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MEDC 5310 – Media & Culture

Assignment 2

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### “Double-Edged Celebrity in Presidential Politics”

It was senior campaign strategist Steve Schmidt and ad man Fred Davis who hatched the idea, and “Celeb” was the most memorable and arguably most effective ad of the McCain campaign. Schmidt was a veteran of the 2004 Bush campaign, an election perhaps best remembered for a controversial pseudo-documentary produced by the Swiftboat Veterans for Truth attacking John Kerry’s war record. Kerry’s slow response to the piece effectively crippled his image, and his greatest strength, his record as a war hero, was turned into a question mark. According to Heilemann and Halparin’s book, *Game Change*, Schmidt wanted to use a similar strategy around Obama’s biggest strength, his fame (330). Fred Davis reasoned, “Big celebrity? So’s Britney Spears! So’s Paris Hilton!” (qtd. in Heilemann 330) The selection of Spears and Hilton was deliberate, as the ad would not have been as effective using more universally beloved figures such as Oprah Winfrey or Ellen DeGeneres. Schmidt even reportedly joked, “Don’t politicize Oprah. She’s more powerful than you can comprehend, like Obi-Wan Kenobi.” (qtd. in Heilemann 330) Not all celebrity is created equal, and Douglas Kellner cites a critical distinction between “ascribed celebrity,” “achieved celebrity,” and “attributed celebrity” (715). Paris and Britney represent the tabloid-driven side of

celebrity, which proved a more practical narrative for McCain to attack Obama. Cultural studies provide a framework to critically analyze the attack ad's structure and effect on the larger campaign using textual analysis, audience studies, and political economy studies.

According to Richard Campbell, textual studies focus on interpretation of the message (Media 484). The original Celeb ad was 30 seconds long and structured as follows:

- :00 Cuts between Britney Spears, Paris Hilton, and Obama amid camera snaps over the sound of crowds chanting Obama's name.  
Female voiceover: *"He's the biggest celebrity in the world."*
- :05 Obama waves to crowd, stands in front of the Leaning Tower of Pisa.  
Voiceover: *"...but is he ready to lead?"*
- :10 Obama speaks to a packed National Mall standing in front of the Washington Monument.  
Voiceover: *"With gas prices soaring, Obama says no to offshore drilling...and says he'll raise taxes on electricity."*
- :20 Low-pitched drum hit stops the "Obama" chants, image cuts to Obama superimposed on an intertitle: *"Higher taxes, more foreign oil."* Voiceover reads the intertitle aloud and sums up, *"That's the real Obama."*
- :25 Smiling John McCain in profile, looking upward, his voice approving the message per the campaign reform law he helped pass.

Most ads follow a short-form of the three-act story arc. In this case, Act One is the setup, establishing a central question and an association between Obama and tabloid celebrities. Act Two is the evidence, a negative interpretation of Obama's energy policy. Act Three is a synopsis and a call to action to vote for the other guy. The inclusion of images like the Leaning Tower and the Washington Monument play up the fact that Obama is larger than life in order to attack that quality.

The celebrity message resonated because the spectacle of the primary season had largely resembled a reality television competition. The primaries had been a political version of *American Idol* with small-town voters playing the parts of Simon, Randy, and Paula. Each week, the front-runners moved on and the public watched the field grow smaller one candidate at a time. Given Obama's relatively young political career, the public mainly knew him for his speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, so the long primary was the public's opportunity to get to know him. The unprecedented media access combined with the 24-hour news cycle gave the public its most unfiltered look at a presidential primary and its many candidates to date.

One natural metric for audience studies in political campaigns are the polls, and the Internet has even created a cottage industry of meta-polling through websites like RealClearPolitics, Pollster, and FiveThirtyEight.com. According to an aggregate polling by Pollster.com, the month after the ad aired was McCain's strongest.<sup>1</sup> It was not until September, in the wake of McCain's bungled response to the financial crisis and a searing Tina Fey impression on Saturday Night Live of McCain's gaffe-prone running mate, Sarah Palin, that the campaign went into freefall. Both the danger and the brilliance of the Celebrity ad was that it directly challenged America's love affair with celebrities, specifically the opportunistic, artificial variety we see on reality television. The Democratic primary race had come down to a strong and famous female candidate and a young, energetic, biracial candidate. Regardless of the winner, America was poised to experience its first non-white male presidential candidate from a major party. This

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<sup>1</sup> View aggregate polling graph over course of 2008 election cycle:  
<http://www.pollster.com/polls/us/08-us-pres-ge-mvo.php>

added drama correlated with an increase in public interest and a higher voter turnout both in the primaries and the November election.

Media commentary about “Celeb” was largely negative, as is usually the case for any attack ad. In an interview on MSNBC, columnist Bob Herbert went so far as to read racial undertones in the ad, noting the intentional contrast between two phallic symbols, two white blondes, and Obama.<sup>2</sup> Politicians and pundits on both sides seemed to be on a hair trigger for possible race baiting, especially so soon after Republican Bob Corker’s “Playboy” ad that aired during his 2006 Tennessee Senate race against Harold Ford, Jr.<sup>3</sup> Endearing the media is never the goal of political attack ads, and most politicians claim to hate them. They come into play because they tend to be effective with voters. The point is to plant seeds of doubt about the opposing candidate. *Game Change* recounts the rhetoric between the campaigns immediately following the ad. The day the ad first aired, Obama was at a Missouri campaign stop where he suggested McCain would try to make the public scared of Obama because he doesn’t look like “those guys on the dollar bills.” Schmidt immediately jumped on the statement as not just playing the race card, but as “dealing it from the bottom of the deck” (331).

Political economy studies focuses on “the production of popular culture and the forces behind it” (Campbell 486). For media outlets, a testy campaign translates to better TV ratings, print media sales, and web traffic, so playing up the drama between the candidates and talking up the possible racial undertones of the ad was a ratings catalyst and an economic driver. The drivers for the two candidates were transparent enough as each wanted to get elected, but McCain likely never considered the interests and reaction

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<sup>2</sup> View Herbert’s interview: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHIJUE0PrjY>

<sup>3</sup> View the Corker ad: <http://www.bing.com/videos/watch/video/playboy-ad/6v3gtc1>

of an unlikely figure, Paris Hilton. The “Celeb” ad cast Hilton as a celebrity of the “attributed” variety, which Hilton interpreted as a direct attack on her brand. In response, Hilton released a parodic attack ad of her own using online video distribution sites FunnyOrDie and YouTube.<sup>4</sup> In the ad, she sunbathes in a swimsuit while mocking the “wrinkly white-haired guy” and offering a surprisingly cogent energy policy compromise that would include limited offshore drilling with strict environmental oversights as a stopgap measure until Detroit could get better at making hybrid and electric cars. The ad quickly went viral, garnering over one million Youtube hits in a single day (Kellner 722).

National politics, especially in presidential elections, was a celebrity spectacle long before the 24-hour news cycle and rise of reality television. John Kennedy and Teddy Roosevelt are two notable examples of media darlings who leveraged their celebrity to build a successful political brand. To some extent, celebrity is helpful to winning elections, and one popular cliché among pundits is that Washington is Hollywood for ugly people. The real difference between Obama’s celebrity and the celebrity of a Kennedy or Roosevelt is the sheer volume of media. McCain’s campaign calculated that people were growing sick of the coverage and that Obama had peaked too early. While it was not enough to swing the election, the ad was memorable and presented a strategy that may well be repeated in the 2012 election. Cultural studies provide a three-pronged avenue for analyzing the content, effect, and strategy behind McCain’s ad. Whether people love or hate a celebrity, the one constant in American culture is that we want to watch the spectacle unfold.

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<sup>4</sup> View Paris Hilton’s rebuttal: <http://www.funnyordie.com/videos/64ad536a6d/paris-hilton-responds-to-mccain-ad-from-paris-hilton-adam-ghost-panther-mckay-and-chris-henchy>

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