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POLITICAL NEWS AND THE 'CELEBRITY FRAME'

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Introduction

The category of 'celebrity' in the broader context of a 'celebrity culture' has received intensive attention for several years. Work has developed from earlier studies into the nature of 'fame' by connecting with the new terms of visibility, publicity and promotion of an expanding and diverse system of media flows (among the more influential general accounts are Marshall, 1997 and Turner, 2013). The worlds of entertainment and of sport, with their intensifying economies of consumption, are central to the growth of 'celebrity culture', given the attention that both receive and the crossover between them. However, it is clear from many studies that what I call here the 'celebrity frame' has become increasingly dominant in politics internationally at a number of levels (Street, 2003 and 2004 were important early attempts at an assessment, with Marsh et al., 2010; Wheeler, 2013 and Wood et al., 2016 among later developments of significance). In the figures of Donald Trump and Boris Johnson, celebrity portrayal is apparent at the highest level – connecting across popular culture and, in both cases, drawing extensively on the strong personae within television entertainment both figures enjoyed prior to attaining political high office. The coverage surrounding them in the context of the ongoing COVID19 pandemic shows further aspects of their respective celebrity frames and, in my conclusion, I shall briefly comment on this.

Journalism of different kinds is, of course, a key factor in the emergence of celebrity figures, remaining important (alongside other media forms) in the maintenance or possible diminution of that status. Other significant flows at work in this process include

promotional and publicity initiatives and the huge variety of social media placements and online interactions. Drawing variously on these, journalism projects celebrities within the terms of 'news' – still a culturally central, if broadened, category in the circulation of social information and one upon which other flows are, to varying degrees, dependent. For the realm of politics, a relationship of mutual advantage can emerge. Political figures may often benefit from the scale and nature of the attention they receive within a celebrity frame, intensifying their public identity, while political journalism also benefits from the much wider interest and engagement that a celebrity-based narrative can generate, going well beyond core audiences for political news – an expansion often bringing extra 'color' and affective appeal to coverage. As I shall discuss later, this expansion can be regarded variously as a positive or negative factor in relation to democratic values and the development of democracy-in-practice.

In this chapter I want to put some emphasis on the practices of political journalism at work in the development and character of political celebrity. In doing this, the focus will be on coverage of 'celebritized' political figures rather than the much broader issue of the coverage afforded to political comments and activities by celebrities from outside the sphere of professional political life. In a much-cited article which was one of the first to give 'celebrity politics' a comprehensive, typological review, John Street (2004) distinguished between what he called CP1s – elected politicians variously adopting celebrity-related approaches to publicity and CP2s – individuals already established as celebrities in the sports and entertainment world who choose to 'intervene' in the political sphere to different degrees. The two are clearly interconnected but the positioning of journalists and publics in relation to each and the specific nature of the publicity benefits gained are often rather different.

Although I shall make reference to the growing academic literature this will be highly selective, since I am not offering a 'literature review' of what is now a vast range of commentary and analysis but rather a brief critical summary of key themes and future research directions. First of all, it is useful to attend to matters of definition and context, connecting the emergence of celebrity politics to the much longer strands of activity by which political figures have sought heightened and popular visibility. This is followed by a look at the state of research, giving specific attention to the way journalism is variously active within the political celebrity system. Attention to recent work on Trump and Johnson and a small case study of coverage of Johnson's election to Prime Minister will help here. Finally, a summary reviews the key points to emerge.

Definitions and contexts

There is no doubt that the term 'celebrity' lends itself to a wide and loose application and this has been true of its use when applied to politics and political news. Clearly, highranking politicians have, historically, often been 'famous names', alongside other major state/national figures, for instance those in the monarchy or the church. This has been so even in circumstances where widespread illiteracy and limited news services prevailed and knowledge of political figures and their activities was limited to relatively small sections of the population. Nevertheless, whatever the long and varied history of

political fame and its coverage by journalists at various stages of press development (see for instance Brady, 1997), I think it is helpful to see the 'celebrity' idea as highly dependent first of all on the emergence of an extensive sphere of popular culture grounded in the entertainment industry. Secondly, its growth is linked to television as a way of routinely hearing and seeing certain prominent people, often in 'informal' settings, and 'getting to know them', however partially and selectively (see the discussion and examples of the changing terms of 'political style' and media aesthetics in Corner & Pels, 2003 and the review of ideas of 'political persona' in Marshall & Henderson, 2016). The celebrity idea is based on a perception of a degree of social intimacy when combined with recognition of social distance. This sense of seemingly close relations with a figure known to exist in the 'distant' sphere of fame presents an imaginatively stimulating and pleasing paradox which publicity strategies can successfully play upon. Whatever the precursors for this in the press, photography and then radio, it seems clear that such a sense of 'colloquial' relationship strengthened considerably with the arrival of popular television services and the 'television personality' (Van Aelst, Sheaffer & Stanyer, 2012 explore some of the different definitions and approaches to 'personalization' as a notion). This situation is then taken further and modified by the varieties of 'web presence' that are increasingly required, including those involving the personal stylizations of Twitter (which Trump has clearly made a daily instrument – and weapon – of identity management, see Enli, 2017; Kreis, 2017). The strongly personalized forms involved in these developments are different from identity within the broad category of 'fame', in which projection of the 'personal' may be a minimal factor.

Such a dimension to political figures can operate as a form of personal branding in the context of a political sphere which in many countries is inclined ever more strongly to unstable party systems, volatile electorates and increased polarization (discussed recently in Davis, 2019). It often carries across to the more formal settings for political appearance and their terms of media performance and coverage. It may, of course, develop a negative dimension despite the best efforts of political PR, emphasizing weaknesses and deficits in a politician, perhaps in a comic way, rather than supporting positive self-projection. Here, a range of social factors including age, social class and regional identity may play a part, just as they do in the construction of positive representations – although, more generally, women are exposed to broader risks of negative, belittling portrayal within the more intensive personal framing that celebrity culture brings (see, for instance, the early accounts by Muir, 2005 and Van Zoonen, 2006).

It is clear that politicians can develop a 'celebrity factor' to different degrees, some vying with the personal styling and charismatic prominence of those at the top in sports and entertainment while others, possibly in quite senior positions, limit this aspect of their public profile and thereby attract only a modest element of news coverage deploying the 'celebrity frame'. It would, for instance, be hard to see the former British Prime Minister Theresa May as ever attaining, or wishing to attain, strong 'celebrity' status, even though she occasionally engaged in selected PR moves from the 'celebrity playbook'. For instance, at the 2018 Conservative Party conference, she approached the podium for her main speech dancing to an Abba tune ('Dancing Queen'). This was a strategic break with formality and a projection of the 'personal' but it was finally limited in its success as a media strategy by the awkwardness of its execution. A similar, general restraint in self-projection would broadly be true of another former Prime Minister, Gordon Brown. By

contrast, the personal styling of Tony Blair and the coverage generated around him is an indicator of how the expansion of a political leader into the territories of popular culture, through selective emphasis on 'lifestyle and tastes', could be managed (for an historical perspective on modes of 'leadership' in Britain, see Richards, 2019). This is an aspect that can also be seen, for example, in the strategies and the coverage of Barack Obama, as discussed in Kellner (2015).

Of course, there is a much wider international dimension to the phenomenon and its variations. Russian president Vladimir Putin would represent one prominent example (see Goscilo, 2012), at points close both in performance and the journalism which it attracts to Western European and US instances but also in many ways very different, reflecting distinct historical and cultural factors. Political journalism in the Americas, Australasia, Africa, Asia and other parts of the world has also shown evidence of the relations of proximity and distance described above (e.g. on Australia, see Wilson, 2013; on China, see Jeffreys, 2016).

A final point to note here, in part following from the examples above, is that 'celebrity' status can be of very different kinds as well as having different intensities. Some of it is more related to what Wood et al. (2016) term 'superstar' status, familiar from conventional entertainment and sporting success and anchored in the 'specialness' of a defined skill or talent. Other forms, which Wood et al. term 'everyday', give primary emphasis not to 'high' achievements but to the 'ordinariness' of habits and tastes of those variously attracting media interest. 'Everyday' forms can be observed in the kind of frames which have been generated around participants in reality television programmes, whose subsequent personal lives often attract high levels of media visibility. These are not always exclusive categories either, since Wood and his colleagues make a convincing argument about the way in which certain political figures, including Boris Johnson, have developed an effective mix of 'superstar' and 'everyday' elements in their promotional approach. We should recognize here, however, that the start of the celebrityization process for most politicians, unlike for many 'everyday' instances, is often their own promotional strategies – ones which journalists variously identify, reflect or challenge in an essentially *responsive* mode.

Reporting political celebrity

It is worth noting that many studies of celebrity, including within politics, tend to place their emphasis less on journalistic practices and more on the practices of the celebrities themselves. One of the exceptions to this is the special issue of *Journalism*, edited by Dubied and Hanitzch (2013), which sought to explore the dynamics of reporting political celebrity. Citing earlier work in their introduction, they note how it might seem that:

The normative logic of traditional news is geared toward public service and the greater good, looking at audiences in the understanding of a citizenry that needs to be supplied with relevant news to make informed political decisions. Celebrity content, on the other hand, addresses its audiences in the capacity of consumers, focusing on the realm of the personal and the private. (Gorin & Dubied, 2011: 138)

In an important move of self-correction, they then observe how such a division fails to recognize the real record of practice (rather than the proclaimed values) of 'traditional

news'. This is patently true. Moreover, it also risks underestimating the wide variety of 'celebrity content' now found in news flows and the increasing emphasis on the consumerist, the personal and the private in other kinds of news, including that from 'traditional' suppliers.

Any attempt at examining the variety of news about political celebrities has to engage with three interlinked factors. First, there is the *formal* variety of such news across different media and platforms – a variety which gives different visual and verbal options for story development. Second, related to this, there are the very different news markets with their distinctive audience and readership *demographics*, whether these are broad or narrow. The term 'popular' only gestures at one of the factors here. Third, there is the *political orientation* of news outlets, which can vary widely both in nature and in strength but which will almost certainly influence the ways in which news about politics is constructed in relation to the political viewpoints and affiliations of particular politicians. This runs from the more subtle forms of bias all the way to a full-blown championing of some figures and sustained attacks on others. More generally, as my earlier comments suggest, it will not only be through modes of 'political journalism' that reporting on political celebrity is carried out. A whole range of general reporting and commentary, extending further into features, cartoons and modes of entertainment, is involved in the portrayal of those politicians with the higher levels of celebrity status and 'political journalism' often draws on this broader sphere. I want to give these points some substance by looking briefly at studies of Trump and Johnson.

Trump and celebrity journalism

Not surprisingly, Trump's distinctive celebrity profile, grounded in his pre-existing television identity as host of a major reality show, *The Apprentice*, has attracted widespread academic attention. This has essentially been concerned with the characteristics of Trump's performance, particularly his language both spoken and (as mentioned earlier) on Twitter. Recently, Street (2019) has revisited his own earlier writing in making the case for looking more closely at the distinctive *modes* of 'celebrity' at work in Trump's performance, suggesting that it might be finally more useful to see Trump as essentially a celebrity performing the role of politician rather than the reverse.

One research study to offer a closer indication of how the press have related to the unprecedented scale and character of Trump's profile is Boydston and Lawrence (2019). Part of their study contains citation from journalists on the framing of their own reportorial practice. They quote political consultant Kevin Eckery:

Everybody who was following the Trump campaign was following the rules. There was some great journalism... But, even though a lot of people did really good work, and even though everybody followed the rules, you still had a situation where just that overwhelming volume of Trump access to the media had its own weight. Because, he was bringing his own brand to this.... Just the fact that he was out there, so that people can be reminded of his brand, which is brash, successful, rich business man, was good enough. That's all it took. (Eckery 2016, cited in Boydston and Lawrence 2019: 8)

Here, there is a clear sense of the broad conventions ('rules') of political journalism being simply overwhelmed by the sheer scale of Trump's pre-formed brand identity and the more limited range of reportorial options it allowed.

One of the authors' main concluding points concerns the play-off between the serious and the dismissive (e.g. Trump as 'clown') frames of coverage, going back much earlier to the reporting of the primary of the 2016 election:

We find that press coverage of Trump's candidacy veered between serious coverage and dismissive coverage during not only the primary but also the general election. That the press continued to print dismissive coverage of Trump even throughout the general election season suggests that journalists and political scientists alike must re-orient themselves to the role of entertainment in modern politics in order to account for the very real seriousness of celebrity candidates, *given the rise of entertainment values and aesthetics as a mode of politics and political representation*. (Boydston & Lawrence, 2019: 11, my emphases)

This is clearly a comment of major importance – and one with relevance also to the case of Boris Johnson, as I shall show below. The idea that 'dismissive' coverage in mainstream journalism would work against Trump's interests can be seen as a bad miscalculation, in that it assumed the existence of generally shared normative criteria for assessing 'seriousness' and relating to it. Although the celebrity frame carries the risks involved in all forms of heightened public visibility (forms which are usefully re-assessed in Thompson, 2020), its cultural power has become greatly enhanced. Thompson joins many other commentators in pointing out that Trump's effective by-passing of the gatekeeping function of mainstream media (which he dismisses as 'fake news') through regular and emphatic use of Twitter has given him considerable control over the terms of his public persona, no matter how awkward, adverse or openly critical the immediate news context.

Boris Johnson and celebrity journalism

Johnson's profile as a political celebrity, an identity which has obviously now undergone further expansion since his becoming Prime Minister in 2019, has parallels with but also strong differences from the case of Trump. Johnson himself is an ex-journalist, with an extensive, long-established and sometimes controversial history in the British media system as a reporter, columnist and editor. His 'celebrity' status goes back over at least two decades, involving a period of heightened visibility as the Mayor of London between 2008 and 2016. His television appearances were grounded in light entertainment (most importantly, the BBC comedy quiz show *Have I Got News for You*, on which he first appeared in 1998). Perhaps most significant of all, and related to this last point, is his development as, in part, a 'comic' figure, given to sharp, witty comments and positioned, often affectionately, as a 'fun person' by others. This persona has helped provide extra proximity and warmth in his relationship with media publics, captured by regular references to him by Christian name alone or the diminutive 'Bojo' in reporting. Few other world leaders are mediated to their publics so extensively in such 'first name' terms. While he has always attracted a measure of critical reporting, including for his deployment of the 'clown' persona, the conservative orientation of the British mainstream media and its

hardening in favour of Brexit means that he has not received anything like the degree of negative coverage found in much reporting of Trump. Critics have viewed his behavior *dismissively*, an indication of shallowness (as with the early reporting of Trump), but he has more often been regarded by them as 'devious', a very different framing.

Within British politics, and perhaps internationally, the character of Johnson's celebrity status is without precedent and it will continue to develop. One important dimension of it relates to his positioning within the frame of the 'posh'. 'Poshness' in Britain – a privileged social background as manifested in behavior, demeanor and accent – is a complex category capable of generating both disdain and respect. Recent trends in British popular culture, including TV drama, has shown, albeit selectively, strengthened positive alignments with the 'posh'. Johnson's way of being 'posh', particularly in speech, is a key part of his performative range, supporting the ways in which he can seem 'engagingly different' from many other politicians and allowing him to perform 'ordinary' without compromising the obvious 'specialness' which his accent and vocabulary signals. In a way which is without parallel in British politics but well-established in the broader celebrity sphere, the frame he has generated often extends to coverage of members of his family, including the regular reporting of the views of his relentlessly publicity-seeking father, Stanley Johnson, in newspapers and on radio and television.

The nature of his relationship with the media, and his work within it, has attracted a range of scholarly commentary, but Wood et al. (2016) offer a useful account of some aspects of his celebrity performance, even if parts of it would now benefit from significant updating. Among the more important points they make one relates to Johnson's strategic cultivation of an air of 'spontaneity', as if in interviews he is speaking almost entirely without prior planning. This speech is often vigorously colloquial and slangy, in contrast to the dominant, more formal, register for senior politicians. It frequently displays a scorn for modes of conventional authority (Yates, 2019 is suggestive on this and its links with populist alignments in British political culture) and sometimes leads to much-reported 'gaffes', in which Johnson says the 'wrong' thing, either factually or in relation to prevailing codes of propriety. Both the spontaneity and the gaffes themselves contribute, say the authors, to a kind of 'politics of normality' and authenticity – generating strong and positive links with quite sizeable sections of the public (Wood et al., 594–595). More than any recent political leader in Britain (even Blair), Johnson's orientation has been towards strong positivity and 'feelgood' messages, a tendency significantly developed in his campaigning for Brexit and then in various phases (to date) of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even his tendency to exaggerate and to lie seem so far to have become regarded both by sections of the press and parts of the public as finally 'forgivable' consequences of such a freewheeling personal energy and commitment to upbeat declaration. This shows the extent to which strong celebrity factors can significantly modify the kinds of criteria brought to bear in assessing individual political performance.

We can see some key dimensions of Johnson's rather special kind of celebrity profile coming through in the way in which a selection of national newspapers reported his winning of the Conservative Party leadership, and therefore his election to prime minister, on July 23, 2019. The following quotes are from the following day's front pages:

Daily Mail (a photograph of Johnson posed in a way resembling the dance routine of comedian Eric Morecambe). **NOW BRING US SUNSHINE!** (citing the words of

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Morecambe's famous act-finishing song). [A top right-hand box reads 'PM Boris Special Edition']

Daily Express (a close-up photograph of Johnson with clenched left fist) **HANG ON TO YOUR HATS....HERE COMES BORIS!**

The Daily Telegraph (a close-up of Johnson appearing to salute outside number 10 Downing street)

I'm the dude. [explained in box below as 'The leader to Deliver Brexit, Unite the Country, Defeat Corbyn, Energise Britain'].

The Sun (same picture as *Telegraph*)

HEY DUDE! DON'T MAKE IT BAD. (with cue to refrain of the Beatle's song above photograph). An inset spot reads **BOJO IS OUR NEW PM.**

What all these front pages do is *celebrate* Johnson's election, and with light-heartedness – not just political approval. They all work with strong 'celebrity' values. Readers are positioned positively close to a familiar figure: one whose performance is associated with energy and effectiveness but also with fun.

Even the *Daily Mirror*, a newspaper which is explicitly critical of Johnson, has to work with recognition of the dominant frame in order to deny its validity. The front page carries four photographs of Johnson engaged in varieties of self-consciously 'funny' performance (in posture, expression, context etc.), accompanied by the double headlines 'BORIS JOHNSON, PRIME MINISTER and ITS REALLY NOT FUNNY ANY MORE...' [The italicized negative here seems more than a touch desperate (unlike the other papers, it is *asserting* a judgement to its readers rather than seeming to *share* one with them).

Of course, more detailed forms of political reporting occur elsewhere in these and other papers, but the front pages inevitably set the basic terms of personal identity within which any further engagement with perspectives, values and policy is embedded. This is less true of television reporting, although elements of the dominant press rhetoric clearly inform aspects of broadcast reporting and the TV coverage gives extensive space for Johnson's direct performances in terms of location, action, gesture, demeanor and speech. Returning to a point made earlier, Johnson's emphatic projection of celebrity – incorporating aspects of 'ordinary personhood' alongside 'specialness' – may expose him to kinds of adverse visibility which a quieter self- projection would not. However, the continuing effectiveness of his chosen strategy across a broad and diverse public, through both traditional and newer media platforms, would so far appear to have limited the risks of significant damage. The sheer strength of his celebrity projection, routinely renewed in his statements and interviews, is a factor to which nearly all journalism about him – 'quality' and popular, celebratory or critical – has had to orient itself.

Summary

It is clear that, in many countries, journalistic coverage of political figures will continue to have a strong 'celebrity' dimension. Use of the web by politicians, in part to bypass professional reporting, is still developing and this will feed into the kinds of persona that become publicly dominant and to which journalists have to relate. The situation will continue to be viewed by some commentators as deeply regrettable: a further indication of the reduced democratic conditions within which politics is conducted, including the expansion of forms of populism which seek to use personalized appeal to reduce the effect

of conventional modes of scrutiny and debate within the political system (in this sense, following the early reservations of Marshall, 1997). Alternatively, circumstances may be viewed as inevitable and even democratically productive, given a perceived need both for political culture and popular culture to be more closely aligned than in the past and for less formal modes of behavior, language and civic relationship to become the norm (Street, 2003 and Wood et al., 2016 develop versions of this position). Whatever broader interpretations are made, it is clear that sizeable sections of national publics have, in different circumstances, grown used to seeing and hearing about their political figures within varieties of the 'celebrity frame', often deriving a degree of satisfaction and pleasure from this mode of portrayal. While popular opposition to specific celebrity politicians is widely apparent internationally, opposition to the 'celebrity' perspective in general is far less so, with many critics and protestors within the political sphere selectively employing this perspective themselves in their communications.

The varied forms of political journalism, 'serious' and 'popular', will in most cases find it difficult to ignore the 'celebrity frame' surrounding many of the people they report on – and will often be involved in sustaining and amplifying it, even if reluctantly so. Across the range of journalistic modes, this frame will appear in both the most serious coverage and the most trivial, entertainment-led stories. It will therefore be a factor at work both in critical reporting and in the most propagandist of supportive accounts. One reason for this is the requirement for many kinds of political journalism to engage audiences and readerships who, as noted above, may have become both familiar and comfortable with celebrity-style politics. Moreover, as I observed earlier, the very idea of 'political journalism' as a distinctive mode of reportorial engagement is likely to be further weakened by broader changes in media structures and flows and inter-related generic shifts. The basic challenge for serious work will continue to be that of not letting recognition of the established realities of the celebrity frame significantly impede or deflect investigative scope and energy. Both are crucial to sustaining and developing whatever democratic accountability current political systems allow.

As I write, the COVID-19 pandemic across its various phases continues to be a key focus of political leadership and management in many countries. Questions of personal projection and personal 'style' have been highlighted in what is a further phase in how 'celebrity frames' relate to intensive political news-making internationally. Trump's oftendismissive comments on the disease, and his decisions regarding it, have displayed further aspects of the controversial relationship between personality, policy and language which have shaped his presidency throughout. Here, his extraordinary refusal to accept the results of the 2020 presidential election and the threats and false claims of fraud he continued to make through the two months following the announcement of the result have taken American political culture and language to new lows in the modern period. They led to the assault on the Capitol building on January 6, 2021, after Trump had urged more vigorous forms of protest against the confirmation of the results. His behavior in the election aftermath, reported worldwide, is set to shape Trump's presidential image in a lasting way – further exposing some of the risks which excessive celebrity-centered politics can bring to democratic systems. In the United Kingdom, the final impact on the established political persona of Boris Johnson, himself briefly hospitalized during the pandemic, will take some time to gauge. In both countries, questions about the speed and manner of governmental management of the crisis and its economic aftermath will exert

a significant influence on perceived performances of leadership, modifying what once might have seemed to be celebrity framings invulnerable to change.

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