In the postmodern world, the value of knowledge itself is questioned, and by extension those who claim to be authorities on that knowledge. As a result, Arnold Schwarzenegger as action hero is just as credible as Arnold Schwarzenegger as governor, thus redefining the meaning of an informed citizen. If Arnold Schwarzenegger can rescue entire planets, then why can voters not assume that he will be able to save California? The blame for this theoretical shift belongs not with the broader entertainment industry, but instead with the news industry itself. Such celebrities-in-politics issues are not limited to California or even the United States. This article explores the difficulties of obtaining a consensus on the central interpretation of credibility and truth in a postmodern society.

In political news, the California governor’s race is temporarily thrown into disarray when residents of the other 49 states file a class-action lawsuit demanding the right to vote in the recall election, on the grounds that “it’s on TV all the time.”

—Barry, 2003

We’re becoming accustomed to and almost satisfied with people in government who are either venal or stupid. And with the emphasis on fundraising for all elections, which is ruining the electoral system, we will be accepting entertainers as our candidates, not those who have learned the processes and practices of government. You can’t govern without having the training for it. Even Plato said that a long time ago. You need to be trained in government, to exercise it, to practice it. But the American public is now satisfying itself with entertainers.

—Flowers, 1999, p. 7
If neo-Nazis in Amsterdam can create their own CD label and sell hate music in Boise, and Chinese activists can maintain a prodemocracy movement from fax machines, and impoverished laborers anywhere in the world can view *The Bachelorette* (n.d.) in a hot tub from their satellite dishes attached to grass hut roofs, then Arnold Schwarzenegger can be governor of California. If incongruent reality and disdain for predetermined definitions of authority are hallmarks of postmodernism, then the California recall election of 2003 is a postmodern marvel. The question for traditional news media is more complex: How do journalists ethically and with credibility provide information necessary for democracy to a public that considers both ethics and credibility in relative terms?

This question particularly becomes problematic because a discrepancy exists between traditional news values and what the postmodern media consumer appears to want. Advocates of uses and gratifications theory presume the average reader or viewer consumes news for a range of reasons: information, entertainment, social identity, group interaction, and so on (Sherry, 2002). Journalists covering democratic institutions presume that the public really wants information—perhaps information for voting or perhaps information so that they look smarter than their peers—but the presumption is that the public wants information for information’s sake. Habermas (1962/1993) argued that information itself is the precursor to active citizenship, though that information may or may not come on the form of traditional mass media. That truth seems self-evident in a world where voters include only informed citizens who gather knowledge from deductive sources and not primarily from *Saturday Night Live* (Michaels, n.d.). This however is not necessarily true in postmodern politics or for the postmodern media consumer. The public may want news for information but the public does not necessarily seek out news sources or even political advertisements for that information (Solman, 2003). In an effort to draw in greater market share, what appears in the news itself becomes more spectacle than informed or substantive. Media opinions, meaning the priorities outlined in news reports, are not necessarily an “index of what the public apparently thinks” (Bignell, 2000, p. 152).

The journalists and consumers’ assumptions about credibility grate against each other. In the postmodern world, the value of knowledge itself is questioned, and by extension those who claim to be authorities on that knowledge. Therefore, Arnold Schwarzenegger as action hero is just as credible as Arnold Schwarzenegger as governor, thus redefining the meaning of an informed citizen.

Baudrillard (1990) argued a decade and a half ago that the first Gulf War was not really taking place because the public experiencing that war was so far removed. This disconnection created a “hyperreality,” in which the virtual world becomes more real to media consumers than anything in front of their faces, thus taking over truth. Hyperreality as Baudrillard described it
simply means that the original image and the copy become interchangeable and the true nature or credibility of the original becomes irrelevant. Just as terrorism is more violent than violence and obesity is fatter than fat, hyperreality is more real than reality itself (Baudrillard, 1990). Dana Carvey playing George Bush, Sr., on *Saturday Night Live* becomes more of Bush, Sr., than the former president—so much so, that even when Americans see Bush, Sr., they visualize Dana Carvey’s caricature.

Hyperreality challenges the basic journalistic definitions of truth: What you see may or may not be what you get. If movies can reinvent images, why cannot those who make the news? Technology has contributed to a postmodern fact: the quality of film and movies has progressed so as to create what Bignell (2000) called “preservation from doubt” (p. 146). If Arnold Schwarzenegger can rescue entire planets, then why can he not save California?

The term media event is an indication that in a postmodern world we can no longer rely on a stable relationship or clear distinction between a “real event” and its mediated representation. Consequently, we can no longer work with the idea that the “real” is more important, significant, or even “true” than the representation. (Fiske, 1996, p. 2)

The blame for this theoretical shift does not belong with the broader entertainment industry but instead belongs squarely with the news industry itself because of choices made in both representation and sourcing. After the 1992 Los Angeles riots, then Vice President Dan Quayle blamed the violence on African American poverty, high numbers of African Americans being raised by single mothers, and Murphy Brown. His first two arguments and criticism against them went underreported, while massive national attention, late-night talk show monologues, and public commentary about the riots focused on the fictional Murphy Brown. Postmodern hyperreality came not when Quayle talked to Murphy Brown but when Murphy Brown talked back. Fiske (1996) argued that the perspectives of African Americans in poverty and African American single mothers were not granted the same voice or hype as a sitcom character in the traditional news media. The traditional news industry by and large did not give coverage and thus did not provide an opportunity for ethos for the “real” players.

Mainstream television scrambled to get the pundits that whites wanted to hear, so their analytical commentaries were provided by university professors [and] politicians … On MTV, however, the pundits were rap artists: they spoke from their experience of pauperization, of police brutality, of social exclusion, and of racism, and brought to the nation’s screens voices and viewpoints that its mainstream media repressed. (Fiske, 1996, p. 186)
Therefore the news industry should not be surprised by the fact that candidates with only hyperreal credentials for public office can get elected, any more than the fact that young voters glean most of their information about political candidates from sources that most journalists would not find credible.

*Just as the credibility of sources is perceived as relative, then so is truth itself.*

Just as the credibility of sources is perceived as relative, then so is truth itself. Postmodernism blurs distinctions between what has traditionally been assumed to be the world as it is, such as that found in a newscast; from what could be, such as historical fiction; from what might be, such as a futuristic science fiction movie; to what can not be (Fiske, 1996). The philosophies, political theories, even artistic proofs offered in each come through the same mediated channels; therefore all potentially have the same claims to truth. These relativistic assumptions about truth did not emerge in this late capitalist era but predate the Enlightenment. If ethics is a matter of taste, as Hume (1777/1987, 1751/1998) maintained, then truth can be merely perceptual as well.

However Hume (1777/1987) also insisted that a free press was necessary to keep government in check, even if there are certain dangers in “unbounded liberty.” He wrote

> The spirit of the people must frequently be roused, in order to curb the ambition of the court; and the dread of rousing this spirit must be employed to prevent that learning, wit, and genius of the nation may be employed on the side of freedom. (p. 5)

Enlightenment scholars saw a free press with an aim toward political criticism as a necessary component of the democratic process. The underlying premise of their arguments—that the media have credibility by default of their watchdog role—flies in the face of postmodern theory. Ethos or credibility ultimately must be granted by the audience and cannot be presumed. That becomes quite difficult when the media consuming public and journalists hold different definitions of credibility.

Habermas (1962/1993) wrote that community understanding is possible in a political process where multiple voices have the opportunity to both listen and be heard (p. 227). This premise grounded his vision of an ethical democracy. Therefore, the role of the media in an ethical democracy is to be that
conduit for a full range of voices because truth emerges through rational argument. However, traditional news organizations must accept culpability when they allow the hyperreality of celebrity to overpower, outshine, and shout above the voices of the people that government is designed to serve.

**Celebrity in Global Politics**

Celebrities in American politics did not begin with the recent California recall election. Ronald Reagan’s “B”-movie career and brief stint as radio sports announcer are well-known, as are Clint Eastwood’s brief tenure as mayor of Carmel, California, and Sonny Bono’s election to the U.S. House of Representatives. There was also Jesse Ventura’s term as governor of Minnesota. Ventura, who had made a career of faking athleticism as a professional wrestler, served one term as part-time mayor of a Minneapolis suburb and hosted an in-your-face radio call-in show, tapped voter dissatisfaction in Minnesota and surprised political pundits in that state and across the nation by successfully staging a third-party victory in 1998. Many political experts had predicted that the state’s long-time attorney general, Skip Humphrey, would be able to cash in on his family name and recent success in Minnesota’s suit against the tobacco companies, and best Norm Coleman, the popular mayor of St. Paul.

However, Ventura connected with first-time voters by using both a successfully quirky ad campaign and the Internet, constantly reminding voters of his celebrity wrestling past. Voters appeared dissatisfied with a choice between career politicians, instead favoring someone who promised to shake things up. As governor he subsequently marketed action figures of himself, wrote an autobiography (*I Ain’t Got Time to Bleed*; Ventura, 1999), was color announcer for a short-lived professional football league, and continued to host his own talk-radio show. In addition, he regularly appeared on entertainment journalism TV venues, in which his penchant for being outlandish won him continued notoriety. At one point he was quoted as saying the reason St. Paul’s streets meandered as they did was a result of their being laid out by Irishmen (DeFiebre, 2002). As he said this, he tipped his right hand to his mouth, as if he were hoisting a drink. On another occasion he said he wanted to be reincarnated as a 38DD bra (Whereatt, 2000). He was covered by a local, regional, national, and international press corps that seldom asked hard questions, instead treating Ventura as one might a daft relative, of whom no one would reasonably expect intelligent answers on complex issues.

Celebrities in politics are not a U.S., Western, or even one-third world phenomenon. Fernando K. Poe, Jr. used his film persona to gain popular support in his run for the presidency of the Philippines, and his primary opponent sought out a popular former TV anchor as a running mate for the
May 2004 elections. Poe, who was named best actor five times in the Filipino version of the Academy Awards and holds more than 300 film credits, frequently played characters who championed the underdog. As in the California race, Poe opted against participating in debates so that he could concentrate on “seeing the people.” His campaign manager argued that political debates merely polarized the nation (Salvosa & Lema, 2004). The high school drop-out turned actor gave the country few clues to his public policy stances.

The so-called Manila insider in this race, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, although ultimately winning the election, suffered from what her top campaign strategists called a “charisma deficit,” and said she struggled to get out her message concerning her expertise and experience to the “masa” or masses of “fiercely independent but under-informed voters” (Morella, 2004, p. 13). Following the election, Arroyo supporters challenged Poe’s status as a citizen in court. Commentary during the 2004 Filipino presidential race read as though it came straight from The Los Angeles Times or from a textbook on the postmodern media:

Many Filipinos have become star-struck because of disillusionment with traditional politicians. Political parties have failed to deliver and are losing their relevance. Television and the movies have provided alternative “leaders” because of the wide reach of free television (85 percent of Philippine households own a television set), its role as court of last resort for those whom government doesn’t listen to, and the accessibility of movies, the cheapest form of entertainment … Celebrities make the jump into politics because of the lure of an easy win and the promise of a continued presence in the limelight. Actors who claim to understand Filipinos’ plights say that the roles they have played give them a special empathy with the people. That many Filipinos believe them shows how illusion and reality have meshed. (Vitug, 2004, p. 8)

Meanwhile, the European Union has experienced its share of illusion or reality mesh. Porn star Dolly Buster (a.k.a. Katerina Bochnickova) was for a time the Number 1 Czech candidate to serve on the European Union parliament, before withdrawing her name from ballot. Like other celebrities, she focused her campaign platform on “contact with the people” (“Briefly Noted,” 2004; “Porn Star,” 2003). Popular British actress Glenda Jackson is a Labour Member of Parliament with a line of political credentials, but even she receives more media coverage for who she is rather than the policies she advocates (Mukherjee, 2004).

Japan’s parliament has included sumo wrestlers, and the former head of Osaka also was a stand-up comedian. The Russian parliament includes a popular singer and a film maker (“Terminator-Governor Joins Long Line,” 2003).
India’s voters have embraced its celebrities entering politics, from Bollywood beauties to cricket stars. Actress Jayalalitha Jayaram serves as chief minister of Tamil Nadu, a southern state, and other actors have “been known to actively fashion political personals through the characters they portray, in order to route their transition from screen to political stage” (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 81).

In fifty-six years of independence, the world’s most populous democracy as elected over fifty actors and actresses, twenty sportspersons, hundreds of India’s erstwhile royals and one infamous ‘bandit queen’ to office … Contemporary trends in Indian media show politicians to be in competition with other celebrities for media attention. (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 80)

Yet international commentaries on all of these celebrity politicians make reference back to one key political star: Arnold Schwarzenegger as the celebrity politician who packs the terminator or gubernator punch.

Schwarzenegger Enters Politics

Early on in 2003 Californians became increasingly annoyed with Governor Gray Davis. Although Davis was not guilty of dereliction of duty or malfeasance (the usual criteria for removing a person from elected office), California’s constitution contained no such stipulations. When 2 million California residents signed a recall petition, some 100 candidates jumped at the chance to get on the ballot. One of those who jumped was the world’s highest paid movie actor—Arnold Schwarzenegger—and the trampoline he used was the Tonight Show.

During an 11-minute, 21-second appearance on the “Tonight Show” to announce his candidacy for governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger transformed a recall election that was already a national spectacle into a global media story that may break all the old rules about the way a race for elective office is waged, and won and covered. An electronic media that is largely inattentive to elections now finds in the California governor’s race something it truly values: a reality TV show with a proven ratings winner cast as a star. (Lopez, 2003, p. B1)

Journalists and commentators urged reporters to carefully scrutinize the actor and former body builder.
Immediately after this announcement, a variety of journalists and commentators urged reporters to carefully scrutinize the actor and former bodybuilder. Philip Trounstine, who heads the Survey and Policy Institute at San Jose State, urged political writers to pose serious policy questions:

Arnold may try to sidestep the political writers …. As long as Jay Leno is your only interviewer and you don’t have to face a [veteran reporter], it can be a cakewalk. Schwarzenegger has a Q factor now that other politicians couldn’t possibly have. That’s all fine and dandy, except there is a huge, unprecedented responsibility to find out where he stands on policy issues. (Nicholas & Garvey, 2003, p. A1)

Others echoed the same theme:

California voters know more about Schwarzenegger as a bodybuilder and Hollywood action figure than they do about his public policy ideas. To fill in the gaps, the state’s media should doggedly question him in his views and not accept simplistic answers. The media should investigate his past and treat him as a candidate, not a curiosity. If journalists do not now cover him like a blanket, California voters will be shortchanged, and Minnesota’s one-act Ventura production could well gain a second act, with Schwarzenegger getting top billing by media default. (Babcock, 2003, p. B15)

However, the majority of voters in the state seemed unconcerned that Schwarzenegger did not know or did not deal with issues of public policy. Issues simply were nonissues to Schwarzenegger supporters because his supporters “knew” who he was.

Californians have never known more about a new governor. We’ve seen him naked on screen. We know about the Nazi father, the celebrity journalist wife, the bodybuilding titles and the crude behavior toward women. We have seen him in theaters, fallen asleep to his voice on television and imitated his accent. (Mathews, 2003, p. A1)

As with Poe in the Philippines, voters had never seen him hold office, did not know what programs he would cut, how he would balance the budget, negotiate with legislators, or manage the state’s bureaucracy—let alone solving the state’s financial $38 billion deficit. However that did not matter.

The public knows who Arnold is, said Tony Quinn, a non-partisan Sacramento campaign analyst. “He’s one of the most famous people on the face of the earth. They’re not looking for a 12-point plan dealing with water transfers. They just don’t like the way the whole political class has run things.” (Barabak, 2003, p. A1)
Schwarzenegger was asking the voters to trust him, and they did, even when the media reported details of his crude, groping behavior toward women—behavior that apparently had gone on over many years. In response to reports of sexual misconduct, he responded,

Yes, I behaved badly sometimes. Yes, it is true that I was on rowdy movie sets, and I have done things that were not right, which I thought then was playful. But I now recognize that I have offended people. And to those people that I have offended, I want to say to them, I am deeply sorry about that, and I apologize. (Nicholas, Hall, & Finnegan, 2003, p. A1)

Not only were his supporters not offended by such behavior, but they blamed The Los Angeles Times for reporting such groping, and the newspaper reported losing thousands of subscribers because of its reporting. Thus Schwarzenegger was able to cast himself as the victim of a malicious newspaper attempting an 11th-hour sneak attack on his character. The Los Angeles Times reported campaign appearances where supporters “roundly booted the mere mention of the paper” (Lopez, 2003, p. B1).

Schwarzenegger, as have other celebrity politicians before him, proved that celebrities can play by their own rules. When allegations of Schwarzenegger’s groping women and admiring Hitler came to light, political reporters appeared to think the candidate’s fan base would crumble. Instead, the late-breaking charges seemed to earn him sympathy, with voters being more upset with The Los Angeles Times for publishing his misdeeds than with Schwarzenegger for acknowledging them.

According to conventional wisdom, once hard-nosed political reporters got their mitts on Arnold, he would crumble like a bad Schatzi strudel. Well, they proved to be about as scary as Don Zimmer throwing a punch at Pedro Martinez. Arnold ducked them all, proving you could run a gubernatorial campaign pretty much like a summer movie opening! (Goldstein, 2003, p. E1)

Schwarzenegger also is not the only celebrity adept at manipulating public relations. Michael Jackson protested charges of child molestation in an interview to CBS’s 60 Minutes. Martha Stewart made her case on Larry King Live and Barbara Walters on ABC’s 20/20. Former basketball star Jayson Williams discussed his manslaughter trial on 20/20, and current basketball star Kobe Bryant held a press conference on ESPN where he and his wife discussed his “nightmare” (Scherer, 2004, p. 2).

Variously dubbed by the media as the “Kevlar candidate” and the “Teflon Terminator,” Schwarzenegger seemed to believe it is the news media’s role to help sell his agenda. “This is a first: a governor who perceives Capitol reporters as his personal publicists,” according to columnist

I got a lot of publicity, and that helped me really to become the highest paid entertainer in the world …. It was really the press that has helped me to get to the place where I am today. This again was also true through the campaign. If it was for Proposition 49 [after-school programs] or if it was for the gubernatorial race, it was again you that helped me so much …. So I want to thank all of you for this great job. (Skelton, 2004, p. B6)

Two months before California’s gubernatorial election, Schwarzenegger’s senior strategist, Sean Walsh (Nicholas & Garvey, 2003) predicted free media would decide the winner, not political ads. Early on, Schwarzenegger drew interest from entertainment news shows such as Access Hollywood and Entertainment Tonight, shows that normally avoid politics. Such shows are free to cover Schwarzenegger and not other candidates because they are exempt from equal opportunity requirements. They were granted newscast status by the Federal Communications Commission in the 1990s, enabling them to cover candidates based on news-worthiness (Nicholas & Garvey, 2003).

If newsworthiness appears closely linked to a candidate’s image, then Schwarzenegger’s image appeared to be straight out of the playbook of long-time Ronald Reagan aide, Michael Deaver, who raised the photo opportunity to an art form. According to Deaver

In an age in which most people get their news from television, showcase your candidate in the most visually glorious setting possible, the leader surrounded by adoring citizens. Then no matter what the reporters say about him, what sticks in viewers’ minds are those triumphant pictures. (Alver & Lewis, 2003, p. 60)

Photos of Schwarzenegger in The Los Angeles Times showed the candidate active, self-assured, and smiling. Similar shots of Gray Davis often showed the governor looking dour and inactive. Such photos of Schwarzenegger were omnipresent in all newspapers across the state. The actor was frequently photographed with his wife Maria, a photogenic TV journalism celebrity in her own right.

In the end, it was clear that the voters did not want to see television stories or read newspaper articles about whether the candidate was short on answers to the state’s fiscal crisis or whether he misbehaved around women. As reporters, when we did try to focus on issues, we felt as thought we were doing such pieces for one another because the general public had all but turned out when it came to that kind of news coverage. Even so, we felt obligated to pursue the
truth and tried not to allow our frustrations to poison the fairness or integrity of our reporting.

Schwarzenegger’s star power is now influencing how television covers state politics in California. An unprecedented number of media outlets covered his inauguration at the state Capitol and now, in what some see as a positive impact of “the Schwarzenegger effect,” local stations that closed their Sacramento bureaus during the 1980s are reopening them as Governor Schwarzenegger takes over. The show must go on. (Alver & Lewis, 2003, p. 61)

The public increasingly figures there is nothing to lose by shaking things up and voting for an entertainer with star and name appeal.

It appears the public increasingly figures there is nothing to lose by shaking things up and voting for an entertainer with star and name appeal. In other words, the public is embracing a philosophy of “Hey, it couldn’t get any worse.” As one letter writer to The Los Angeles Times said,

What a great day for democracy. Far from being the laughingstock of the nation, the people of California have shown what true democracy is and affirmed what Thomas Jefferson said two centuries ago. To be successful, a democracy needs a little revolution every now and then. (Vigor, 2003, p. B16)

Although Baldassare, a pollster for the Public Policy Institute of California, saw the Schwarzenegger phenomenon as a way for many people “to stand up and be heard and say how really mad they are” (Skelton, 2004, p. B1), columnist Lopez (2003) saw Schwarzenegger’s success in a less positive light:

What we’re witnessing is not a civic awakening, but a further descent into the hellfires of modern society. The worst elements of politics, media and pop culture have converged to deliver a lurid spectacle, rife with candidates who seem plausible only because our standards have sunk so low. Arnold is the perfect candidate for a celebrity-obsessed, know-nothing populace, and having been in movies so long, he may actually believe any problem in the world can be solved in two hours and five minutes. (p. B1)

In the 2003 California gubernatorial recall election, the media were damned by voters and right-wing talk radio hosts when attempts were made to cover Schwarzenegger vigorously—in other words, as the media
would cover a “real” candidate. When the news media covered him as it
would an entertainer, they were criticized as being soft and pandering.

What was surprising, though, is that Schwarzenegger’s strategy was
surprising—and that it was surprising to experienced political and media
journalists. Journalists in the Golden State seemed oblivious to the recent
Jesse Ventura media feeding frenzy in Minnesota. On September 20, The
Los Angeles Times media columnist Tim Rutten (2003) wrote

Schwarzenegger’s gubernatorial campaign is dealing with the media in an
entirely novel and unforeseen way, almost completely shutting out experi-
enced political journalists, while making their man available only to friendly
forums—right-wing talk radio and the congenial celebrity chat shows. Two
questions arise: Will it work? And, if it does, can Arnold’s happy ending be-
come a school for other candidates?” (p. E1)

Similarly, Republican political analyst Tony Quinn saw the voting public
striking out against the political establishment. “If they could punish the
whole gaggle of them, they would . . . . It’s a real assault on the political class
and could very well apply to President Bush [in 2004] . . . ,” Quinn said
(Skelton, 2003, p. B1). Reporters’ kid-glove treatment of Schwarzenegger has
not been limited to California’s recall election. He continues to be treated like
a star, even when standing in a crowd at the National Governors Conference

They stood side by side before a bank of cameras outside the White House, a
handful of governors poised to talk about their morning meeting with Presi-
dent Bush. The first question went to the governor of California. So did the
second and the third. Sensing a trend, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger in-
terrupted the barrage to observe that the states of Mississippi, Louisiana,
Utah, and Kentucky were being ignored. “I would like to say also that other
governors are here,” he said. “You’re the star,” a reporter replied. (Nicolas &

As governor, he borrowed many celebrity tactics that were successful in
his candidacy. A muscular T-shirt clad Schwarzenegger appeared on bill-
boards in major cities from Seattle to Boston promoting business in his
state. His smiling face appeared above the words: “California Wants Your
along with Davis appeared on Jay Leno to promote Proposition 64. Much of
that interview centered on Schwarzenegger’s acting tips to Davis, who that
week had a cameo appearance in a TV sitcom. Then, a trial balloon to “cut
government costs by creating a part-time legislature” ended up being a
lead balloon. Schwarzenegger returned to Jay Leno and announced the
budgetary measure needed more research. Meanwhile, his catch phrases
are becoming legendary or infamous, depending on interpretation: He
characterized the Democratic legislative candidates as “girlie-men,” a phrase that appeared to be better received when applied to Davis a year earlier (Nicholas, 2004, p. B1).

Schwarzenegger promised California a revolution. However, as Salladay and Nicholas (2004) pointed out in a Los Angeles Times Magazine cover story, the newly elected governor himself was the revolution. During his campaign he had ridiculed the Legislature, but once elected he signed 75% of the measures this legislative body had approved. He averted a public relations nightmare when, at first supporting a bill that would hasten the execution of cats and dogs at animal shelters to save cities and counties $14 million, he quickly reversed himself.

Celebrity Changes Political Reporting

Schwarzenegger may appear to be an extreme example, but he is far from alone. There have been and continue to be an increasing number of other examples of celebrity candidates successfully operating under the scrutinizing radar of experienced political reporters. Such apolitical candidates are being hyped by the popular, burgeoning infotainment media, while at the same time voters are more and more hostile to political journalists, traditional news operations, and to traditional politicians.

The postmodern media consumer and therefore the media industry itself values the unusual over the rational, and novelty for nothing other than novelty’s sake.

Workable reporting models must emerge to increase media credibility to the point where the electorate might trust journalists to cover politics in a fair, substantive manner. It would be hoped that such models could lessen the likelihood that entertainers could take a foothold in the collective political conscience of voters based solely on their star power. However, this is a tall order. A first step might be to have the public and media take off their rose-colored glasses when scrutinizing Schwarzenegger and other entertaining politicians. However, in a popular culture, mass-media world that may be an even taller order. As Grosswiler (1998) explained, the postmodern media consumer and therefore the media industry itself values the unusual over the rational, and novelty for nothing other than novelty’s sake.
For democracy and by extension the news media to survive this postmodern angst, these models must consider that the very nature of celebrity thwarts the standard reporting mechanisms that may be more appropriate for career politicians. A successful model begins, as Habermas (1962/1993) suggested, with a goal of informing voters, meaning that voters know all viable candidates equally well on election day. To do that, journalists must report with fervor when celebrity candidates fail to explain the policies they want to implement if elected. Investigative reporting teams must birddog candidates and examine their political histories, then from that careful reporting, put together audience-friendly candidate profiles.

Such solutions mirror the assumption of most journalists, and indeed is the subtext of most journalism schools. Even in the wake of Minnesota’s experience with Jesse Ventura, California journalists still expected that if experienced political reporters persistently asked tough questions of Arnold Schwarzenegger he would be forced to answer the questions or, failing that, that the public would understand that he had no real plan to help the state out of its fiscal problems, and, as a result, not vote for him. Schwarzenegger did not answer the tough questions because he skirted the news media in favor of the entertaining television infotainment shows.

John Kennedy and Richard Nixon also appeared on the Jack Parr show during their 1960s race to the White House, and Bill Clinton continued the tradition when he played the saxophone with Arsenio Hall. Although appearing on such venues is nothing new, such former candidates were experienced politicians who also had faced and responded to hundreds of political reporters. The celebrity candidate can escape this scrutiny if the traditional news media offer kid-glove treatment. Notably, the candidate also escapes if he or she skirts the questions and the public appears not to care, as distrust of both journalists and traditional politicians is so great.

A consensus on a central interpretation of credibility and truth are by their nature impossible to achieve in a postmodern society. With such dissatisfaction among the public, journalists, and politicians, one is hard pressed to see how a Habermassian connection—or reconnection—might be possible. Without real interest and connection by the electorate for either journalists or politicians, the prospect for a healthy democracy seems unlikely at best. There seems little reason for hope when the public decides that the best leader for the world’s seventh largest economy is an actor with no political experience and a resume that includes bodybuilding, groping women, being attracted to Hitler, and smiling as he delivers Hollywood one-liners.

Nonetheless, the whole of California has not fallen into the Pacific by means of natural disaster, terrorist attack, environmental mismanagement, or political corruption. All of these, however, are quite possible. Postmodern hyperreality does not change the actual reality of budget defi-
cits, poverty, or racial strife. Perhaps such models could lessen the likelihood that such entertainers could take a foothold in the collective consciences of voters. The rise of the celebrity politician through postmodern forces must be considered in light of media corporate mergers and economic pressures such as those brought in Enron’s collapse.

The absence of a clear solution to level the political playing field, even the lack of hope for finding one, does not change the need for models for covering celebrity politicians. These models must emerge if democratic nations are to avoid further denigration of their political institutions and trivializing of their media.

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