The "Celebrity Obama" Strategy: The 2008 Presidential Campaign's Attack Ads.

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Abstract

In July 2008, Barack Obama, the Democratic presidential candidate, travelled overseas and delivered public speeches that were heard by hundreds of thousands of people and aroused considerable enthusiasm. All the media said that Europe had been "seduced" by the rising star of progressive America. However, back in the United States, Obama had to defend himself against the Republican campaign commercials that mocked his European tour and called him a "celebrity", just like Britney Spears or Paris Hilton. From the electoral spots to the media coverage of the conservative networks to the Internet buzz, "Celebrity Obama" is also an image that matches the traditional conservative anti-intellectualism. Depicting Obama as a cultured, narcissist politician who appreciated Europe means to turn him to the rural disgust for the cultural elites of the cities on the coasts. This study investigates the communication strategies adopted by the Republican Party and the conservative independent groups during the electoral campaign. It verifies how public opinion was affected by such messages, comparing and analyzing the opinion polls conducted at the time.

Keywords: American politics, political culture, American political communication.

1. Celebrity politics between pop culture and strategies of political communication.

In the past decade, pop culture has become an increasingly decisive element of political communication. While on the one hand it has served to attract and entertain the largest possible number of people, on the other, according to some scholars, (Negrine, 2008). its increasing penetration of political rhetoric has been facilitated by the stunting of the cultural skills of citizens, so that many of them find difficulties to distinguish complex political messages. Pop culture's political success is therefore due to the fact that voters do not need particular abilities to understand the narratives elaborated and recounted by political leaders (Stayner, 2007).

Because pop culture's field of political action comprises both electoral campaigns and governmental communication, its use serves to achieve goals that may be both electoral victory and the maintenance of political power. The relationship between political communication and popular culture should therefore be considered in light of the interests and ambitions of political actors. In parallel, change in the style of political communication should not only be evaluated in light of the pessimistic view of voters as passive and manipulable; it should also be construed in light of the progressive professionalization of political communication influenced more and more by marketing and advertising (Sanders, 2009). Paradoxically, this trend recalls the classic model of the rational voter developed by Anthony Downs (1957) according to which voters have little time, scant resources, and limited incentives to examine and compare candidates and political programmes. Citizens therefore require condensed information, and the parties furnish it in the form of images, brands, and narratives. In other words, in the form of popular culture.

One of the most successful outcomes of the merger between pop culture and political communication is represented by what English-speaking scholars call "celebrity politics" – a phenomenon receiving increasing specialist attention (Corner and Pels, 2003; Sanders, 2009). There are two main ways in which political use is made of the concept of celebrity. The first concerns the stars of pop culture – actors, singers or sportspersons – who use their fame to support and promote a social or political cause; the second pertains to the politicians who adopt the style, language, tools and images of pop culture for the purpose of promoting themselves and their ideas (Street, 2004). The former case does not directly concern electoral competitions, except in the classic form of endorsement – which is not treated here – while the second concerns it completely (Nash, 2009).

Although the mingling of political communication and pop culture has often been accused of "disengaging citizens and working against civic engagement" (Putnam, 2000) and of "undermining democratic participation,"

(Hooghe, 2002) there is substantial agreement on the effectiveness of these practices, and on the success in terms of image and votes accruing to politicians when they use the schemes of pop culture – especially when they pose as celebrities by adopting styles and language typical of show business, and therefore communicate with the public by means of symbolic registers immediately understood (Saward, 2006). However, the phenomenon of celebrity politics has given rise to much more than a simple aesthetic change; it has engendered a hybridization of politics itself, which seems to be shifting towards an environment that holds together war and love stories, euphoria and seduction, post-modern energy and tribal spontaneity. The leader "no longer seeks to foster reflection, nor adherence to projects, but to stimulate the public's empathy, emotional courage, and enamorment" (Susca and de Kerckhove, 2008).

The case examined in this article concerns the difficulties and attacks to which a political celebrity is subject precisely because of his/her status as a celebrity. In particular, the article will analyse the television spot campaign mounted by John McCain against Barack Obama during the 2008 American presidential campaign. These television and web advertisements were resumed in official events and debates. Their purpose was to weaken the Democratic candidate by targeting his "celebrity status". Obama's popularity during the electoral campaign was particularly high among young people, and his vital and potent image seemingly rekindled the aura of glamour which had surrounded John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan – two other candidates highly adept at cultivating their image. Like Barack Obama, they were perceived as glamorous and vibrant. They were politically inexperienced and proposed themselves as agents of change. They also shared an extraordinary ability to speak persuasively to millions of people.

Kennedy has a central place in the evolution of the modern American presidential campaigns. While before him there had been chief executives, such as Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin D Roosevelt, who used the instruments of celebrity to their advantage, Kennedy was the first superstar chief executive, and he wielded the techniques of the new age of television as no other politician ever had before him (Gould, 2003). These skills enabled him to overcome a rather thin background for a US presidential candidate, in 1960. Three terms in the House of Representatives and eight years in the Senate had not left much in the way of a legislative record, but the absence of policy commitments worked in Kennedy's favour. He could campaign on the slogan of 'getting America moving again' without having to stress specifics (Reeves, 1993). What counted even more was the way the enthusiastic response of the crowds to his candidacy indicated that, if he were to gain office, Kennedy had the potential to transform the presidency into a media sensation (Giglio, 1991). The Kennedy campaign produced nearly 200 TV ads, which varied widely in subject and style. Several Kennedy spots showcased his spontaneous speaking abilities, using excerpts from rallies, speeches, and debates. He seemed the embodiment of youthful energy, and the difficulties caused by his weak back, and his dependence on painkillers, were carefully screened from public view. Additionally, the glamour and beauty of Jacqueline Lee Bouvier Kennedy added to the sense that a new vitality had to come to the White House (Dallek, 2003).

Like Obama and JFK, also Ronald Reagan was energetic, charming, good looking and had an intuitive feel for national concerns (Dallek, 1984). But, despite the others, he was a conservative and he was not young. He was a well-known B-movie Hollywood actor and he can be placed in that short-list of the media celebrities that entered politics, along with Sonny Bono, Jesse Ventura, Arnold Schwarzenegger and a few others. Probably because of his ascertain celebrity status, his 1980 political advertising differs from Kennedy's and Obama's. The core of his TV campaign was a conventional biographical ad tracing Reagan's career and crediting him with reducing California's deficit while lowering taxes. The ad's main purpose was to show that Reagan—best known to the public as a movie actor—was also an effective governor. The "celebrity status" was much more employed in his re-election campaign, when, combined with the "restored American optimism", represented the axis of his 1984 political spots. There, with lush images of Americans buying houses, raising flags, washing cars, going to work, and playing in their yards, all set to swelling music in a montage style familiar from soft-drink and beer commercials, Ronald Reagan ads presented an upbeat image of "Morning in America." Reagan consultant Philip Dusenberry said that the ads were designed to evoke emotion rather than thought or understanding: "That's the most powerful part of advertising. It stays with people longer and better."

While John F. Kennedy and Reagan never faced any attacks on their constructed or spontaneous image of celebrity, Barack Obama had to defend himself from John McCain's attacking strategy. Obama embodied the change that America wanted: this was not just one of his various slogans but a recurrent motif in his entire campaign.

Being a "young, skilful and inspired politician" was a label which Obama accepted gladly. But the exaggerated cult of Obama's image, the vagueness and rhetorical exaggeration of some of his speeches, the sometimes blind fanaticism of his supporters, and certain narcissism, were targeted by his adversaries and began to represent potential weaknesses. McCain's idea of insisting on portraying Obama as a celebrity was not only a strategy designed to emphasise his inexperience and lack of policy by mocking his popularity. It was also part of a more sophisticated plan to arouse two prejudices deeply embedded in American conservative culture: anti-elitism and anti-Europeanism. The European tour thus became an excellent pretext for depicting him as a candidate enamoured of the old continent, with its beliefs and customs so distant from those of a country where more than two Americans in three had never been abroad and only 21% of them had a passport (Usa.gov, 2010).

The accusation of being a celebrity, which in itself was an admission of Obama's success among young people, was therefore instrumental to the potentially more dangerous accusation that he was an elitist intellectual liberal, intrinsically different from average Americans and their attitudes. Also the attacks against Obama as an alleged Muslim served this purpose: that is, depict him as "different" and thereby sever "the vital empathetic link to be built between the candidate and the voters" (Susca and de Kerckhove, 2008). In order to garner votes from the conservative electorate, which might instead abstain (given that many prominent neoconservatives were out of the race), and to gain the support of moderate voters – but nevertheless sensitive to the appeals of patriotism and the American cultural tradition – McCain put himself forward not only as a war hero but also as a lover of football and the Sunday barbecue, the Protestant church service and American pride. Obama sometimes seemed to imitate McCain on these themes. He frequently cited the Founding Fathers and Abraham Lincoln, and called for a New Deal of national pacification in emulation of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The European tour, worldwide popularity, and vague rhetoric could therefore have been problems for the Democratic candidate.

McCain's appeal to the cultural values characterizing American exceptionalism reawakened the ideological core of American conservatism exemplified in Robert Kagan's famous essay, *Power and Weakness* (2002), which theorized that the United States must free itself from all intellectual subservience to Europe, and that "Americans are from Mars, Europeans from Venus". This reference to the European idiosyncrasy for war could implicitly weaken Obama's aptitude for being Commander-in-Chief, especially compared with a war-hero candidate like McCain. The exceptionalist and nationalist vision was still very strong in the country. It culminated in the aftermath of September 11 when it was repeatedly claimed that American history was structurally different from, and superior to, that of the European countries (Bonazzi, 2004). With the partial exception of the loyal British ally, the anti-European stereotypes are well-known: Europeans are weak, ungrateful, hypercritical, factious, sometimes anti-Semitic, and often anti-American. They spend their money "on wine rather than weapons" while the United States must invest economic and human resources to defend them as well. Anti-Europeanism and anti-Americanism stand at the opposite extremes of the traditional ideological continuum. Just as anti-Americanism in Europe is traditionally associated with the left, so anti-Europeanism in the United States is strictly of the right. Hence American democrats are considered more "friendly" to Europeans: indeed, in the disdainful words of Jonah Goldberg: "Clinton thinks like an European" (Garton Ash, 2003). To resume the above metaphorical dichotomy, therefore, it is likely that Republicans come from Mars and Democrats from Venus.

American anti-Europeanism originated in the American Studies of the early 1930s, which extolled the anti-ideological and pragmatic approach to social life. This approach was exactly the reverse to that in Old Europe, viewed as the "past" and towards which America should rid itself of any kind of oedipal complex. American neo-conservatism was likewise born as an intellectual movement. It rapidly spread to broad swathes of the general public and merged with the populism and traditionalism of the rural states. It added to religious fundamentalism and supply-side economics to become a radical grass-roots movement of full-blown conservatism.

McCain's determination to appeal to the "guts" of his electorate and to gain the votes of traditional abstainers, like the evangelical congregations which, when mobilized, were decisive for the double election of George W. Bush, was once again manifest in the choice of the neoconservative Sarah Palin as running mate. Some foundational works, such as Richard Hofstadter's *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1964) and *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1966) can provide context here. Especially the second one represents an early analysis of interaction between political campaigns and cultural prejudices. Hofstadter began work on this groundbreaking study after the defeat of Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic nominee whose willingness to speak in complex, allusive sentences made him a darling of academia and the literati. Stevenson's reluctance to dumb down was interpreted by many as evidence of a vacillating, elitist character.

Hofstadter showed the divide between intelligence and intellect that has existed on these shores since the time of the Puritans. Intelligence is deemed essential to practical problem-solving; it "seeks to grasp, manipulate, re-order, adjust... [it] will seize the immediate meaning in a situation and evaluate it." Whereas intellect "is the critical, creative, and contemplative side of mind... [it] evaluates evaluations, and looks for the meaning of situations as a whole" (Hofstadter, 1966). Analysis of the attacking commercials against Obama is therefore useful not only to highlight the possible harmful side-effects of constructing a political celebrity, but also to investigate two symbolic elements that become instrumentally involved: anti-Europeanism and anti-elitism, these being attitudes still rooted in part of the American conservative electorate's culture.

This article also deals with one of the peculiarities of American political campaigns: Negative campaigning. That is a central element of American politics since the foundation of the Republic, which has been made even more relevant by the development of the mass media. The causes for its success in the American context are first and foremost institutional: the use of a majority electoral system and of institutionalized primary elections to nominate candidates leads to campaigns mainly focused on the candidates and not on the parties, so that personal characteristics become more prominent and attacks on them become potentially more fruitful. The increasing polarization of the American political system (Jakobson, 2007) and the rise of "going public" by Presidents against Congress (Kernell, 2007) are other factors which may have contributed to the increasing bitterness of campaigns. Cultural causes, such as a well-rooted tradition of comparative commercial advertising, and legal circumstances, such as a regulation that is less restrictive than in other countries with respect to both content and financing of campaigns, may also be relevant. Finally, negative campaigns are favored by an electorate that is little informed about politics and distrustful towards it (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

The debate in the literature on negative campaigning has been characterized by two main theoretical positions: the demobilization hypothesis and the democratization theory. The demobilization hypothesis is supported by scholars that observe how negative campaigning poisons the political debate because it points out arguments that are "ridiculous, irrelevant and irresponsible" and bring the discussion to the level of tabloids (Kamber, 1997). The title of a famous book by Jamieson (1992) summarizes the malaise for the phenomenon and underlines the link between negative advertising and deceit: *Dirty Politics: Deception, Distraction and Democracy*. A path-breaking research on the topic found that negative campaigning can polarize the electorate, mobilizing the extreme wings of the parties; and depress turnout by increasing political disaffection among moderate voters (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995). However, these claims and other arguments that negative campaigning can be dangerous for the democracy have not always been upheld in the literature (Lau, Lee Sigelman, Heldman & Babbit). The idea that attacks against candidates could affect voting behavior and political disaffection is based on the assumption that voters are easily influenced and vulnerable to demagogy.

By contrast, the theory of democratization is based on the idea of the rational voter, for whom "emotions and reason interact with each other, producing a conscious and reflective citizenry" (Greenwalt, 1995). From this perspective, the exchange of harsh attacks among candidates gives the voters a chance to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each figure; moreover, a real political fight stimulates voters' interest (Geer, 2006). More generally, the democratization hypothesis views negative campaigning as an opportunity to enlarge the public debate (Riker, 1996). In support of this approach, some studies of American electoral campaigns have shown that positive messages tend to be less truthful than negative ones because they are less scrutinized by both voters and the media and thus are under lesser pressure to justify their informative contents (Geer, 2006). The subject has also been studied by psychologists, who have pointed out how candidates, in order to win elections, need to emphasize emotion (*ethos* and *pathos*) rather than reason *(logos*) (Westen, 2007). The aim of this article is to evidence the risks that a celebrity politician runs in an electoral campaign, especially if the personal attacks used against him or her intersects with narratives long present in the American political discourse. The analysis considers the television and internet spots produced by the presidential candidates, their parties, third-party groups, and individual web users.[1] It has been decided to concentrate on electoral commercials because of their continuing importance in US presidential campaigns, during which they constitute the main source of information on the candidates for voters (Kaid, 2004).

2. The 2008 American presidential campaign: political advertising strategies.

The 2008 political campaign, which resulted in the selection of the first African-American president in the nation's history, was about change. Polls indicated that more than 80 percent of likely voters felt that the country was moving in the wrong direction (Gallup, 2008).

As in 2004, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were important issues, yet foreign policy was overshadowed by the economy when the mortgage crisis hit full force in September. Other economic concerns included health-care costs, energy policy, gas prices, and rising unemployment. From the primary campaigns into the general-election contest, candidates positioned themselves as agents of change. Normally it is the party out of power in the White House that calls for change. In 2008, both parties claimed to offer "change," as opposed to "more of the same." The candidates made these claims in an ad war that was unprecedented in its quantity and cost. Ads were created in rapid-response fashion, timed for the increasingly fast-paced news cycle. Also, as a reflection of the shift in popular culture toward the provocative tone of the Internet, which relies on bold statements and humour to inspire "forwardability," the 2008 ads were noticeably sharper and more aggressive than that of previous elections (Livingoomcandidate.org, 2010).

Barack Obama's campaign created a number of positive ads that emphasize such words as "values" and "work," portraying him as someone whom working-class voters can feel comfortable with. While Obama's ads tended to be more positive in tone than McCain's, there were also a large number of attack ads. Just as President Clinton's 1996 ads linked Bob Dole with Newt Gingrich, nearly all of Obama's attack ads linked John McCain with President Bush, whose approval ratings were extremely low. By linking McCain to Bush, the Obama campaign successfully undercut McCain's image as an independent maverick. John McCain's ads were mainly about Barack Obama. Following the pattern of the 2004 election, the Republican campaign used its ads to define the Democratic candidate. In addition to attempting to portray Obama as a liberal Democrat who favours tax increases, the ads also tried to suggest that he is a celebrity who isn't ready to lead. However, with the selection of Sarah Palin as the vice-presidential candidate, the message was refined. Rather than focusing on the question of experience and readiness to be commander in chief, the later McCain ads claimed that Obama was a dangerous choice because "we don't know enough about him" (Livingroomcandidate.org, 2010).

The campaign for election of Barack Obama as the forty-fourth President of the United States has been described as innovative for various reasons. One of them is the extensive and sophisticated use made of popular culture. Obama's staff, in fact, organized a campaign frequently very distant from the traditional seriousness of electoral campaigns. On some occasions it resembled outright 'showbiz', or a rock concert, or a TV series. Moreover, celebrities from sport, the cinema and show business appeared in the media to express their support for Obama (Savigny, 2008). The Democratic campaign made constant and innovative use of social networks and video-sharing websites like YouTube. It thus addressed young people and less politically engaged social groups by using easily understandable images and languages. The adoption of the pop video of Will.I.Am's "Yes, We Can" as the campaign's official song, and numerous more or less spontaneous episodes of enthusiasm for Obama, testify to the advent of a candidate with unprecedented political features. It is no coincidence that Obama's huge electoral staff included professionals who had previously worked in Hollywood, and even former MTV choreographers (Denton, 2009). According to Rick Davis, head of the McCain campaign: "These images of celebrity status and the way he has conducted his campaign to date both in the kinds of events that he has and what he says at these events owe more to the development of an international celebrity status than it does to a traditional campaign for President" (Holmes, 2008).

The intention of Obama's staff was to run a campaign which implicitly contrasted the image of the young Obama with that of the 'old' McCain, thereby using the classic and effective strategy of presidential youthfulness that had favoured candidates like John Kennedy and Bill Clinton in the past (Jamieson, 1996). It also sought to divest the Democratic candidate of his most strongly marked features (race, inexperience, presumed liberal ideas) which might alienate part of the crucial moderate electorate. This bred the idea of organizing a campaign which portrayed Obama's candidacy itself as an extraordinary event, with a view to involving young people and marginal social groups. It was suggested that Obama should use an evocative, inspiring, and bipartisan rhetoric, almost Messianic in its tones, calling for some sort of "national pacification".

In both the primaries and the general election, Obama's candidacy aroused an unprecedented amount of interest and participation, which sometimes verged on fanaticism. Record micro-donations, the enlistment of thousands of volunteers, and the proliferation on the Web of hundreds of videos and blogs supporting the African-American candidate are good gauges of the enthusiasm for Obama. His staff also did its utmost to embellish Obama's campaign with symbolic references, for instance by having his candidacy announced from Springfield, the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln.

Finally, in order to compensate for Obama's lack of international experience – which was his main weakness compared with the experienced candidate and war hero John McCain – his campaigners decided to organize, between June and July 2008 (that is, a few days after his victory in the Democratic primaries), a tour that would take in the Middle East (with the usual visits to the troops in Iraq and Afghanistan) and the European capitals of Berlin, London and Paris. The idea was to enhance Obama's international credentials and to respond to McCain's oft-repeated criticisms that Obama had not been to Iraq in the past two years and was largely unknown to America's allies in Europe.

Obama's European tour was not restricted to high-level meetings and visits to American bases; the presidential candidate also held public meetings in the three above-mentioned European capitals. These attracted crowds of sizes which exceeded all expectations: it was estimated that an audience of almost a million people heard Obama's three speeches (Zeleny & Kulish, 2008). Obama therefore returned to the United States bolstered by his indisputable international success. This was yet further proof of the enthusiasm aroused by his candidacy and of the performance of his celebrity status, which – also thanks to the media – had transmitted his image overseas as well. His European meetings turned into mass rallies similar in numbers and features to rock festivals or spontaneous street parades. This great public success was enthusiastically reported by large part of the American media, and on conclusion of the campaign it proved to have brought Obama largely benevolent media coverage – much more favourable than that received by his opponent (Denton, 2009).

But on his return the United States, Obama – now the favourite in the race for the presidency – was met by the Republican counter-offensive, which focused precisely on his world celebrity status. On 30 July 2010, John McCain's campaign aired its first television campaign commercial, entitled "Celeb", attacking the Democratic opponent. The transcript follows:

> (enthusiastic crowd)
> Chant: Obama! Obama!
> Narrator: He's the biggest celebrity in the world. But is he ready to lead?
> [Text: BUT IS HE READY TO LEAD?]
> Narrator: With gas prices soaring, Barack Obama says no to offshore drilling.
> And says he'll raise taxes on electricity.
> [Text: OBAMA: NO OFFSHORE DRILLING. OBAMA: NEW TAXES]
> Chant. Obama! Obama!
> Narrator: Higher taxes, more foreign oil, that's the real Obama.
> [Text: HIGHER TAXES. MORE FOREIGN OIL]
> [Text McCAIN]:
> McCain: I'm John McCain and I approved this message.

The commercial, of the standard 30-second duration, was the most expensive in the first part of the campaign (the period between officialization of McCain's candidacy – in March – and his formal investiture at the Republican convention held in St.Paul, Minnesota, in early September), and it was broadcast 11,125 times on local, national and cable television, for a total cost of 3,677,133 dollars (data from the Campaign Media Analysis Group). The video opened with a shot of the crowd acclaiming Obama at his Berlin meeting. Then images of Obama alternated with those of frivolous and "flaky" celebrities like Britney Spears and Paris Hilton. The next part attacked Obama's proposals on the crucial issue of gas prices. The aim of the commercial was to highlight Obama's lack of experience and to launch one of the Republican campaign's slogans: "Is he ready to lead?". The issue selected was among those with greatest impact on the average American voter – and especially so in rural areas, traditionally conservative and most preoccupied with the price of petrol, given that any increase could mean hundreds of dollars of extra cost a month.

McCain's strategy was threefold in that it merged together three narratives: the popular issue of gas prices, Obama's lack of experience and, especially, his unconcern with the problems of ordinary citizens due to his celebrity status. Thereafter the celebrity = elitism equation became a mainstay of the Republican propaganda and characterized the entire campaign. According to the Republican campaign advisor Steve Schmidt, the aim of the commercial was obvious, and it could have influenced the outcome of the campaign. He asked rhetorically: "Do the American people want to elect the world's biggest celebrity or do they want to elect an American hero, somebody who is a leader, somebody who has the right ideas to deal in a serious way with the problems we face?" (Mosk, 2008).

Two days after the first broadcast of "Celeb", its twin spot "The One" appeared on McCain's official YouTube channel. This called Obama "the Chosen One" and compared him with Moses and Jesus Christ. The tone of the video, as usual on the Web (Brader, 2006), was predominantly ironic, and it mocked the rhetorical sermons and blind fanaticism that seemingly infected some of Obama's supporters. Also this video showed the cheering crowds on the European tour, a feature reiterated by fully eleven of the subsequent television commercials produced by the McCain campaign and which, even if the spot was only broadcast in the months of August and September, became the leitmotif of the entire campaign. The Republican Party then released another parody video on the Web which ridiculed Obama's celebrity status. In this case, Obama's Berlin visit was parodied by showing young techno music fans declaring their support for the Democratic candidate and other hippies and hashish smokers sporting T-shirts hailing Obama.

As shown by Table 1, if reference to Obama as a celebrity (often evoked in other spots with the image of the Berlin crowd chanting "Obama!Obama!") is included in a table summarizing the topics addressed by McCain's television commercials, it ranks in third place, behind such classic Republican issues as taxes and energy, and above current or long-standing ones like the price of gas and the need to reduce public spending. The penetration of public opinion by the negative image of Obama as a celebrity is confirmed by YouTube data showing that, on 4 November 2008 – the day of the election – fully 121 videos spontaneously produced by individual Web users, or by third-party groups, referred to the issue, mainly mocking Obama's celebrity status and comparing him with Michael Jackson, Abba, and the usual Britney Spears and Paris Hilton.

Table 1: Issues mentioned in John McCain's TV spots: Expenditure, TV Broadcasts, Number of Spots.

Issue	Expenditure	No. television broadcasts	No. spots
Taxes	$55,469,863	120,514	28
Energy/Environment	$34,518,380	83,020	14
"Celebrity Obama"	*$32,980,115*	*71,210*	*12*
Price of petrol	$30,941,390	56,857	13
International affairs	$30,140,197	66,953	12
Public spending/Budget	$29,230,267	58,115	4

Source: Author's calculations on Campaign Media Analysis Group/New York Times data

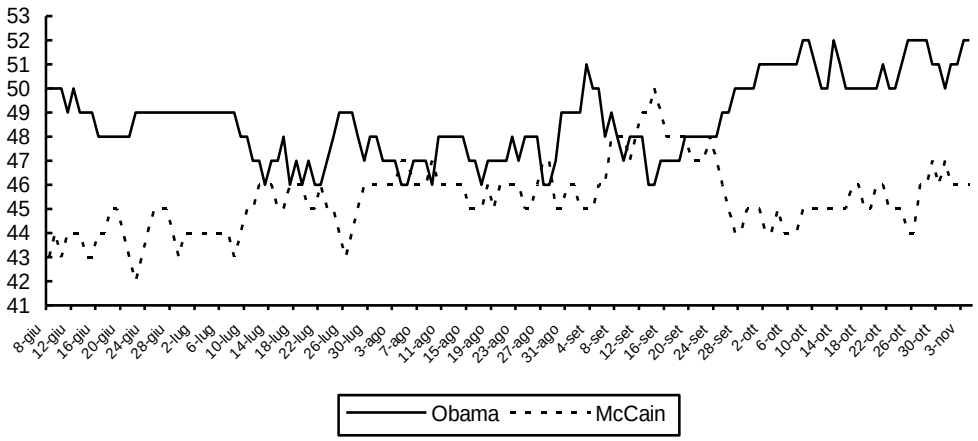
However, it was not only the Republicans that made political use of the concept of celebrity. Proof of the issue's penetration is also provided by the reply that Obama's spokesman, Tommy Vietor, gave to journalists when asked for his opinion on the communication strategies adopted by the McCain camp. The Democratic consultant responded with a laconic: "Oops! He did it again," the title of a well-known song by Britney Spears (Mooney, 2008). He thus alluded to a celebrity often regarded as the epitome of dissoluteness. Demonstrating that neither were the Democratic activists idle on the matter is the fact that Spears featured in a video produced by the independent liberal group ProgressiveAccountability.org. In this video the singer and McCain seemingly think alike as they praise the work of the unpopular outgoing president George W. Bush. McCain's spot-driven attacks on Obama's celebrity status were concentrated between the end of July and mid-September. They were then resumed only a few days before the election, when the last television offensive was launched on 28 October. This centred on a spot entitled "Special" which was broadcast 683 times at a total cost of 653,289 dollars.

Public opinion surveys testify to the awkwardness of the issue treated by the commercial: a Gallup/Usa Today poll of 15 September 2008 found that 18% of Americans considered Obama to be more a "celebrity" than a politician, and 4% of the interviewees had heard of him but did not know what he did; above all, they were unaware that he was running for the White House. The damaging potential of the issue was confirmed a few days later, when a survey by the Pew Research Center reported that 54% of respondents indicated experience and leadership ability as the most desirable qualities in a candidate for the presidency (Pew, 2008). Moreover, the personalities associated with Obama in the McCain campaign commercials – Britney Spears and Paris Hilton – respectively received negative evaluations from 67% and 79% of the interviewees (USA Today, 2008).The Gallup graph of the trends in surveys on the two candidates (Figure 1) shows that McCain's anti-celebrity offensive enabled him for the first and only time to tie, and even overtake, his opponent. Because there are no data available it is not possible to correlate the two events. Nonetheless, it is widely agreed that support for McCain peaked in the days immediately after the announcement that Sarah Palin had been selected as his running mate, and as the populist and anti-elitist rhetoric personified by the Alaska governess intensified (Abramovitz & Sabato, 2008).

In a Gallup poll of 12 September 2008, Palin received a "positive rating" from 59% of the interviewees and her "public and private profile" was appreciated by over 65% of respondents (Gallup, 2008). But Palin's popularity rapidly dwindled as a series of gaffes made voters aware of her illiteracy and the extremism of her politics. In early September, Sarah Palin was the brightest rising star in the political firmament. John McCain's decision to choose her as his running mate energised right-wing Republicans who had been lukewarm about the top of the ticket. Palin was very popular among the conservative base and was a choice that disconnected the conservative intelligentsia and the party faithful. She became a polarizing figure in the race: charismatic and bold-speaking, Sarah Palin had an undeniable effect on reviving the anti-elitist prejudice of the conservative base. But few weeks later, Palin became a figure of controversy and, in some quarters, ridicule. And, in November, the "Palin factor" did not drive enough conservatives to the polls to offset Barack Obama's gains with independent voters.

It is interesting to observe that, in some ways, Sarah Palin got the rock star treatment too, drawing much bigger crowds than McCain. For a while, it turned out that Alaska Governor had more in common with Britney Spears and Paris Hilton in internet-searchers' minds than Obama. Since her name was announced as John McCain's running mate, Sarah Palin generated more US-based internet search traffic than Britney Spears, Paris Hilton, Michael Phelps and Barack Obama combined. That's according to the audience measurement firm Hitwise, and search pattern statistics from Google. Of course, since relatively few of the electorate knew who Palin was before McCain's announcement, it makes sense that the top search term for Palin was simply the Vice Presidential candidate's name. But the second and third top searches, of the 1,323 unique search queries tracked in the first two weeks since her nomination were "Vogue Magazine," and "Photos,". Other popular searches were "hot photos," "Sarah Palin Bikini Photos," "Sarah Palin Nude," and "Sarah Palin Naked." And people might normally associate those terms with those other two women who are famous for being famous (Britney Spears and Paris Hilton, for instance). In other words, the 'Palin factor' was also a form of 'celebrity', albeit of a different kind.

Figure 1: Polls on the Obama-McCain duel.



Source: Gallup.com

Because of the dangerousness of the issue ('being fit for the office' has always been a "requirement" for American presidential candidates), the Obama's campaign has always been rapid on rejecting the accusations that their candidate was shallow and inexperienced. The response strategy was the classic one of accusing the opponent of lying and poisoning the campaign, while avoiding the country's real problems. The spot entitled "Proud of that Commercial" served this purpose. The transcript follows:

> [TEXT: JOHN McCAIN TOWN HALL 7/31/08]
> WOMAN IN THE AUDIENCE: You have made comments about, like, the mudslinging - how that had been affecting other campaigns, and how you didn't want to do that. And yesterday, with the comparison to Britney Spears and Paris Hilton, like, I was like: Okay?
> [TEXT: McCAIN ATTACK AD]
> FEMALE NARRATOR: He's the biggest celebrity in the world.
> (Sound of record rewinding)
> McCAIN: All I can say is that: We're proud of that commercial, we're proud of that commercial, we're proud of that commercial.

[TEXT: We're PROUD OF THAT COMMERCIAL]
[TEXT: JOHN McCAIN: PROUD OF THAT COMMERCIAL]

Obama's response was necessary not to fall victim to the kind of negative (indeed slanderous) campaigning that had buried Michael Dukakis in 1988 and John Kerry in 2004, when both Democratic candidates were belated in responding to accusations, and on election day were dragged down by the weight of suspicion generated by the attacks against them. The financial power of the Obama campaign, the thousands of volunteers available, and the aggressive responses to McCain, accused of "going personal instead of talking about real issues," enabled the Democratic candidate to shake off the damaging label of a "empty celebrity". In the second part of the campaign, Obama grew more pragmatic and talked more about issues, partly abandoning his previous lofty rhetoric and rockstar posturing (Abramovitz and Sabato, 2008). According to my calculations, in the month of October, 42% of Obama commercials concerned programmatic issues, with 28% and 31% in August and July, and 35% in September. The Obama campaign staff's fears are highlighted by the words of Tad Devine, a Kerry's top strategist in 2004, who at the end of August 2008 warned Obama about the worrisome downturn in the polls: ""If somebody attacks you, you have to frame the attack: 'This is the same old politics, or better yet, the Bush-Rove politics," something Obama has done well, said one Democratic strategist. "At the same time you do that, you have to counterattack. You don't want to look like a whiner. You want to look tough." Also Tom Daschle, the former Democratic Senate majority leader, said in an interview with the Financial Times that the Mr Obama's Republican rival John McCain was seeing a "short-term blip" as a result of the "celeb" advertising, including one that used the image of Charlton Heston as Moses to mock the supposedly messianic Mr Obama as being "The One". "To a certain extent the ads are having some effect," Mr Daschle said. "But you can't be thrown off your game plan by a momentary dip in polls" (Weiner, 2008).

3. Conclusions

The case analysed has highlighted the difficulties that a celebrity politician may encounter in an important and hard-fought election campaign like that for the American presidency. On the one hand, information rules which increasingly induce the "spectacularization" of politics, and the need to win over more marginal electors, make recourse to forms of popular culture unavoidable. On the other, the presence of a deeply-embedded anti-elitist culture makes it possible to attack a celebrity candidate and reduce his or her presidential chances. In this regard, it was crucial for Obama to respond swiftly and forcefully to McCain's attacks, in order to prevent infection of the public mind with the idea that he was a political novice unsuited for government. McCain's strategy was to exploit the age gap between the two candidates, to emphasise his congressional seniority, and to insist that Obama was too inexperienced for high office. The intent was to "unmask" the shortcomings of Obama by showing the attempts to cover up his inadequacy by making him into an international star. The strategy was successful because it rekindled two long-standing conservative prejudices: anti-elitism and anti-Europeanism.

It would obviously have been impossible for a Democratic candidate to use the same strategy against a Republican; for the cultural base addressed by McCain's campaign was that of the conservative voter allergic to celebrity worship, elitism and Europeanism. The announcement of Sarah Palin as the Vice Presidential Republican nominee can be considered the turning point of the 2008 campaign. On one hand, she revived the anti-etilist conservative prejudice energising right-wing Republicans and helped McCain on temporarily closing the gap in the opinion polls. On the other hand, her subsequent bad TV performances disclosed a superficial, uncultured politician and let Obama leading the polls again. Incidentally, she was perceived as a celebrity too: during the first two weeks after the nomination, she generated a huge web search traffic.

But not on her name only, many searches, indeed, concerned fashion and hot photos. And people might normally associate those terms to pop culture stars, such as the above-mentioned Britney Spears and Paris Hilton. Anti-elitism and anti-Europeanism did not damage Obama, who triumphantly conquered the White House. But these two attitudes are still strongly present in the American public discourse and cultural panorama. Indeed, the Tea Party, which burgeoned in the first two years of the Obama administration, is fuelled by the same prejudices and is nothing other than a reincarnation of classic American neo-nationalist ideology. Barack Obama has not been the first presidential candidate that has been considered a celebrity. Also John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan faced a similar public perception. But they were not attacked for this and their "celebrity status" became one of their campaigns' strengths. Nowadays, on the contrary, being a "celebrity politician" may have side-effects, and the public opinion surveys cited in this research showed that McCain's offensive coincided with a downturn in positive evaluations of the Democratic candidate.

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