrics and the band's decision to sue the CDU. This demonstrated how the celebritisation of politicians has become a requisite in modern democracies not only for media-savvy politicians including Schroeder and Tony Blair, but also for less suitable candidates such as Merkel. Consequently:

> The celebrity politician ... is the successful embodiment of the concurrent constituents of the political field and the stage of private life. He emerges mainly from performance on television, because television and its many genres are the main source from which the majority of people learn about politics, with talk shows ranking high when it comes to influencing voting decisions (Van Zoonen 2005, 78).

John Keane: Monitory Democracy, New Forms of Scrutiny and Celebrity Voice

Bang's work concerning the reformulation of democratic relations between political elites and the public ties in with John Keane's vision of 'Monitory Democracy' (Keane 2009a). Effectively, Keane argues that since 1945 governmental or parliamentary forms of democratic practice have declined. Therefore, the central grip of elections, parties and representative assemblies has weakened and behaviour in 'all fields of social and political life [has] come to be scrutinised ... by a whole host of non-party, extra parliamentary and often unelected bodies operating within and underneath and beyond the boundaries of territorial states' (Keane 2009b).

These alternative types of accountability are linked to monitoring mechanisms which are founded on consumer preferences, customer voting and networks of redistributed power. The new formations of monitoring have included concepts of 'empowerment', 'high energy democracy', 'stakeholders', 'participatory governance' and 'communicative democracy'. This means that Monitory Democracy has placed an emphasis on surveys, focus groups, deliberative polling, online petitions, audiences and customer voting. Simultaneously, the number of power-scrutinising institutions has exponentially increased to include non-governmental organisations, human rights bodies, think tanks and consumer protection agencies. For Keane, these bodies have a liberating role as 'people are coming to learn that they must keep an eye on power and its representatives, that they must make judgments and choose their own courses of action' (Keane 2009b).

Keane contends that Monitory Democracy is closely associated with the rise of the new communications technologies of the multimedia and the Internet. These horizontal flows of information have led to overlapping and interlinked devices through which multiple forms of scrutiny may occur. For instance, the older mechanisms of media accountability have been replaced by a myriad of citizen-generated discussion groups. Most especially, within the content of the Internet there has been a move away from journalistic 'objectivity' to the 'subjectivity' of bloggers, social networking and adversarial journalism. In this context, the malleability of 'hype' has been viewed as a profundity in which everyone's opinions are of equal worth. Thus, it may be contended that these methods of scrutinisation enfranchise citizens through the formation of 'bully pulpits' in which there exist

'One person, many interests, many voices, multiple votes and multiple represen-
tatives' (Keane 2009b).

Through the 'communicative abundance' that exists, the private lives and romances
of politicians, unelected officials and celebrities become of interest to millions of
people. Ordinary individuals morph into media stars through simulated reality
television elections and as competitive news practices constantly seek to break
'scoops':

> Thanks to journalism and the new media of communicative abundance
> stuff happens. Shit happens. There seems to be no end of scandal, and
> there are even times when '-gate' scandals, like earthquakes, rumble
> beneath the feet of whole governments (Keane 2009b).

Therefore, akin to Bang's viewpoint of the relations between Everyday Makers and
expert-celebrity parties, Keane emphasises the opportunities for citizenship to
provide for accountability and exchange values between the public and political
elites. He has shown how maverick celebrity politicians including Ross Perot, Ralph
Nader and Martin Bell have championed unrepresented citizens who do not
connect with the political classes (Keane 2002, 13). In this manner, celebrity politics
may be seen to enhance democratic processes that are no longer defined by 'interest
aggregation on the input side of politics; but rather with the organisation of "voice"
and accountability on the output side' (Marsh et al. 2010, 331).

Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential Campaign: A Case Study of Celebrity Politics, Everyday Makers and Monitory Democracy

Barack Obama's ascendency to the US presidency can be seen to be representative
of the confluence of the reconfigured relationships that have emerged between the
Everyday Makers, Monitory Democracy and the political classes. Obama's story was
one of a rapid rise from being a little-known state senator for the 13th District of
Chicago, who made a well-received speech at the 2004 Democratic National
Convention, to the senator for Illinois in 2004 and to becoming a presidential
candidate who deployed information innovations within his campaign (Green
2011). Throughout his campaigns, his candidacy demonstrated how demo-elites
should remain in constant contact with the electorate to build for success.

On the one hand, Obama continued as a CP1 within the traditions of John F.
Kennedy, Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton as a presidential candidate who
employed 'telegenic' imagery in relation to the 'hyper-reality' of the US
entertainment–politics nexus. Therefore, Obama as an educated and articulate
African-American with an international background presented himself as a con-
temporary exemplification of the American Dream. On the other hand, his previous
experience as a community organiser in the South Side of Chicago, in tandem with
his utilisation of information communication technologies (ICTs), meant that he
engaged in a grass-roots campaign. In developing a personalised form of interaction
with local activist groups and lay people, Obama demonstrated CP1 attributes to
define his appeal as against conventional 'big' politics.

Sean Redmond describes Obama as a 'liquid celebrity' who effectively communi-
cated with those American citizens who had become disenfranchised by machine
politics. He formed linkages with non-traditional activists by being a 'charismatic
authority figure who promised ... solidity yet stream[ed] in and out of material view
[as he did not] ... fix or ... propagate ... [a] communion [with the public] beyond
triumphant spectacularism' (Redmond 2010, 81). Through his catchphrase of 'yes
we can' he promised the US electorate a palpable, yet undefined, sense of 'togeth-
erness' to deal with the nation's economic, political and foreign policy ills. His
campaign focused on a communitarian response to the fear-inducing terrors of the
modern age and was framed through the utilisation of media spectacle.

In this respect, Obama's campaign managers urged their candidate to make a series
of must see speeches which were globally televised to heighten his public worth.
Jeffrey C. Alexander has commented that Obama's acceptance speech for the
Democratic nomination at the Mile High Stadium in Denver, Colorado was at one
level a highly stage-managed celebration of the rise of a black statesman. However,
it was simultaneously an idealistic event which included a reciprocal exchange
relation of values between the candidate and US citizenry (Alexander 2010, 22–23).
Paul M. Green describes the experience in quasi-religious tones, stating: 'there were
people in the hot sun who at 2,500 feet above sea level were prepared to risk
sunburn or sunstroke to see him and four hours before his speech in the stadium
there was a two-and-a-half-mile queue to get in and see Obama!' (interview,
1 August 2011)

In terms of spectacle, Obama utilised the US entertainment–politics nexus to seek
Everyday Maker support when he appeared as a senator on popular talk shows
such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (1986–2011) and as a 'rock'n'roll' candidate he
effortlessly mixed with celebrity endorsers including Oprah Winfrey herself. As her
show was broadcasted to nearly 150 countries, Winfrey became one of the US' most
internationally recognisable figures and in 2008 she held the top spot in *Forbes
Magazine*'s (1917 onwards) hundred most powerful American celebrities. More-
over, her endorsement through her very popular monthly magazine and book
clubs proved to be an important factor in defining Obama's appeal by mobilising
political support within the African-American community:

> Oprah Winfrey's endorsement of Barack Obama prior to the 2008 Demo-
> cratic Presidential Primary generated a statistically and qualitatively sig-
> nificant increase in the number of votes received as well as in the total
> number of votes cast. For example, after controlling for a wide variety of
> socio-economic factors such as race, gender, education and income, a 10
> per cent change in the county-level circulation of Oprah Magazine is
> associated with an increased share for Obama of 0.2 percentage points ...
> In total, we estimate the endorsement was responsible for 1,015,559 votes
> for Obama (Garthwaite and Moore 2008, 3).

Moreover, while he shared platforms with film stars such as Leonardo di Caprio and
music legend Bruce Springsteen, the Hollywood establishment provided Obama
with substantial campaign contributions totalling $4.8 million. In accordance with
previous Democratic candidates, Obama understood that the support of film and
rock stars allowed him to appeal to a wider range of constituencies within the

American electorate. Additionally, his image appeared on a host of magazine covers including the iconic 'Africa' edition of *Vanity Fair* (1983 onwards); he became the first presidential candidate to receive the open endorsement of *Rolling Stone* (1967 onwards) and was named as the 2008 'Person of the Year' in *Time* (1923 onwards) magazine.

Obama demonstrated a critical awareness of popular culture when he proclaimed that the highly praised yet cult Home Box Office (HBO) policier *The Wire* (2002–08), which dealt with the impact of the drugs war on a largely African-American underclass in West Baltimore, was one of his favourite shows. He added to his credibility as a discerning viewer when he claimed that he found the street-smart, gay stick-up man Omar Little (Michael K. Williams) the programme's most interesting character. During the campaign, Obama commented on how the series' ironic dramatisation of America's inner cities tied together with his background as a community organiser. Thus, through his viewership, he expanded upon how associative democratic practices could be employed to tackle the nation's social divisions (Fletcher 2009, 38).

Further, both Kellner and Ian Scott have shown how the liquidity of Obama's celebrity image became intertwined with fictional representations of the American presidency in US films and television (Kellner 2010a, 35; Scott 2011, 27). America had been made ready for the rise of a black president through a range of anticipatory representations of African-American chief executives. For example, Dennis Haysbert played a charismatic and competent black leader President David Palmer in the popular television thriller *24* (2000 onwards) for five seasons. However, the most revelatory anticipation of Obama's election occurred in Aaron Sorkin's *The West Wing* (1999–2006), which in its final two seasons conducted a fictionalised presidential campaign between a Democratic Mexican-American candidate Matthew Santos (Jimmy Smits) and a maverick liberal Republican Californian senator Arnold Vinick (Alan Alda).

Both Vinick and Santos bore more than a passing resemblance to the senators John McCain and Barack Obama. For instance, Obama's fictional counterpart was a coalition-building newcomer who had only served a short period in Congress, was an attractive liberal, had a photogenic family and was a candidate of colour. These coincidences were not a matter of chance as a *New York Times* (1851 onwards) article demonstrated that one of *The West Wing*'s writers Eli Attie had contacted David Axelrod, a key Obama adviser, to find out more about the then state senator after the 2004 Democratic Convention address (Selter 2008). In this respect, he discovered that Obama refused to be defined by race and sought to rectify partisan divisions in US politics (Kellner 2010a, 35–36).Yet:

> The spectacle of Obama did not simply emerge, however, through such hyper-iconic images, broadcast live or tracked in news bulletins, and written about in the mainstream media. Obama's spectacular campaign colonised the internet and social networking sites and interfaces such as Youtube, Facebook, My Space and Twitter, and it sent [around the world] live text messages and updates to subscribers/devotees via their mobile phones, about upcoming speeches, rallies or as a call for donations or active support (Redmond 2010, 87).

Even before Obama had officially declared his candidacy, two Facebook groups, 'Barack Obama for President in 2008' and 'Barack Obama (One million strong for Barack)', gathered thousands of members, enabling him to launch his campaign on the national scene. To this end, Bang is impressed by how Obama employed multimedia technology to interact directly with Everyday Makers. He notes that the chief innovation of Obama's campaign was its own social network entitled 'mybarackobama.com' (MyBo). This information resource enabled local associations, invariably drawn from youth groups, college students and non-traditional political actors to organise as grass-roots activists, thereby working in an inclusive and relational manner (Bang 2009, 117).

Obama's social network mobilised the democratic input of over 2 million users and through the availability of 100,000 profiles enabled 35,000 affinity groups to be organised at a community level (Bang 2009, 125). These networks of activists arranged over 200,000 events which facilitated 70,000 people to raise $35 million for Obama's campaign (Straw 2010, 43). Obama's team learned many of the lessons drawn from the liberal Democratic Senator Howard Dean's 2004 Democratic Primary campaign in which significant monies were raised. They recognised that Dean's candidacy had collapsed through a lack of mobilisation and organisation of his support base. Consequently, Obama's campaign benefited from the input of one of the co-founders of Facebook, Chris Hughes, who developed Internet software that focused on real-world organising and connecting with the electorate.

Therefore, across the battleground states, Obama's utilisation of social networking technologies enabled his campaign organisation to swell to 1.5 million local and community organisers. To aid their door-to-door canvassing, volunteers were given access to constantly updated databases through field offices and via MyBo concerning information about potential voters' political leanings (Lai Stirland 2008). Additionally, Obama activists were issued with an 80-page instruction manual to illustrate the organisational focus of the campaign and were assigned specific roles such as team and data co-ordinators to lead cadre operations in particular states. This blend of volunteering, gumshoe canvassing and information processing became the hallmark of the Obama campaign:

> The Obama campaign ... [built, tweaked and tinkered] with its technology and organisational infrastructure since it kicked off in February 2007 and [developed] the most sophisticated organising apparatus of any presidential campaign in history ... [It was] the first [campaign] to successfully integrate technology with a revamped model of political organisation that stresses volunteer participation and feedback on a massive scale, erecting a vast, intricate machine [that fuelled] an unprecedented get-out-the-vote drive in the final days of [the campaign] (Lai Stirland 2008).

However, Obama's team realised there needed to be some latitude in its top-down blend of legwork and information technology. They allowed activists a greater degree of autonomy in rooting out the opinions of non-specifically targeted members of the electorate. For instance, a Florida campaign worker, Jeanette Scanlon, was encouraged to canvass her neighbourhood and utilised MyBo to explain the differences to wary locals about Obama's and McCain's tax policies (Lai Stirland 2008). Moreover, the campaign was able to spread its message virally as it

placed an emphasis on the horizontal linkage of a range of non-traditional political actors. In turn, these participants became politicised as they were invited to solve common challenges and to make their voices known in scrutinising Obama's response to America's problems, thereby enabling them to reconnect 'in new political communities for the exercise of good governance' (Bang 2009, 133).

MyBo was noted for Obama's personal use of the multimedia and he popularised his appeal through a variety of podcasts and Blackberry messages. Redmond has defined this development as 'Avatar Obama' in which the liquidity of his celebrity performance was established through a multiplicity of identities that allowed him to connect with the American electorate and a global range of diverse groups. The wide number of 'social' portals and interfaces that Obama commanded meant that he was able, in quick or real time, to relate directly to members of the public not only in an intimate manner but simultaneously on a collective basis. He defined a political image that was founded on reciprocity and shared meaning to encourage the popular scrutiny of his political deliberations. Therefore, the often disaffected 'mobile youth' gravitated towards him and his messages of change, hope and identity (Redmond 2010, 92). Thus:

> Obama articulated an image of himself as an inspiring political authority who does not expect a 'blind' or rationally motivated form of obedience ... He spoke about authority as a reciprocal and communicative two-way power relationship ... in order to get people with different ... identities and projects freely to accept cooperation across all conventional boundaries (Bang 2009, 119).

Conclusion: A Normative Position for the Democratic Worth of Celebrity Politics

Bang and Keane have focused on the relative worth of the values of voice and output as against the requirements of aggregated input and agency to define a normative position of post-democratic behaviour. Yet, while accepting the theoretical sophistication of Bang's analysis concerning Everyday Makers, Marsh et al. (2010, 330) bring into question the validity of several of its assertions. First, to what extent has the politics of late modernity actually witnessed a rise of network governance and the decline of hierarchical relations? Second, does this analysis overemphasise the extent to which network governance employs celebrity to garner the support of lay people while ignoring traditional sources of information? Third and most importantly, to what extent does Bang choose to ignore the structured inequalities within networked societies as political elites market themselves through the media and celebrity to the public?

Similarly, Keane's emphasis on the desirability of consumer-led forms of scrutiny may be seen to underestimate the divisions that exist in modern democracies. In effect, in failing to address the nature of power in post-democratic societies, Bang and Keane's focus on output does not deal with matters of inequality and reinforces Putnam's fears concerning the democratic deficit. Most especially, it may be suggested that Everyday Makers and Monitory Democratic practices favour the voices of the ill-informed over the enlightened. This means that populist attitudes define

a distorted version of the common good. Therefore, these reconfigured forms of behaviour may operate akin to what Alexis de Tocqueville termed as soft tyranny (De Tocqueville 1863 [1830]). In this respect, normative democratic ideals have been undermined by the vagaries of public opinion, conformity to material security, the absence of intellectual freedom and the prejudices of the ignorant.

Subsequently, Bang's and Keane's approaches provide a partial analysis of the 'worth' of celebrity politics. Their arguments aid understanding of the role of CP1s such as Obama in creating 'spaces' to define links between the political classes and the public. Yet, if the normative expectations of celebrity politics are limited to a measurement of voice and output alone, such activity has no greater merit than in relaying the values of the demo-elite to the public or in allowing oppositional groups to articulate their interests.

Further, in terms of Obama's involvement with Everyday Makers, such an emphasis upon the 'form' (liquid celebrity, MyBo) rather than the ideological 'content' (Keynesian economic values and smart power in foreign policy) of his campaign may be seen to demonstrate the limitations of 'Avatar Obama' (Redmond 2010). As Redmond relates, he took an immense pleasure in the emotional commitment he felt towards Obama's cause at the time of the campaign. However, in retrospect, he grew to view Obama's utilisation of intimate personal communication and public celebrity as being 'watery'. Effectively, Obama's rhetoric replaced a fixed set of meanings with an emphasis on a passionate sense of 'feeling', resulting in a sense of profound discomfort:

> I *felt* a sharing in the injustices of capitalism, the history of slavery and racism, and the opportunity we had ... to make the world anew again. One feels stronger, almost superhuman, when one is taken over by a belief or a conviction such as that. Surely, this sensorial transformation *is* something? ... But such imagined strengthening of the self, and of the consumerist world, is the exact way in which liquid celebrity ... ensure(s) that it holds the imaginary or mythical centre together. ... As I reflect upon my love for Obama now ... the transient nature of the connection and the emotional seduction he once offered but no longer does is what I most *feel* (Redmond 2010, 93–94, emphases in original).

Within this context, Obama's transience as a CP1 may be seen to be reflected in the rapid rise of the reactionary Tea Party with its own set of liquid celebrity politicians such as Christine O'Donnell, Rand Paul, Michelle Bachmann and the former Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin. Like Obama, the Tea Party utilised Internet-based social networks to facilitate grass-roots participatory practice, political organisation and the mobilisation of the electorate. In turn, through the ICTs' communicative abundance, Tea Party candidates could define a personal and collective sense of belonging to an inchoate cause which demonstrated a more volatile expression of populist disempowerment and emotional commitment. Consequently, these CP1s benefited from the same forms of Everyday Maker involvement and Monitory Democracy principles of voice and output that had enabled Obama to achieve his electoral victory. Yet their success was indicative of a markedly different set of ideological values:

> All the talk of long-term realignment that accompanied President's Obama's win now appears misguided. The message from this electoral cycle [2010] is that Americans are no longer loyal to any brand in politics and the country is entering a phase where movements, founded by frustrated voters who use social networking tools to organise and spread their message, can take the lead every two years (Bai 2010, 1).

Therefore, this article contends that for celebrity politics to have an appropriate value, it must be seen to enhance civic virtues through the mechanisms of input and agency as much as illustrating the openings for voice and output. For CP1s and CP2s to have a democratic worth they need to demonstrate ideological substance and provide clarity in establishing a fixed range of meanings upon which people may achieve a real sense of connection with political causes. To this end, celebrity politics may be employed not only as a means to involve disaffected members of the electorate with a reconfigured political process. More vitally, such forms of activity should provide a basis for those citizens who wish to participate in terms of their own political efficacy to define a wider sense of the common good.

About the Author

Mark Wheeler, Faculty of Law, Governance and International Relations, London Metropolitan University (City Campus), Calcutta House, Old Castle Street, London E1 7NT, UK, email: *m.wheeler@londonmet.ac.uk*

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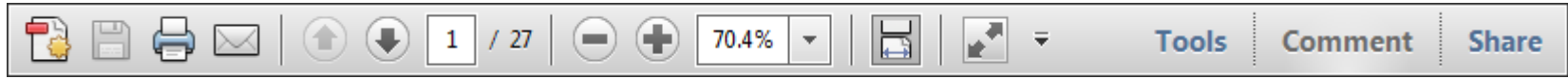
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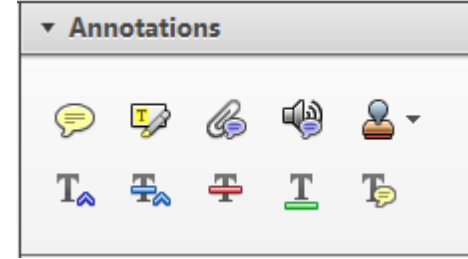
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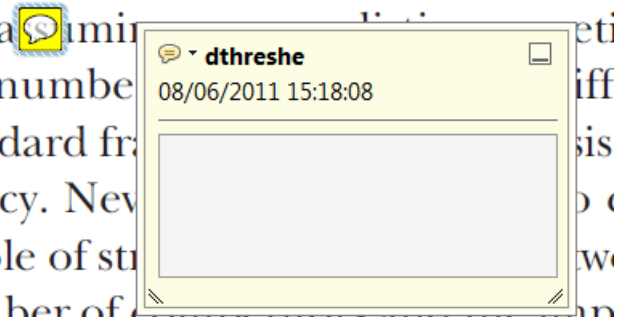### 4. Add sticky note Tool – for making notes at specific points in the text.

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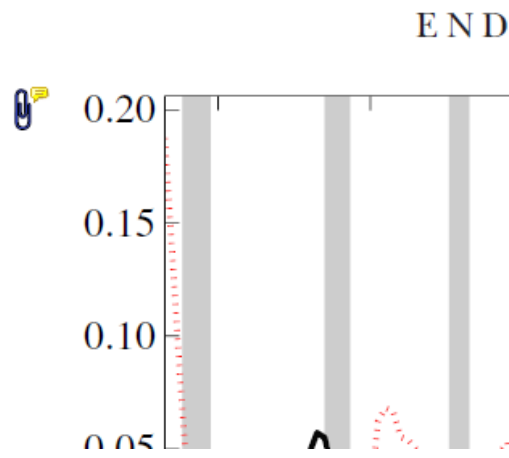
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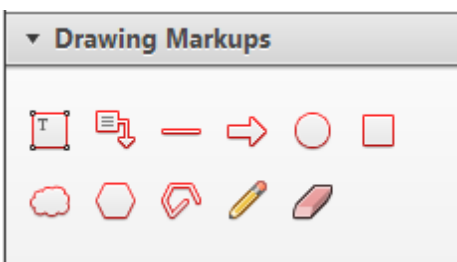

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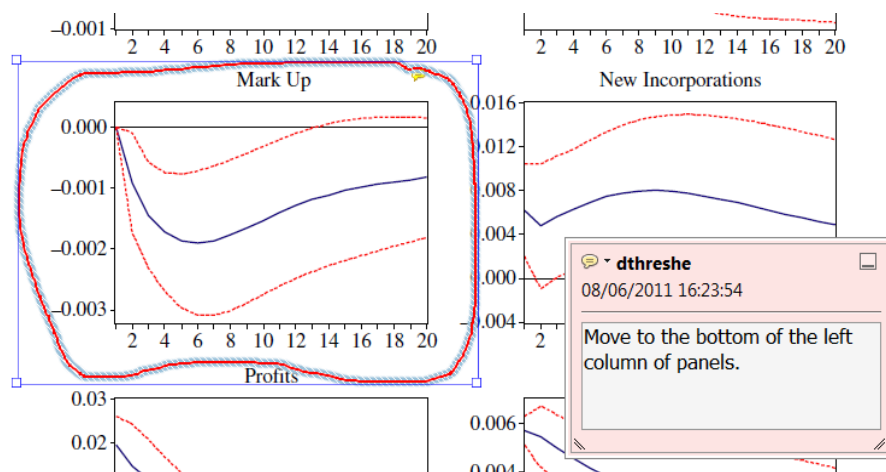
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