



**How politics and culture collided
in the 2008 presidential campaign**

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THE NORMAN LEAR CENTER

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The Forum's founding director was the late Ithiel de Sola Pool of the MIT Political Science Department, a pioneer in the study of communications.

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PARTICIPANTS



Johanna Blakley is the deputy director of the Norman Lear Center. Based at the USC Annenberg School for Communication, Blakley performs research on a wide variety of topics, including global entertainment, cultural diplomacy, celebrity culture, digital media and intellectual property law. She has overseen two major research initiatives about the impact of intellectual property rights on innovation and creativity: *Ready to Share: Fashion & the Ownership of Creativity* and *Artists, Technology & the Ownership of Creative Content*. Most recently, she conducted two nationwide polls, with Zogby International, on the relationship between political ideology and entertainment preferences. Blakley is a regular contributor to the Lear Center Blog, and she has guided more than forty manuscripts through the publication process at the Lear Center, including *Warners' War: Propaganda, Politics & Pop Culture in Wartime Hollywood*. She is on the advisory board of Kartemquin Films, one of the longest-running documentary companies in the country; she's on the board of directors for Les Fignes Press, a venue for literary experimentation; and she's a Fellow at the Los Angeles Institute for the Humanities.

media writer for Inside.com, a web news site focusing on the business of entertainment and publishing. Previously, Carr served as editor of the *Washington City Paper*, an alternative weekly in Washington D.C. for five years. During that time, he wrote a column, "Paper Trail," which focused on media issues in the nation's capital. In 1997, Carr received first place in the media category of the Association of Alternative Weeklies annual awards for "Good News ..." From 1993 to 1995, Carr was editor of the *Twin Cities Reader*, a Minneapolis-based alternative weekly, and wrote a media column there as well. Before serving as editor of the *Reader*, Carr worked for a variety of business, entertainment and sports publications in the Twin Cities area.



David Carr is a culture reporter and media columnist for *The New York Times*. He began working at the *Times* in 2002, covering the magazine publishing industry for the Business section. Prior to arriving at the *Times*, Carr was a contributing writer for *The Atlantic Monthly* and *New York Magazine*, writing articles that ranged from homeland security issues to the movie industry. In 2000, he was the

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Stephen Duncombe teaches the history and politics of media and culture and is the author, most recently, of *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* (2007). Other books include *The Bobbed Haired Bandit: a True Story of Crime and Celebrity in 1920s New York*, with Andrew Mattson (2006), and *Cultural Resistance Reader* (editor, 2002). He is working on a book about the art of propaganda during the New Deal. Duncombe has been a professor at NYU since 1999. He received his M.Phil. and Ph.D. from the City University of New York in Sociology.

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Henry Jenkins is one of the most productive and influential film and media scholars in the world. His books and articles have been major contributions to existing fields of inquiry such as film history, political communications and children's studies. His works have helped to establish new fields such as media ethnography (*Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*; *Science Fiction Audiences: Dr. Who, Star Trek and their Followers*), and game studies (*From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*).

He writes monthly columns on media and technology for *Technology Review Online* and *Computer Games Magazine*. He has testified about youth and violence before the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee, about media literacy before the Federal Communications Commission, and about copyright before the Governor's Board of the World Economic Forum. At the time of this event, Jenkins was a professor of Literature and Comparative Media Studies and Director, Comparative Media Studies Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Today, he is the Provost's Professor of Communication, Journalism and Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California.

Politics and Popular Culture

David Thorburn: Good afternoon. My name is David Thorburn. I'm the Director of the MIT Communications Forum and a professor of literature.

It's my privilege to introduce today's panel. Before I do that, I'd like to remind everyone in the audience that we are embarking on a very exciting series of forums this semester, as well as a conference in April. The events of the forum are listed on the MIT Communications Forum Web site.

I'm especially excited and curious about today's forum, which seems to me to present a kind of ideal mix of speakers – as you'll see. And the topic – as you'll discover if you don't already realize it – has always been an important topic. But it's become a central one for our society and our politics in recent years.

I'm going to say something very briefly about each of the speakers and about the moderator and then turn things over to the moderator, Professor Jenkins.

Johanna Blakley, sitting closest to me here, is the Deputy Director of the Norman Lear Center where she performs research on celebrity culture, global entertainment and digital technology. She lectures on many aspects of media and the entertainment industry and has held a range of jobs in high-tech firms – a range of high-tech jobs, including such positions as Web producer, Web site reviewer, digital archivist, research librarian. She is a universal genius, it seems.

In the middle, David Carr is a columnist for *The New York Times*. His column appears every Monday, and it's quite remarkable. Carr has shown himself to be competent to write about and even to specialize in a whole range of things having



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to do with popular culture and celebrity culture.

As you may know, he is The Carpetbagger for *The Times*. That's his alias as the person who follows the Oscars. He's detoxifying from that very demanding experience. He's had this horrible task of having to interview celebrities for the last few weeks. I feel very sorry for him about that.

One of Carr's preoccupations is one I share and one that the forum has looked at from time to time. It is the fate of newspapers and the apparent disappearance of the newspaper as a central force in American society. It's the possible migration of some of our best newspapers to what will, in the long term, almost certainly be an identity only on the World Wide Web. This is a matter to which he's devoted a lot of attention in his columns. If there's an opportunity in the question period, some of you may want to ask him about that.

David Carr is also the author of a very courageous recent memoir that has been justly admired by the reviewers, a book called *Night of the Gun* – a personal and very revealing memoir that I urge all of you to read.

Stephen Duncombe, furthest from me, teaches history and the politics of media and culture at New York University. His work in recent years is among the most often cited by students of popular and digital culture. Among his books are two especially influential titles: *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*, and most recently, *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*. He writes a blog at RealitySandwich.com.

Finally, I want to introduce and say a few words about my friend and colleague, Henry Jenkins.



I hadn't seen him in about a week. And when I did the sight of him filled me with such dismay and lamentation. Not because there's anything about Henry that should cause dismay. But because I realized, looking at him, that this was his last semester at MIT. I'm sure that there will be many folks who share my feelings about what an astonishing resource for the Institute Henry Jenkins has been.

But I wanted to take this opportunity to mention that in his 20 years here – he spent 20 years at MIT – I've never seen a faculty member in my more than 40 years in the profession who had a larger impact on a wider range of activities connected to his institution than Henry Jenkins.

As some of you know, he's a very distinguished scholar, the author of a number of influential and seminal books, including most recently *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. It's a book that has been influential in Hollywood, as well as among scholarly communities and has even begun to affect programming in certain ways.

He is also a teacher of immense gifts and is one of MIT's most admired teachers. He's also a longtime headmaster of one of our undergraduate dormitories. And in that capacity has affected undergraduate life even more deeply and fully than a normal teacher would.

In addition to that, of course, he is the genius behind the graduate program in Comparative Media Studies, and probably half the people in this room have been directly and beneficially affected by Henry Jenkins' ideas, by his generosity, by his powers as a teacher and a thinker.

Though we still have some months, thank goodness, before we actually have to say farewell, I wanted to take this opportunity to signal my sense that when Henry Jenkins leaves MIT, a gap, a gaping abyss will be created that no single professor will ever be able to fill.

Henry is currently the Peter DeFloriz Professor of Humanities at MIT and the founder and director of the graduate program in Comparative Media Studies launched in 1999.



He will leave MIT this summer to go to USC, and that's why lamentations should be modified – qualified – because, clearly, Henry's going to what is a very wonderful and exciting job, and I'm sure he'll be able to continue his good work there.

At USC, he will hold a joint appointment in the Annenberg School for Communication and in the School of Cinematic Arts, and he will become what is called the Provost's Professor of Communications at USC, a distinguished endowed chair.

With that, let me introduce Henry and let him take over the event. Henry?

Henry Jenkins: After an introduction like that, it's a little hard to know how to sink back into the role of moderator. But I'm delighted to be joining you today, and I thank David for the warm introductions to a panel discussion that I've been deeply looking forward to.

What I'd ask is that each of the speakers introduce themselves a bit and describe their relationship to the topic, and then we're going to have a back-and-forth exchange. I've mapped out some questions for them in advance, which will go for about an hour, and then I'll open up the floor to you guys to ask equally smart and perceptive questions. We're moving toward a more participatory culture, and we welcome your participation.



So that said, fittingly, I guess, I move from an MIT speaker to a USC speaker and ask Johanna to start things off.

Johanna Blakley: Sure. I must say we're gloating at USC to have Henry Jenkins coming our way. Like, who are the fools who let this man go? We tend to cherry-pick from all around the country and around the world, and so it's one reason I'm really excited to be there.

I'm especially excited about the center within which I work. It's called the Norman Lear Center. It's based at the Annenberg School, and it's very unique.

It's an academic unit. We have academics. We have a lot of faculty involved with us. We have students working there. But we don't teach classes. We put together entrepreneurial projects that try to improve media, improve entertainment, and sometimes use entertainment for educational purposes.

Also, we're activists. We're trying to find ways to harness the power of entertainment in order to do something good for the country, for the world. We have a few projects like that. I can talk about them a little later.

But one of the things that we're most famous for at the Lear Center is our understanding, our commentary and our research projects on the intersection between politics and entertainment. I don't have to convince anybody that there's an intersection. Some people think it's the worst thing that's ever happened to public discourse in civil society. Other people see that maybe we can take advantage of that intersection in one way or another.

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Regardless, we have to understand it. It's a very powerful sort of convergence. There's anecdotal information about it everywhere in every imaginable discipline throughout the newspapers, in the media. But very few people have good research on it.



In what way does entertainment affect politics? In what way does a person's political preferences, for instance, affect the way they become an audience for some sort of entertainment content?

These were the kinds of questions that we were trying to answer, or at least start to address, with a survey. It's called the Zogby Lear Center Politics and Entertainment Survey, and I have some slides and some data that I'll share with you about that pretty soon.

Henry Jenkins: Okay, David? Pull up your slides?

David Carr: Yeah, go ahead. David, I just wanted to mention in terms of my duty covering the Oscars and the pity that you showed toward me. I spent time talking to Mickey Rourke and, yes, Kate Winslett and the kids from *Slumdog*, and I don't know that it was any more boring or less enlightening than, say, your last seminar. It's not terrible duty.

We're here because the Venn diagram of popular culture and political culture has become a circle. I was watching the State of the Union the other night and there were congressmen Twittering the events, and I thought three things.

I think Congress has been Twittering a long time before it's become a verb.



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Secondarily, if it was my Congressman, I'd rather have him listening than Twittering. I don't need him annotating what's in plain sight to me. I don't really need to see his little thought bubbles about this.

The third is that everybody who's watching this is probably surprised except Henry. Henry totally saw this coming. I think we saw it in the last election. What the Obama guys worked out is we'll give you access to our events, to our lists. All we want is your information. That's all we want. And that's a commercial imperative over and over. Free is always an exchange for your data.

I think of text messaging of the vice president. Mainstream media said, "Oh, it's a complete failure." But what did they gather? Four million names. How much money do you think they pulled out of those people? We have to acknowledge that friends are more important than supporters. So if you think of 2.5 million Facebook friends, it's much more – because of network effects, because you have a deeper knowledge of who they are.

What was cool is they raised more money by an order of magnitude than ever, but then they spent it in very traditional ways. I don't think it'll be that way the next time around. They spent over \$250 million on network ads. It was that money harvested on one platform and then spent on another. As you guys look towards 2012, you have to look at the spending.

If you look at it, they started with a database. They made it into a base. Now they're at the White House. They don't just have a base; they have a database.



Barack Obama's speech on race

Obama's first big hurdle is his battle with newspapers like mine. He's going to be able to go around, communicate with his guys, and say, "You know what? They're not getting it right."

Recall what was going on in '04? No YouTube. Facebook was just across the street, that was it. No HuffPo.

Part of what happened, and this just amazed me, was the Obama campaign put out 70 of their own videos. They had access that we could not obtain. They did something called "Four Days in Denver" that showed Obama warming up, Obama with the family. Any network would've killed, killed, killed to have that kind of access. So they have leverage that we as coverers do not.

People say, "Well, it's on the Web. Unless it's Grandma getting tasered out of a tree and falling on a trampoline, nobody's going to watch it." What was the biggest video for the Obama campaign? It was a 37-minute unannotated lecture on race. So it depends on what you're talking about.

I went to both conventions with 15,000 media members. But you walk into, say, where the *Los Angeles Times*, or *Chicago Tribune* used to be, no footprint at all, nothing. Whereas Politico had 40 people. Slate had 11 people. Daily Kos had 10 people. So the number of reporters didn't change, but their identity and approach most certainly did.

One of the things that happened there was Katie Couric, who had been imprisoned behind an anchor desk and had not been doing big numbers. She left the anchor desk, went guerilla with the camera, adopted the tools of the insurgency, and in doing so came up with great coverage, rehabilitated her career.

My seminal moment at the Democratic Convention: as I was talking to Craig Newmark of Craigslist, I was standing there talking to him and realized a kid just to my right was live



Joe the Plumber was one thing. But Joe the Plumber became a million other things mashed up in whatever way people wanted to their own end. Whatever campaigns put out there, they should know that it's going to be used and annotated.

-David Carr

blogging our conversation. I thought, you know what? It doesn't get any more meta than this. Craig and I are talking to each other, and this guy's writing about it.

Let's see what else I've got here. Do you guys know who Mayhill Fowler is? She more or less tilted the ranks. She was a citizen journalist for the HuffPo, and she came up with the "bitter" remarks that almost knocked Obama off his stride.

I saw her afterwards and said, "Well, what do we take away?" And she said, "There's going to be a lot more of me in 2012." Presents a kind of asymmetry that I think campaigns are going to have to deal with.

The miracle of that campaign was watching an organism organize itself. They created a template. So things like phone banking, which is a nightmare for every national campaign, self organized. People took 10 names off the list, they were able to take what they wanted and leave it there without significant management and oversight from the campaign.

You had a lot of blended media not just from CNN. I was there with a lot of video. And CNN was grabbing citizen video from wherever they could. One of the things that happened early on is it became a kind of style thing or an expression of who you are. You didn't call somebody and say, "We need your support. We need your vote." You said, "Hey, have you seen this video by Will.i.am? Let me send it to you." It's out there. It's ready.

To be a supporter of Obama went beyond your political identity. You could be a fan of *Saturday Night Live*, which made you a fan of Tina Fey, who I saw last week, who looks a lot to me like Sarah Palin. That was an expression of your cultural identity that became a part of your political identity.



Sarah Palin and
Samuel “Joe the Plumber” Wurzelbacher



When I was at that convention, I heard Palin say “snow machine.” I knew she was going to be driving her own path through the American public in the same way. Once they created these images – and Henry has done wonderful work on this – they lost custody of them.

So, Joe the Plumber was one thing. But then Joe the Plumber became a million other things mashed up in whatever way people wanted to their own end. Whatever campaigns put out there, they should know that it’s going to be used and annotated.

The way the conventions had historically gone is that all the big papers would come in at 10 o’clock, sort of scratch your bellies, drink some coffee, and say, “What are we going to do?” No more. For one thing, we’re all up at seven in the morning. We are all too busy making media to consume any media. We’re running around like a chicken with our head cut off.

I watch this apparatus of citizen-generated content. YouTube videos used to their own ends mashed up. It feels niche, but it’s acting mass. And what a great tool for marketing, what a great tool for democracy or, if you’re so inclined, what a great tool for fascists, as well. So I do think that it’s not all goeey and wonderful.

One more and then I’m going to sit down.

You had Obama Girl, which is one kind of expression. And then you had Derrick Ashong, who is a hip-hop guy who got captured making an impassioned plea on behalf of Obama in a video that went viral. Obama Girl didn’t vote, according to news reports. The miracle and the reason that the youth vote made an impact is not what they did, not the activity that they did online. It’s what they did offline. They went and voted. When we look back, what we’ll look at is not how they raised the money or how they got so many people engaged. It’s how did they take that behavior and make it work offline. They did it by making voting seem



like something cool.

Henry and others have pointed this out. I'm just coming out of the Oscars where the polls and the participation are endless. We all pull up to *American Idol* with the expectation that we're going to play a role. If we just watch, for sure, the greatest, greatest drama in recent American democracy, we would expect at the end as a citizenry, as a culture, to have an opportunity to say, "I like that guy." It's just now baked into the process, and I'll stop talking.

Henry Jenkins: Okay, Steve?

Stephen Duncombe: There's a moment from the recent presidential campaign that has stayed with me. This is something I pulled off the Web, so the titles aren't mine.

[Playing video clip.]

Barack Obama: "I understand that because that's the textbook Washington gives. That's how our politics has been taught to be played. That's the lesson that she learned when the Republicans were doing that same thing to her back in the 1990s. So I understand it, and when you're running for the presidency, then you've got to expect it, and you've just got to kind of..." [Flicks dirt off his shoulder as "Dirt off your Shoulder" by Jay-Z" plays in the background.]

Stephen Duncombe: All right. It was a brilliant move by Barack Obama. He had just gotten beaten up, actually, and this was his comeback after a bruising debate. It was a brilliant move for a number of reasons. It signaled that he could rise above criticism and separate himself from the politics as usual, and he used it as a rhetorical strategy to do that.



Obama referencing Jay-Z

It signified that he understood and appreciated popular culture, particularly youth culture. It's a great moment. If you see it from a wider angle, who stands up first? It's all these young people and then the older folks, "Okay, I'm going to stand up, as well. I guess this is good. I don't know what that means, but it means something."



It also got me thinking a lot about the relationship between politics and popular culture and how it's shifting, and also how I think politicians can start to think about popular culture in a productive way.

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It also distanced him from his opponents on a cultural level. That is, Hillary Clinton had held press conferences and hearings condemning popular youth culture, like *Grand Theft Auto*. And so did presidents past. Think about the use of rap music by Hillary Clinton's husband in Sista Souljah during the campaign that Bill Clinton was running. Clinton demonized it. It was a way to distance himself from popular culture.

It also was brilliant because it then got – as Henry well knows – remixed, mashed up and reproduced. When I typed it in Google, I could've picked from one of any hundreds of different versions of this.

It also reminded us just how unbelievably cool Barack Obama is. And the moment really stayed with me. It also got me thinking a lot about the relationship between politics and popular culture and how it's shifting, and also how I think politicians can start to think about popular culture in a productive way.

Traditionally, there's been two ways for politicians to think about popular culture. One is the pessimistic line, and the pessimistic line – whether it's liberal or conservative – goes something like this:

Popular culture is, at best, a distraction from politics. At its worst, it's a contagion to be quarantined, inoculated from and eradicated. Like the circuses of Imperial Rome, popular culture distracts us from the sorts of thinking and reasoning necessary for an informed



populace in a democracy. In other words, we're watching American Idol when we should be reading about foreign affairs.

Worse, the values expressed in popular culture – and for those on the left, it's materialism, consumerism, racism and sexism; for the right, it's hedonism, immorality, irreligiosity. These values infect the public mind, making any sort of moral political community impossible.

Worse still, as political thinkers since Plato and Aristotle have complained, pop culture speaks to the emotions. The heart and the gut are maybe a bit lower, whether it be Homer or wind instruments or rap music. Whereas politics ought to be a rational affair of the sober mind.

That's one kind of approach. The other approach is its exact opposite – the populist approach.

This approach is the uncritical celebration of pop culture as popular politics. This is more traditionally thought of in terms of things like folk cultures, the voice of the people, or subcultures. Punk rock is a proto-revolutionary formation, which I argued in a book once.

This perspective makes its way out to the wider world, as well. For conservatives, NASCAR becomes the very expression of rugged individualism tied with superior industrial can-do. Or for liberals, something like world music becomes a popular articulation of people's appreciation for diversity and global unity.

Regardless of political persuasion, pop culture in itself is a fully constituted expression of popular will from this perspective, and that is at its most extreme. This sort of cultural populism substitutes culture for politics.



In other words, politics drops off and only culture is examined. So watching *American Idol* is democracy. It doesn't lead to democracy, doesn't converge with democracy, but actually is a replacement for democracy, and that's something to be celebrated, according to them.



But I want to offer another model for thinking about the relationship between pop culture and politics. I came up with *mobilization*, but we could probably come up with a better word.

My thinking has been heavily influenced by two people: one, Antonio Gramsci, who's an Italian communist who died in Mussolini's jails; and the other is Stuart Hall, who is a West Indian British academic who's still alive and well, although he recently retired from the Open University in the U.K.

What they did was really valuable. I could've added Walter Lippman in there – the young Walter Lippman – but I'll just take those two.

They turned their concern away from whether or not popular culture is political or anti-political in itself, but reframed the question in what I think is a very useful way: how *can* and how *is* pop culture used politically? That is, how is culture mobilized in the service of politics?

This mobilization could be practiced on a superficial level, like Obama referencing pop culture in a political speech. But it also can be practiced in a much more extensive and productive manner. As the populists understand, popular culture expresses popular ideals,



Pop culture is a unique laboratory of popular fantasy that can be explored, understood, mobilized and then actualized through political practice.

-Stephen Duncombe

desires and dreams, and sometimes nightmares. In this way, popular culture is remarkably utopian.

I remember a Jon Stewart joke before Obama was our president. He said, “Well, how do you know when the drama you’re watching is set in the future? Because we have a black president.” Okay? So his question is, what happens if we really get a black president? We’ll be in the future.

In any case, what he nailed was the utopian element of popular culture. But pessimists argue pop culture isn’t politics; it’s an idealization and a fantasy. What I’ll argue is it’s exactly the fantasy element of popular culture, it’s the phantasmagoric element that makes pop culture so useful to politics. Pop culture is a unique laboratory of popular fantasy that can be explored, understood, mobilized and then actualized through political practice.

This isn’t easy because popular culture is shot through with all sorts of contradictory messages and desires. *Grand Theft Auto*, for example, is a misogynistic hyper-violent fantasy, but it’s also a dream of autonomy and control. Celebrity media acknowledges adulation of an ersatz aristocracy of the image, but it also acknowledges our profound desire to be seen and recognized – that is, not to be invisible in our world.

Every McDonald’s advertisement is an example of bad eating habits being pushed upon us. It’s also an image of idyllic community life. In each case, there’s a utopian element and a dream of what a better world could be.

This is why pop culture matters politically because pop culture is this great, fabulous wide-open repository of popular fantasy. It’s the job of politics to look at these

fantasies and make them reality.

I'll just stop there.

Henry Jenkins: We have some interesting opening provocations. One place we clearly want to start our discussion is around the figure of Obama. Two of you have already spoken fairly explicitly about him.

David, on your slide, you had the phrase "Obama as a brand," and that might be a productive way to think about the campaign. In what way was Obama a brand? Arguably, he was not a television candidate. He was a transmedia candidate who spread his message across every available media platform. I know you were focusing on that during the campaign and wrote some really interesting stuff about it.



David Carr: They began with an ideal, and only the substance and meat of who he was accreted very slowly and was brought together. At the start, for example, a lot of people said Barack "Hussein" Obama – not the best name to run for U.S. president. But that word Obama – its roundness, its fullness, its sort of distinction – it led to something called Obamaism, where it became a source not just of political identity but cultural identity.

When you said you were for Obama, it said a couple things about you: I'm ready for the future. I'm ready for this time when we're going to have a president and he's going to happen to be black. The other thing that it said about you is, "I'm down. I know what this means. I know what he's talking about." I'm a reporter so I'm a moral and ethical eunuch and have no political beliefs that you'll ever discern. But I do think that there was a palpable hunger among people.

We've seen what the crusty old white guys could do, and I think it was less about race



and more about youth – everything he did, everything he demonstrated. Really, what was his big concern once he won? Can I keep my BlackBerry? Can I keep it? More than a few of us could shamefully identify with that. When the media asked him about it, he said, “Oh, yeah, you push a button on this, and it turns into an automobile. And you push a button on this, and it defends the free world.” And we say, “you know what? I like that guy. He’s funny.” He had a trade dress as a popular culture figure and admittedly Hollywood and Will.i.am and everybody gathered around to give him a halo effect. But he’s the first guy who understood.

When he was thinking about how he could take something little and make it big, who’d he go and see? Marc Andreessen. He was smart enough to say, I have a very small brand. It hasn’t been dented. How can I make it go viral using a variety of platforms in a convergent culture to both create funding for further advertising but also to create and access network effects, to build my brand into something robust and mighty that might leave parties a little beside the point, that might not make *The New York Times* as important as they once were and to kind of cut my own path to brand building.

Henry Jenkins: I want to extend this question to Steve and ask him to think about the utopian side of it. I think about the Shepard Fairey graphic with the word “Hope” underneath it. Here in Boston, Shepard Fairey has an exhibit at the Institute of Contemporary Art. But this guy was originally a guerilla graffiti artist. You’ve seen “Andre the Giant Has a Posse” posted underneath the bridges. But the “Hope” icon speaks to that role of fantasy.

Stephen Duncombe: There are two ways to read that. One is the very cynical way, which is what Walter Lippman was writing about in 1923. Politics works by you



Will.i.am

floating this empty symbol, be it “patriotism” or “hope.” Then everybody attaches their own particular and very heartfelt emotions to it. What might be “hope” for you might be different for someone else. But we can all agree on hope. Then you trundle that out. That’s the cynical *manufacturer of consent* that Walter Lippman was talking about in 1923.



It does work cynically. But somehow Obama was able to not betray the individual interest with his generalized “hope” and instead allow it to become an empty thing which we could all apply to it what we wanted. At the same time, it did not come across as fake and empty and cloying. This is why a brand is a very good way of describing him.



One thing he did particularly well – he knew there are lots of types of popular culture out there, lots of types of ideals, and historically the Democrats had read popular culture the way the right has wanted them to see popular culture. Country & western is popular, but rap and alternative music are somehow elitist or urban or something of that nature. What was fascinating about Obama is he went out and said, “You know, I’m a mixed race, latte-sipping, urban guy who likes basketball and hip-hop.”

David Carr: And I finish my speeches with the big country western song.

Stephen Duncombe: I know. He did it well. But he’s not stupid because it is a big tent out there.

David Carr: Yes, yes.

Stephen Duncombe: But a lot of people who listen to country western also listen to hip-hop. He was able to say, “Look, there is a sort of competition of culture out there, and you can align yourself with this other thing, which is just as popular and has crossovers into what is considered the real American culture.”



It was something that I was looking at very closely in this campaign because popular culture, celebrity – these things are tools. They're weapons and they can backfire.

-Johanna Blakley

Henry Jenkins: So, Johanna, the research you've been doing is all about this competition of culture and how it relates to political taste.

Johanna Blakley: Yes, I would add to the Obama discussion that it was very interesting to see a popular cultural literacy play out in the campaigns. It can be dangerous for political campaigns to utilize celebrities and to engage in popular music. It's so easy to make a misstep. Obama rarely did, and McCain desperately tried to make Obama look bad for being in sync with popular culture and being so popular himself. McCain made that attack ad that featured Paris Hilton, and it ended up biting him on the ass. Instead Paris Hilton ended up coming up with a great viral video that made her look a lot smarter than anybody thought she was.

Unidentified Speaker: She really is stupid.

Johanna Blakley: But she is really stupid. It was good writing, but I heard she memorized what she said. It was her energy policy. It was interesting to watch. It was something that I was looking at very closely in this campaign because popular culture, celebrity – these things are tools. They're also weapons and they can backfire.

So do you want me to talk about the Zogby survey?

We did this survey with Zogby International. It was a really smart survey because it doesn't do much good to ask people what their political ideology is. You can ask a political scientist what their political ideology is and they might have some sort of coherent response for you. Generally people have very deep feelings about a lot of complicated issues, but they don't necessarily know how to articulate what that adds up to, what they are as a political being.



We developed a sophisticated political typology as part of this survey. It included 42 statements about all of the really scary issues that you can imagine – environmentalism, abortion, diplomacy, the wars, military action – all the kinds of things that are hot-button issues in American politics. This was a national American survey, and about 3,200 were surveyed.

We did a statistical analysis of the way in which people responded to those questions and we checked to see whether there were any groups that emerged. We wanted to see if there were cohorts in America that were held together by the way they responded to these statements.

We didn't care what they called themselves. They could call themselves Libertarian. They could say they were registered Democrats. We asked them these things in another section of the survey, but in our statistical analysis, we just looked at how they responded to the 42 statements. We wanted to see where they might fall on some sort of continuum.

We didn't care how many groups would come out of it. When we did the statistical analysis, it turned out that the tightest clusters were around three groups.

The largest group sounded conservative to us in terms of how they responded to these political questions. We called them the Red group. The second largest group we called the Blue group. They sounded very liberal in the way they responded to these issues. Then there was a very murky middle group that constituted about 24% of the country. We called them Purples because they had these shared values between the Reds and the Blues. It was hard to figure out who they were, but they were a very interesting group.

The same set of people were then asked hundreds of questions about entertainment. What kind of music do you like? What kind of movies did you see last summer? What's your favorite TV show? When you have spare time, what do you like to do? Do you like to read books? Do you like to surf the Web? What kind of game franchises are your favorites?



One of the reasons I wanted to put this survey together was to find cultural touchstones – entertainment products that bring people together across ideological divides.

-Johanna Blakley

Lots and lots and lots of questions like this, and also a few questions about their thoughts on the convergence between entertainment and politics.

We found these political clusters very significant. This is the Red cluster. I wanted to just get the slide up so you could see some of the entertainment preferences among that group. We looked for a strong correlation between the political groups and the particular way they consumed entertainment. It turned out there was one.

The shocking thing is there were so few overlaps among the three groups. We found that there were these entertainment and media ghettos. If you fell into the Blue group, you most likely hated most of the entertainment preferences of the Red group and vice versa. If you liked a certain television genre, you most likely belonged to one group and not another.

This was also distressing. One of the reasons I wanted to put this survey together was to find cultural touchstones – entertainment products that bring people together across ideological divides. There weren't many. I was shocked.

House was one of the few cultural products that was equally favored among Purples, Reds, and Blues, and also favored across almost every single demographic tab. And we had just about every tab that you can imagine – race, gender, sex, where you live in the country, what kind of citizen you think you are. They all liked *House*. There were so few of these cultural touchstones that it was quite distressing to me. But it made for a good press release.

Purples were very, very interesting. These were people who consume more entertainment than the other two groups. They tend to watch just about everything on primetime television. These are their favorite shows: *Law & Order*, *60 Minutes*

and *CSI*. A conservative person in the Red group wouldn't be caught dead watching *60 Minutes*.

Purples like reality programming, or at least they're the only group that's willing to admit it. They love the *Wii* and *Super Mario Kart* and *Dance Dance Revolution*. But when we asked whether they ever enjoy entertainment that was made outside of the United States, they said, "Never." There was this unwillingness to admit or this reluctance to believe that they could enjoy something that wasn't created in their own country.



Dance Dance Revolution

Now, Blues. I was rigorous about selecting entertainment content that was most popular – the best-selling game franchises, the most popular shows from the most recent Nielsen ratings, the biggest blockbusters. I wanted to ask about entertainment that the most people had seen or heard of.



The most popular popular culture in this country is quite appealing to Blues. Reds don't like much of it. If I had included questions about niche entertainment – the Golf Network and those places where the Republican National Committee advertised their candidates – I would probably find more entertainment preferences for Reds.

This was very revealing in and of itself. When we are looking at the most popular popular culture, we are looking at a culture that is preferred by one political group over another.

Henry picked up on this in one of his blog entries on his site. In my favorite part of the survey, I asked questions about what they thought about this convergence between entertainment and politics. "How often do you find yourself enjoying entertainment that reflects values other than your own?" Twenty-six percent of Reds – that's one in four of them – said they never find themselves enjoying entertainment that doesn't reflect their



values. This is on a Likert scale. You didn't have to choose "never." Only 9% of Purples and 10% of Blues agreed.

Then we asked, "Do you find yourself entertained by things that you believe are in bad taste?" Forty-five percent of Reds – almost one in two – said they never find themselves entertained by things that they believe are in bad taste. Only 21% of Blues and 36% of Purples agreed with the statement, that they never find themselves entertained by something in bad taste.

This was a key data point. We're not arguing that people like certain representations because they reflect their politics, reflect their life, reflect what they think the world should be about. Actually, there's an entire audience hungry for representations that are foreign, unfamiliar, horrible, and examples of what not to do. They have a very different relationship to representations than other groups have.

We asked whether they thought you could find political messages in fictional TV shows and movies. Setting aside news, documentaries and talk shows, do you think entertainment contains political messages? A very large majority said, "absolutely." There isn't a sensibility among the American public that if it's popular culture, it's not political.

One thing we're curious about at the Lear Center is whether people learn from fictional representations. We have a huge project – funded by the Centers for Disease Control – to get accurate health information into TV shows. The CDC has found, lo and behold, that people believe what they see on primetime TV. Those medical facts aren't necessarily checked. The CDC provides funds to us so that we can help television producers and writers to get it right.

We also asked, "How often do you learn about political issues when you watch fictional TV shows or films?" A majority of the American public said that they often

Actually, there's an entire audience hungry for representations that are foreign, unfamiliar, horrible, and examples of what not to do.

-Johanna Blakley

do.

Henry Jenkins: Steve and David. I'd be curious to get your reactions to what these implications might be for your approaches.



Stephen Duncombe: This was something that David said. He said earlier that cultural identity is becoming merged with political identity.

What I love about those last charts, Johanna, is that people are finding politics in their fictional entertainment; what they define as politics is increasingly cultural.

What sort of things did they enjoy in this fictional world? What sort of attitudes do they have about their neighbors, and so on and so forth? Those very things that we wouldn't have thought of as politics, that the Oxford English Dictionary doesn't define as politics. It's an expansive notion of what we think of as political as it starts to enter into the cultural realm.

David Carr: Part of our problem as a culture is that our core expertise is consumption. We don't make stuff but we're good at consuming stuff. Consumption becomes a metric for who we are. There was a movement that said if you went to the better grocery store and spent more money on your food, it was a form of voting or political expression.

In the same way, if you're willing to admit that you like watching Tom Selleck, you're making a statement of who you are. We both remarked when we saw *House* up there on the Reds' list. What is *House* doing there? He's an anti-authoritarian!

These maypoles of culture are what the entertainment industry is looking for – this sweet

People are finding politics in their fictional entertainment; what they define as politics is increasingly cultural.

-Stephen Duncombe



spot where everybody can find something that they want. What happened with Obama is what you talked about. You had a vessel that got filled up with people's aspirations, and it became a cultural marker. I listen, I watch the *Daily Show*. I called my daughter who's a junior at the University of Wisconsin, and I said, "Obama's speaking tomorrow. What do you think?" She said, "I think he is just going to kill." And I said, "Why?" She said, "The biggest nitwit on my floor just came up to me and said, 'I'm really interested in seeing this Obeema (sic) guy tomorrow.'"

Like a handbag being a marker or the consumption of a show, she was sensing that this was a way to communicate that you are "with it," that you knew what you were doing. Like the Superbowl or the Oscars. The Oscars are a great example of some people standing up and saying, "That is the worst, most appalling thing I have ever seen. They can't get that right. That's terrible." While others say, "I loved it! It's wonderful!" We tend to use these iconic large events as a mirror in which we see ourselves or identify ourselves.

Stephen Duncombe: Johanna, is this a bad thing? Along the lines of what David is talking about – this is a conflation of politics and culture. The idea that a politician can become a brand, an empty brand in which we find ourselves. As we find ourselves in, "I'm a Levi's wearer," or what have you. Is this the absolute degradation of politics?

The second view is that this is how we've learned – for better or for worse – to express who we are and our identities and our pleasures and our desires. What we should be looking for are those people who do it with integrity. This is the game. Are you going to do it well or are you going to do it badly? Are you going to do it with honor or without honor? And stop holding out this idealized sort of enlightened vision of the rational public who will make decisions based on cold calculation.



House

Johanna Blakley: The risk of using popular culture and celebrity is that it trivializes something that's otherwise important, right? [*Someone shouts out.*] That's one thing that gets people so up in arms that they actually shout out from an audience to say, "Yes, this is a horrible thing!"

When things – important things – are trivialized, that's a huge problem. When substance is undermined because you have added some glitz, that's a huge problem. But if you are able to suck some extra people into the tent because you got Bruce Springsteen to perform a song before you spoke, that's probably a good thing.

You have to mobilize this stuff with integrity and with care. You have to be a brand manager of sorts. You have to figure out what's going to draw the right people in so that they will be open and interested in the message. Your message may be a health message, for instance, like what we do at the Lear Center. Or it could be a political candidate's message. It can also be a proponent of evolution who's trying to explain to a very angry audience why evolution ought to be taught in that school. Scientists, too, need to use the tricks of entertainment and popular culture in order to get people into the tent and to get their message heard.

It's often more of a method than a content, and it can be used in the worst, the most horrible and unimaginably bad ways. But it can also be used very effectively.

David Carr: Let's remember that it's not only a tool of the hip young candidate. In 2004 and 2000, what was George Bush selling? Didn't he win those elections on style points? You would never look at him and say, "Well, there's a Mensa. I want him in charge of the free world. He's got so much throbbing brainpower." But you've got John Kerry with the gigantic stick up his backside, compared to Bush, the other guy with his thumbs through his belt loops who knows how to wear a pair of boots, who can push some brush around. Who do





I want to identify with? Is it John Kerry – wearing those bike shorts and riding that jillion-dollar bike, or the guy who knows how to get on a horse and doesn't look stupid when he does it.

You can laugh, but think back to 2000. What a gasbag Al Gore was. How full of himself – that style, that popular cultural approach. He was dealing with templates from an earlier era – ones that were, frankly, borrowed directly from Ronald Reagan, but worked for Reagan well.

A huge part of this is not new. It's the networked effect. People were up in arms with the Obamas fist bumping. It personally brought me enormous pleasure – both when they did it and when I saw it on the cover of *The New Yorker*. You don't know what way things are going to cut.



Stephen Duncombe: I want to bring it back even further, to 1933. FDR's fireside speech, which people compared to Obama's recent speech. FDR was using this new medium of radio, thinking about style completely and utterly. I encourage everybody to go and download it and listen to the speech. What's interesting about it is that it doesn't sacrifice substance. He in fact uses style, his rich voice. A playwright, Robert Sherwood, scripted the speech, in addition to a couple of poets working with FDR. So it's a very stylized speech. But he very plainly describes how the banking system works.

Oftentimes we think about style and substance as an either or. You have Al Gore or you have the empty rhetoric of George W. Bush. But FDR did both. That's what Obama is doing as well. He is pulling the two together. We don't have to sacrifice one for the other.

David Carr: Can I ask you a brief question?

Johanna Blakley: Yes.

David Carr: Nobody except your Blues liked anything foreign. But then *Slumdog Millionaire* passed 100 million, won the Academy Award, and it wasn't just one cohort that pushed that over the top. Or was it? You and I both care about the Oscars, so I wanted to go there for a minute.

Johanna Blakley: Well, I must say I hated *Slumdog Millionaire*. I was so disappointed in it. I am the only person I know who feels this way. *[Someone from the audience yells.]* I love Danny Boyle. What was he doing with this sentimental schlock?



It's the genre that was really appealing to a very broad audience. Many people believe that there are universal values and that certain stories can tap into them, like *Titanic* for instance. They show you box office numbers and say, "See? This story resonates with people who have absolutely no connection to that culture whatsoever."

It's simplistic to claim that there must be a universal story just because people respond similarly to the same cultural object. It's much more complicated than that, but my presumption is that's what was going on in *Slumdog Millionaire*.

Henry Jenkins: The role of comedy in the political discourse of this year is probably one of the most striking features – whether we're talking Obama Girl on YouTube or *Saturday Night Live's* skewering of Palin or the role of *The Daily Show* in articulating the values of a generation.

The discourse of comedy is profoundly different as a way of framing political debates than

It's simplistic to claim that there must be a universal story just because people respond similarly to the same cultural object.

-Johanna Blakley

the melodramatic discourse of the “Morning in America” campaign, the “Daisy Girl,” or classic political advertising. We might think of it as propaganda with its deep appeal to sentimentality and emotion. This cuts directly to what you were saying about *Slumdog*.



What do we make of the role of comedy in this campaign? Even John McCain was trying for a certain snarky comedy at Obama’s expense. It didn’t go over well, but it was still an attempt to translate the campaign issues into satire rather than melodrama.

David Carr: You’re right that things have changed a great deal. If you think back to 1988, what was political comedy? It was Mike Dukakis in a tank with the helmet on. I’m sorry to keep picking on Massachusetts people, but you guys really aren’t from here either.



Michael Dukakis

Funny is hard. Funny is really, really hard. We’ve more or less empowered many with people with cheap, ubiquitous video technology that they can manipulate. It’s what Henry talked about.

Think of how moribund *Saturday Night Live* was in this culture when this election started. No one was watching it. They got a puff of oxygen off of this, realized what they had, and wrote it back into the American consciousness. In this election, there was only one story. Trust me as somebody who writes about other things, there really was only one story.

I had a book out that came out in August. I didn’t even care about my book. How could anybody – in dramatic terms, in comedic terms – come up with a Sarah Palin? You never could have conjured her. I spent a lot of the season laughing my ass off.

Stephen Duncombe: Also interesting was the type of humor – satire and irony. It’s a different type of humor that doesn’t tell you what to think. It’s funny because you

have to fill in the blank. It says, “This is not what I’m thinking. This is not what I believe.” Then the audience has to figure out that space, that place of, “Ah, this is what the comic really thinks. This is what I really think,” There’s a form of communion there.

It’s a deeply political type of humor. This is why Swift was using it. It creates a community of meaning because you both have to come up with a punch line. It’s a democratic form in a lot of ways. It’s not about telling you what to think. It’s about leaving you a space and saying, “Okay, now fill it in.” I love that style of humor.



That was part of the political excitement. The humor helped with the democratic feeling of this election.

Johanna Blakley: We get a lot of calls at the Lear Center from press who say, “Oh, we hear that young people these days aren’t reading the news, and they’re just watching Jon Stewart.”

We were interested in the results of this survey. It was a Pew research project, not done at the Lear Center. Pew annually gives quizzes to people in order to find out how much they know about current affairs. They look at knowledge levels.

They then asked these same people where it was they liked to get their news. It turned out that the people with the highest knowledge level were the people who liked to get their news from the *Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report*. This makes sense because the joke is so not funny if you don’t know what they’re talking about.

You have to do your research. You have to have already read the paper and know what’s going on. Then you watch the comedy show and get the joke. It’s not to say that it makes you a more sophisticated political thinker. Just among my own community of friends, I get a little irritated when my friends pretend like the joke that Jon Stewart told last night is their

It’s a different type of humor that doesn’t tell you what to think. It’s funny because you have to fill in the blank.

-Stephen Duncombe



own political perspective, as if they came up with that critique. It's a shortcut to a sophisticated kind of political sound bite, a sort of riffing off what smarter people who think about this all day are saying on your TV.

It's not the most beneficial and educational method of teaching people about politics, but engagement is crucial. There's a give and take. There's knowledge that is required before the joke makes any sense at all.



Stephen Duncombe: Can I ask the panelists, who got addicted to the ticker on CNN? It was updated every hour or two hours. Did anybody – was anybody else addicted to that? Just us? Never mind.

David Carr: But look at the trade dress in that room. You've got John King on the giant iPod. You've got the ticker underneath him.

Stephen Duncombe: It became a soap opera. It became a constant. I got fascinated with it. I would have to update the political ticker every 35, 45 minutes. I wonder if that is engaging me, or is this turning us into a soap opera? I haven't figured that out entirely.

Johanna Blakley: Soap operas are among the most engaging entertainment forms known to man.

Stephen Duncombe: Definitely.

Johanna Blakley: It is the best place to disseminate health information – just to let you know – because you've got people watching five days a week. The characters

can have very complicated diseases, and you can give the audience very complex advice over a six-month story arc. Then you can administer surveys and find out whether people learned something.

There's no contradiction there at all. By turning politics into melodrama into soap opera, you are deeply engaging people in a narrative. It just so happens that the narrative is actually happening in the real world.

Unidentified Speaker: Does the narrative then actually kind of jump from the screen or from the living room out into their real world?

Johanna Blakley: Oh, yes. We do a lot of survey information on that for our health project because we have to keep proving to the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control that this stuff works.



In the Zogby survey, we asked people, "What have you ever done based on what you've learned about politics in some fictional show that you watch?" It was amazing. A vast majority of the American public said they had done something – written to a newspaper, made a donation. The poorest people were the most likely to say they had made a donation. African Americans, in particular, said they volunteered in their neighborhood; they called somebody. Everybody said they talked to somebody about it. You see a compelling story; you ask somebody else, "Oh, did you see that? Did you know?"

It's impossible to keep the entertainment experience contained within the media. It ends up leaking into real lives.



It's impossible to keep the entertainment experience contained within the media. It ends up leaking into real lives.

-David Carr

David Carr: And sometimes it's content that seems really stupid and really base – like *South Park* – always topical, always on the news, always with a point of view. What looks like paper cutouts of young preteen boys shouting filth into the air is keeping me on beam and in narrative.

Johanna Blakley: That's where the form really informs the content. Because they're paper-cut animations that are easy to put together in a week's time, they can actually talk about the news that happened over the last week. If they made beautiful animation, they'd talk about the news that happened six months ago.

Henry Jenkins: I'm going to open it up to the floor for questions in just a minute. But I'm going to ask one last question of the panelists to give you guys time to formulate your questions. And I'd like to take advantage of my moderator's role to flash a couple of graphics of my own up here.

Last week, the *New York Daily Post* ran this cartoon depicting the shooting of a chimpanzee who'd gone wild on its owner's home with the headline, "They'll have to find someone else to write the next stimulus bill." This forced a begrudging, and some think not so much of, an apology from the *New York Post*.

As I looked for the cartoon, I found online at least a year's worth of cartoons that had directly connected Obama to chimpanzees – part of the PhotoShop culture, the participatory culture that we've seen where average citizens are taking images and manipulating them in various ways to frame the issue.

Then I went back even further and discovered this, which many of my liberal friends had circulated. We have seen this on bulletin boards and refrigerators, which

showed George Bush as a chimpanzee.

I throw that open to be provocative. And also to ask, what do we make of the controversy over this particular cartoon? What does this tell us about the role of satire in politics and the politics of participatory culture?



David Carr: I didn't get it. I did not get the controversy.

Stephen Duncombe: I got the controversy. The controversy is that you can call me a bad driver and it doesn't really matter. If you call a woman a bad driver, it has a host of connotations and restrictions behind it.



New York Post cartoon

It's this idea that humor could be outside of a historical and political discourse while at the same time, in order to be funny, it couldn't have been. That's why I never bought the *Post*. On some level they knew and wanted to skate that line and see what would happen. They wanted in some odd way to be post-racial but also garner the fruits of the racist discourse as well.

I could understand why people got upset. I thought it was a pretty bad cartoon.

David Carr: It was executed very poorly.

Stephen Duncombe: Yes.

Johanna Blakley: Comedy always happens within a context. That's one reason why it's less okay to talk about how bad an Asian driver is as opposed to how bad a white male driver is.



There's this cultural context and that context is saturated with stereotypes. After Henry said he wanted to talk about this cartoon, I Googled around for racist cartoons about Obama. I found several that were actually from last year.

The emphasis was really on racist stereotypes, those that might be invoked for a black male. Penis size was something mentioned or gestured to in several cartoons I found. It's one of those examples of utilizing a stereotype that's demeaning and reductive, but you're utilizing it in such a way that you're suggesting that this person – who is a member of a minority and is, therefore, a victim of racism and of certain stereotypes – actually has an advantage over the rest of us.

Stereotypes can be invoked and have completely different valences, positive and negative.

Stephen Duncombe: I totally agree with that. What was interesting about the PhotoShop images, including the George Bush one, is that we offer it often as if greater participation meant more civility in discourse, more diversity in discourse. What is offered in the role of PhotoShop collages can go much lower than would be acceptable on the pages of a newspaper. These images circulate freely on YouTube and many of us were comfortable with it on our refrigerator door when it was about George Bush but not when it was about Obama.

Those of us who are excited about the participatory dimensions of new media also have to be ethically aware of these kinds of insensitivity – the debased levels of discourse that sometimes circulate in a participatory culture.

Henry Jenkins: That's what discussion is about. *The New York Post* shows up on my street and what can I do? I can write a letter to them that may or may not be published.

But with anything that shows up on the Web, I can actually produce something. I can comment below it. I can make my own counter offer go viral and get more hits than theirs. The form is fundamentally different.

Yes, the stuff might be just as atrocious, just as uncivil, perhaps more uncivil. But the forum in which we're working allows for a discussion, as opposed to the broadcast model.



David Carr: Those of us at large media outlets always thought of the Web as one more publishing opportunity when, in fact, Jeff Jarvis and others remind us it's actually a way for you to listen and hear.

I have started to occasionally veer into political issues, and I notice no difference in level of discourse. It's great that we can hear from our audience. It's sometimes appalling what they really want to talk about.

Henry Jenkins: On that note, let's hear what our audience wants to talk about. So prepare to be appalled.

Johanna Blakley: I had one thing, if you don't mind.

Henry Jenkins: Sure.

Johanna Blakley: A friend sent this to me, and I found it so deeply compelling. It fits in very nicely with Steve's book project, and what he's saying about dreams, politics and engaging with political discourse in popular culture – writing blogs about it, making videos and remixed videos. It's a way of creating a story where you have a role, right?



You post this online and it becomes a part of political consciousness that is deeply subconscious.

-Johanna Blakley

Stephen Duncombe: Yes, right.

Johanna Blakley: And it's participatory. I was fascinated by this blog entry on *The New York Times* site. It was called "Dreams of Obama." Did you see that?

The blogger – I can't remember who it was – said that her friends told her, "I've been dreaming about Obama, and I like Michelle, but now I feel kind of guilty."

So she started collecting all these dreams about Obama, and, oh, the dreams were fascinating. Sometimes they were sexual, sometimes they were fraught with angst because, "I really like Michelle, why am I doing this to her?" But sometimes it was Obama taking out my trash and cleaning my house. I think it's metaphorical.

You post this online and it becomes a part of political consciousness that is deeply subconscious. It's great storytelling and it's affecting the lives that we're leading.

Henry Jenkins: Okay, over here first.

Unidentified Audience Participant: In sympathy with what was being said about Brand Obama, what was most impressive to me about Obama the candidate was in broadcast television. There are two moments that I want to mention:

One was during the debate when he was being attacked by Hillary. Watching him on the screen as he took the attack, processing it, controlling it, and then responding from another place. I was impressed with that, whether I like Obama politically or not. And I'm not that impressed with Obama in some ways.

The other moment was what I took to be a feigned gesture at the end of a

subsequent debate. It was when he got up and went to pull Hillary's chair away from her at the end of the debate, to sort of hold her chair for her.

What I wonder in the first instance possibly if you think it's an example of someone – with their consultants – understanding the nature of television as a medium and understanding the importance of a cool presentation.

I'm not sure I quite understand how you can manipulate people with integrity. It seems to me you might have a good message; you might want to draw people in to hear a good message. I just don't understand how manipulating people is something that's done with any kind of integrity, even if you think your message is a good one.



Stephen Duncombe: Yes, I want to speak to that quickly. Two things.

Don't underestimate Obama's training in being surveyed and looked at since the age of one. He's a black man growing up in a non-black country. When he walks into a room, people look at him and have judgments about him. He's learned to look at himself. I mean this is what W.E.B. Dubois writes about in *Double Consciousness*.

The studied cool that people saw had a lot to do with growing up black in America. It can go one way or the other, and this is the way it went with him.

Going back to the idea of manipulation and how you have integrity within manipulation – I'll give you one example. Las Vegas. Not the gambling casinos, but the Las Vegas that's a fake and everybody knows it's a fake. It manipulates you, or rather, it is a spectacle. It attracts you, it draws you in, but no one who goes to the New York, New York casino thinks they're actually going to New York.



[Obama is] a black man growing up in a non-black country. When he walks into a room, people look at him and have judgments about him. He's learned to look at himself.

-Stephen Duncombe

You can have a spectacular portrayal. You can have a stylistic portrayal. And at the same time, you can be open about what you're doing. This is the difference between George Bush landing on the USS Abraham Lincoln – which is selling a fantasy as the truth – versus presenting a good story and presenting a narrative or a brand that people actually want to be part of.

We're not saying that he's fake. We're saying he's learned how to package himself, sell himself, and be an identity – be an image. To a certain extent, we all do that now, and he's just particularly good at it.

David Carr: I think it's a splendid question. I remember the first instance you're talking about. When he was processing was he also processing what you and I would think? I've seen the guy up close. It's hard to overestimate the amount of processing at work there.

It comes from what Steve was talking about and an awareness that at some point, this is going to be played out in a public context.

These are exemplars of the ability to time and platform shift. If you came in on Monday and said, "Did you see Obama and how he really thought it through, etc., etc.?" I would say, "No, but I'm going to go look at it right now."

Something that's completely different now is the ability to catch up time and again. The water cooler is now movable and we can all be in on the joke and have a greater opportunity to have a deeper conversation along the way.

Henry Jenkins: Okay, question over here?

Unidentified Audience Participant: This has been a very interesting, really

wonderful discussion on a lot of levels.

One of the things I wanted to touch upon was the image of popular culture. What is this popular culture? Based on this discussion, a lot of it seems to be about representations – or a way of thinking about individuals either as leaders who are branded in certain ways (as chimps, or as a cool rap aficionados, or as types of consumers). The Red groups, the Red consumers, the Blue consumers, the Purple consumers are a kind of large mass.

The Obama phenomenon started to draw attention to a middle level of politics. Here, it was more about small groups networking, a kind of collective engagement. It was less about the representations as it was about facilitating the flow that got people involved and got people in small groups.

It's a kind of jazz democracy, right? You have these people improvising on different themes but in small groups. This distinction between news, documentaries and talk shows – that one is not pop culture but the other stuff is. I'm not sure about those distinctions. If pop culture is the things we talk about – if we watch Colbert with knowledge of what really happens in the news – then that distinction doesn't really hold. It's because it's about how we talk about it with each other. It doesn't matter whether we learned it from Colbert or we learned it from a column in *The New York Times*.

I'm curious to hear more about this. The word "mobilization" came up and I think maybe "mobilize" is one way to think about collective engagement – that there is a middle level of politics.

What's frustrating about the whole meltdown is that we either need great leaders to pull us out of this or we should keep spending as consumers. How do we participate in these smaller groups? That really seems to be what Obama suggested or showed was out there. But our discourse still hasn't caught up with a way to talk about that. Thank you.





Stephen Duncombe: I would agree, if we weren't talking about popular culture. One of the things that I – as a political activist – really admired about the Obama campaign was that they were able through their networking to reactivate civic society and civil society. You could plug in at all sorts of levels and be an activist for a day.

One thing I learned as a community organizer is the first thing you do when someone comes to a meeting is give him a job. Once they actually complete that task, no matter how small it is, they are now part of your campaign.

They built a culture of organizing. People in my circle of political organizers have been talking about what we should do with this culture of organizing now. Is Obama going to use it? Have all these people that used to think of themselves as consumers of politics now think of themselves as producers of politics? How can we tap into that? That's when social movements and organizations explode – when people who don't think of themselves as politicians start to act as politicians.

You saw it in the Civil Rights movement. You saw it during ACT UP. That's when these things explode into new and exciting formations, which us tired old politicians would never have thought of.

Johanna Blakley: I read an article that you wrote recently about how powerful these small networks are because it's a way groups of people can share a sense of being celebrities. They become known to other people.

We always think of it as a mass audience and one celebrity and everybody's looking for their seven seconds of fame. But when you have tight, aggressive and mobilized little networks, everybody becomes a kind of celebrity within them. That's another

way popular culture and the notion of celebrity become injected into participatory culture and into the political process in a very functional fashion.

David Carr: The ability to customize by geography lends itself to a really substantial online/offline response. This isn't some crunchy progressive imperative.



People look at a mega church in Houston and say, "How can the spiritual needs of 4,800 people be satisfied by this one guy?" Of course they can't. They've self-assigned into prayer groups. They meet with sub-leaders. Everybody gets a role to play.

The feedback you get is not only that you exist but you are a good person. You're trying. You're involved on a very retail level. For Obama, it's the Chicago in him. But I've watched him work a room of really drunk, entitled white people and watched him work the retail aspect of it. He came up with a campaign that didn't just suck things from people but gave them things – gave them a psychic return for involvement.

Henry Jenkins: Pop culture consumption today is almost never individual. It's always social. It's always through networks in one way or another. Fan communities and gamer communities have become large-scale collective bargaining units on behalf of media consumers. As they do so, they're teaching their rank and file how to act politically.

I'm very interested in these proto-political behaviors. How do people quickly mobilize to write letters to keep a television show on the air or to repel a cease-and-desist letter? And how do we move from those tactics into new forms of political activism?

Most of what I saw in the Obama campaign I recognized from fan cultures of one sort or another. The myth of Obama as fan-and-chief is running through the communities I regularly

That's when social movements and organizations explode – when people who don't think of themselves as politicians start to act as politicians.

-Stephen Duncombe

study. The fact that he reads Harry Potter novels to his kids, that he can reference YouTube videos, that he knows how to do the Vulcan salute. There's a whole mythology about Obama as geek fan boy that made him an appealing candidate for those learning how to navigate through social networks to achieve proto-political ends. It's now becoming political as the attention turns from cultural toward more traditional politics.

Stephen Duncombe: Right. Yes, there is.

David Carr: Obama is somebody who could make a noise on many levels, he was able to customize and segment his message and send it out – radiate a message in such a way that a lot of people feel he belongs to them, to very different people.

Stephen Duncombe: We're used to thinking of consuming as a passive activity. Then there's this moment when people start saying, "Well, it's not necessarily passive because we bestow meanings on what we consume."

Because of technology – particularly in the media sphere – we're rarely just consumers. We're actually consumer-producers. What Obama tapped into is not age-old organizing techniques – which he would've learned in the streets of Chicago as a community organizer – but a fundamental understanding that when people consume a message, they want to produce it as well. They want to make it go viral. They want to put their own little spin on it. They called it "snowflake organizing" in which every snowflake was different. You would take in Obama's message, and then you would reproduce it.

They allowed for a lot of people to make it their own. They never clamped down and did a policing of the videos or of the message. Not that they could have. But



Barack Obama

they didn't even try. They realized that when a thousand flowers bloom, it's going to work for us as long as we've got a 30-minute infomercial.



David Carr: Henry and others have written about what customization will do – the ability to put a little top spin on something and get it moving in a certain way.

Unidentified Audience Participant: I'd like to change the perspective a bit. If pop culture is ephemeral and fleeting, if we've enjoyed discussing the success of the new media and politics, let's go four years in the future. Will there be a Twitter? Will there be a Facebook? What's in the pipelines now that will substantially change the paradigm in 2012?

Stephen Duncombe: Henry?

Henry Jenkins: Yeah, the crystal ball that MIT issued when I became a faculty member is busted this week.

I completed *Convergence Culture* when the last campaign was ending. *Convergence Culture* doesn't include any reference to Web 2.0, doesn't include any reference to YouTube, doesn't include any reference to Second Life, doesn't include any reference to Twitter. It has a reference included at the very last minute to iTunes.

A lot has happened since the last presidential election. And I'm modest enough to admit that I didn't see most of that coming. The logic of what that book described would account for all of that. We're on the horizon, but we don't know yet what they're going to be.

We can think logically where the culture is going to move us. But none of us could tell you what the technologies or the platforms are actually going to be four years from now that will enable politics to take place.



But none of us could tell you what the technologies or the platforms are actually going to be four years from now that will enable politics to take place.

-Henry Jenkins

If you noticed four years ago, you would've seen the beginnings of satire as a political tool. You would've seen signs of fan-based movements in politics. You would've seen a number of the things we talked about here today. The lessons of Joe Trippi and Howard Dean impacted Obama in ways that we could have predicted, but we can't. What we can't predict is what's the next platform.

David Carr: You can't overestimate how radical it could be. You could have a candidate in 2012 say, "Yeah, I got a media strategy. Let's not engage them at all, zero. We're going to broadcast using our own media, and we're going to build a constituency, and we don't want third party annotation of anything we do." It could be as radical as that.

Stephen Duncombe: David made a fleeting reference to Walter Benjamin and Benjamin's seminal article on "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." It ends by saying reproduction has changed the ballgame for politics. It's either going to lead to fascism or it's going to lead to a democratic communism.

He's leaving it open because he doesn't know which way it's going to go. Either the idea, the image, is going to be brought together and given a singular meaning under fascism, or people are going to have a discussion about the meaning of images.

That's the way we have to look at it now. You can look at the logic of what's happening, but also understand that there's always agency there, that it can split one way or the other.

Unidentified Audience Participant: Hi. Thanks for a great panel. My name is Madeline. I'm a graduate student in the Comparative Media Studies department. I

have a question mainly for you, Johanna, but to be expanded to the rest of the panel.

What role does age play in the preferences, the definitions of each of those groups? It seemed to me that age would be a factor. What role does age play in the formation of popular culture? Is it driven by younger people or by other factors that might influence popular culture?



Johanna Blakley: I can give you a demographic portrait of each one of the groups if that's of interest. The oldest group was the Reds. They were also the wealthiest, and they were the group within which a majority never graduated from college. They're making the most money, but they weren't the most educated. They were most likely married. They were most likely living in rural areas. Most of them – a majority – described themselves as “born again.” Seventy-two percent were registered Republican. They were the least racially diverse group, and they were the only group where men actually outnumbered women. So absolutely – demographics drive the kinds of preferences that you saw up on the screen.

Blues were the youngest group, the most educated, the most urban, the most racially and religiously diverse. They were 79% Democrats, 18% registered Independents. They were as likely to describe themselves as moderate as they were to say that they were liberal or progressive. We asked them to self-identify in a separate part of the survey. They were female, they were single or in a civil union, and most of them lived in the center Great Lakes region.

As for Purples, most haven't graduated from college. Half identify as “born again.” They were most likely divorced, widowed or separated. They were mostly female, live in the city or suburbs and live in the East. The largest group were middle-aged and middle class. They were more likely to make less than 35K in household income. A majority voted for Kerry in 2004. Forty-five percent were Democrat, 24% Republican and 31% Independent.



Unidentified Audience Participant: One follow-up question. I don't know enough about statistics and how these numbers play out. But what kinds of consequences will those groupings have? It's a percentage of a percentage of a percentage. How does that lead to any sort of consensus?

Johanna Blakley: What was important to us was figuring out where the ideological divides are in this country before we could get to the work of the survey and the research. We wanted to figure out whether there was any correlation between political ideology and entertainment preferences.

We had no idea where the fault lines were going to be, how many groups we were going to discover, how coherent they were, or whether there were going to be coherent groups at all. It turned out that there were these three chunks. It was very interesting to take a look at what each one of those chunks really meant. The pressure on us was really to figure out who the middle group was. The way in which we generally talk about politics in the United States is between conservative and liberal, between Democrat and Republican. We have a very vague notion of what those people in between might be like and who they are.

Turns out it's one in four Americans, if you're looking at our ideological index. Who are they? What are they thinking? This was something that we wished to answer, and we've done different sub-analyses of the data. In 2007 we did a big *New York Times* magazine piece that was about female moderates.

The moderate group was the largest majority female of all the three groups, and we were very curious about who they were as a demographic. The value of this information is how it illustrates where the fracture lines are in this country and ideologically how we cluster together in groups. Just looking at party registration

and looking at the way people identify themselves politically is much less predictive of what their ideological beliefs are and also less predictive of what their entertainment preferences are.

David Carr: If you're talking about a youthful cohort and what they might be capable of, they're right now tipping over mainstream media culture. And their influence is profound, it's self-producing, self-consuming, self-editorializing. They're dictating terms going forward. You can't underestimate what's going to happen in terms of the political process because they can move as a cohort and express needs in a way that previous generations could not. Imagine if those guys in the 1960s had a desktop like these kids had.



If I'm running nationally, I'm going to do what Obama did. People say, "Well, how did Brand Obama get built without wobbling off course?" It was a self-cleaning oven. The communication goes both ways; and boy, if he really screws up in the White House, is he ever going to hear about it. When he screwed up on NAFTA in the campaign, this huge network jumped down his throat. It's call and response.



Bobby Jindal

Henry Jenkins: The Republican Party has been trying to pump up Bobby Jindal as the Republican Obama. We saw a good example of his media skills this past week. Do you think there are candidates who can learn the lessons of Obama?

Stephen Duncombe: They haven't found them yet. Poor Bobby Jindal. That was just terrible.

The Republicans don't have any ideas. They're exhausted. It reminds me of the Democratic Party in 1976 through the most recent election. Republicans certainly don't seem to have anybody. They seem to have retreads of Democrats, which is what the Democratic Party did for about 20 years. So I don't see anybody in the wings.



Sarah Palin is not. I think she might be charismatic, but I don't think she has the sort of savvy and the ability to work across platforms. She can only work in one way, which is a prepared speech, and perhaps in public speaking to an audience that agrees with her. But she's not across platforms. Obama really is good across platforms. It'd be interesting to see if the rest of the Democratic Party can come on board. I don't know if they can. His team certainly can, but I'm not sure the rest can.

Unidentified Audience Participant: I'm a researcher in the Industrial Performance Center here at MIT. One of the things that I kept hearing, both pre-election as well as post-election, about Obama was, "Wow, it's so nice to have an inspiring person in this office," or, "So nice to have an inspiring person running for this office."

I wanted to get your collective reactions to what happens to be an important aspect of our culture right now, in terms of the type of entertainment that people are looking for and the type of entertainment that's popular.

Is this inspiring or is this a temporal thing? Is it something that we see throughout time and it just happens that here's a guy who can actually do this? I'm curious if we see that inspiration theme reflected in other areas of pop culture.

Johanna Blakley: I think it's very typical in sports, where people have idols. They have a body like ours, but they can do the most amazing things with it. It's incredibly inspiring. You love it when there's somebody different who can transcend human fallibility. If you play the sport that you watch them play on TV, you're in shock. "How did they do that?"

That's the feeling a lot of people have about Obama, that under all of this media pressure and constant surveillance he just doesn't screw up very much.

I think it's important to have icons. It's part of what celebrity culture celebrates. And it can be inspirational for everyone. I don't think it's in any way new and I think it depends on people with huge vats of talent and they don't come around all the time. There aren't many of them.



David Carr: Let the economy stall for a couple more months. Let him continue to be unable to get a commerce secretary. Let his decisions in Iraq come to haunt him. And mainstream media and the viral media will demonstrate his feet of clay enormously. His exalted status will dissipate like that.

Apart from frittering away enormous equities we had in the world, George Bush was a hood ornament of American culture. People had become uncomfortable with him because he was inarticulate and because his great sin in terms of world leadership probably had less to do with significant strategic errors and more to do with the fact that the guy couldn't talk, couldn't communicate, and didn't represent us well as a people. There was a cultural reflex.

That was part of the great hunger for Obama. You saw people who were totally into him because he could talk. They're buying into the semiotics, as opposed to the practical decisions that he makes.

Stephen Duncombe: I actually think that like Ronald Reagan and FDR, the world can go to hell in a hand basket and Barack Obama will still have high approval ratings. He is at the top of his game. The sports metaphor is an apt one. It is like watching an athlete at the top of his game. He has unerring instincts. He can pull what should be a disaster and turn it into a victory. He understands pacing, the whole stimulus package. When the mainstream media did go after him, when the Republican noise machine turned up, he did what he had always done in debates but on a longer time scale. He let it go, let it go, let it go. When the new cycle started to shift, he dominated the game for the last three days. I mean the guy is really,

really good.

When in Kuwait, while shooting basketball with the troops, he made a swish shot from outside the three-point line. There's a Republican conspiracy theory that he's a Manchurian candidate. At that moment, I was thinking there might be some credence to that because no one can do that with the whole world's media watching.

Unidentified Audience Participant: I'd like to provoke further discussion about style and aesthetics. I think that they are political action. Not that they precede it or that they surround it but that the creation of aesthetics and style is a political action.

I'm increasingly aware of lobbying and the influence of lobbying on our elected officials. What may appear as cold rationality is in itself a style. It's a style that tries to disappear into political action. Political action is a certain way of speaking and being.

George Bush appealed on a certain level to this for eight years. His speaking style did represent many people and people were very happy with the way he challenged a certain coldness and rationality with warmth and emotion. Obama is actually taking the Bush project a little bit further in the sense of a style and performance of politics.

Stephen Duncombe: You're saying that there is a politics actually embedded in style or in aesthetics? I think yes.

Unidentified Audience Participant: I meant that there isn't an opposition between style and politics such that that style is politics.

Stephen Duncombe: I definitely don't think there's an opposition between the two. Style definitely is politics within a certain way of appearing, with a way of speaking. It carries with it baggage, a whole way of seeing the world, a way of arranging what comes into our senses and what's left out of our senses and so on.



That's why style has to be thought of politically all the time. We can't say that we don't do style. We just do content because that in itself is a style. So you always have to be thinking about it.

David Carr: I was in Denver way, way up in the stadium, and they did that drum roll that they do at a big national convention. "The man is coming. He's going to be here." Over and over, everybody comes out and talks about this guy, and then, when he comes out, after this big drum roll, a black guy walks out and I thought, "Oh, it's a little windy up here, stuff flying into my eyes." What I was reacting to was not Obama as president. No matter what anybody has ever said about this country, we as a people – regardless of what he does – can access our better nature. He has the ability to take that great weight and not let it crush him. He ran away from race throughout, but we all pinned so many hopes on him.

It didn't bring him to his knees and he didn't go there rhetorically. There was a grace to it. We were already as a people doing that work and assigning that meaning, and he didn't need to pound that nail in.

Johanna Blakley: There is so much substance in style. We would like to think that style is just the surface, it's the bells and whistles. It's packaging. That has never been the case. It's always historical. It's always embedded in the cultural context. It communicates volumes.

People who are able to understand the meaning of style are the people who can usually best communicate with an audience. That's one of Obama's amazing skills. It's one reason that so



It's hard to claim that we can somehow revive politics by taking the entertainment out of it, by taking the style and the bells and whistles and the fun parties and the carnival. It's just not going to happen.

-Johanna Blakley

many people have talked about Brand Obama because that's exactly what branding is about. It's creating a space within a retail consumer market that is owned by one thing. A brand has an identity; it has a content; it has substance. It's ephemeral. It's fake. It's constructed. It's a few colors. It's swoosh. What it's composed of is beside the point. It's the meaning that it conjures that's really important. It's hard to claim that we can somehow revive politics by taking entertainment out of it, by taking out the style and the bells and whistles and the fun parties and the carnival. It's just not going to happen.

Henry Jenkins: Time for one last question.

Unidentified Audience Participant: You talked a fair bit about the role of comedy in this past election. I wanted to get your thoughts on the role of drama and some TV drama in laying the groundwork and helping to define in people's minds a sense of what's possible and what's normal.

I'm thinking of things like the *West Wing*, the character of Santos – who was specifically modeled on Obama back when he was still a local politician in Illinois. A young, progressive, non-white candidate who actually gets elected president. What's the role of a program like *Commander in Chief*, with Geena Davis becoming the president as a result of having been selected as the running mate for an elderly maverick Republican candidate, or the black president on 24?

This continuous week-after-week set of images that people are exposed to helps to lay the groundwork for Obama as president. So that even though we've never actually had a black president before, the notion of having a black president or a woman president is not quite as jarring or as surprising or as strange to people because they've lived with it in that medium over that length of time.

West Wing was on at a time when people's opinions of both the presidency and the Congress were at an all-time low. It at least reminded people that it's theoretically possible to have political leaders who are both intelligent and well motivated. It helped keep people from becoming cynical about politics and reminding them of what's possible.



If I were a politician right now, I'd be watching House every single night, trying to figure out what's going on there.

-Stephen Duncombe

How much of a role do you think those kinds of images have played in what's come about?

Stephen Duncombe: I think it's immense. I always joked that *West Wing* was the good government in exile. However, it's dangerous to think that it actually created a mindset which was then going to be accepting of a black president, a thoughtful president, so on and so forth.

It worked the other way – which is why it was successful; why the producers thought they could get away with it; why the money actually was given to it. It had a lot to do with correctly reading the desires of the American population.

One of the good things about living in a free market capitalist society is that when things don't tap into a public psyche, they only last one season. But not if you've got a couple of seasons under your belt. If I were a politician right now, I'd be watching House every single night, trying to figure out what's going on there.

Henry Jenkins: Of course, if we follow that logic, Steve, it explains why Obama beat Clinton since *Commander in Chief* didn't last.

Johanna Blakley: I talked to the executive producer of *24*, who is a big Democrat, and he said, "Oh, people are always making fun of our show, saying that it's so conservative and it's so retrograde." He said, "We helped get Obama elected!" We thought that if he had been able to get the show on the air before the actor's strike, Hillary would've won because of

Cherry Jones' portrait of a president on *24*, which is just now on the air.

David Carr: I agree with the basis of the question. We, as a culture, have been doing these calisthenics for a long time, getting ready. So well put.

Henry Jenkins: Okay. Thank you very much. If the audience will join me in thanking the panelists? Thank you very much.



Jimmy Smits on *The West Wing*