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Politicians as entertainers - a political performance of the personal

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ABSTRACT

Appearances on entertainment television constitute opportunities for politicians, not only to convey political messages, but also to perform personality. Most research has focused on the interview setting as the locus of such performances. But in addition to being interviewed, politicians occasionally turn entertainers themselves, dancing, singing, playing instruments or doing comedy. This article analyses such performances as a specific communicative practice that plays a part in the construction of public persona. The analysis is theory driven and based upon the concepts of personalization of politics, performativity and the carnivalesque. Our conclusion is that such performances have the potential to communicate emotive sociality, accentuate celebrity status, construct ordinariness and work as a pre-emptive inoculation against satire and ridicule. There is, however, also a risk to appear undignified and scrupulously populist involved, since the performances negotiate borders of political decency.

KEYWORDS

Personalization of politics; entertainment television; carnivalesque; performativity

Introduction

In 2002 the then Swedish Social Democratic Prime Minister Göran Persson appeared in the children’s programme Abrakadabra. Persson was featured in a segment in which the show’s host, Doris the Cow, portrayed by an actress dressed in a full body cow costume, interviewed him about the workings of democracy. At the end of the segment, Persson was seen dancing with Doris.1

Much of the following debate concerned the mediatization of politics in general, and how far politicians are ready to go to in their quest for popularity. The critics focused almost exclusively on the dance. Persson was castigated for cynical vote fishing. But the dance was also seen as a part of a calculated and strategic make-over, orchestrated by party spin-doctors, in which Persson’s image was to be transformed from boorish and arrogant to accessible and sympathetic (Persson Mora 2017).

Persson’s dance was not the last time Swedish politicians engaged in singing, dancing and doing comedy on entertainment television. In the 2017 talk show Hellenius hörna Social Democratic Prime Minister Stefan Löfven impersonated a whisky-touting character of the police-drama Beck.2 The Christian Democrat party leader Ebba Busch Thor was
singing and dancing in the Swedish adaptation of The Lyrics Board in 2017. Former Feminist Initiative party leader Gudrun Schyman presented her 2010 participation in the Swedish version of Dancing with the stars as an opportunity to bring out her ‘sexy side’ and to ‘show that I am not a bitter cunt who squeeze my legs together, flaunt hairy armpits and haven’t been laid in a long time’ (Broman 2010, p. 27 our translation). Former Right Wing Prime Ministers Fredrik Reinfeldt and Carl Bildt made cameos of themselves in comedy skits when holding office.

Politicians turning entertainers on television is by no means a unique Swedish phenomenon, but seems to be a development in line with the accentuated personalization and mediatization of any political system in which power depends on public approval, and where public approval depends not only on political accomplishments and agendas but also on how well politicians communicate the personal (McKernan 2011; Bjerling 2012; Lawrence and Boydston 2017).

Entertainment television has a particular way of connecting with potential voters since it ‘engages the audience on an emotional level, bases truth claims on experiential knowledge, and treats the audience as being physically present within the program’ (Holbert 2005, 438). Those are factors that make it a preferred platform from which political personas are constructed and produced. Most of that production takes place in an interview setting. But when politicians step out of that setting to initiate an amateur performance, they employ a mode of communication that extends the range of potential inroads to affective connectivity with audiences/voters offered by the tv-medium. Researching that mode of communication and how it relates to the political is one way to meet ‘the need to study entertainment television as political communication’ (Holbert 2005, 440). In this article we examine the function of amateur performances as a complementary communicative practice by which politicians communicate the personal.

This calls for a mode of analysis designed to bring out the phenomenon’s communicative particularities. Singing, dancing, playing an instrument or doing comedy have qualitative differences as far as production of meaning is concerned – but in our study we treat them as facets of a type of generic communicative practice that contrasts performatively with the production of the personal taking place in interviews and discussions. The article is analysing that practice through an analytical lens composed of: personalization of politics, performativity and the carnivalesque.

The meaning of entertainment performances has cultural variations. Singing, dancing and doing comedy may mean different things in different cultural spheres. Our analysis uses Swedish examples – but examples from the Netherlands, Great Britain, Norway, Australia, USA and other countries (Corner 2000, p. 400; Street 2004, 436) show that the expressions of the personalization of politics display similar characteristics all along the Western cultural sphere under the influence of Anglo-American entertainment television. A study of amateur performances by politicians may therefore be subject to what Stake calls naturalized generalization which means that the reader intuitively generalizes throughout a population ‘by recognizing the similarities of objects and issues in and out of context and by sensing the natural covariations of happenings’ (Stake 1978: 6, 7). While acknowledging the ‘natural covariation of happenings’, our study is looking at the production of meaning concerning the general phenomenon itself and is not so much an analysis of how it is performed in individual cases.
The otherwise extensive literature on personalization of politics and celebrity politicians seems to lack both empirical and theoretical engagement with politicians’ performances of amateur entertainment on television as a distinct communicative practice. Politicians do perform the personal when interviewed on entertainment television. When interacting socially with other guests and the host politicians are using both verbal and non-verbal communication to display a broad spectrum of personal qualities. However, when engaging in singing, dancing, comedy acting or some other form of amateur entertainment performance, an additional form of communication is employed for that same purpose. This is a communication of which the meaning, roots and purposes are contextually framed by modern evolutionary psychology research as to social and affective functionality. It may also be understood in a socio-historic context by exploring its carnivalesque aspects and drawing on a comparison with the role of the medieval jester.

**Social cohesion and carnivalesque intersection of power and play**

From a functional evolutionary perspective, laughter, music and dancing have contributed to social cohesion by establishing emotional bonds between group members (Dunbar, Gamble, and Gowler 2018; Mehu and Dunbar 2008, 1747). They constitute social practices that have been proven instrumental in keeping larger groups together socially by acting as a ‘key mechanism promoting intragroup affiliation and bonding’ (Manninen et al. 2017, 6127). Dunbar, Gamble, and Gowler (2018) also argue that activities like singing, dancing and joking over time have been developing into instruments of forging a willingness among participants to defend one another, and thereby played a role in contributing to sentiments of belonging within groups. Particularly smiling and social laughter are ‘likely to be involved in the formation of cooperative relationships’ (Mehu and Dunbar 2008, 1747). Pearce, Launay, and Dunbar (2015, 1) even suggest that singing is ‘promoting fast cohesion between unfamiliar individuals, which bypasses the need for personal knowledge of group members gained through prolonged interaction’. The practices has thus an evolutionary history of making people like each other – even though they are not personally acquainted.

Politicians acting as entertainers is a phenomenon related to a long historic symbiosis between sovereignty and entertainment. Within the framework of cultural studies, the medieval carnival of Europe is viewed as a set of rituals filled with rich symbolic imagery used as a model for understanding timeless social functions related to mechanisms of power (Burke 2009, p. 281, 257; Muir 1997; Robinson 2011; Zemon Davies).

The carnival is described as a mode of life existing outside of predominant societal norms, a ‘second life of the people, organised by the principle of laughter’ (Bakhtin, 1984, 8) which served as a locus of negotiation of boundaries between repute and disrepute, moral and immoral, and decency and indecency in the intersection between power and play.

The imagery was fundamentally polysemic and open to a variety of interpretations. Muir explains that ‘there can be no universal interpretation of Carnival that successfully explains all the variations. Carnival employed a set of images of its own that were independent of any particular social function they performed’ (Muir 1997, 92). However certain themes reoccurred. Two of those of interest to our study are: the illusory inversion
of power and the re-enactment of an alternative social order shaped after a pattern of play.

The carnival was marked by an emphasis of the debasement of the lofty and the uncrowning of power. Persons of higher social status would partake in full regalia and allow themselves to be de-crowned as a facet of the temporary upheaval of all established order that was the festival’s essence (Burke 2009, p. 260; Robinson 2011). Social roles and hierarchies were uprooted, and the seriousness of officialdom was through impersonation, humour and entertainment replaced by a sense of temporal equity and belonging. Through visual and bodily inversions of power and servitude it served ‘to infuse through the system at least temporarily the values of an egalitarian society’ (Zemon Davies 1975, 103). The carnival furnished a scene on which rulers could perform, or at least allow, the performance of that temporal egalitarianism. Sociologists claim that the carnival possessed an immanent duality which could enforce social control by serving as a security valve for discontent and thus reinforce the existing order and established power structures, but also articulate criticism and spark insurgence (Zemon Davies 1971, p. 74; Muir 1997, p. 92, 269). According to Burke (2009, 282) the carnival was a competition between officially orchestrated rituals that ‘expressed the attempt of the ruling classes to control ordinary people’ and unofficial rituals that ‘expressed protest against those attempts’.

Another medieval intersection between laughter and power was the court jester whose task was to humanize the divine sovereign by making him laugh at himself and to bring him in closer contact with his lowly subjects (Otto, 2001). Amoore and Hall (2013, 102) argue that the role of the medieval jester expressed ‘something of the indistinction between the inside and outside that plagues, but is necessary for, the exercise of sovereign power’. In his book Abnormal Foucault (2003, 13) states that there is always an element of the ridiculous attached to power. He claims that: ‘the person to whom power is given is at the same time ridiculed or made abject or shown in an unfavourable light, through a number of rites and ceremonies’. The jester operated within this indistinction as a link between royalty and populace. He was a member of the inner circle of the court, but at the same time represented the culture and taste of the lowly. His satire worked as a lens through which the sovereign could see himself as his subjects saw him and thereby gain humility (Otto, 2001).

This position made the court jester the embodiment of the incongruity and ambiguity marking a sovereign power demanding respect while being the subject of public laughter. The jester’s in-house position represented the power’s illusion of control of the uncontrollable. His singing and dancing were attempts to humanize the sovereign by incorporating an element of the culture of the powerless into the representational depiction of sovereign power (Amoore and Hall 2013, 104). His very appearance was reckoned to ward off evil by counteracting pride and haughtiness at the court and his very presence was a token of a sovereign being in touch with his subjects. (Otto, 2001, p. 31).

Television shows as arenas where politics is personalized, and personality is performed

In our analysis we use the concept of performativity in the sense of a concept describing how social actors construct and reconstruct themselves through performances, both theatrical and in the ‘real world’ (Loxley 2007, p. 3, 118; Kohler Riessman 2008, 106). The
performances may be a part of a planned strategy in which they are fitted to define a greater narrative and destined to reinforce a desirable projection or representation of a persona that harmonizes with that narrative. Berns (2009, 681) describes how “narratives produce – in a performative and interactive manner – individual and group identity on a pragmatic and cultural plane”. In a performative sense a politician is constantly crafting a story compelling us to vote for him or her. An important part of that story is the main character’s success in performing a personality with a broad appeal.

Since the beginning of the 20th century the link between political leadership and mediated personality has been an object of study (Rojek 2016, 74). Scholars have pointed out that self-promotion and exposure management are a prominent features of any politician’s quest for power, and that the mediated projection of an agreeable personality is a necessary complement to the promotion of political ideas and the display of leadership qualities (Meyer and Hinchman 2002; Bjerling 2012; Diessens 2013; Turner 2014). This personalization of politics has followed two lines of development. Both a shift in media focus from ‘political to personal characteristics’ and ‘a shift in focus from the politicians’ public life in office to their private life’ (Van Aelst, 2011, 214). Those shifts have contributed to an intimidiation of politics which means that the politician’s activities, opinions, tastes and preferences in areas not necessarily pertaining to political views or goals are broadcast, commented on and given a political dimension (Bjerling 2012, p. 43, 92; Stanyer 2013).

It is a development that has forced politicians to make their media appearances more versatile. They need not only to appear as political strategists, innovators or potential leaders, but also as compassionate, witty, funny and in touch with a wide spectrum of what it means to be human (van Zoonen 2005, 78). Turner (2014, 152) points out that ‘the management of public persona has become a core activity for contemporary politics. Politics is now overwhelmingly about the management of the media representations of individuals’. This development has incited politicians to use entertainment shows for politically strategic purposes (Lawrence and Boydston 2017, 45).

Holbert (2005, 438) points out that entertainment television has a qualitatively distinct way of communicating political content to audiences. He argues that the political in entertainment media may be received differently from political content in regular news reporting or in other journalistic productions, and therefore should be given attention as a separate field of study. Entertainment television has a particular way of connecting with potential voters since it ‘engages the audience on an emotional level, bases truth claims on experiential knowledge, and treats the audience as being physically present within the program’. That is a reason why entertainment television is a preferred platform from which the political persona is constructed and produced.

Politicians’ participations in talk shows and other types of entertainment television have traditionally consisted of entertainment-oriented interviews (Loeb, 2015, p. 28; Parkin 2014, 6). One of the early breakers of that tradition was Bill Clinton’s saxophone solo in the Arsenio Hall show during the 1992 presidential election campaign. Parkin (2014, 3) argues that Clinton thereby created a new venue for communication with voters. Parkin (2018) further states that the performance led to changes in the public perception of what constitutes acceptable political communication, changes that has rendered those arenas not only more acceptable, but even necessary platforms for serious candidates (p. 278, 280, 281). When Clinton dropped the microphone and grabbed the saxophone it was
a successful quest to expand the potential of entertainment television to communicate the personal for political purposes.

Ways in which entertainment performances forge political persona

Entertainment shows provide an arena where both explicit political messages and animated representations of the politician’s personal character could be displayed. An analysis of performances in those arenas must start with the obvious: they are not haphazard or a product of chance. There is a high degree of strategic calculation and risk management involved.

The key actors of the political system always reckon with the effects of the preferred reading structures of media products on the large majority of the audience and stage-manage their own performance in accordance with it (Meyer and Hinchman 2002, p. x).

Our analysis identifies five areas where the performances communicate meaning in line with the personalization of politics. The areas are not mutually exclusive, but rather overlapping as far as produced meaning is concerned. We will also deal with the potential political risks of this communicative practice.

‘Tailoring the political for a wider range of potential markets’

When Turner (2014, 151) suggests that politicians aligning themselves with celebrities are ‘seeking new ways of tailoring the political for a wider range of potential markets’, he ties the personalization of politics to a modernist consumption culture and a commodification of political figures. Driessens implies that an element of seduction is involved when the personal is used to forge emotional attachments to political personas.

Emotionalization and dramatization, which have been categorised as elements of personalisation, have become common strategies to capture people’s attention and consequently seduce them to consume and establish attachments with products and brands (including political parties and personas) (Driessens 2012, pp. 664, 665).

By trying to communicate the personal at a predominantly emotional level, dancing and singing politicians strive to ‘establish attachments’ to themselves as political commodities by a strategic personalization of the political aimed at segments of voters who may be out of range of, or less susceptible to, other types of political communication. Performing in the way we discuss in this article is a way to tailor the politician’s persona to accommodate audiences and appeal to voters by using a predominantly emotional mode of communication (Lawrence and Boydston 2017, 43).

When Prime Ministers Reinfeldt4 and Bildt5 performed as amateur actors impersonating themselves in comedy skits, they advertised their own capability to view the purported pompousness of their office with an ironic glimpse. This was an endeavour to both create identification with voters who view politics and politicians ironically, and to project a likeable easy-going persona who does not take oneself too seriously.

Feminist party leader Gudrun Schyman participated in Dancing with the stars to show her ‘sexy side’ and to ‘show that I am not a bitter cunt who squeeze my legs together, flaunt hairy armpits and haven’t been laid in a long time’ (Broman 2010, p. 27 our...
An extraordinary construction of ‘the ordinary’

As paradoxical as it seems, the celebrity politician’s amateur performances as a singer, dancer or comedian may also be a part of the politically crucial construction of ordinari-ness. McKernan (2011, 197) points out that the illusion of ordinariness is a vital element in the composition of a politician in touch with ordinary people. He explains that to achieve both popularity and legitimacy ‘politicians must master a performance that simulta-
neously portrays them as unique and ordinary’.

An appearance on a television entertainment show is an opportunity to get exposure in both modes of presentation simultaneously. When politicians are given the opportunity to talk about topics seemingly devoid of political content or to discuss popular culture, they may express opinions or tastes that transcend politics and with which voters can identify at a personal level and agree to, even if they are not inclined to agree with their political views. When politicians discuss politics they do it from a political platform where
they perform the extraordinary. But when discussions revolve around popular culture the performance creates ordinariness since politicians are produced as having ordinary tastes and consuming (and even participating in) the same popular culture as ordinary people.

When singing, dancing or doing comedy, celebrity politicians could take this projection of ordinariness one step further. In the skits in which former Swedish prime-minister Reinfeldt figured, comic effects were created by showing how he acted, and was treated like any ordinary Swede in situations like shopping grocery and being criticized for not taking care of his own dishes at a coffee-break at work. The performance gave him the opportunity to enact ordinariness both by an ordinary artistic performance and by performing the ordinary albeit in an extraordinary setting.

When politicians perform artistically, television promotes the illusion of ordinariness through its construction of intimacy and closeness to the audience. The medium frames the performance by mimicking an evening among friends and projecting the illusion that this could have happened in any living-room, or at any karaoke bar in company with ordinary people doing what ordinary people do to have a good time. In that setting, the performance engenders sympathy if it is poor, and if it is proficient, it inspires awe. Bush Thor, the party-leader of the Christian Democrats, was for instance widely commended for her singing qualities when performing on The Lyrics Board whereas prime-minster Persson’s dance with Doris the Cow presented him as, at best, an ordinary dancer.

But regardless of the quality of the performance, the politician is not produced as an aspiring or full-fledged artist. He or she is rather impersonating someone ordinary performing the social to reinforce friendships. No matter how well Bush Thor was singing – she was there as a celebrity politician, not as a singer. Her singing constructed her as an ordinary person good at singing and at the same time the exclusive setting was a hallmark of and reinforced her extraordinariness and celebrity status. By making ordinary amateur performances in an extraordinary setting, politicians are trying to pull off a presentation that ‘simultaneously portrays them as unique and ordinary’ (McKernan 2011, 197).

During the medieval carnival dignitaries performed equity when dropping their regalia and not only allowing, but also participating in popular festivities. When making amateur performances on a show, politicians signal a higher form of commitment to the principle of play than a mere appearance in a show would. This communicates an appeal to embrace them, not only as rulers, but also as fellow participants in the common project of ‘having a good time’ or sharing a cultural event in a personal setting. They are thus re-enacting the carnivalesque illusion that rulers are ready to temporary divest themselves of power to play along with subjects on equal terms. They are performatively applying for membership in a community of taste and creating a ‘they are like us’-feeling thus reinforcing the sense of ‘them’ as a properly representing ‘us’. Marshall (2020) argues that endorsement of popular culture by politicians is an important factor in legitimizing power.

Celebrity’s relationship to another form of public identity – the politician/political leader – is conceptually and practically connected by their shared relationship to the popular and its articulation through the various mediated forms of popular culture. This connection to popular culture is one of the ways in which power is legitimized as the politician or celebrity is authenticated by their capacity to embody the citizenry in one sphere and the audience in another (p. 89).
When politicians’ exercise amateur performances, the two spheres merge. They complement performances of power, where they address voters as citizens from a political platform, with a performance of play which addresses constituency as audience. This is a quest to legitimize power by complementing approval of political performance at the ballots with approval of personal performance on television. Representativity concerning the political will of citizenry is complemented by representativity as far as audience taste in popular culture is concerned.

**A quest for likeability and a sense of belonging**

Politicians singing, dancing and doing comedy on entertainment television perform actions that, from an evolutionary psychology perspective, have developed to create emotional and social cohesion between members of a group. Pearce, Launay, and Dunbar (2015, 1) even suggest that singing is ‘promoting fast cohesion between unfamiliar individuals, which bypasses the need for personal knowledge of group members gained through prolonged interaction’. The distant intimacy of television allows politicians to bond with voters in this way without being physically in contact, and without the constraints of forging intimacy on an eye-to-eye basis. It is a process in which a ‘popular self’ or ‘ordinary easy-going and pleasing persona’ is constructed in a setting that is at the same time intimate and distant (Driessens 2012, 651). When listening to someone playing an instrument or singing ‘the impression of a “personality” can be gained subliminally’ and a performance may function as a non-verbal communication of likeability and personal charm depending on how strongly contextual factors promote such a construction of meaning (Navickaitė -Martinelli, 2018, 143).

Entertainment television is especially apt to convey emotions in a seemingly intimate setting (Rojek 2016). Talk shows are often imitating the materiality of the living room. There is a host. Guests are posing as invited friends. The atmosphere is purportedly relaxed. The purpose of the event is to get to know each other. The whole setting mimics a benign environment where social actions reinforce, deepen and intensify friendship, belonging and good relations (Loeb, 2017).

In such a setting an amateur artistic performance is a way of telling the audience that the performer feels secure, that he or she considers him- or herself among friends and therefore dares to show vulnerability and to engage in confidence-building behaviour.

After his performance in Hellenius Hörna Prime-Minister Löfven confided that he had dreams of becoming an actor in his youth. His acting was turned into a connective surface of identification with audiences with past or present acting aspirations. The bonds with voters he tried to forge did not involve common political dreams but were based on culture and play.

Welsch (2005, 245) argues that singing is a form of socially situated emotional communication of personality in which the emotions conveyed come across as ‘true’ and unfeigned. Singing is a mode of communication lending an illusion of authenticity to the persona under construction. An illustration to this effect is what the Cultural Editor at the Swedish daily Dagens Nyheter wrote, after inadvertently having encountered a videoclip featuring a singing Donald Trump.
Even though the scene is bizarre, there is something touching about it. Never has Trump appeared so authentic and unfeigned – maybe because all people become more open and vulnerable when they sing. There is something deeply disarming about a broken or false tone, regardless of who is singing (Wiman, 2018 – our translation).

Politicians performing within the framework of entertainment shows are constructing themselves as vulnerable and authentic. They implore our sympathy for and engagement in them as persons. Those striving for control are presented as out of control. People of power are acting in a context where they seemingly have no power.

A politician singing, dancing or doing comedy on television is communicating a relatable, enjoyable and likable persona. It is a way to project the impression that one is not taking oneself too seriously and to load the public persona with para-social dimensions of identification and likeability.

**Instrumentalizing celebrity status**

Moving from being mere interview objects to acting as amateur entertainers on tv-shows brings politicians’ celebrity status one step further beyond the sphere of political culture and deeper into ‘the complex dimensions of publicity, fame, and into a wider, and by its very definition, popular culture’ (Marshall 2020, 89). Driessens (2013, 543) discusses the term ‘media-capital’ as ‘the subset of cultural capital that relates to the media, including, amongst others, being media-savvy, having good interview skills and the ability to speak in sound bites, or being a talented singer or actor’. We argue that invitations to sing or dance on a tv-show even if you are not talented – is a token of a celebrity status that transcends the status of a politician just being interviewed on television. Amateur artistic performance is a way to expand the possibilities for politicians appearing on television to capitalize upon their celebrity.

Politicians being interviewed on entertainment television are instrumentalizing their celebrity status, making it a tool for accessing an important arena – the show – and an important platform – the interview – for the production of both the political and the personal. When they sing, dance or act on television – an extended range of communicative means to perform the personal is accessed and instrumentalized.

Driessens is making a valuable identification of two facets of the conversion of celebrity capital into political capital. ‘Being media-savvy, having good interview skills and the ability to speak in sound bites’ (Driessens 2013, 543) is a way for a politician to use rhetoric dexterity in handling the medium to convey a message, or to perform ‘the politician’ in whatever media format available. That form of capital is convertible into political capital through a mediated projection of a skilled orator, intelligent strategist, inspiring leader and trustworthy politician or the liking; qualities that are instrumental for executive office.

Singing and dancing on the other hand, is about converting celebrity capital by performing the personal. It is about creating a personal connection to voters by chiselling out the person behind the political façade, and about making that person radiate likeability and relatability. Entertainment television is an arena where both forms of capital could be converted into political benefits. The celebrity status of the politician is a capital that could be used to access arenas where doing comedy, singing and dancing could be used to promote politically beneficial connections between performer and audience.
Without a certain amount of ‘accumulated media visibility that results from recurrent media representations’ (Driessens 2013, 543), ergo celebrity capital, the chances that a politician would be given the possibility to benefit from the affinity-generating powers of singing, dancing or doing comedy to connect with voters on prime-time television would be very slim.

Celebrity capital is used as an entry fee giving access to media platforms particularly suited for a strategic production of the personal. Politician who endorse their celebrity status to the point of making amateur artistic performances on public television are using that status as a strategic tool to access an additional mode of communication of the personal. In the process they are converting celebrity capital into political currency. The performance becomes an operationalization by means of which that conversion is effectuated. To use a marketing metaphor: celebrity capital is the capital buying the advertising platform – the performance on that platform is what generates political capital in the form of a more voteable political persona.

**Inoculation against ridicule**

When stepping into the role of an entertainer, and particularly when doing cameos of themselves, politicians are trying to take control over the element of ridicule that Foucault (2003, 13) reckoned an intrinsic part of a position of power. They become their own jesters. In the process their persona is pushed out on a carnivalesque tightrope trying to gain public affection while balancing on the edge of ridicule.

Satire and ridicule could be damaging to the public persona of any politician (Lee 2014). Studies based on Inoculation Theory seem to indicate that attempts to counteract the effects of satire by ‘pre-exposure to the weakened versions of the persuasion’ (Compton 2018, 96) may under certain circumstances prove successful (Lim and Ki 2007; Compton 2018, 99). But efforts to inoculate against political humour could also backfire. Compton suggests that politicians at the butt-end of jokes or satire in American late-night television do better in keeping silence than to make efforts to ‘pre-empt late-night television ridicule’ since such efforts in his study proved to be more damaging than helping (Compton 2018, 95).

A media appearance in which a politician performs as a singer, dancer or comedian could engender an array of satirical responses. But also constitute an alternative, non-argumentative form of inoculation against satire. The non-successful inoculation efforts studied by Compton were verbal and argumentative, not performative or self-satirical, and some of his results indicated that political humour could itself have an inoculating effect (Compton 2018, 99).

Showing vulnerability and being ready to show that the personal could be the object of a certain amount of self-induced ridicule is a way to take the edge out of malicious satire that may be more efficient than trying to counteract it verbally with arguments. Being self-satirical makes satire less poignant. Making a fool of oneself in a controlled setting is a way of lessening the impact of possible future satire as an assault on character, thus constituting one example of ‘how humour could be strategically, intentionally used to confer resistance to influence’ (Compton 2018, 102).

A politician poking fun at him- or herself on entertainment tv-shows, makes the acidity of other tv-shows’ satiric assaults on character less abrasive. It is a way to disarm or poke
a hole in the pomposity attributed to politicians and people in power. A politician doing parody of him- or herself, or engaging in amateur singing or dancing, is constructing self-distance and a relaxed relation to prestige and pompousness thus striving for control of the ridiculousness adhering to power.

**Negotiation of political decency**

When power is using play as a mode of communication there is a risk that the quest for control of image and persona derails into the uncontrollable, and that performances of equity and ordinariness turns into something undignified and ridiculous. Beneath the purported constructions of likeability and belonging, there is always the risk of criticism and dislike. Satirical news programmes are arenas where that risk is imminent since their very idea is to make politicians’ political and personal performances into objects of ridicule and satirical critique and commentary. In some of those shows politicians themselves participate as a part of the entertainment. A situation that puts their communicative skills under great stress since it means being both the object of satire and making witty and humorous comments about themselves and their politics. Turner (2014, 150) states that talk shows and ‘satiric news commentary programs such as The Daily Show and The Colbert Report, has challenged traditional sources of news and thus influenced how the process of mass-mediated political presentation must be organized’. This presents a challenge to politicians – how much entertainers must they become to attract voters and when do they reach the point where their performances just appear scrupulous, undignified and ridiculous.

Otto (2001) points out the medieval jester had to be careful to use just the right amount of satire – otherwise he could fall out of favour. When riding the celebrity beast, any politician risks being identified with celebrity culture’s connotation to void, empty, non-authentic representations and a lack of stability.

In a sense, celebrity might be described as fame emptied of content, or artistry. (...) What is striking is not simply how celebrities transform and reinvent their identities today, but how many of them embrace and indeed celebrate a culture of inauthenticity. If originality and authenticity were the hallmarks of traditional notions of fame, then parody, pastiche and, above all, sudden transformations in a star’s identity are the key indicators of contemporary celebrity (Elliot and Boyd 2018, 4).

Amateur performances on television entail the risk of appearing ridiculous and undignified. The performance may come across as an insincere and cynical fishing for votes. The singing, dancing and other artistic performances negotiate the boundaries of what is acceptable behaviour for people in power, and how far they may venture into ordinariness and populism.

The conversion of celebrity capital into another kind of capital does not always go unnoticed or without resistance since it can disrupt the relative value of the different kinds of capital and the corresponding power dynamics within social fields. Think for instance of the legitimation crises or lack of authority of entertainment celebrities entering the political field as candidates, or inversely, of the harsh criticism on politicians gaining and validating celebrity capital (Driessens 2013, 554).
One notorious example being British MP George Galloway’s appearance in the British version of Celebrity Big Brother. He claimed that his participation was among other things ‘an attempt to reach young people who were otherwise disengaged from politics’. Instead it rendered him the epithet ‘The most hated man in Britain’ and the appearance was reckoned an important factor in his eviction from parliament at the elections following the show (Hartley 2007, p. 46, 47).

In the 2012 presidential campaign John McCain tried to label Barack Obama a ‘shallow celebrity’ with the hope of making him appear unpresidential (Wheeler 2013, 88). And Prime Minister Persson was, as mentioned, accused of undignified vote-fishing by his opponents after his dance with Doris.

**Concluding comments**

Our discussion identifies and addresses an underdeveloped field of study: politicians communicating the personal through amateur entertainment performances. When politicians engage in dancing, comedy skits and singing they are using television shows to employ a mode of emotionally charged communication evolutionary designed to promote social bonding at a group level.

Celebrity politicians are able to communicate in that way because their celebrity status makes them sought for by media producers controlling arenas in which amateur cultural performances by the right people have commercial and popular value. Access to those arenas opens the possibility to perform the personal in a way that expands the communicative surfaces that politicians have at their disposal when it comes to communicating the personal for political benefits.

Politicians partaking in popular entertainment are purportedly endorsing folk humour and claiming ordinariness. It is also an attempt to conquer additional arenas where the personal could be performed and where potentially emotional attachment with voters could be forged. A politician dancing, singing and doing comedy on television is a performance synthetically recreating the carnivalesque equity where the lines between both audience and performer, and ruler and subject, were blurred.

When politicians launch themselves into media arenas where power regularly is heckled and made an object of ridicule, the action is an invitation to laugh and to be entertained with the politician instead of at his or her expense. It is an attempt to take control of the satire and ridicule that inevitably is associated with persons in power. The performances thus echo of the friction inherent to the carnival. On the one hand the ruler’s participation and attempt to control the proceedings and the image of himself. And on the other hand, the unbridled circulation of satirical imagery with subversive power (Burke 2009, 282). The modern entertainment media becomes likewise a battleground of imagery. Performing politicians try to project the image of an unassuming and self-ironic individual but run the risk of ending up the ridiculed object of satire. The performance may backfire and entail a loss rather than a gain of political capital.

The risk to appear ridiculous and undignified when performing on talk shows is always there – but is reduced by the leisure informed social codes and the format. The setting is informal and forgiving. The host is in most cases hand-picked for his or her ability to create a socially comfortable atmosphere and positive energy. Loeb states that a norm guiding most talk shows is ‘congeniality which leads host to build
a predominantly friendly environment that features the guest and their product in a way that will be interesting for the audience and flattering for the guest’ (Loeb 2015, 28). The show’s prime narrative trop is comedy and its defining features are festivity and laughter. The narrative function of the politician is amusement. People watch to feel good, not to exercise political scrutiny. Other participants are mostly favourably inclined. Most possible outcomes of the performance are positive for the performing politician. If skilled, politicians will engender respect, if poor they may still foster sympathy and identification. Parkin points to ‘the growing legitimacy of connecting politics with comedy that has developed over the past few decades’ (Parkin 2018, 274). When entertaining audiences, politicians are engaging in a communicative practice loading their political persona with connotations to amusement and relaxation.

In today’s mediatized political landscape politicians ‘must use entertainment for political aims’ (Lawrence and Boydstun 2017, 45). This necessity has apparently incited some politicians to step up their involvement in popular entertainment by incorporating elements of the jester when performing the personal. The intersection of entertainment television and celebrity culture has provided an important carnivalesque scene well suited for that purpose. What this means in terms of political communication is a field of study that this article aims at opening up for further investigation.

Notes

1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9WCfi0cTUDI
2. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IS3Izu68xq8 [Swedish – from 0.23 to 1.08 into the clip]
4. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9q9TzV1607g [English]
5. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G_DyBUvLzKA [Swedish]

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