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## **Partisan Branding and Media Spectacle: Implications for Democratic Communication**

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We live in an increasingly “branded” world. In the commercial marketplace, the implications of this phenomenon are now relatively well understood. In the “political marketplace,” however, brand marketing has received far less attention. Yet politics, like economics, has become an arena of brand marketing. Just as companies seek to brand consumers, parties and politicians are seeking to brand citizens. Moreover, the commercial media, in their efforts to capitalize on partisan conflict, support and amplify these branding efforts. But what are the implications for democratic communication?

### **Brand Marketing**

The concept of the *brand* was first developed around the turn of the twentieth century in response to innovations in mass production and mass marketing (Klein; Rayport). It has only been in the last few decades, however, that brand logic has emerged as “the DNA” of modern marketing (Light and Morgan 25). In brief, the logic of brand marketing is explained accordingly: In a supply-side economy, characterized by competition between essentially identical products within a given product category, marketers seek to recruit and retain market share by cultivating a sense of identification, trust, and loyalty between their product or company and potential consumers. Ideally, this is accomplished by offering the highest quality product at a competitive price. When competing products are virtually identical, however, perceptions of quality are all a marketer has to work with. Toward this end, marketers know that perceptions of quality can be cultivated through the strategic use of names, images, slogans, packaging,

advertising, and other brand marketing techniques. They also know that emotional appeals, rather than informational appeals, are more effective in this regard, because emotional appeals cultivate a positive image or mood that consumers subconsciously begin to associate with a product or company (Gobe).

The goal of brand marketers is to cultivate such a high degree of identification, trust, and loyalty that consumers will be willing to let the brand do the shopping, or their thinking, for them (Williams; Light and Morgan). This is considered possible because consumers are too busy to test and compare the relative merits of competing products. Brand marketers therefore offer consumers a shortcut by associating their product with promises of value, satisfaction, status, and so forth. When people buy into this promise, they place their trust in the brand to deliver a quality product that fulfills their needs and desires at a competitive price. Moreover, the ultimate brand image is one that can be separated from the product line it was originally associated with and transferred to entirely new product lines. In such cases, value is separated from the product, residing instead in the brand image which the owners of the image can then market in new ways.

### **Non-Commercial Branding**

Though brand logic initially emerged in the marketing of consumer products, it has since migrated into various non-commercial domains. The case of brand marketing in higher education is illustrative. Like the market economy, the higher education “market” is competitive. Universities compete with one another for the best students and faculty, as well as for private contributions and public support. Not surprisingly, many universities are attempting to create consistent and attractive brand images that will foster a sense of identification, trust, and loyalty among students, faculty, alumni, fans, donors, legislators, and so forth. As campus marketer John Lawlor writes, “institutions with strong brand identity carry a halo of positive assumptions that build trust and confidence in the institution” (19).

Toward this end, many universities are setting up task forces on “institutional image” and developing “integrated communications and marketing strategies” made up of “consistent identity systems” that permeate everything from press releases and admissions materials to sweatshirts, coffee mugs, graduation cakes, and even student protest signs (Lawlor 19). This trend is especially noticeable in college athletics

where university marketers pursue “brand equity” through redesigned logos, renovated stadiums, carefully coordinated merchandising, and other related strategies (Gladden and Wong).

The point is not simply that universities are trying to cultivate an image that can inspire commitment, nostalgia, or a sense of community. Rather, what is significant is that these brand images are increasingly separated from the educational process, commodified and marketed in a manner that can undermine the ideal of universities as communities within which critical inquiry and dialogue can occur. Such was the case, for instance, at the University of North Dakota, where on-campus dissent over an arguably racist brand image was stifled, and a blind eye was turned to the concerns of the surrounding native community in order to capitalize on the market value of the image (Ganje).

### **Partisan Branding**

The logic of brand marketing has also migrated into the domain of electoral politics. Unlike university marketers who are generally candid about their efforts to construct brand images for their campuses and teams, political marketers shy away from the terminology of branding. To speak publicly of “partisan brand images” would be crass and counterproductive. After all, who wants to vote for a politician or political party that is packaged and marketed like a brand of soap, even though many are (Reynolds et al.; McGinniss).

Though the logic of branding is applied to the marketing of politicians and political parties, the connection is generally not made explicit. This is not to say that most citizens are unaware of all political marketing practices, such as advertising, but branding is more than advertising. It is a comprehensive marketing strategy with broader implications. Even within the market economy, many of these implications are poorly understood by the general public. In order to better understand these implications, it is helpful to examine why and how the logic of branding has migrated into the sphere of electoral politics.

### **The Competitive Political Market**

For the discussion at hand, the most relevant aspect of the U.S. political system is its competitive structure. Partisan politics has a similar structure to a competitive capitalist economy. Both systems are founded on the assumption that human nature is fundamentally self-interested and

competitive. Based on this assumption, contests are prescribed as ideal models for the distribution of resources in both the economic and political spheres. In economics, contests determine the distribution of material commodities and capital. In politics, they determine the distribution of public authority and decision-making power. In both cases, however, the underlying structures are remarkably similar.

Whereas economic theorists understand the competitive pursuit of self-interests in largely material terms, political theorists broaden the concept of self-interests, or merely *interests*, to include all material and non-material needs, values, desires and aspirations. Interests, thus conceived, are assumed to underlie the preferences of individuals and groups in political decision-making processes. In pluralistic societies, moreover, it is assumed that diverse individuals and groups will inevitably have divergent or conflicting interests.

Accordingly, Western-liberal political philosophers generally propose that the primary function of a political system is to negotiate conflicting interests in a utilitarian manner that satisfies the widest possible range of those interests. Hence, the standard by which we tend to evaluate political systems is very similar to the standard by which we evaluate economic systems. That is, both systems are evaluated according to how well they allegedly maximize the satisfaction of competing self-interests.

Toward this end, the political arena has been structured much like a capitalist free market. It is an arena within which individuals and groups or parties try to advance their particular ideals and interests in a competitive manner. The mechanism that is assumed to operate within this political market is remarkably similar to the “invisible hand” that allegedly operates to maximize efficiency and satisfaction within a capitalist economy. As Lyon explains:

Supporters of party government argue that if one looks at the larger picture and sees the “political market” in which several parties, the media, interest groups, and individuals all interact, democratic needs are served in a kind of mysterious way [...] [as though] another “invisible hand” is at work. (129)

In this regard, Western political systems have quite literally evolved into arenas of political “entrepreneurship” in which politicians compete for control over the means of public decision-making, just as capitalists

compete for control over the means of production within the economy (Schumpeter; Downs). This occurs initially through the formation of political parties that represent competing ensembles of interests. Competitive political campaigns then determine leadership and control within and between parties. Once political leadership and control are determined through these contests, processes of public decision-making are structured in a similarly competitive manner—as partisan debates.<sup>1</sup> In these contests, individual politicians, as well as entire political parties, maneuver to gain or maintain political capital and market share, as measured by public opinion polls, favorable media coverage, financial contributions, volunteer support, and so forth. In this way, decision-making processes become inseparable from election processes, as partisan debates become the stage for “permanent campaigns”—never-ending contests over political capital—in anticipation of the next round of elections (Blumenthal). In this mass-mediated age, of course, these never-ending campaigns play out largely through the media.

### **Brand Logic in the Political Market**

In a partisan political economy that is structured like a capitalist market economy, it is all but guaranteed that political campaigns will come to resemble commercial marketing campaigns. Political parties are, after all, corporate entities seeking to advance their own corporate interests in order to survive in a competitive market. As Held notes:

Parties may aim to realize a programme of ‘ideal’ political principles, but unless their activities are based on systematic strategies for achieving electoral success they will be doomed to insignificance. Accordingly, parties become transformed, above all else, into means for fighting and winning elections. (170)

Like their commercial counterparts, political parties must wage these campaigns largely through the mass media. Also, like their commercial counterparts, they have learned that the most effective way to do this is to use emotional rather than informational or substantive appeals. For these reasons, political marketing strategies increasingly exemplify the logic of brand marketing.<sup>2</sup> As Greider explains:

The same logic has now become the prevailing rule for political competition in the media age. Campaign consultants and managers

describe the electoral process in the same dispassionate—and amoral—terms. Elections are for selling, not for governing and certainly not for accountability. The selling depends, not on rational debate or real differences, but on concocting emotional bonds between the candidate and audience. (214)

This conclusion is echoed by political marketing expert Bruce Newman, who explains that:

Every politician's reputation is perceived by people in exactly the same way that products and services develop brand identities in the marketplace... This is precisely what political parties and politicians do to sell their ideas to the American people. (45-46)

Branding strategies seek to promote identification, trust, and loyalty. Clearly, these goals are as important to political parties as they are to commercial corporations. Accordingly, brand marketing strategies manifest themselves in many ways in the political arena. One of the most obvious of these is the effort to design and promulgate consistent and mutually reinforcing images and messages across all media throughout a campaign. As branding guru David Carter emphasizes, "a strong brand identity requires consistency" (20). Hence modern political parties hire designers to create slick visual images and communication specialists to articulate pithy slogans and sound bites, all of which are employed in consistent and mutually reinforcing ways on partisan placards and pennants, bumper stickers and buttons, t-shirts and tour buses, as well as convention stages, television advertisements, and billboards.

In addition, like commercial brand identities, these partisan identities are increasingly formulated through careful market analysis. Employing the tools of psychographic research that have been developed and refined by several generations of commercial marketers, political marketers now spend large sums of money measuring public values and sentiments, and testing the efficacy of emotionally charged images and messages—such as "a thousand points of light," "compassionate conservative," or "it's the economy, stupid"—through surveys, focus groups, audience response indicators and similar methodologies.<sup>3</sup> As in the commercial arena, the result has been to reduce the amount of political communication characterized by substantive information. Instead, political marketers seek to cultivate images or moods that lead voters to identify with a party or a candidate on emotional or subconscious levels.

Once such images and messages have been crafted, political marketers also rely on the same saturation strategies as commercial marketers. As companies like McDonalds, Coca-Cola, and Nike have all learned, repetition is a powerful branding strategy. Among other things, it helps position a corporation or party as one of the “top of mind” or “dominant” brands—the first or only brands that come to mind (Carter). Repetition also cultivates a general sense of familiarity, another key ingredient in building a sense of trust.

Finally, like commercial marketers, political marketers strive, in these and other ways, to cultivate such a high degree of identification, trust and loyalty that voters will be willing to let the party or the candidate do the thinking for them. Voters, like consumers, are busy people. Many do not have the time, the will or the means to research and compare the relative merits of competing policies and platforms. Political brands offer voters a shortcut by promising solutions and reassurance—or policy satisfaction. When voters accept these promises, they place their trust in a politician or party. In this way, political marketers, like their commercial counterparts, seek to build relationships between voters and politicians, or parties that will endure even after particular policies and platforms become obsolete.

In other words, the ultimate accomplishment in political branding, as in commercial branding, is to imbue the brand image with a value that can be separated from “the product.” To the extent that political parties cultivate successful brand images, this means that the image value of the party can be separated from the individual politicians that come and go. Likewise, to the extent that individual politicians can cultivate successful personal brand images, those images can also be separated from the different policy positions they advocate at different points in their political career (and sometimes those images can even be passed on to their offspring).

### **Partisan Branding and Media Spectacle**

Most Western media systems are dominated by advertising supported media. Nowhere is this truer than in the United States. To uncritical consumers, news and entertainment content appears to be the product that is being manufactured and sold by these industries. In reality, of course, the audience is the product. Advertising-supported media manufacture audiences in order to sell them to advertisers for a

profit. This is the underlying logic of the modern media economy (Smythe).

In order to manufacture audiences as efficiently and cheaply as possible, media content consists largely of spectacle—dramatic or striking representations constructed to attract and hold the gaze of viewers. The most formulaic types of spectacles are contests. Consider for example: street fights were historically a form of public spectacle capable of drawing large crowds or audiences. Not surprisingly, televised boxing and wrestling are modern forms of contest-spectacle that are used to manufacture media audiences. Indeed, all “spectator” sports are a form of spectacle, with the most massively hyped events—such as the Super Bowl, the World Series, and the World Cup—generating hundreds of millions of dollars in advertising revenues based on the sizes of the audiences they manufacture (Real).

Fights and sporting events, however, are not the only examples of contest-spectacles in the media. Many contemporary news stories are constructed as contest-spectacles. During the time I was writing this paper, the dominant U.S. news channels were airing spectacular round-the-clock coverage of the spy-plane standoff between the United States and China, interrupted by coverage of other contest-spectacles such as the courtroom dramas surrounding recent high-school shootings, the race riots in the streets of Cincinnati, the escalating Arab-Israeli violence in the Middle East, and the “war on drugs” in Central and South America.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, news coverage of virtually every significant social issue in the past decade has employed some form of contest-spectacle frame, often through the use of military metaphors such as “the war in the woods,” “the culture wars,” “the gender wars,” or “the free trade wars” which allegedly began with the “Battle in Seattle.” Such constructions have become so formulaic and predictable that media-savvy social activists now recognize that if they want to have a voice in the mediated public sphere, they merely need to stage a spectacular protest.<sup>5</sup>

These and other forms of contests are especially effective in manufacturing audiences when spectators are drawn to identify with, and root for, one or the other side in such contests. Again, the case of spectator sports is illustrative. Sport teams go to great lengths to cultivate a core of fans who personally identify with the team. As discussed above, such identification is increasingly achieved through branding strategies. Once a fan identifies with a team on an emotional level, the outcome of every athletic contest takes on personal significance to the fan (Real).

This is one of the reasons athletic competitions have become such an effective form of spectacle. The same is true of nationalistic, ideological, and other forms of contest. As long as substantial segments of the population identify, on an emotional level, with one or the other side in such contests, the contests provide valuable material for media spectacle.

Finally, it should be noted that the media do not simply report on already existing contest-spectacles. Rather, the media often co-construct the spectacles they report on. Daniel Boorstin's concept of the *pseudo-event* illustrates this point well. A pseudo-event is an event that either would not have occurred, or would have unfolded quite differently, in the absence of media coverage. The November 1999 "Battle in Seattle" provides a classic example. Though the WTO meeting would have occurred in Seattle that year regardless of media coverage, and though there may have been some form of protest or resistance even without media coverage, the spectacular characteristics of the protest that did occur (e.g., the carnivalesque atmosphere and the media-genic protest strategies) were a function of anticipated media coverage. By providing the commercial media with raw materials for dramatic and colorful media content,<sup>6</sup> the protesters encouraged the media to construct a mediated spectacle that, to audiences, appeared even more spectacular than it did to those who were actually present.

### **Partisan Spectacle**

Given the spectacle-driven nature of the commercial media, it should be no surprise that partisan contests figure so prominently in contemporary media coverage. And given the co-constructed nature of media spectacles, it should be no surprise that the commercial media serve as partners, with political parties, in the construction of partisan political spectacles.<sup>7</sup> Like the WTO protestors discussed above, political parties know that they can gain coverage by providing the raw material for media spectacle.

Though these observations are neither surprising nor original, they take on deeper significance when the practice of brand marketing is factored back into the analysis. If the purpose of brand marketing is to cultivate a sense of identification with a product, a team, or a political party and if this sense of identification is partially what makes a contest such a powerful form of spectacle, then political parties and commercial media share a common interest in the cultivation of partisan identities and loyalties. For political parties, brand identities have become a

necessary marketing strategy. For the commercial media, these identities draw the public into contest-spectacles.

Consider, for instance, the type of horse-race coverage that now dominates media content during U.S. election seasons. American elections are often covered like spectator sporting events; that is when they are not covered as wars.<sup>8</sup> On each side of the field are two parties/teams with their consultants/coaches on the sidelines helping to call the plays and formulate the winning strategies. Each party has its own colors, slogans, and logos that decorate the bumper stickers, buttons, and placards of loyal voters/fans. At the top of the mediated field of play is the ubiquitous scoreboard, recording every setback and advance in the preliminary rounds of public opinion polling and later in the championship rounds of actual voting.

Granted, each party does hire its own players and coaches who choose their own strategies and execute their own plays. By themselves, however, the parties cannot construct the larger spectacle described above. Fortunately for the parties, the commercial media recognize the audience-manufacturing potential of these contest-spectacles. Doing their part, the media provide the forum, the cameras, the lights, the scoreboard and the announcers. They also carefully integrate the contestants' colors, slogans and logos into their own broadcast designs. They hype the partisan contests, and the contestants throughout their cross-media holdings. During the game they focus on offensive and defensive strategies, lost and gained scoring opportunities, penalties and infractions, as well as political injuries inflicted. Off the field, they give free air-time to the more aggressive and provocative political players and coaches through press conferences and locker-room interviews. In between games, they replay the "political play of the week," discuss the "game plan," publish performance statistics and interview a constant stream of political analysts and commentators in order to milk the spectacle for all its worth. Furthermore, in the era of the permanent campaign, this spectacle is never-ending. Immediately following elections—which are the Super Bowls of political spectacle—the next season begins again.

Of course, the media do not always provide positive coverage for individual politicians. At times, media caricatures, reports of scandals and other forms of antagonistic coverage can be quite damaging to a politician. On the whole, however, antagonistic coverage tends to be directed at individual candidates rather than entire parties, just as

individual athletes are more likely to draw criticism (e.g., for inappropriate actions on or off the field) than entire teams.

In addition, individual candidates work hard and are often quite successful at putting a positive spin on the way the media covers them. All candidates in high profile elections hire media relations professionals who employ all available strategies to shape or manipulate press coverage. These political handlers work to shape the news agenda, frame issues, control media access, stage carefully scripted pseudo-events, supply press releases and other information subsidies, invent emotionally potent and value-laden slogans, ensure that paid and unpaid coverage are working in concert, shield the candidate from attacks and even enlist the aid of journalists in countering attacks.

The construction of partisan coverage is thus a complex, negotiated process between the media and the candidate's team (as well as other special interest groups vying to influence media coverage). In general, however, most candidates arrive at these negotiations with substantial negotiating power—barring major scandals or massive inconsistencies between the image they are trying to manufacture and their actual record. Even when individual candidates lose out in these negotiations, news coverage continues to naturalize the partisan systems they are working within by making democracy synonymous with partisanship.

### **Implications for Democratic Communication**

In all of these ways, the commercial media and the political parties they report on share a symbiotic relationship, co-constructing political spectacle and co-marketing partisan identities. But what are the implications for democratic communication? On the one hand, there are epistemological implications: implications for the ways we know and think. On the other hand, there are political implications: implications for the ways we exercise power and authority. Of course, as most contemporary sociologists understand, knowledge and power are like two sides of the same coin (Foucault). For analytical purposes, however, it helps to examine the two independently.

### **Epistemological Implications**

Western societies are deeply rooted in dualistic patterns of thought. For instance, ancient Greek and Semitic cultures both embodied highly dualistic worldviews. These world-views have been adapted and carried forward to the present in countless ways. The “adversary paradigm” in

Western logic and philosophy,<sup>9</sup> as well as the adversarial nature of the Anglo-American legal system<sup>10</sup> are but two examples. Both are rooted in assumptions that truth and justice are best pursued through oppositional contests. On a more generalized level, Westerners tend to think in terms of “two sides to every issue,” and we tend to divide the universe of political opinion into the binary-oppositional categories of “left” versus “right” or “liberal” versus “conservative.” In these and many other ways, our culture naturalizes dualistic and oppositional modes of thinking (Ong; Tannen).

Partisan media spectacle appears to reinforce and amplify these cultural tendencies. As *cultivation theory* predicts, and cultivation analysis has born out, the commercial media distort and exaggerate many aspects of social reality (Weimann). Furthermore, cultivation researchers have found that people who rely heavily on the commercial media for news and information about the world around them (which many people today do) tend to perceive social reality more as the commercial media represents it, rather than as it actually is (Signorielli and Morgan; Weimann). Partisan spectacle fits this cultivation model very well. Most public issues are complex and multi-faceted and cannot be adequately understood in simple dualistic terms. Yet within the media universe, complex issues tend to be reduced to oppositional dualisms according to the partisan-spectacle formula discussed above. Accordingly, we can expect that people who rely heavily on the commercial media for news and information about the world around them will be more likely to understand public issues in dualistic and oppositional terms than people who rely on other sources of news and information.

Given that heavy reliance on commercial media is the norm rather than the exception in our society, the implications are significant. Dualistic and oppositional modes of thought, rooted in ancient cultural traditions and sustained by modern media formulas, may well impede our capacity to deal with increasingly complex public issues. In developmental terms, it appears as though they arrest our political culture in an immature stage of development. How else could journalists continue to claim “objectivity” simply by reporting “both sides” of every issue—as if every issue is two sided (rather than multifaceted). As a society, partisan branding and partisan spectacle play a role in keeping us epistemologically challenged.

### **Political Implications**

Beyond these epistemological implications, partisan branding and partisan spectacle have a number of significant political implications. First, when complex and multifaceted public issues are reduced to simple binary oppositions, this obviously diminishes the diversity of views and voices that have access to our public sphere. All that remains are the two “dominant brand” perspectives. Like Coke and Pepsi in the cola wars, dominant political parties crowd out alternative views and voices.

Furthermore, as with the cola wars, the dominant brand parties are far more similar than different. As discussed above, branding strategies are generally employed when there is little or no actual product differentiation. In a political system that subordinates all dominant parties to the logic of capital accumulation, many critical observers assert that there is little real difference between dominant parties. Through brand imaging, however, the appearance of difference is achieved. This appearance of difference in turn creates the appearance of choice. But “choice” is the central illusion of the modern partisan-spectacle because in the U.S. it is confined to candidates nominated by two parties that both represent moneyed interests. Hence, as Edelman concludes, the privileged benefit more than the disadvantaged from the construction of political spectacle, which, in our political sphere, represents “the triumph of mystification over strategies to maximize well-being” (125-126).

Another implication of partisan branding and partisan spectacle is that, together, they represent democracy as a spectator sport rather than a civic responsibility. When democratic governance is reduced to a contest-spectacle, all that is left for the public to do is root for one or the other team. Through brand marketing strategies, political parties have been relatively successful in cultivating populations of loyal fans, or voters, that identify with and root for their parties in this manner. But this is hardly the way to cultivate an active and engaged civil society.

As in commercial marketing, the ultimate goal of political brand marketing is to cultivate such a high degree of identification, trust, and loyalty that voters will be willing to let the party do the thinking for them. When voters enter into this relationship, they place their trust in a party to deliver the best policies, thereby relieving themselves of the responsibility to stay informed and educated on public issues. If a party has marketed an effective image, this sense of trust and loyalty will carry on even after particular policy proposals become obsolete.

Yet another implication of partisan branding and partisan spectacle is that, together, they increase social divisions by reifying polarized and antagonistic identities (Edelman). When antagonism, rather than mutualism, becomes the mainspring of human identity, the result can be understood as a social pathology (Hoover). In this context, political parties take an almost unlimited number of social, economic, environmental, and other issues, most of which are complex and multifaceted, and reduce each of them to a single ideological stance or position. They then aggregate positions on all of these issues into a single meta-position on all things political. The commercial media, employing its contest-spectacle formula, then reinforce and amplify these partisan meta-positions through an unending series of partisan debates, partisan commentary, and partisan election coverage. Through the constant repetition of partisan news frames, employing binary labels like “left” versus “right,” “liberal” versus “conservative,” or “Democrat” versus “Republican,” the media, in partnership with the dominant brand parties, cultivate the divisive view that there are indeed only two competing meta-positions on all things political.

Within such a cultural environment, these divisive views and the party identifications that accompany them are, in turn, transmitted with remarkable stability from generation to generation. In effect, political parties, with the assistance of many parents, begin branding children during their formative years—cultivating a life-long relationship of identification and trust between future voters and the parties to whom they will entrust their thinking. As American political scientists Flanigan and Zingale explain:

Partisanship represents the feeling of sympathy for and loyalty to a political party that an individual acquires (probably) during childhood and holds (often) with increasing intensity throughout life [...]. Individuals who think of themselves as Republicans or Democrats respond to political information partially by using party identification to orient themselves, reacting to new information in such a way that it fits in with the ideals and feelings they already have [...]. Partisanship orients individuals in their political environment, although it may also distort their picture of reality. (54)

The result for many post-modern citizen-consumers is brand-structured political consciousness. Of course, party identification research shows that, despite the increasingly aggressive efforts of

political marketers, party loyalties are decreasing slightly in countries like the United States (Silby). Even so, while partisan identification within the American electorate declined from approximately seventy-five percent in the 1950s to approximately sixty percent in the 1990s, sixty percent of the population is still a substantial political force (Miller). Indeed, it is higher than the percentage of people who actually vote.

Moreover, many portions of the electorate who resist this brand-structured political consciousness merely become alienated from the entire process of governance. In the United States, half of the population does not even bother to vote now in major national elections. Though there are many reasons for this, one of them is that many people cannot identify with the aggregate meta-positions associated with the dominant brand parties—as demonstrated by the fact that almost forty percent of the eligible electorate now identify themselves as “independents” (Miller 112). Another reason is that many people recognize the corruption of the party system and its subordination to moneyed interests (Silby). Ironically, this recognition, and the cynicism that it breeds, appear to be increasing as a result of the media’s contest-spectacle formula, with its focus on motive and strategy rather than substance.

Finally, the implications of partisan branding and political spectacle can be further understood by considering the theory of *commodity* spectacle articulated by Guy Debord. As Debord points out, one of the defining trends of the twentieth century was the subordination of both state and media to the logic of the capitalist economy. In the process, our entire socio-economic formation has been transformed into a mass commodity spectacle – with the commercial media as its most glaring manifestation. This mass spectacle, Debord explains, is not merely a collection of images but a set of social relations among people, mediated by images. Spectacle, in other words, is the face or expression of unconstrained capitalism as it permeates and organizes every aspect of contemporary social reality. Furthermore, in his more recent *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Debord points out that in the post-modern political sphere, or what he dubs “the realm of spectacular politics,” (6) the illusion of partisan struggle over how to manage this socio-economic formation merely masks the fact that “no party or faction of a party even tries to pretend that they want to change anything significant” about the system they are competing to govern (21).

Though Debord may overstate the totality of this socio-economic formation and its monolithic expression as an integrated spectacle, his

theory has much heuristic value. Among other things, it raises questions about the function of partisan contests and partisan spectatorship in an advanced capitalist economy. Whose interests do these contest-spectacles ultimately serve? Does partisan spectacle help legitimize the existing social order while diverting our attention away from the possibilities of a more just and sustainable order? And what is the function of partisan identity formation within the existing order? If our entire socio-economic formation has been transformed into little more than a mass commodity spectacle within which our political parties have been largely subordinated to the logic of unconstrained capitalism, does this not suggest that partisan identities are indeed little more than brand loyalties?

### Notes

- 1 Granted, much contemporary political decision-making actually occurs outside of these formal partisan debates—that often serve as little more than a dramatic veneer on complex processes of political maneuvering and negotiation. Even these behind-the-scenes processes, however, are generally characterized by the same adversarial dynamics. Refer, for example, to Clift and Brazaitis, *War Without Bloodshed*, for insights into the adversarial nature of behind-the-scenes partisan politics.
- 2 This paper focuses only on the broad similarities between political marketing in contemporary Western nations. There are, of course, subtle but important differences, and a comparative treatment of these would provide more nuanced insights into the trends discussed in this article. For instance, while the American media system has historically been more heavily commercialized than most other countries, and American politicians have pushed media marketing strategies further and faster than politicians in many other countries, party structures in America are slightly weaker than party structures in some other Western democracies (even though they still play a central role in the American political process). As a result, partisan branding in the United States tends to focus slightly more on individual party leaders rather than on parties as collective institutions. The analogy in commercial marketing would be to focus more on branding particular product lines rather than on branding the company as a whole. In either case, political marketing strategies are more similar than different in most Western countries, and they appear to be converging rather than diverging.
- 3 For an overview of the field of psychographic marketing research, refer to Kahle and Chiagouris, *Values, Lifestyles, and Psychographics*. For a discussion of how these methods are being applied in the field of political marketing, refer to Reynolds, Westberg, and Olson, *A Strategic Framework for Assessing Political, Social Issue, and Corporate Image Advertising*.

- 4 This is not to dismiss the real conflicts that underlie some of these issues, nor to suggest that some of these issues do not deserve public attention. Rather, it is merely to point out that the commercial media turn issues such as these into a profitable form of spectacle that contributes little to the actual resolution of the issues. For an insightful discussion of the way that such coverage tends to exacerbate rather than resolve conflicts, as well as proposals for more constructive ways that journalists could cover conflicts, refer to Rubenstein et al., *Frameworks for Interpreting Conflicts*.
- 5 Greenpeace was one of the earliest media-savvy activist organizations that exploited this formula very successfully and thus became a model that many subsequent activist organizations and groups emulated. For an insightful discussion into early Greenpeace media strategies, as well as the Faustian bargain they represented, refer to Dale, *McLuhan's Children: The Greenpeace Message and the Media*.
- 6 The provision of raw materials in this manner is an example of what Gandy calls an "information subsidy," which, due to the competitive nature of our media economy, is very difficult for the media to turn down. However, as Gandy's research shows, a hierarchy of dominance exists when it comes to the provision of such information subsidies. Spectacular protest strategies are one of the few strategies available to those on the bottom of this hierarchy of dominance. Yet these strategies result in substantial loss of control over the quality of the message that makes it through to the public. Hence the Faustian bargain discussed by Dale in his examination of Greenpeace media strategies.
- 7 For a seminal discussion of contemporary political spectacle, refer to Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*.
- 8 As Jamieson and Campbell note in their description of U.S. elections: "Battle metaphors enable reporters to describe the staff and volunteers as troops, the primary as a battleground, the strategy as a process of mapping out option, and the outcome as analogous to such memorable names as Armageddon or Waterloo. Strategic options include a holding action, a retreat, a withdrawal, a first strike, or a pre-emptive strike. The outcome can be defeat, victory, or a rout. Candidates can declare a truce, sign an armistice, sign a peace treaty, declare war or continue hostilities. Reporters can also dip into the biblical past to resurrect images of David and Goliath, or in the case of feuding among ideological kin, Cain and Abel. In 1988, for the first time in recent history, metaphors of the campaign as war occurred more often than sports metaphors" (267).
- 9 Refer, for example, to critiques of this adversary paradigm in Moulton, *A Paradigm of Philosophy: The Adversary Method*, and Tompkins, *Fighting Words*.
- 10 Refer, for example, to critiques of the legal adversary system in Menkel-Meadow, *The Trouble with the Adversary System in a Postmodern*,

*Multicultural World, and Thornburg, Metaphors Matter: How Images of Battle, Sports, and Sex Shape the Adversary System.*

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