

Pop Goes the Campaign

The Repopularization of Politics in Election 2008

Jeffrey P. Jones

Late in the 2008 presidential campaign, Cindy McCain, wife of Republican presidential nominee Senator John McCain, complained to supporters about the rough treatment she and her husband received during a media interview. "They picked our bones clean," she exclaimed. She wasn't complaining, however, about an encounter with traditional venues for hard-hitting political journalism such as *Meet the Press* or the *New York Times*. Instead she was referring to a joint appearance by the McCains on ABC's entertainment talk show, *The View*. Although the program is cast in the morning talk show mold of light talk and easy-going banter by female hosts for predominantly female viewers, *The View* turned out to be anything but softened in the 2008 election season. The five co-hosts routinely debated each other and visiting guests (including the Obamas and the Clintons) with pointed political questions and rebuttals. Following the McCain campaign's release of two ads that included blatantly false accusations about his opponent, comedian co-host Joy Behar confronted the senator directly on the veracity of the ads' claims. "You know that those two ads are untrue, they're lies, and yet you at the end of it say, 'I approve this message.' Do you really approve them?" *New York Times* opinion columnist Frank Rich contextualized the importance of the exchange when he wrote, "You know the press is impotent at unmasking this Truthiness when the hardest-hitting interrogation McCain has yet faced on television came on *The View*." Rich went on to proclaim sardonically that Behar was the "new Edward R. Murrow" of a defunct news culture.

Around the same time, little-known Alaska Governor and Republican vice presidential hopeful Sarah Palin gave her first interviews to major news organizations after being nominated. Following interviews with Charlie

Gibson on ABC and Katie Couric on CBS, the long-running sketch comedy show *Saturday Night Live* became one of the most influential sites of public commentary on the embarrassing performances. While traditional forums for political discourse on television such as network and cable talk shows debated the merits of Palin's interviews from their predictable partisan positions, it was comedian Tina Fey's spot-on parody of Palin's performance of these journalistic encounters that captured the most prescient interpretation. Fey, who naturally bears a striking resemblance to the Governor, was able to parody Palin's interview with CBS news anchor Katie Couric by repeating much of what Palin had actually said in the interview with only slight derivations for comic relief. In so doing, Fey and SNL transported the viewer out of the serious context associated with journalism—one that offered the viewer little recourse beyond befuddlement or disbelief—and recontextualized the encounter through a comedic lens, thereby granting the viewer a different perspective from which to view the event. The power of satire as a tool with which to scrutinize its comedic subjects allowed the comedian to strip the encounter bare and offer up instead the essence of the situation—a Governor who was a political and intellectual lightweight who sought to charm her way through a campaign and into an office that she was ill-prepared to fill.

The sketch comedy parodies of *Saturday Night Live* and the entertainment talk of *The View* demonstrate the important role that popular culture forums now play in mediating electoral campaigns. While the McCain-Palin campaign and the news media were simultaneously attempting to "define" Sarah Palin for the voting public, SNL took this nationally unknown politician and, through its satirical commentary on news footage, cemented a largely negative and damning public perception of the candidate.¹ In the process, SNL demonstrated that entertainment television, more than other forms of political communication such as news or political advertising, can produce perhaps the most effective interpretation of all.² Similarly, when the hosts of *The View* took what was supposed to be a "safe" campaign appearance designed to appeal to women and turned it into a hard-nosed grilling over honor and fairness, an infotainment forum became not only a venue through which a politician was directly held to account for his questionable public actions, but also demonstrated the freedom such venues have to honestly label the actions for what they were. While these two events became notable moments in the campaign, they are significant in demonstrating the role of popular culture in contemporary political communication, a role that has greatly increased in recent years (even surpassing the surprising levels of the 2004 presidential campaign) (Jones, 2005b, 2006). But what do such forums offer viewing publics?

Fortunately, scholars have begun recognizing that voters' attraction to political content in popular culture forums must be explained by more complex

reasons than was previously offered a decade ago (i.e., an ignorant polity comprised of citizens who are easily distracted by spectacle, too lazy to do the tedious work of informing themselves, and too immature to participate in elevated conversations of policy).³ What still demands our attention, and must be repeatedly demonstrated, is what exactly popular culture forums offer citizens that traditional political communication venues do not. As the examples of *SNL* and *The View* suggest, one important reason is associated with the limitations of other traditional forms of campaign communication—in this instance, journalism. While journalists Charlie Gibson and Katie Couric can conduct interviews, it is through the structures of other forms of public communication that such encounters can often be made sense of best. In this instance, the journalists themselves were restrained in stating the obvious. And while the blogosphere or cable talk shows offer commentary that is predictably partisan (and thus easily dismissible), it was comedy television that perhaps offered the best mainstream response for making sense of the ridiculous performance. Similarly with the example of John McCain's misleading ads, journalists felt constrained in labeling these ads for what they were, at least to the candidate's face. Although television pundits might be licensed to say the ads contained "lies," such claims are typically countered by other screaming heads maintaining just the opposite. If, as Frank Rich suggests, contemporary journalism is now largely an impotent arbiter of truth and falsehood, entertainment television programs such as these have shown that they are not hampered by such self-imposed constraints on political speech.

Indeed, popular culture has become one of the most important places and more open and free-flowing areas for communication about politics, the presidential election included. My usage of the term "popular culture" refers to those forms of popular media typically directed toward entertainment, not political or public affairs content. Whereas newspapers, news magazines, television news, and public affairs talk shows have traditionally served as primary arbiters of information and commentary about presidential election campaigns (and politics), entertainment media (across television, film, magazines, music, radio, and the Internet) now arguably play just as significant a role. In an election that produced compelling and dramatic narratives, popular media discovered that political content could be its hottest commodity. *The View*, for instance, broke viewership records, while *SNL* recorded ratings numbers it hadn't seen since 1994 (Gelman, 2008; Seidman, 2008). In so doing, these shows not only offered different narratives of the campaign and different ways of making sense of it, they also produced a centrifugal push of political information (and interest) to sectors of the polity that may not regularly attend to the traditional venues of electoral politics and its narratives. Finally, as the examples of *The View* and *SNL* attest, entertainment media hosts and writers can operate outside

the structural norms or the unwritten rules that typically govern the interactions between news media, candidates, and campaign staffs. In popular culture, those interactions can be more unscripted, more aggressive or critical, and often more broad-reaching, moving from serious to humorous and back again in seconds. As such, they offer fresh and alternative perspectives from which to assess candidates and their campaigns.

The 2008 election also witnessed the emergence of a new form of popular media: humorous, parodic, and mash-up videos on the Internet such as those found on the video sharing site YouTube. Many in the press have dubbed the 2008 election "The YouTube Election" to note the significance that this new outlet of communication (which did not exist in 2004) had on the campaign (Ramirez, 2008; Kowitz, 2008). Its significance for the discussion here was the way in which YouTube became a popular conduit for the wide circulation of user-generated political content as well as videos by professionals (though nontraditional players in political campaigns). As examined below, an array of humorous, playful, and often critical videos circulated across the Internet, receiving millions of views as people shared them with family and friends via e-mail and social networking sites. Even notable political moments that occurred on television such as Katie Couric's interview with Sarah Palin, John McCain's mea culpa on *The Late Show with David Letterman*, and Tina Fey's parodies of Palin on *Saturday Night Live* found wide circulation and viewership as video clips on the web. Citizens were liberated from the constraints of viewing content within the confines of the broadcast schedule or through news reporting of the events. Instead, citizens could engage significant (and even insignificant) campaign events when, how, and where they wanted. The Internet thus served as both an archive and a performance theater for a variety of video content about the candidates and the campaign. In short, digital media had extended a participatory hand to voters to join in the campaign fun. As argued in the concluding sections below, it is hard to overstate the importance of this for the reinvigoration of popular participation in politics.

FUNNY OR DIE: VIRAL VIDEOS

Beginning perhaps with the Clinton 1984 ad (a video critically portraying Democratic hopeful Hillary Clinton as the Big Brother of politics in a rip-off of Apple's original 1984 ad) and ending with an odd performance by John McCain on *Saturday Night Live* (where he essentially endorsed the ridicule of his running mate), the 2008 campaign, as played out in popular culture, had a humorous and playful quality to it. That is in stark contrast to the doomsday tone of much of pop culture in the 2004 campaign, dominated as it was by the likes of Michael Moore, Swift Boat Veterans, Eminem

