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Putting Entertainment Value Back into Politics

By Greg Shaw

Entertainment is making a welcome comeback in politics. That may be a dirty word for the Washington Week in Review crowd. After all politics is serious business, certainly not a place for Hollywood or Madison Avenue. But boring begets boredom, and anyone concerned about the embarrassing levels of voter turnout and political participation in this country should see the silver lining in this often entertaining election season.

We've seen it all -- drama, tragedy and humor, the very pillars of entertainment. And entertainment sells -- for the campaigns that are raising money, the networks that want market share and the special interests, which seem capable of turning every plot twist into a new soapbox for their issue.

During Election 2000, we've tuned into nail-biting drama in the post election on the one hand and soap opera quality melodrama on the other. The line has blurred between the actual soundbites and those of Saturday Night Live's comedy sketches. Many of us online enjoy the increasing numbers of Web sites that parody the all too serious political issues. Check out www.SoreLoser.com and www.IKnowWhatYouDidinTexas.com. The Nader-trader Web sites, which allowed Nader and Gore supporters to swap votes, added an element of gaming to the election.

And it's paying off. A recent New York Times survey found that 90 percent of Americans say they are following the made for TV post-election very to somewhat closely. CNN's Jeff Greenfield bragged on the air recently that ratings are high. And a recent report showed that political Web sites are seeing traffic increases of 300 percent.

During a conference this week in Washington, D.C., Andrew Kohut of the Pew Research Center made this observation: historians will do better to read transcripts of Comedy Central's Daily Show rather than those of the network news to really understand this election. Pew's research found that 54 percent of Americans sent or received email jokes about the candidates or campaign. The Bush campaign's most successful fundraising email was entitled, "What Jay Leno said about Al Gore."

One thing successful marketers and our forefathers have in common is a flare for entertainment. Long gone are the days when political parties offered supporters a good strong drink and carnival-like barbecues, brass bands and parades. Today, blown-dry candidates and campaign photo opportunities look exactly the same. Simply stir in American flags and add a beaming candidate who delivers the same monotonous lines. Oh, and applause is strictly prohibited during the televised debates.

Michael Schudson writes in *The Good Citizen* that politics was entertainment during the era of the Lincoln-Douglas debates. In 1858, between 10,000 and 20,000 people assembled to hear the first debate in a town of just 7,000. “This was the best show in town...Politics provided high drama and spirited fun to neighborhoods devoid of activities anywhere near as engaging and exciting.”

Casting a ballot no longer provides hardy entertainment, complains another political scientist. In a culture in which entertainment is the métier of value, campaigns and elections are no longer fun.

Entertainment is serious business. Michael J. Wolf’s book, *The Entertainment Economy*, shows us that media and entertainment have moved beyond culture to become the driving wheel of the global economy. Every business – candidates and campaigns as well -- is locked in the same battle for consumer attention that movie producers and television programmers deal with on a daily basis.

With entertainment back in the mix, perhaps we’re headed back to the future when political parties and candidates made democracy fun, back when political participation was at all-time highs. During this election, Americans saw that politics can be entertaining and that every vote matters. This election reminds us that whether it’s politics or marketing, campaigns must motivate, inspire and touch people. Banal, me-too product advertising, like much of today’s emotionless political campaigning, fails to entertain anyone.

It’s the entertainment, stupid!

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