

## **Fame: Politicians and Celebrities**

### **Monika Jane Browatzki**

Speaking on the relationship between politics and celebrity, Andy Warhol stated of Ronald Reagan, "I met someone on the street who said, wasn't it great that we're going to have a movie star for president, that it was so Pop, and when you think about it like that, it is great, it's so American." The creation of persona recognized by the masses for those in the elite, or those aspiring to be in the elite, is a phenomena documented among all cultures, worldwide. The rate of both the initial popularization of new media within Western nations, as well as the willingness of its leaders to adopt them into their agenda, best exemplifies this practice. To be king is to be chosen by god, while to be a pharaoh is to be recognized as a god itself. There is a shift observed, then, when one follows this lineage of high rule to modern American society – a social order whose government is removed from religious hierarchy. It is the obtainable position of "celebrity" which fills the void in character previously occupied by the notion of divinity in the highest governing role.

For one with the intent of holding the title: president of the free world, a simple and knowable persona is a necessary possession. In the grandest sense, these abstract and carefully calculated public personalities serve as appealing presentations, characters whose establishment is aimed at easing the friction felt between a ruler and the general populace. To limit the gap felt between the masses and those who rule over them is to better prevent any possible resentment or uprisings that may brew among them. Presidents of the people must be elevated above their citizens in one way and, yet, accessible in another. It is their publicly broadcast charm that may very well convince a voter to trust them with the considerable control over their lives awarded by such a position.

In the exploration of these theatrical characterizations, it is important to survey both the

motives driving their “characters” creation as well as the effects that follow their institution. A great benefit to this understanding can be found in examining the evolution of these pseudo-authentic public representations over a broad spectrum of time. When describing the thoroughly unique, and often groundbreaking ways in which various United States presidents have employed the new media of their age many universal commonalities become apparent. If nothing else, such study helps to identify the direct traits interpreted either positively or negatively by the American people regardless of era. Namely, the masses have consistently displayed their desire for their leaders to maintain accessible and charismatic personalities, a fashionable family dynamic and, most importantly, the means to cultivate their trust on an emotional level. This sense of trust has been established, time and time again, through the conveyance of distinctly apolitical views and interests. The more positive information a candidate can provide about their personal life, coupled with their ability to make use of whatever modern methods exist to deliver such messages; the more elevated their chances of political success become.

In the digital era there is an unprecedented ease of access to information; multimedia outlets translate presidential love poems to their potential voters. In a behavior much like that of a hopeful lover who keeps an ear open to hints of passion or disgust regarding one topic or another a media savvy president will closely monitor the pulse of popular culture and opinion. Both attempts are made in the hope of maintaining a sympathetic role, thus gaining the trust and connection of their prospective admirers, the voters. For a president this results in an increased ability to communicate back to the masses on the issues that they most desire to focus on at any given time. A candidate’s ability to successfully utilize the very resources prominent in popular culture displays a tangible connection to the current world, and furthermore a willingness to adapt and promote productivity in a manner relevant to the public of any given generation.

**“Mr. Roosevelt is the Tom Sawyer of the political world of the twentieth century; always showing off; always hunting for a chance to show off; in his frenzied imagination the Great Republic is a vast Barnum circus with him for a clown and the whole world for audience; he would go to Halifax for half a chance to show off and he would go to hell for a whole one.”**

**- Mark Twain, Mark Twain in Eruption (1940)**

In studying the progress and manipulation of media through the presidents who sought to exploit it Theodore Roosevelt is a fitting place to begin. Becoming the 26<sup>th</sup> President of the United States (after the death of President William McKinley) he would come to be referred to as “the first media president.” In addition to being, at 42 years of age, the youngest president up to that time, Theodore “Teddy” Roosevelt was the first U.S. President to appear on film. It was through this format that he perpetuated his image as a ‘dandy’ and outspoken leader.

Before becoming president Roosevelt worked his way up through the political system; previously holding the position of police commissioner in New York City. It was in this period of time that he honed his skills of understanding the reasoning and inherent language of newspaper and magazine reporting. He would then make use of those formats to the betterment of his public image. Roosevelt was known to invite journalists to go along with him on his late-night squad car patrols. His implied role as a strong and powerful figure of authority stemmed from these earliest moments of his political career. Regarding his relationship with the media he was quoted as saying, “we accomplished some things by assuming the appearance of a power which we did not really possess” (Corry, NYT).

Once in presidential office Roosevelt's use of newspapers and magazines only intensified. He famously proclaimed that the White House was a "bully pulpit" and unabashedly used the masses' interest in the president's position to engage them. This allowed him the opportunity to present citizens with a wide scope of information most relevant to them, and to in turn rally their support. Through his hands-on managing of his image within the press, Teddy was, effectively, his own personal relations manager. During his presidential career Roosevelt once again established positive and interactive relationships with journalists; openly inviting the press to document his actions as they did during his days spent as police commissioner. This worked to cultivate his acute awareness of the ways in which these outlets provided the masses with information regarding his political character. Teddy also understood the ability that these same connections had to convey back to him information regarding the immediate interests of the American people.

In keeping with his knowledge regarding the interests of the public Teddy orchestrated coverage of his political goals from their sentimental beginnings to their eventual and triumphant successes. Through the press Teddy successfully communicated any opposition to his goals as universal wrongdoings. The masses then felt a personal sense of accomplishment in righting these injustices through their continued support of his policies. Maintaining an awareness of the schedules and practices of newspapers and magazines Roosevelt was documented at times updating them hourly with a constant flow of information. Through this unprecedented connection Mr. Roosevelt aimed to fill and control any gaps that he felt were present in their reporting.

He would also invite media correspondents to practice intimate presidential coverage such as; the reporting of leaks, gossip, or other potential story ideas. As Teddy developed personal rapport with the journalists he would filter out his favorites, and those who reported positively on his cabinet would gain both easier access to his press unit and prestige within the industry. Teddy

would often put on a show for the press providing relevant content for their articles, but also entertainment of a more personal nature, bordering on the journalistic genre of “general interest stories.” This open relationship charmed the journalists into communicating to the public the experience of being friends with a humorous, accessible, and boisterous president - a previously unforeseen privilege that inspired a general desire to support and like him.

**A man may die, nations may rise and fall, but an idea lives on.”**

**- John F. Kennedy (1963)**

Another technological breakthrough that diversified the face of media reception was the television. As an invention nothing before had completely encompassed all forms of popular media in the manner of television programming. The technology was popularized by its ability to interpret classic literature and folklore in an audio-visual format as well as current event reporting in the vein of a newspaper. This home entertainment avenue allowed for an increased ease of distribution than was previously available through theatrically released works. It was this innovation that allowed the television’s overwhelming presence in American culture to be quickly adopted.

In 1961, the year in which Kennedy took the position of 35<sup>th</sup> president of the United States, there were an estimated 52 million television sets in American homes, an approximate presence in nine out of ten households. Being 43 years of age at the time of his election - an age quite similar to that of Roosevelt upon his own presidential induction - John F. Kennedy was, likewise, a pioneering figure in a newly-popularized media. It was during his campaign that Kennedy appeared in the first televised presidential debate in U.S. history. His opponent was Richard Nixon, the vice president of the exiting cabinet. Kennedy’s confident display served as a sort of “screen test” of his ability to

appear attractive to audiences through a televised format. Many historians largely attribute JFK's eventual victory to the overwhelmingly positive public reaction to his performance within this event. Nixon, ignorant of the great difference between the reception of a performance televised and one broadcast via radio, did not take the necessary care to compose and present himself in an appealing manner.

At the time of the debate Nixon was suffering from fever of 101 degrees; a condition that prompted his advisers to suggest he decline presence in the debate. In a show of disregard for the unfamiliar power of television, Nixon refused to heed these suggestions. He not only took part in the debate as planned, but also refused any assistance offered to "clean up" his look for the television audience. This indignant stand against the notion of public vanity was not interpreted kindly, resulting in a notoriously poor reception of his on-screen presence. As far separated in their approach to the format as in their political stances, Kennedy went so far as to wear professionally applied make-up for the event and undergo extensive preparatory training. This perfection of his visual impact was, while an entirely calculated element, interpreted as an indication of his assumed innate and pleasing persona.

Throughout the duration of the debate Nixon was sweaty, unshaven and even a little maniacal in appearance. Meanwhile, Kennedy came off as calm, collected and in control of the proceedings. Subsequent polls recorded a great discrepancy in opinion among audiences who witnessed the television broadcast of the debate and those whose experience was limited to radio. Nixon, whose television performance was widely seen as a massive failure, fared much better in the opinions of those who merely listened to the debate. This discord formed a telling impression of one candidate's adherence to media and mores of past, while also highlighting the ability of the other to serve as an exemplification of the sexualized television era.

This performance would serve as a foreshadowing of the celebrity image that JFK would come to embody - one that was, in part, accomplished due to his extensive comprehension of the potential power given by this new visual medium. As he was sworn in NBC delivered the inauguration live and in color. In the following January John F. Kennedy held the first televised presidential press conference; it was a political scene staged from the center of the Technicolor superpower of the modern world.

In a piece published by TV Guide in 1959, JFK spoke on the development of glamorized politics and his choice to participate in this practice, stating:

Honesty, vigor, compassion, intelligence—the presence or lack of these and other qualities make up what is called the candidate's "image." While some intellectuals and politicians may scoff at these "images"—and while they may in fact be based only on a candidate's TV impression, ignoring his record, views and other appearances—my own conviction is that these images or impressions are likely to be uncannily correct.

President Kennedy was well prepared to optimize this exposure for his own time in the spotlight. He had preemptively organized a varied support group to assist him in communicating the established “Kennedy brand” to voters. This media-minded coalition included his campaign manager and brother, Robert F. Kennedy, and “Guild, Bascom & Bonfigli,” a San Francisco-based advertising agency that fashioned his television commercials. Both JFK and his wife, Jacqueline, had extensive experience with media promotion. In 1957, the same year in which their first child was born, John Kennedy wrote “Profiles in Courage,” a biography of eight U.S. Senators throughout the nation’s history which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Jacqueline Kennedy also had experience

with the publication of her written word, having worked in prior years for the Washington Times-Herald newspaper. Of curious note is that two of the interview subjects featured in her column were none other than the then-vice president, Richard M. Nixon, and a young senator of rising popularity by the name of John F. Kennedy. On November 8, 1960, Kennedy won his bid for presidency against Nixon. Two-and-a-half weeks later, the incumbent presidential couple celebrated the birth of their second child.

JFK secured his campaign to an ideal media foundation, one composed of practices that utilized the extraordinary access granted by popular entertainment outlets to convey his perceived manifestation of the American dream. As closely associated with the Kennedy Legacy as John, himself, was the first lady. As an instant figure of public intrigue, Mrs. Kennedy was an optimal and graceful accompaniment to the glamorous and widely televised image of the chic and modern presidential family. Upon her arrival in the White House, Jacqueline established “The White House Fine Arts Committee,” which served to assist her in remodeling the couple’s new home, as well as “The White House Historical Association,” which provided tours and guidebooks to finance the endeavor. Once completed, she provided a televised tour of the White House grounds and stylish interior to a CBS news crew, an exclusive and personal report that garnered a viewer count of 56 million.

In addition to the social aspects of their lives, the styles of fashion adopted by both John and Jackie were a constant topic of news. Mrs. Kennedy was known for her orchestration of elaborate White House parties - publicized events that provided artists, writers, scientists, poets, and musicians the opportunity to share niceties with politicians, diplomats, and statesmen. Her personal fashion choices were a constant source of commentary, resulting in extensive replication by audiences. Despite her consistent media presence, Jacqueline often took the position of a soft-spoken and

elusive fashionista. She even opted to be depicted through illustration rather than in a photo for Vogue Magazine's "First Lady" issue, an established tradition for the publication since their 1929 coverage of Lou Hoover. Although the subject of much interest herself, the majority of Mrs. Kennedy's television appearances were made at the side her husband.

While harboring some intent to control the media's infiltration of his life, John F. Kennedy was, nonetheless, absorbed into the public consciousness in a manner not previously experienced by political figures. The public's desire for information was, seemingly, insatiable. Before long, scandals arose that distanced JFK from the "family man" image he had worked to portray. In its place, one resembling that of a play-boy was instated. The level to which JFK encouraged the media's stray from the status quo previously being presented is debatable, but regardless, stray it did. Allegations arose of his extensive extra-marital affairs, the most infamous of which was his continued contact with sex icon Marilyn Monroe, as well as his possible association with mob activity.

Rumor aside, the intimate connection that Marilyn Monroe fostered with both John and his brother, Robert Kennedy, has been made indisputable by fact. Similarly, the role that The Rat Pack played in Democratic campaigns (highlighted by their performance at the July 11, 1960 Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles, California) adds to the rumors regarding the family's ties to organized crime a very public sense of legitimacy. As if it had not been previously cemented, John F. Kennedy's powerful and strange celebrity presence within the public psyche was made an infinite cerebral impression following his assassination on November 22, 1963.

The heavily disputed details surrounding his death have remained a subject of much study and debate, as, surely, they will continue to be. Universally accepted, however, is the potent afterimage left by John F. Kennedy's political and celebrity character, imprinted as it is upon the

national memory. His was a presence thoroughly integrated into all facets popular culture, and, one which continues to be called upon as a reminder of the unavoidable convergence of public figure and public image. It is a peculiar state of being which has been made increasingly common by continuously pervasive media exposure.

**With great power comes greater responsibility.**

**– Barack Obama**

On February 10, 2007, Senator Barack Obama announced his candidacy for the 2008 United States presidential election. At 47-years-of-age, he was, in the same vain as previous media-conscious candidates, a relatively young presidential contender. Hailing from a prestigious educational training, a history that would prove to be unexpectedly divisive among the voting public, President Obama first received his B.A. in Political Science from New York's esteemed Columbia University. From there, he continued on to Harvard Law, from where he received his Juris Doctorate degree. His high-level political experience was of a much less storied nature, having only served as the senator of Illinois for two years before making his presidential bid.

Becoming the 44<sup>th</sup> president of The United States of America, much of his iconographic presence – and his political successes – can be attributed to his sympathetically attractive underdog stature. Standing as both the first African-American president, as well as the first citizen born outside of the continental United States to hold the position, Barack Obama came to symbolize the actualization of promises made and expanded upon from the origin of the country. Further amplifying this image is his familial history, born of a Kenyan father to a white, Midwestern woman at a time in the country's history which laid much scandal upon such arrangements. While

embodying a personal history of such intrinsic likeability, the presidential hopeful walked a fine line between graceful acknowledgment of these factors and more exploitative measures. Whether or not his attempt at such was or was not a success is an assessment that is best made through a simple recognition of his victory. Much like the practices of media marketing organizations, the campaign that elevated President Obama to his political status was one which sought to acquire the interest of the 18-to-29-year-old audience. As shown in the results of studies conducted by The U.S. Census Bureau, this focused attempt garnered a statistically significant turnout for this demographic – rising to 49%, as opposed to their 47% turnout in the 2004 presidential election.

As the most consistently traveled sites, Twitter, MySpace, Facebook and YouTube provided to campaigns free platforms from which they could better reach their targeted audiences. In 2008, Facebook alone boasted an active userbase surpassing that of 120 million individuals. Within this count, Barack Obama was officially supported by 2,444,384 users, and, the official representatives for the Obama administration active on the site had submitted a staggering 495,320 wall posts and 1,669 less-involved “notes.” Also present on other social networking platforms, the Obama administration had accumulated: 844,781 “friends” and 147,630 comments on MySpace, 115,623 Twitter followers (with 262 updates being made to the account) and 117,873 YouTube subscribers, 25,226 YouTube “friends,” and a combined web of 1,819 related video posts made independently by users.

More so than other candidates, the Obama campaign made a premeditated effort to reach out to individuals who have developed an overwhelming reliance on the internet as a source for all information. During a period of time continuing to be socially defined by these solitary practices, it is unsurprising that the campaign which presented the most comprehensive and thoughtful attempts at the incorporation of these social mediums was able to net such quantifiable gains from the

practice.

The ability gifted by personalized electronic interactions with the voting public has been used to establish the same intimate bonds which once motivated Jacqueline Kennedy to deliver her televised tour of the White House, or, prompted Theodore Roosevelt to become increasingly personable with correspondents of the press. Obama was able to become a “friend” to millions of potential voters. If anything can convince a person to support one side of any competition, it is the involvement of a friend in the running, and, to convince them that a preexisting candidate fills this role is an understandably coveted act. However, despite the proven viability of the internet as a forum to convey information, if audiences interpret its use as ill-informed or insulting, it can result in the same level of political suicide provided by mediums of the past.

Candidates for the coming election have already begun their preparations to utilize the Internet in a manner similar to that of Obama’s proven success. As with any interaction, a negative perception is always a possible outcome. A relevant example of this has been witnessed in republican Newt Gingrich’s announcement of his presidential candidacy via Twitter, a seemingly desperate appeal made to an audience whose interests he was otherwise ignoring. Furthering the insult, his initial tweeted-appeal to be given one of the highest government positions in the world, featured a link to a YouTube video, which has been criticized for its notably poor quality. His decision to not make his announcement in a more established media setting also harmed him with his core supporters. The result impression of this attempt is one characterizing him as being thoroughly out-of-touch with the audience he wished to entice; failing as he did to use the format in a meaningful and effective manner. This reaction is akin to that of audience's poor reception to Nixon’s infamous performance in the television debates, half-a-century prior.

Similar to the methodology employed by Kennedy during this same historically significant

campaign, Obama applied a modern finish to more established campaigning formats. Along with his pronounced Internet presence, President Obama's campaign was known for its application of musical and literary talents to convey his message to a less politically minded audience. In the same way that Kennedy conveyed an embodiment of the masculine romantic ideal vocalized in the work of Frank Sinatra; Obama employed this technique to more completely embolden his status as an icon of minority empowerment and equality.

Consciously encompassing a variety of genres and recognized age appeals Obama's campaign co-opted songs conveying this message. As a professed audiophile, the presidential hopeful conducted a myriad of interviews with Rolling Stone Magazine across the span of his campaign. While based primarily in political discourse, one of the underlying messages present in these efforts was that of genuine appreciation for the artists whose work had become a functioning part of his campaigning arsenal. Interestingly convergent with Kennedy's association with The Rat Pack and the connotations of that interaction, is the legendary rapper Tupac's song "Changes" mixed with Obama's speeches tying in associations with gang activity from a much different era. However, those who would find the greatest concern with such connections tended to base their fears on the bad reputation of an artist rather than examination of the positive message within the music.

It is important to recognize the powerful impact that Barack Obama as the first black president has made upon the African-American community. Encouraging a diversion of focus from the damaging stereotypes attributed to the hip-hop scene, he has mindfully attempted to exhibit enlightening messages of progress and proactive political responsibility among minorities. Obama has managed this while wisely avoiding the potential pitfalls of open condemnation of these cultural elements – an arch standing which has marred the images of other modern African-American

politicians in the eyes of the very people they seek to most represent. In positively engaging these voting constituents who tend to produce notoriously low polling numbers, Barack Obama's campaign managed to make great strides in bettering their voter turnout. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, about 131 million people were reported as voting in the 2008 U.S. presidential election, an increase of 5 million from 2004. This increase includes a disproportionately large number of new African-American voters, weighing in at nearly 2 million more than was previously reported. Additionally, the election drew 2 million more Hispanic voters and about 600,000 more Asian voters.

Aiding in the creation of the image serving to bolster President Obama's support his highly educated wife, Michelle, was incorporated as an integral part of the Obama campaign in a manner rarely seen in American politics. Born and educated in Chicago, Illinois, Michelle majored in sociology, minored in African American studies and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts from Princeton University in 1989. Afterward, she continued her education and, like her husband, earned a Juris Doctorate degree from Harvard Law School. Upon her completion of these educational milestones, Michelle worked as an associate at the prestigious Sidley Austin law firm in the areas of marketing and intellectual property. It was there that she met Barack, an enthusiastic young intern working through a summer associate program. Her knowledge and experience within these fields would eventually provide a great amount of working insight for her husband's rather unlikely presidential campaign.

Outside of her intellectual interests, Mrs. Obama is known for her keen fashion sense and social involvements. These personal interests, along with her relatively young age and photographic good looks, provide a strong parallel between her and Jacqueline Kennedy. As was the reaction to Mrs. Kennedy in the past; the media enthusiastically documents Mrs. Obamas actions currently.

Like many before her, she has been featured in Vogue's "First Wives" issue, and even has her own website dedicated to fashion, [mrs-o.org](http://mrs-o.org). From here, any user can follow 'what and whom she's wearing,' a feature which offers the option of being linked to Twitter, Facebook, and Flickr. In addition to glamorizing her role as a fashionably relevant first lady, the site is used to publicize her good deeds, such as a viewable gallery of photos taken of her on the White House lawn, in which she is seen actively hosting a series of fitness demonstrations for a number of children and their parents.

Despite his focus on electronic media, Obama has far from abandoned the television practices perfected by John F. Kennedy. Making appearances on a variety of programs with high ratings among varied demographics, Obama's television presence was most notably felt in the months leading up to his election. During his hefty 2008 campaigning, 3.58 million viewers tuned in to see the candidate's initial interview on "The Daily Show with John Stewart," a left-leaning political comedy program which is successful in the same young and desired market which he was reaching to through his extensive internet promotion. In his return to show in 2010, he became the first sitting president to appear on the program - albeit to a slightly diminished audience of 2.84 million. When he appeared on the popular women's daytime talk show, "The View," a record 6.6 million viewers were recorded; a statistic that indicates the largest audience measured for the program since its 1997 inception. Much like his second appearance on "The Daily Show," Barack Obama was the first current president to appear on the program.

As the next election rapidly approaches, hopeful presidential candidates are following the paths which lay exposed by the successes of those before them, while, also, forging their own new tactics of courting the American people. While prepping their plumage, rubbing Vaseline over their teeth to maintain photo-ready smiles and readying themselves for infant posteriors poised across the

nation, their quests are carried over into the less renowned world of the Internet. Outlets of all media forms have readied themselves for the renewed assault of public interest, hyping their hosts up on cocktails of disregard for personal privacy and energy drinks provided by the sponsors of their segments. While unshaven photographers lie in wait behind strip clubs and garbage cans, eagerly awaiting the scandals which will make or break the next potential leaders of the free world, an army of over-educated and under-worked twenty-somethings sit at home, reloading reddit and reblogging the poorly constructed sensational reporting of the fringe websites to which they subscribe.

In every competition to establish which candidate can accumulate the most digital “friends” or working relationships with the musicians who make up MTV’s top ten video hitlist, it is neither the intent nor inherent nature of promotion that has changed. No, as the elbow rubbing and back scratching begins, the necessity of presidential hopefuls to manipulate their public image and manhandle the press will remain just as it has been for over two centuries of national history. What alters with the flow of history are the formats within which these battles of popularity are raged, characterized most comprehensively by their likelihood to change. Some will flounder in their attempts to make use alien technologies, while others will exceed at using every new innovation to express their relevancy in the lives of those they so desperately wish to appeal to.

This approach, however, should not be construed as inessential or shallow, as it is the prerogative for candidates within a democratic system to maintain a viable level of trust with those they seek to represent. If this translates to an inferred lowering of standards, a series of pressures which forces an out-of-touch elderly man to make a fool of himself via twitter, then so be it, because, when you think about it like that, it is great. It's so American.

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