

## "I Am Not an American": The ACLU's Scrapbook for Freedom campaign

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*In 2003, the American Civil Liberties Union launched an advertising campaign featuring well-known actors and musical artists that ran in popular magazines. This campaign used text and images to equate being an American with being a member of the ACLU. This essay critically examines the ACLU's attempt to utilize popular culture, and specifically the use of celebrity, to not only recruit members but to define what it means to be an American. Utilizing theorizing on identification and consumerism, this essay explores not only the campaign's persuasive potential, but also its possible effects for a democratic, informed citizenry.*

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In 2003, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) launched a print advertising campaign, initially scheduled to run September through December, featuring well-known actors and musical artists that ran in popular magazines such as the *New York Times Magazine*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Utne*, and *Vanity Fair*. This campaign used text and images to equate being an American with being a member of the ACLU and was described by ACLU Executive Director Anthony D. Romero in a press release: “This first-ever branding campaign is part of an overall effort to inform the public about who the ACLU really is: an organization committed to defending fundamental American values for more than 80 years” (“Celebrities Speak Out,” 2003). A variety of celebrities appeared in these advertisements, including Richard Dreyfuss, Samuel L. Jackson, Holly Hunter, and Natalie Maines to name a few; many of who wrote their own copy on the issue of their choice. What tied the advertisements together was the initial part of the copy which began “I am not an American” and then continued to state what they did not believe in (for example, in the case of Kirstin Davis of *Sex and the City*, “who believes we should all have the same opinions”). The advertisements would then continue to state what the celebrity believed in instead, and concluded with “Keep America: safe and free” (an obvious slight at the Bush Administration’s record on civil liberties and the war on terrorism). Also appearing in the advertisements was a box with the ACLU’s logo and the slogan “Join us now because freedom can’t protect itself.”<sup>1</sup>

The issues themselves were as varied as the celebrities; for example, Michael Stipe on free speech; Emilio Estevez on racial profiling; Fran Drescher on same-sex marriage. This was in no way an insignificant act by the ACLU, reportedly costing \$3 million of their annual \$4.5 million budget (Ives, 2003, p. 4). Executive director Romero argued that the rationale for this expenditure was due to perceived growing dissatisfaction with the Bush administration. “It’s essential to talk to the American people now, . . . because there is a beginning of a debate and a dialogue at the grass roots” (Ives, 2003, p.4). In purely instrumental terms, the campaign was reportedly a resounding success, nearly doubling membership and increasing contributions to record highs, prompting the extension of the campaign into 2004 (Graphic Design USA, 2004).

Yet, these advertisements prompt greater questions or issues concerning the campaign beyond its success for the ACLU. Three issues can be raised, although they are interconnected. At an obvious level, the campaign is trying to recruit members and raise funds, but it does so by equating the ACLU with being a “true” American (the implied juxtaposition with the actions taken by the Bush Administration). Secondly, the campaign uses celebrities to do so—so there’s the use of argument (sound reasons, arguments offered, implied premises to the knowledgeable audience—classical logos) but there also is this celebrity ethos (image based, credibility on who they are, their reputation perhaps but also their persona as celebrity). For example, Holly Hunter’s ad states “I am not an American who believes that questioning or criticizing my government is unpatriotic. I am an American whose voice and actions define who I am in a free society. I support the ACLU because it stands behind my right to be heard without fear.” Within the same space as those words, however, she is pictured with a slightly slanted view of the top of the US Capital building amidst a darkened and reddened (thus ominous looking) sky. And we, the audience, of course, bring what we believe about her to the

reading of the advertisement as well (e.g., previous political activism, transference of qualities to her based on characters she has portrayed in films we have seen). Finally, the campaign utilizes celebrities to define what citizenship is; it interweaves them with the meaning of being an American: the core values, simple arguments, basic beliefs.

### **Past research on celebrities and politics**

Research on celebrities influencing politics is certainly not new. Scholars point out that Robert K. Merton was talking about these issues as early as the 1940's. For example, Merton studied Kate Smith in 1943, and concluded "an entertainer . . . can take on the attributes ordinarily reserved for the moral leader" (p. 82, as qtd. in Simonson, 2006, p. 278). P. Simonson (2006) comments that this new focus on "'public image' indexed an emerging politics of celebrity, made possible in part by media technologies which brought the distant famous seemingly close up to the masses" (p. 278).

Since then, the research on celebrity and politics has largely focused on two areas. First, studies discuss how politics mirror celebrity status (see Corner & Pels, 2003). In this vein of research, research examines the intimacy that politicians try to create through their public persona, think about the specific example of Bill Clinton playing the saxophone on the Arsenio Hall show, ushering in this new age of late night show campaigning. Second, studies talk about celebrities who become politicians (Babcock & Whitehouse, 2005, p. 180). Examples of research here include studies on Ronald Reagan, Jesse Ventura, and more recently Arnold Schwarzenegger.

What about the use of celebrity as political activist, however? While the ACLU is not the first to recruit celebrities for its campaigns (PETA, for example, is well-known for this), it engages in unique positioning because it does more than merely use a celebrity spokesperson but attempts to define an entire group of individuals through 1) the discourse of the celebrity and 2) the power of the celebrity image.

### **Popular Culture, Celebrity and Political Discourse**

The campaign's, and the individual advertisements', persuasiveness works through a blending of popular culture that depends upon both the use of celebrity and political discourse. To better understand this, the concepts of identification and consumer consumption should be applied.

#### *Identification*

Kenneth Burke (1969) posited that identification works through similarity; we identify with others who seem like us. While they are not identical to us, they appear to share such qualities as ideas or interests. What makes this idea more relevant is Burke's proposition that identification may occur even when interests are not "joined" as he puts it, if one "is persuaded to believe" that they are (p. 20). Thus, identification may require an act of persuasion.

On face, the celebrity does not seem like us, the average American reader of the advertisement; they are after all a celebrity and we are not. Yet, J. Gripsrud (2002) posits

that the media create an audience through celebrity, but one particularly defined through identification. This audience forms not through the arguments offered though. Gripsrud remarks in regard to identification,

This can, however, refer to different sorts of processes in different sorts of relationship. If we say we identify with some sports hero, say, it probably means that we *consciously wish* to be or become like the hero in question, either in the sport his person is good at or in terms of his or her stamina, attitude or whatever. We do not necessarily wish or plan to become similar to this hero in every way. On the other hand, when psychologists say that boys identify with their fathers and girls their mothers, they speak of partially *unconscious* wishes, and the desire for sameness is more comprehensive than in the case of identification with sports heroes. Perhaps many young people's identification with film or pop stars is situated somewhere between these two forms. . . it is not the least the star's *personality*... (italics in original, p. 14)

The public mask of the celebrity provides a basis for a reader's identification. The advertisements thus may pull the reader in by the celebrity creating identification. We bring to our reading of the advertisement our awareness of who we already believe the celebrity to be—their persona. Yet, more than just this operates in these advertisements, as well. Marshall (1997) in his study of celebrity and culture, comments on what he terms the audience-subject. He states,

The audience-subject is in fact what we are attempting to identify within the celebrity sign. The celebrity's power is derived from the collective configuration of its meaning; in other words, the audience is central in sustaining the power of any celebrity sign. The types of messages that the celebrity provides for the audience are modalized around forms of individual identification, social difference and distinction, and the universality of personality types. Celebrities represent subject positions that audiences can adopt or adapt in their formation of social identities. Each celebrity represents a complex form of audience-subjectivity that, when placed within a system of celebrities, provides the ground on which distinctions, differences, and oppositions are played out. The celebrity, then, is an embodiment of a discursive battleground on the norms of individuality and personality within a culture. The celebrity's strength or power as a discourse on the individual is operationalized only in terms of the power and position of the audience that has allowed it to circulate. (p. 65)

Keep in mind then the deliberate positioning of the celebrity when entering this political, public sphere. John Corner and Dick Pels (2003) clarify Marshall's comments, remarking "Within this context, individuals attempt to make sense of social experience through celebrating and selectively identifying with the lifestyles of public personalities" (p. 8). In this case, rather than mere social difference and distinction, the celebrity represents a political personality, offering a lifestyle not just of individuality (represented by the "I am") but of collectivity (represented by the "an *American*") with which to identify. How can the reader understand the discursive battlefield of American politics

within the context of the war on terror? These advertisements suggest identification with celebrity subject position can form one's own social-political identity.

And what do the advertisements offer us to identify with? They show the celebrities in a variety of common settings. We see Samuel L. Jackson and Latonya Richardson lounging on a sofa, presumably in their living room, Emilio Estevez in a coffee shop, Michael Stipe behind the wheel of a car, Richard Dreyfuss at what appears to be neighborhood restaurant or bar. The ACLU describes them in fact as photographs “designed as ‘up close and personal’ portraits of the real people behind the public faces” (“Celebrities Speak Out,” 2003). So there is this individual identification; they are just like us, doing things we do (and we do things they do). And the advertisements present a variety of topics—surely one of them, especially given their careful, targeted placement in particular magazines for each celebrity/issue [Davis in *Vanity Fair*, Kurt Vonnegut in *Atlantic Monthly*, Sheryl Crow in *Rolling Stone* (Ives, 2003)]—will catch our eye. As the reader adopts the position, she or he too can be an American.

As a matter of identification, the celebrity placement in this set of advertisements provides that subject position—what it means to be an American. Moreover, their representation of this as aligned with the ACLU's political positioning further enacts this discursive battlefield. If we, as readers, identify with the celebrity's positioning as we view and read an advertisement, then it positions us as well. Marshall's analysis thus can be expanded to this political realm. More than just a social identity, this discursive, and visual, based identification constructs a political identity.

### *Consumer consumption*

Secondly, the advertisements promote the reader as consumer, although this move is closely linked to identification. John Street (1997) writes about today's world where “consumption becomes a form of political activity. . . . Via consumerism, popular culture comes to represent direct political empowerment. But this attribution of populist radicalism to consumption is problematic” (p. 162). The consumption of political “products” substitutes for actual activity. Marshall comments further about how the combination of argument and celebrity position the consumer as both rational and irrational. He is talking about what political leaders do, but his analysis can be expanded. He posits,

The two layers of political rationality of leaders—reasoned, rational legitimacy and a form of affective consensus building—describe the organization of contemporary political campaigns and elections. This double system of rationality has emerged in concert with another double system of rationality, the framework of consumer capitalist culture. The linchpin of legitimacy in consumer capitalism is the consumer. The centerpiece of contemporary political culture is the citizen. In contemporary culture, there is a convergence in subjectivity toward the identification and construction of the citizen as consumer. This convergence entails a reinforcement of the dual system of rationality in politics. The citizen becomes reconfigured in political campaigns as a political consumer who, like any consumer, must make purchase choices among several

different commodities. On one level, the consumer is constructed as ultimately rational... Simultaneous with this conception of the consumer as ultimately rational is the complementary organization of the consumer through advertising as motivated by irrationality. . . . The cultural linkages or forms of connotation that momentarily make sense are appeals beyond the domain of the rational consumer to the realm of affect, which is perceived to be a more powerful and expansive way to influence decision making. (p. 205)

Street (2003) clarifies what Marshall means by this affective function: “This refers to the emotive response that is generated by these relationships—the feelings and meanings that constitute them and motivate the actions that follow from them” (p. 91).

In this case, the advertisements provide both the rational—in the form of the arguments—and the irrational—the connection to and/or persuasion by the celebrity persona. And so, the citizen consumer must make a choice—to be patriotic or not. The advertisements further play to this affective function or emotive appeal. It is not just that Jackson and Richardson have celebrity power but they (as African-Americans) tell us “We are not Americans who think it’s ever cool to hate or to silently tolerate prejudice,” going on to quote from MLK, Jr’s “I have a dream” speech. In instances like this, even the argument content is tied to the particular identity of the celebrity appeal.

Furthermore, consumerism constitutes the notion of the audience. Street (2003) argues:

One way in which narratives come to constitute political reality is by giving an identity to the ‘people.’ The suggestion is that who ‘we’ are is created via, among other things, the rhetoric of those who seek political power. This is not marketing as selling to an established market or ‘demographic’; this is about creating an identity (that may subsequently be exploited by marketing strategies). Creating an identity depends on the use of symbols ... (p. 93)

Now Street is talking at the level of political theater—political leaders again. To take this further, instead of talking about politicians as celebrities, but celebrities themselves making the political argument, then they become the symbol that provides us the identity (being an American, in this case). They are performing American identity [and Street is delineating between a performance and a product.]

For example, Natalie Maines’s advertisement, which reads: “I am not an American who confuses politics with patriotism. I am an American who loves our country because we are all guaranteed the freedom to disagree with government decisions. I am an ACLU member because no one does more than the ACLU to defend the rights of all of us to be heard and to sing out loud when we feel it.” The advertisement, of course, is predicated on knowing something about her famous statements at a concert in London, but as one reads the advertisement, it is read in the first person (I, the reader, am an American ...), and the prior discussed identification with

the celebrity allows that celebrity to act as the symbol. The reader's identity is created in the same act as they are marketed to by the ACLU.

Furthermore, I, as reader, am not forming an opinion. I am buying into an already existing opinion. Gripsrud (2002) remarks, "the [cultural] public sphere is as a result not so much a space where opinion is *formed*; it has rather become a space where opinions—and power—are *displayed* or demonstrated" (p. 238). This move is key to the consumption aspect. This combination of identification and consumption amounts to the buying into of a persona ourselves as the reader, not an act of deliberating about what constitutes an identity as an American.

### **Conclusion**

Marshall (1997) argues, "The celebrities articulate agency and activity in democratic culture. . . . The celebrity, then, is the public representation of individuality in contemporary culture, where their movements and personality transformations are significant. Moreover, the celebrity figure is constructed by these apparatuses to contain the public—in effect, to represent the public" (p. 242). These advertisements then might be viewed as representations of American-ness. In a sense it represents our individuality—I can identify with the celebrity, I too am an American who believes—and so I *buy into* the image of the celebrity, the ACLU, and of the American citizen (of which I am now defined within). But in the end, my activity is to send money or to join the organization which will fight on behalf of my views. The celebrity becomes the public representation of the American; the reader's, my, consuming of this representation becomes my political activity.

This study explores the intersections of identification, consumerism, and the ACLU's Scrapbook for Freedom campaign. To fully understand this campaign, further questions need exploring. Future research could examine the implications of what readers know about these celebrities. The advertisements do not function as fixed signs, after all. The public knowledge or beliefs about the celebrities' professional and personal lives influence the reading of these advertisements. Additionally, further attention could be paid to the particular way that patriotism is being defined through this set of advertisements and by the ACLU. Similarly, some celebrities are associated with a liberal cause or embraced by particular activist communities in unique ways that provide delineation as to what patriotism means to them.

This essay suggests that the use of celebrity for political activism presents a more complicated intertwining of popular and political culture than has been previously explored. While past research focused primarily on political leaders and consumption, today's brand of political activism may encourage the consumption of political, celebrity personas, thus allowing the audience to position their own subjectivity in line with the celebrity identification at that same time as it limits political activity to that act, with its subsequent implications for democratic culture.

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<sup>1</sup> A few of these advertisements are available for viewing on the ACLU's website (see <http://www.aclu.org/images/client/stipe.jpg>  
<http://www.aclu.org/images/client/davis.jpg>  
<http://www.aclu.org/images/client/dreyfuss.jpg>)