

# Political information as entertainment

*Dr. Christian Schicha*

Paper for the European Consortium for Political Research –  
Panel on ‘The Entertainization of Political Information’,  
Marburg, 18–21 September, 2003



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**Political information as entertainment**

*by Christian Schicha<sup>1</sup>*

„There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.“ (Klapp 1964, p. 102)

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<sup>1</sup> I want to thank Ingrid Stapf (M.A.) and Dr. Andy Gross for help with the translation.

## 1. The transmission of political information: between news and entertainment

Arnold Schwarzenegger has done it. He is after Roland Reagan<sup>2</sup> another famous actor who successfully candidate for governor in California. This development documents also the close connection between politics and show-business.

Political information is being transmitted as a form of entertainment because free time activities and entertainment are becoming increasingly central in contemporary society, and because media companies are emphasizing entertainment to defend their market dominance. These strategies of market dominance are being thoroughly examined as symbolic politics, staging and theatricality. (compare among others Meyer/Ontrup/Schicha 2000). Within scientific discourse the evaluation of the terms is becoming more differentiated. "Inszenierung"<sup>3</sup> can imply an entertaining presentation of political facts and is no longer equated with the categories "illusion" and "deception". Rather, it is interpreted - free of judgment - as a mode of "effect-calculated events", which remain to be examined empirically in each individual case (compare Schicha 2003b).

The growing trend towards entertainment in political reporting is related to the reception capabilities of the recipients. Politicians feel compelled by circumstances to present themselves as entertainers. What remains important in this context is the adequacy of their appearance. A loss of image may result from an exaggerated use of "Inszenierung", something German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder had to experience after the parliamentary elections in 1998 and especially during the public debate around his appearance on the German show "Wetten dass?"

Political coverage on television is subject to several forces of circumstance. While it is essential to inform the recipients in a credible and appropriate manner, there is generally a lack of time to actually do so. In addition, political programs have to be familiar with the viewing habits of their viewers in order to achieve a certain resonance with them. Both of these developments seem to explain the trend towards "Infotainment" (Wittwen 1995) and „Politainment“ (Leggerwie 2000, Dörner 2001). More "conventional" formats of political magazines and news programs fall back onto repeated ritual patterns of the production of politics and thereby fulfil the expectations of the viewers, encouraging them to trust the system. Those formats tend to be less entertaining and have only little potential in regard to "Inszenierung".

"Conventional" formats are - amongst others - the "ARD-Tagesschau" (a daily news program on public television) and the "ARD-Presseclub" (a weekly press club on public television). The formats of those programs have existed for many decades. Their visual presentation has barely changed over the years. The moderation, the visual look of the studios and the camera work are unobtrusive and unspectacular. The central criteria for the shows is their seriousness and credibility. Political reporting dominates the events, and entertaining segments are only peripheral. In contrast to the conventional formats, "innovative" formats build the bridge

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<sup>2</sup> Ronald Reagan was the 40<sup>th</sup> president of the United States from 1981-1989. In 1966 he was elected Governor of California by a margin of a million votes; he was re-elected in 1970.

<sup>3</sup> Since there is no English equivalent to the term "Inszenierung", the author prefers to use the German term. The closest translation could be "staging".

between information and entertainment. The decreasing numbers of viewers of political magazines, paired with the changing viewing habits of the recipients has led to a faster and more "aggressive" style of reporting in magazine formats. The formats and styles of more entertaining TV genres are used to make the programs more attractive. Due to the variety of daily offers, competition between different stations increases in relation to the competition between different program formats. The programs become more casual, more stimulating and more colourful due to more chatty dialogs of the hosts and polished "audiovisual leitmotifs" from the trailers to the credits. The strategy of using entertainment formats instead of traditional political reporting is an attempt to win more interest and attention. Today, the credibility of political decision makers who want to have an impact on the voting decisions of the citizens depends not only on political competence but also on image.

## **2. Politicians in entertaining formats**

Because of the growing popular disenchantment with politics, politicians are forced to appeal to potential voters by conforming to their media reception habits, as when Gerhard Schröder tried to achieve sympathy with voters by appearing on entertainment shows. Politicians attempt to achieve approval not only through competence in political issues, but also through emotionalising strategies.

Politicians increasingly attempt to win the approval of the voting public by using emotionalising strategies on top of their competence in political issues. They foreground their personalities in order to evoke identification and sympathy (compare Holtz-Bacha 2001). Since it is no longer sufficient for leading politicians to simply "sell" their political contents, what moves to the centre of public interest is the human being behind the political official. In order to achieve the valuable good "attention" in the midst of a multitude of channels, political decision-makers choose several strategies outside of their political function in order to achieve public recognition. Appearances on TV are being increasingly used by politicians to create an media-effective event. To be a politician means to accept challenges set by the media. In what used to be "politics-free" media contexts, it has become common to advertise the person and the message. Gerhard Schröder did not only appear on the tv-series "Der große Bellheim" (ZDF). His appearances in the daily soap "Gute Zeiten-Schlechte Zeiten" (RTL) during the parliamentary election campaign and later as Chancellor in the entertainment show "Wetten, dass..." (ZDF) show that today's politicians take the offensive and create room to manoeuvre in today's entertainment genres. The Chancellor - like the leading politicians of other parties - has not shied away from posing as a photo model for exclusive clothing in the magazine "Life & Style". Gerhard Schröder can be seen as the prototype of a politician who uses many a strategies in order to remain capable of obtaining a majority in elections. Apart from his contacts to business - esp. the automobile industry - he likes to appear as the "regular guy" who drinks his beer out of the bottle and enjoys eating a currywurst, a Berlin style of sausage. He learned from the criticism surrounding his appearance in designer suits and with expensive cigars and now deliberately acts in a "Folksy" style. When appearing in election campaigns he emphasizes his simple origins, and the fact that his single mother earned her living as a cleaning woman. Apart from being able to transmit political arguments, politicians also need to have talent as actors and entertainers qualities, if they want to reach the attention of the voting public. Since only a few politicians have those abilities, it is not surprising that the same media-savvy politicians appear later in the political discussions. They tend to use their competence in image cultivation and entertainment for "talk show-hopping". Only a few days after the

parliamentary elections in 2002, many politicians appeared in the "Harald-Schmidt-Show" (a nightly talk show on the private TV-channel SAT 1). Guido Westerwelle (FDP), Gregor Gysi (PDS) and Joschka Fischer (B90/Grüne), all politicians of the smaller parties who were not allowed to participate in the two Chancellor debates, used the opportunity to present themselves as witty and funny in order to advertise themselves and their party (compare Schicha 2003b). Norbert Blüm (CDU) is one of the few politicians regularly appearing in entertainment shows. The former minister of labour joined the guessing team with comedians and talkshow-hosts in a remake of the ARD-TV-classic "Was bin ich?", a guessing show on Kabel 1. Years before he had participated with short appearances in sketches in "Rudis Tagesshow". This traditional model of public relations following the maxim "Do something good and talk about it" is exploited by politicians who seek to document their social engagement by "good deeds". One example is the green politician Rezzo Schlauch who appeared as a candidate for the Quiz show "Who wants to be a millionaire?" for charity and accepted a cheque from RTL in a show of "Big-Brother" for projects against right wing extremism. The list could be easily extended.

Now follows a look at the phenomenon represented by the politician Möllemann, who recently died, but who attracted the attention of the media like no other politician, successfully projecting his appearance into entertainment formats.

### **3. The media activist: the example of Jürgen W. Möllemann**

Former FDP-politician Jürgen W. Möllemann was a type of media "activist" using almost every opportunity to make the news. Aside from appearing in entertainment shows, he also presented himself through sports activities like parachute jumping. His appearances out of the air before political events were performed to appeal to the public. They were supposedly legitimised during the election campaign by printing the FDP-logo onto his clothing (compare Block/Goergen/Goergen 2001). A media activist like Möllemann - who fell to his death in a parachute jump - knew how to use the media to appeal to the public - often by provoking polarizing debates (compare Hitzler 1991, Vorländer 2003).

He was one of the most sensational personalities in German politics and had - despite several setbacks - a remarkable political career. From 1972 he was a member of the "Deutschen Bundestages". In 1982 Möllemann was appointed Minister of the State of Foreign Affairs. In 1983 he became the head of the liberal party in Northrhine-Westfalia. After 1987 he was Minister of education, later Minister of economics and even Vice Chancellor under Chancellor Helmut Kohl.

During the parliamentary election campaign in 2002 Möllemann cultivated the image of the FDP as the "Spaßpartei", or fun-party. He developed the project "18-percent" (aimed at getting 18% of the vote in the 2002 elections) as well as the idea of the FDP Chancellor candidature. It was mainly the election victory in the federal state Northrhine-Westfalia in 2000, where he was striving to attain 8 percent and almost received 10 percent, that gave his - already strong - self-esteem another kick:

- Möllemann was always given broad media coverage and was a guest in the talkshow of Sabine Christiansen (ARD) even shortly before his death. Nevertheless, dubious political activities increasingly isolated himself at the end of his political career, a fact that must have been bitter for someone that successful as an event manager. In the spring of 2003, he finally resigned from the FDP under growing pressure from his former party friends and became a non-party backbencher in the Deutsche Bundestag. After the scandal around a flyer critical of Israel, Möllemann had distributed to all households in Northrhine-Westphalia shortly before the elections in September 2002, and after an impending criminal prosecution due to alleged tax evasion, Möllemann died in a parachute jump - the day on which his immunity as a member of parliament was annulled and the Bureau for investigation of tax offences searched his private and business premises. His death was most likely a suicide.
- Möllemann was the kind of politician who furthered his own image with dubious methods. Therefore, the kind of commentaries after his spectacular death are not surprising: "He staged his death, like his whole political life" was the first commentary in a tv-report about his parachute crash on the news channel N-tv. The scrolling text "drama surrounding Möllemann" was permanently on the screen during the program and seemed to mark the renewed use of a theatre metaphor. Political scientist Wichard Woyke even spoke of a "Greek tragedy" in respect to the death of the former leading FDP-politician.
- Möllemann was the prototype of the vain politician who knows the rules of the media democracy (compare Meyer 2001). He used the broad spectrum of mass-media stages in order to achieve high public attention. His strategy consisted of provoking, breaking norms and making spectacular statements which attracted the interest of the media. Studies show that Möllemann even used the time of Easter and summer-holidays where there is generally a lack of news, to present himself in the press. Even before becoming minister, when he was only 25, the press reported his parachute jump into a campaign event.
- Möllemann continued intense work on his image in the following decades. His slogan during the federal election campaign in 2002 was "Clarity. Bravery. Möllemann". He always suggested the impression that he courageously brought his goals and interests to fruition. His hobby of parachuting fit this from of image-production perfectly.

His public appearances were masterpieces of successful image-cultivation in terms of language, his self-presentation and in his visual appearance (compare Bußkamp 2002). His strength was his successful image-cultivation, not so much the phrasing of his political messages or concrete programs. Möllemann understood that political rhetoric had to be personalized, and that the personalization was an important measure for political success. The reduction of complex political interrelations could very often only be achieved by focusing on a political protagonist who embodied a specific program.

And that he achieved. He permanently appeared in talk shows and entertainment programs in order to advertise himself, his party and his program. Because of his rhetorical skills, his commanding appearance and his provoking theses he was always a welcome guest. Again and again Möllemann awakened the media's interest through his spectacular actions. During the election campaign in Northrhine-Westphalia in 2000, for example, he designed a election

campaign poster showing a photomontage of Adolf Hitler with the Indian guru Bhagwan and the (fictive) horror-cult-star Freddy Krueger. The logo on the poster said: "If we don't find more teachers quickly, our kids will find them themselves". Under that was written the slogan: "Northrhine-Westphalia needs tempo. Möllemann". This provocation achieved its effect. Big public protests followed, but the poster was printed in many daily newspapers - a (free) advertisement for Möllemann.

Möllemann always spoke negatively about journalists, but he always cooperated closely with them to secure his success: Möllemann held the opinion that journalists were all engaged but also lazy. That is why one had to deliver text modules, if an accurate formulation was essential to the portrayal of the self (compare Möllemann in Bußkamp 2002, p. 102).

In entertainment programs he used his rhetorical talent consistently and successfully in order to win more voters. He was convinced that even serious statements had to be entertaining and had to find their way into the hearts and minds of the people. In his view there were not enough infotainers in the parties. That's why one had to fall back onto professionals from show business, until the right talents would find their way into politics.

Möllemann stated these theses in "STARESSAY" in the glossy magazine "GALA" entitled "To Learn from Verona Means to Learn winning". This referred to prominent Verona Feldbusch, a media performer who is neither able to moderate, nor sing, nor act, but has achieved a cult status, because she was temporarily married to the "musician" Dieter Bohlen. In this article, Möllemann stated that politicians without good show skills had no chance of being elected by the younger generations.

He therefore often made use of "transmission of politics as entertainment" (compare Schicha/Brosda (Hrsg.) 2002). He appeared in the game-show "Wetten-dass?" (ZDF) and in the „Guinness-Show of records“ (ARD). He also used his appearance in 1997 in the „Harald-Schmidt-Show“ (SAT 1) to advertise himself and his party, and did not shy away from the daily-talk-show "Fliege" (ARD) to discuss the topic "comeback" (compare Bußkamp 2002). He considered his appearances in entertainment a successful move (in chess) to appeal to the voters who were disenchanted with politics. In the entertainment program "Wetten dass?" he galloped onto the stage with swimmer Fanziska von Almsick on his back and won a race against action actor Dolf Lindreen. According to Möllemann, that was when the people were able to perceive the "sports" aspect of the politician who dares to participate in a gag. Möllemann considered this form of theatricality as an "Entree" to the people who might have an emotional barrier against politicians (compare Möllemann in Bußkamp 2002, p. 113). After all, it is crucial to appeal to potential voters who might be less interested in politics.

Möllemann was, finally, the first politician to discover the potential popularity of real-life-formats for himself, when building up the first cycle of Big-Brother as a vehicle of media freedom. Almost no other prominent politician or representative of relevant societal groups had held back from giving negative statements about "Big Brother" before the first broadcast of the program in Germany. Besides statements of the German President, the German Foreign Minister, and many other regional ministers and several members of the Bundestag, the major reaction in the FDP was positive. Möllemann spoke up in favour of the broadcast of the first cycle when interviewed in the TV-program "Big Brother: the talk" (RTL II) a week before the federal elections in North Rhine-Westphalia in 2000 (compare Schicha 2002).

During the first cycle he gave host Percy Hoven an interview. In the interview in which he appeared deliberately relaxed, without a tie and dressed in a jeans shirt, he also mentioned the controversial discussions with his daughters about the Big Brother format. Obligated to liberal ideas, he spoke out against a prohibition of such formats and pledged for the sovereignty of the recipients in taking their own decisions about what programs they would like to watch.

Möllemann rejected all rules, regulations and state interventions achieving full support of the audience with such positions. Even though certain limits should not be crossed, Möllemann pledged for a basic prohibition of censorship, which he said had no justification in an open society (compare for more details Brosda 2002). Again he had occupied a topic and had stimulated a public controversy in which he was once more in the centre of the debate attracting the attention. Finally, he moved back into the state parliament with his party with an election result of about 10%. During the elections before, his party had not achieved the 5%-hurdle (a minimum percentage that parties have to achieve in Germany in order to be represented in parliament) and therefore had obtained no seat in Parliament. The fact that Möllemann nevertheless failed politically had nothing to do with his many appearances in entertainment programs, but rather with his political mistakes and provocations which had in the end forced him to leave the party.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Politicians are increasingly under pressure to submit to media pressures that have little to do with traditional talk shows, interviews and press conferences. As a result, new skills like flexibility and quick-wittedness are advancing to a criteria of successful politics. Because of this development politicians are not merely seen as political representatives, but also as private people who inform viewers about their families and their hobbies as well as their political aims. The mixing of information and entertainment, fiction and non-fiction does complicate the categorization and evaluation of the competence of politicians. An inherent danger is that the appearance and the personality of politicians might determine the public's perception more than politicians' political profile.

An appropriate transmission of politics via the mass media can only take place if the political information remains central to the program and if the quality of such programs on the whole constructively contributes to making political processes transparent to the public (compare Marcinkowski 1998).

At the same time, wide public interest in political issues remains a condition for the public discussion of politics. This means that innovative forms are necessary to motivate political interest. The transmission of political information take place not only through conventional means of political coverage, but also through fictitious entertainment.

To my mind, we should not be dismissive of the mixing of entertainment and politics. Dörner (2001) takes the view that the culture of an entertainment-public can constitute a form of "interdiscourse". This can counteract tendencies of fragmentation in socially differentiated societies, and has the potential to produce societal agenda-setting and ongoing discussions by

attracting attention the mass media. Both of these developments could help viewers transform their media-experiences in a communicative and interactive practice.

Recipients of entertainment publics can be offered orientation by consensus building. Traditions can become transparent by permanent "Inszenierung" of political and cultural ideas. As a result, political identity becomes emotionally graspable in forceful symbols. Finally, entertainment-publics open up communal spaces of communication, in which social integration can take place and political communities can form. Dörner is rightfully convinced that innovative entertainment formats in political reporting can make politics "visible" and emotionally experienceable. Entertainment formats also make topics generally accessible and help create sense and meaning, which can lead to consensus building, identification, and models of political action.

Transmitting political information in an entertaining context may be appropriate under the condition that the chance of reaching a large and disperse audience is not simply used for entertainment but also in order to inform about the issues. Entertaining media reception does not automatically stand in the way of political activity. The view that public argumentation is always desirable per se while all forms of political "Inszenierung" are always problematic falls short. Neither political discourses nor theatrical "Inszenierungen" completely depict complex circumstances. Every presentation of the political is a subjective excerpt of more extensive interrelations. The appearance of a politician in an entertainment program can foreground arguments as well as images. Central for their communicative quality is therefore always the content and not the form by itself. The development only becomes problematic if the form replaces the content and not vice versa.

A central and legitimate criteria in the transmission of political messages lies in attracting attention. Why should we not use new and innovate forms with the help of elements of "Inszenierung" and entertainment, as long as they help attract the interest of the public?

The form of presentation does not say anything about the reasonableness of the content. Manipulation, mystification and deception can just like argumentativeness and being informative only be understood in the context of an interpretation based on analysis of content. The form of presentation becomes problematic at the point when decision politics is replaced by performance politics and when political programs are not perceived anymore, but only the techniques of self-presentation of rhetorically skilled politicians, who only pay attention to their image rather than their arguments.

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## 6. Information about the author

- Magister of Art in Communication Science at the University in Essen in 1991
- Dr. phil at the University of Essen in 1995
- Scientific assistant at the Universities in Essen, Dortmund and Düsseldorf from 1991 – 2002.
- Speaker of the executive committee from the „Institut für Informations- und Kommunikationsökologie e.V. (IKÖ)“ in Duisburg since 1996 and responsible editor from the „Zeitschrift für Kommunikationsökologie (ZfK)“ since 1999
- Lecture at the Business and Information Technology School (BiTS) since 2001 in Media Management, Economics Management, Economical Informatics and Business Psychology about Media, Presentation and Rhetoric, Election Campaign, Communication and Rhetoric, Rhetoric and Method of Negotiating and Theory of Knowledge and Science Theory

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*Kriterien einer „nachhaltigen“ Wirtschaftsethik.* Kommunikation im Spannungsfeld zwischen Ökonomie und Ökologie, Duisburg 2000

*Die Inszenierung des Politischen – Zur Theatralität von Mediendiskursen,* Wiesbaden 2000 (with Thomas Meyer and Rüdiger Ontrup)

*Diskurs-Inszenierungen – Zur Struktur politischer Vermittlungsprozesse am Beispiel der Debatte zur „Ökologischen Steuerreform“,* Wiesbaden 2001 (with Thomas Meyer and Carsten Brosda)

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