Beyond Trump: Celebrity Candidates, Mediatization of Politics, and US Middle East Policy
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The past months have seen an explosion of television programs showing dramatic performances, provocative remarks, 4th grade-level conversations, and personal attacks. No, this is not the *Real Housewives* franchise but the GOP nomination race for (arguably) the most powerful position in the world.

The political and media discussions of the presidential campaigns have given great attention to some of the most flamboyant GOP nomination candidates (a.k.a. celebrity candidates) and their outrageous remarks. Many have likened the GOP race to a reality show or a circus, implying some candidates' lack of seriousness and qualifications. In particular, the rise of Donald Trump in the polls has puzzled many (including Trump himself!). However, when understanding the underlying appeal of colorful, dramatic, and offensive performances and the resulting interplay between politics and media entertainment, one should not be surprised.

Analysts have tried to explain the unexpected popularity of Donald Trump by pointing to the appeal of 'outsiders' in the dominant anti-establishment atmosphere and the anger at the political system especially among republican voters. Trump's business success and the promise of job creation are also believed to attract "blue collar" votes. Experts have also attributed Ben Carson's poll hike to the resonance of his story of personal redemption with evangelical voters. Moreover, there is no doubt that Donald Trump satisfies the right-wing republican xenophobes who want to hear how to "get rid of Muslims in this country" and deport Mexican immigrants. Although the frustration, fear, and ethnocentrism of the "silent majority" -as Trump calls them- are certainly significant catalysts, this phenomenon is far beyond that. While Donald Trump (and Ben Carson for that matter, though without the pizazz) are known to make shocking statements often free of any facts or political substance, their supporters don't seem to care. Donald Trump receives great attention from both the media and the republican constituents for the same reason that millions of Americans watch reality TV programs like *The Apprentice* - entertainment! Trump supporters express their interest in politics for its entertainment value;[1] it was even argued that Trump's supporters are in fact fans of the show *The Apprentice* starring Donald Trump.[2] The retired neurosurgeon born-again Christian Dr. Ben Carson has also gained celebrity status through his soft-spoken wandering televangelist-style performances.

The Trump phenomenon is about entertainment, and the republican presidential campaigns are sure giving a show! "Isn't a Trump rally much more exciting than these other ones?" asked Trump at one of his rallies as security escorted a protester out. The reality TV star billionaire real estate mogul is certainly entertaining with his boastful offensive ego and bombastic claims. Ben Carson is also entertaining in his own soft-spoken soothing blinking insulting way. Even Ted Cruz started to understand entertainment and gave a good comedy performance during the third republican debate.[3] Reality television's emphasis on intense emotional performances, sensational claims, provocative statements, exaggerated reactions, and extreme opinions - much like Donald Trump's persona, are sure to attract ample attention. Even Trump himself says "I use the media the way the media uses me - to attract attention." However, this style of celebrity politics has dangerous repercussions. Does the media have any political responsibility to report on issues of substance and provide significant political information?

Media and Democracy

The importance of communication tools in the political process has received great attention even as far back as Aristotle and Plato. The study of political communication since the *World War I* propaganda studies provides abundant evidence for the impact and power that media tools exert on political events.

The importance of media and communication in the political democratic process can be credited to Jürgen Habermas's conceptualization of the public sphere. Habermas, who currently ranks as one the most influential philosophers and social theorists in the world, defined the public sphere as a network of communicating information and points of view that are of relevance to citizens, where issues of public concern are subject to informed discussion and independent political debate.[4]

Participatory democracy is built on the premise of informed citizenry, where public opinion leads to political action. It was Thomas Jefferson, the principle author of the *Declaration of Independence* and one of the Founding Fathers of the United States, who said "An informed citizenry is the only true repository of the public will." Informed citizenry is not possible without the aggregation, dissemination, and scrutiny of information and knowledge. The public sphere, along with its notion of informed citizenry, represents one of the precursory pillars of democratic governance[5] and is most profoundly achieved through the media. The media create a free marketplace of ideas, thus facilitating and affording a functioning and independent public sphere. Most Western democracies separate the political system into executive (presidency), legislative (congress), and judiciary, and consider the press as the "fourth estate" where the media serve to monitor the three government branches. In this regard, the media have a crucial responsibility to inform citizens and enable them to actively participate in democratic politics.

However, when looking at the media landscape in the United States, many critical theorists (most notably Habermas) have argued that the public sphere had been overtaken by large media corporations, which manufacture thought and manipulate citizens as passive consumers of ideas. Habermas describes the transition from a liberal public sphere where media's role is to facilitate political discussion and information to a media-run public sphere where media dictate and limit public discourse.[6] Renowned sociologists and political theorists have often expressed concern about the banalization and commodification of politics through the media, where mass media assumes the role of selling politicians as marketable commodities instead of informing citizens and supporting the democratic process.

One of the important aspects of the US media industry in this regard is its commercial nature, as news commercialization challenges the role of journalism in a democracy. Mainstream media and news organizations face the pressure to survive financially in this high-cost industry. As they rely heavily in their business models on advertising revenues, media organizations are driven by attracting the largest numbers of audiences. As a result, news programs have evolved into an entertainment genre more concerned with entertaining (and attracting) than informing citizens. A marketing perspective has emerged in news reporting where stories that attract larger audiences dominate, such as sensational headlines, personalized perspectives, and shocking and extreme situations. The notion of deviance[7] is particularly relevant when addressing the popularity of Donald Trump. Stories and people that are out of the ordinary are considered newsworthy. When the information industry is left to the free market forces of supply and demand, celebrity trumps substance!

The lack of informed citizenry is detrimental to representative democracy. Uninformed or misinformed citizens can influence policy through voting, polling, or contacting their representatives. For example, polls show that (misinformed) Americans support cutting foreign aid to solve the budget deficit. However, foreign aid constitutes only less than 1% of the federal budget. In this case, uninformed public opinion may influence policy outcomes in the wrong direction. Given the important role of the media in informing citizens and enabling the healthy functioning of democracy, does the US media facilitate the necessary conditions for supporting an independent public sphere and informed citizenry? And to what extent does the media influence political action and elections, especially in the Trump era?

The Trump phenomenon: US Media and the political process

On September 26, 1960, presidential candidates Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy faced each other in the first-ever televised presidential debate. Both candidates performed very well presenting their agendas, answering questions, and engaging in an informative political discussion. The people who listened to the debate on the radio thought that Nixon had undoubtedly won the debate. However, those (the majority) who watched the debate on television overwhelmingly believed that Kennedy was the clear winner. In contrast to the pale and underweight sickly-looking and sweaty Nixon, Kennedy appeared vibrant, tanned, calm, and confident. The next day, in Ohio, Kennedy saw the largest crowds his campaign had ever seen. After winning the elections and becoming the 35th US President, Kennedy said "It was the TV more than anything else that turned the tide."[8]

The famous Kennedy-Nixon debate changed the landscape of US politics, and consequently altered the course of history. Without the televised presidential debate, Kennedy probably would not have been president, and the Cuban Missile Crisis would have taken a different turn, possibly to a nuclear world war! The power of television was evident in how it turned an unknown young Irish-American Catholic Senator into what is now known as the Kennedy Legacy, and one of the most likeable and popular US presidents in history. Due to the perceived power of television, the presidential candidates in the next elections cycles refused to debate on TV for 16 years until 1976 when Gerald Ford debated Jimmy Carter. Since then, televised presidential debates have become an integral part of the political process and changed the rules of the game, where candidates became judged on totally different (primarily visual and superficial) criteria. Performance skills and appearance became part of the political portfolio,[9] especially self-presentation, physical attributes, non-verbal communication, eye contact, and certainly entertainment. While the televised debate between Nixon and Kennedy was not the first time media influenced politics, it showcased the power of the media in shifting political outcomes, made televised debates an integral institution of presidential campaigns, and intensified the mediatization of politics.

The mediatization of politics has been shown through various studies in the last century. The term itself refers to the process of transforming the political sphere from a public to a media-defined realm. Mediatization is more than mere mediation. In this sense, media is not only a channel of communication for political news and information but becomes a central actor and the dominant source of information to the point that other political actors internalize and adopt the media logic as part of the political agenda and the governing process.[10] What is often referred to as the 'media logic' includes the media's news values and storytelling techniques that have infiltrated public life. Media techniques and journalistic norms that have been found to influence the political sphere include

simplification, polarization, intensification, personalization, visualization, and the framing of politics as a strategic game or a "horse race."[11]

The mediatization of politics and the media logic have worked in Trump's favor. The obnoxious offensive lovable alpha character from your everyday sitcom, who by no means is politically, morally, or factually correct, is presented as the ideal persona in popular media culture, and ultimately becomes the ideal candidate to lead the country. For decades, the entertainment industry has followed a general entertainment formula that includes a simple good vs. evil, action-filled, and humorous narrative. Popular culture defined the ultimate hero through action genres, character comedy, and put-down comedy, where one main character (usually the white 'alpha male') has power over other characters. Examples of these characters include the protagonists in *Seinfeld*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, and *Two and a Half Men*. As a result, people's conceptions of leadership and likeable characters are greatly affected by these models, and voters adopt this media logic and criteria when evaluating political candidates. For example, in debate studies, voters rated a superior personal presentation as more important than points on debating issues.[12] Even entertainment skills are criteria that the US president needs to possess. Trump and his supporters tweeted throughout one of the democratic debates about how boring the candidates and the discussions are. Now we find Hillary Clinton showcasing her comedy skills in a skit on *Saturday Night Live*; even Bernie Sanders went dancing on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*!

While the media may or may not promote a certain political agenda and while a partisan bias is not widespread in American news reporting,[13] the media can certainly impact political outcomes through a process of structural bias. A structural bias in political reporting can significantly influence the political process through journalistic norms that advantage or disadvantage certain candidates. Numerous studies have shown that media reporting of politics employs a sports game script (or horse-race approach), in which reporters focus more on the progress and strategies of campaigns than on the real issues and policy positions of candidates.[14] For example, following a debate, countless numbers of analysis pieces and press articles surface declaring who won and who lost, who was entertaining and who was boring, who was strong and who was weak in answering questions, but rarely involve any discussion of the actual issues facing the country or the specific details of the political agendas of the candidates, let alone analyzing or comparing them.

Several reasons that have led to these political reporting norms include the simplicity and safety of stories about strategies (compared to complex and sometimes sensitive policy issues), the suspense and excitement of reporting events (unknown outcomes with significant impact, similar to sports, war, or an action film), the desire among reporters to showcase their political analysis skills and predicting elections outcomes through interpretive reporting, the ease of reporting campaign strategy and progress as opposed to researching and providing technical information about the issues, and finally the commercial nature of the media industry and its reliance on entertaining and attracting viewers for advertising revenues. Therefore, although Donald Trump and Ben Carson do not present any specific or substantial detailed political agendas nor base their statements on factual information, they are winning "bigly" and that's all the media cares about.

The fact that Donald Trump and other celebrity candidates receive great media attention is not without dire political consequences. The study of political communication in the last century has provided ample evidence and theoretical frameworks for the impact of media on political outcomes. Agenda setting theory and research provide evidence that the media can impact the outcomes of elections by setting the public agenda, i.e., by telling people which issues to use in evaluating political

actors. Through selective reporting and framing of issues, the media tend to set the public agenda (e.g., the important issues facing the country) which in turn gives advantage to the candidate whose program matches the media agenda. Through framing, the media can also make a certain aspect of a story more salient and thus promote a particular definition, interpretation, explanation, or moral judgment of an issue or problem.[15] Elections studies have shown that the media agenda influences voting behavior. For example, in 1992 the reelection of George H. W. Bush was highly likely given the actual state of the economy at the time, until the negative media assessment of the economy and the media's focus on the need for a change in presidency contributed to Bill Clinton's victory.[16] Trump and the disproportionate media attention he garners have certainly set the public and political agendas and the criteria for evaluating candidates: negative attitudes towards Muslims and a Muslim president, conflating terrorism with Islam and Syrian refugees, associations between Mexican immigrants and crime, and the amount of entertainment skills a presidential candidate needs.

In addition to the media logic, horse-race reporting, and agenda setting, political persuasion theories have demonstrated the power of media in making or breaking a candidate. The processing of political information at the voters' end goes through one of two paths of information processing. A dual processes approach, such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of persuasion[17] stipulates that people who have high levels of motivation (e.g., personal relevance) and ability (e.g., political expertise) are more likely to use the central route of message processing (i.e., based on cognitive elaboration of the message itself; rational thought, analysis of the message's factual information, etc.). In contrast, the peripheral route to persuasion occurs when people have low levels of motivation or ability, causing message processing and attitude formation to be based primarily on simple cues and superficial environmental characteristics such as appearance, emotional connection, and overall appeal. As such, voters who are not politically savvy or motivated are more likely to base their votes on peripheral cues. From this perspective, the primary elections period and campaigns present an interesting case. At the times of the primary campaigns, people lack sufficient information or involvement and therefore are more likely to go the peripheral route and be more readily influenced by the media and its focus on superficial characteristics, especially early on when the polling takes place[18]. In addition, in primary elections, intra-party policy differences are subtle, and therefore a great attention is given to personal appeal. For Trump, his popularity in early polls might be simply a factor of the amount of media reporting he receives and his attractive persona, where high exposure and visibility make his name the first readily available when people are asked by pollsters. Although the high polling numbers during the primary period do not always mean he will get the votes whether in the primaries or in the general elections, his talking points and highly visible positions are dominating.

When considering the role of media in informing citizens and facilitating the democratic process, one cannot ignore the role of new and social media platforms. Many cyber-optimists have praised new media tools for their liberating potential and as sources of alternative information. However, the promise of new media and social networks in providing sources of political information alternative to mainstream media has not lived up to its hype. The emergence of the Internet has not drastically changed the media norms, where the same mainstream stories are recycled and posted online. Although the Internet can help in mobilizing already-existing supporters,[19] access to non-partisan information about candidates and real issues requires a certain level of motivation and skill. In fact, social media norms have further boosted Trump's popularity. Social media and the Internet have emphasized a new communication style that is short, satirical, and offensive. The empty overheated and hyperbolic rhetoric and the lack of accountability in online behavior have become the norm, and outrageous commentary is most likely to attract attention and go viral, without any concern

regarding the negative consequences of social media posts. When considering political governance in this media-saturated environment, everybody has an opinion about everything. This horizontal new media society exhibits no tolerance for rational discussions of serious issues, and policy expertise is routinely ignored and substituted with emotionally-driven discourse. From this perspective, Donald Trump has mastered the social media game and used it to his advantage. Trump's outrageous tweets and offensive Instagram videos are often reported as news stories that drive news reporting cycles, giving him free advertising and exposure. He probably does not need to pay for ad buys!

Overall, the media play a significant role in influencing the norms of the political process, setting political agendas, and emphasizing certain voting criteria, which all consequently greatly impact elections outcomes. The way American politics are communicated through the media has led to sensationalized, entertainment-focused, and celebrity-biased public opinion, and a resulting peripheral processing in political decision-making and voting behavior. The entertainment model of political reporting in the mainstream US media has certainly given rise to the Trump phenomenon. This is particularly pronounced in the primary elections period where voters have little information or involvement and within-party ideological differences are minimal. As a result, Trump's rhetoric has become mainstream, carrying serious consequences to Middle East policy discussions.

Implications for Middle East Policy

Regarding Trump's chances for nomination or presidency, some argue that his surprising popularity might continue to surprise, while others believe that his fall is inevitable once primary crunch time comes. However, critics of 'celebrity candidates' have been predicting their demise for months. While some republicans still believe that a mainstream 'establishment' Republican will (and should) get the GOP nomination, others have argued that while the head might win in policy, the heart wins in politics.[20] As such, the primaries might create a serious problem for the GOP as the republican establishment knows that Trump cannot win against the Democratic candidate in the general elections, especially without the minority votes.

Nonetheless, whether Trump is nominated or not, whether a celebrity candidate becomes president or not, the agenda has been set! With regard to Middle East issues, the Trump media phenomenon has charged the republican constituency with hate and fear rhetoric and lowered the standards for how xenophobic (and sexist) presidential candidates can be. As studies suggest that the primary elections period has greater impact than general election campaigns[21] in shaping the issues' agenda especially through issues introduced by front runners,[22] racist outlooks are on the menu in the coming months.

With regards to specific implications for Middle East policy, the Trump phenomenon has first of all changed expectations for how tolerant the US public should be and how racist a politician or presidential candidate can be against Arabs and Muslims. When Donald Trump was asked how he will "get rid of" Muslims in this country and his confused response was that he "will be looking at that and other things", the mainstream media outlets exploded. In reaction to Trump's concurring response, the media repeatedly replayed a video of John McCain and promoted it as the ideal example of how a presidential candidate should respond to racist questions. When a woman said to McCain "I don't trust Obama he is an A-rab", he responded "No ma'am he is a decent family man". Following Trump's extremism, the standards have shifted and the suggestion that Arabs are not decent family

people became the acceptable (even ideal) response promoted by mainstream media. Among his many anti-Muslim statements, Trump also called for shutting down American Mosques, registering Muslims in America, banning Muslims from entering the United States, and deporting Syrian refugees already in the US. In other racist manifestation by celebrity candidates, Ben Carson insisted that an American Muslims should not be president and that surveillance should be enforced in Mosques.

Anti-Muslim and Anti-Arab sentiments in the United States are on the rise, especially among republicans. In 2012, 57 percent of republicans held negative views of Muslims and 53 percent held negative views of Arabs, with the numbers improving only slightly with regard to American Muslims and Arab Americans.[23] Recent polls show that one in three Iowa republicans think Islam should be illegal in the US[24] and 72 percent of North Carolina republicans say a Muslim should not be president.[25] When constituents receive leadership endorsement and enforcement of their racist views, free of any fact-checking, legal provision, moral responsibility, or humanity, those sentiments grow and become expressed more freely and persistently in public. This trend sets the agenda for questioning Arab American and Muslim American loyalty, normalizing verbal (and physical) attacks on American Muslims, and promoting hate and fear against the world's Muslims.

Second, with regard to US foreign policy in the Middle East, the political agenda set by the Trump media spectacle will continue to polarize Americans in an orientalist fashion of East vs. West. The republican candidates' policy agendas of carpet bombing Syria and killing the family members (including children) of suspected terrorists and ISIS members, are not short of war crimes. This rhetoric also strips the US of any of its responsibilities for the mess it has created in the Middle East, leading to policy tendencies of further supremacist strategies and alienating Middle East countries and peoples from policy considerations and US actions. The vilification of Muslims promotes a war inclination against the Middle East as a whole and Muslims and Arabs as a collective. Republicans have been heavily criticizing Obama for being too timid in his foreign policy agenda and not doing enough in Syria, promoting military answers for all foreign policy questions including Assad, Iran, Islamic groups, Russia, and the "Islamic State," ultimately causing more problems in the Middle East and the world.

With regard to Palestine, Trump continues to promote the apartheid wall built by Israel inside occupied territory and deemed illegal by the International Court of Justice as "the wall works, just ask Israel." While not relevant nor comparable, Trump's promotion of the Israeli wall (when discussing securing the US–Mexico border) distorts the facts about the illegal Israeli apartheid wall and its negative political and humanitarian consequences. Dr. Ben Carson, on the other hand, denied the entire existence and history of Palestine when he suggested a Palestinian state that is not "within the confines of Israeli territory" and suggested "sort of slip[ing] that area down into Egypt … Right below Israel." Such false and misleading discourse is likely to further misinform the American public regarding the situation in Palestine.

Fourth, the truth has mostly been absent in presidential campaigns and the media role as fact-checker has been ridiculed, ignored, and attacked by the candidates' claims of biased media and their discontent with what they perceive as "gotcha" questions. This has led to an environment of fact-free political debates and a public sphere of lies and overgeneralized hyperboles. *PolitiFact* has even rated 75% of Donald Trump's statements as false or mostly false.[26] In particular, the lack of qualifications and information with regard to the Middle East are especially harmful. Donald Trump has promoted the notion that terrorists of the "Islamic State" are among Syrian refugees, whom he will deport if

elected. While Trump's strategy for Syria doesn't go beyond "taking their oil," Ben Carson has a "much, much, much bigger plan [that] involves Putin and Iran also." Such false statements and hollow foreign policy agendas seem to resonate with republican voters and tap into their fears and emotional stances. Moreover, conflating the "Islamic State" with Syrian refugees and immigration issues is likely to create unconscious mental associations between immigrants and terrorism among Americans, which are likely to influence their voting decisions and policy considerations.

The presidential campaign is still in its early stages, but the media seem to have lost their status as the "fourth estate". Donald Trump, Ben Carson, and other GOP and celebrity candidates have set the tone for sweeping overstatements and fact-free claims in political discussions. Donald Trump might not know the difference between *Al-Quds* and the *Kurds*, but his supporters and his popularity remain unabated. Trump has persisted on top of the polls for six months. These seemingly crazy and outrageous false statements about Arabs, Muslims, and the Middle East continue to gain media attention, set the public and political agendas, create unconscious mental associations among voters, and push the standards of the nature of political discussions.

Can American democracy reclaim its public sphere from the commercial entertainment-driven political media? Probably not anytime soon. Recent attacks in Paris and San Bernardino have not sobered the voters to look for candidates with a serious foreign policy experience and expertise, and celebrity presidential candidates are still leading the polls in the GOP nominating race. This form of "virulent populism" facilitated by the media is on the rise, with celebrity leadership and a false populism claiming to unite the middle class and the unsophisticated masses against corrupt inept establishments, while in actuality promoting right-wing ethnocentric ideologies.

More than 30 years ago, Neil Postman, author of *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, wrote that as television continues to dominate public discourse the only things that would survive are those that people find entertaining.[27] Whether America will choose substance over celebrity is yet to be known, but the Trump phenomenon has given the negative sentiments towards Arabs and Muslims the political legitimacy and the green light to grow and prosper.

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