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The Performance on Television of Sincerely Felt Emotion

By
JOHN ELLIS

The self-presentation of ordinary people on TV took some time to develop. An early game show from British ITV demonstrates the many pitfalls encountered in developing even the most basic of self-presentational codes. So the presentation of sincerely felt emotions did not develop as a style until the late 1980s with the changes in daytime talk and the growth of reality TV. The cult of sincerity, however, has had profound cultural effects, reaching into the political sphere.

Keywords: television; sincerity; politics; self-presentation; game show; reality TV

Television has brought a new visibility and hence prominence to many aspects of human life. It has shown us the inside of other people's homes and the surface of the moon, modes of consumption that are almost within our grasp, and the desperate poverty of many of our fellow humans. It has shown us the world from space and, in so doing, has helped to bring about a perception that we share a planet with finite resources (Poole 2008). Above all, though, television has given visibility and prominence to the emotional. TV has enabled us to take a close look at people who previously were distant or invisible: we have a close-up view of the faces of our politicians and an inside view of the private lives of celebrities. We see our fellow citizens as they experience stress in documentaries or talk about stress on daytime TV. Duncan, in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, may claim

John Ellis is a professor of media arts at Royal Holloway University of London. He is the author of TV FAQ (I. B. Tauris 2007), Seeing Things (I. B. Tauris 2000), and Visible Fictions (Routledge & Kegan Paul 1982). Between 1982 and 1999, he ran Large Door Productions, making documentaries for British TV. He was elected vice-chair of PACT (the film and TV producers' trade association) and is now chair of the British Universities Film and Video Council. He is associated with several research projects aimed at making historical TV available for study.

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that “there is no art to find the mind’s construction in the face” (act 1, scene 4: 11-12), but television allows us to presume that we can. We scan these faces for signs of emotions, seeking above all an assurance that whatever emotion we find is sincerely felt.

Yet at the same time, the emotions that we find are performed. They are disclosed to us by more or less conventional indicators, by the expressions and gestures known as “body language,” a language that can be involuntary just as much as consciously performed. Someone who is “wooden” in front of the camera can be achingly sincere in what he or she has to say but nevertheless nervous about having to say it. What we as viewers tend to see is the nervousness rather than the sincerity, and this serves to undermine the value of what is being said. Groups encountering or “using” the media nowadays take this into account when choosing their spokespeople; public figures are routinely trained to produce the appearance of sincerity in those who are likely to be interviewed in the course of their work.

Performance, sincerity, and emotions go together. Public concern focuses on the possibility of performance of emotions insincerely held (the “crocodile tears” of public figures), but the other side of the coin, that of sincere emotions inadequately performed, is perhaps the more common problem. It lies at the core of the criticisms that many have made of Kate and Gerry McCann, the Scottish couple whose daughter Madeleine was abducted from a Portuguese resort in April 2007. Kate McCann has repeatedly been criticized for not crying in the initial days after the abduction, for “her flat sadness, or the very occasional glimpse of a wounded narcissism that flecks her public appearances” (Enright 2007[AQ 1]). Gerry McCann is criticized because “the sad fact is that this man cannot speak properly about what is happening to himself and his wife, and about what he wants. The language he uses is more appropriate to a corporate executive than to a desperate father” (Enright 2007[AQ 2]). These reactions are to the visibility of the couple’s emotions, as displayed on television in press conferences and statements to the media. The McCanns deliberately made use of television to spread the message about their child’s abduction (which remains an unsolved mystery). But many commentators deemed their television performances to be inadequately sincere. As a result, speculation has wreathed around them, encouraged by elements in the Portuguese police, that they were somehow responsible for their daughter’s disappearance and that they might even have murdered her. Clearly, then, the correct performance of sincere emotion is a problem for our age.

This problem is a relatively recent development, the product of television’s sixty-year history. The new medium required new styles of performance right from the outset, but the need for that performance to communicate sincerity came later. In the initial phase of television, performance styles had to be developed, especially for nonprofessionals. In a second phase, the expression of emotions became more elaborated and confident, especially as TV fictions became more complex. Only then could the centrality of sincerely felt emotion begin to emerge, and at the same time the medium freed itself from the expectation that it should provide explanatory meta-discourses. Audiences were left to judge for themselves the degree of sincerity in the emotions displayed before them in factual

material. The definitive emergence of emotionality as the key means of understanding people and events appears toward the end of the period of scarcity of television (Ellis 2000), at the moment when regulatory expectations were reduced in the 1980s. Thus, the development of the performance of sincerely felt emotions has three stages. To demonstrate the first, the emergence and naturalization of a televisual performance style, I will use an example from the early days of television that shows vividly the problems in securing a new performance style appropriate to the new medium. I will then look in more general terms at the development of emotional complexity in television. Finally, I will examine the implications of the apparent paradox of the performance of emotional sincerity on TV.

Early TV and the Negotiation of Performance Styles

At 8 p.m. on Monday, September 26, 1955, the new British commercial television channel, ITV (which had opened two days previously), showed the first episode of *Double Your Money*. This game show, hosted by Hughie Green, became a mainstay of ITV's schedule until 1968. Green was already an established broadcaster who had hosted the precursor of *Double Your Money* since 1952 on Radio Luxembourg's popular station directed toward the United Kingdom. He became one of the most familiar TV show hosts in Britain and maintained that status for thirty years. This first TV edition of *Double Your Money* takes considerable pains to explain the format, and when the show gets going, Hughie Green is clearly anxious to secure a properly televisual performance from his guests.

This being Britain, even the question "What is your name?" is a minefield. The first contestant replies, "Mr. Harding." Green responds by repeating what the contestant has just said, but this time as a question: "Mr. Harding?" "Alan Harding" is the sheepish response. "May I call you Alan?" "You may." This exchange, remarkable now (television has since put us all on first-name terms with each other) but mundane in its time, establishes Harding's place in the social geography and the limits he wants to put on the intimacy of the exchange being initiated. Green now has to maneuver Harding into the correct stance for interaction before an audience. "I want you to turn around so you can see all our nice friends in the audience and our nice friends at home," he says as he puts an arm around Harding's shoulder and a hand on his chest to guide him to face three-quarters forward rather than face-to-face with Green. This is the only point in the show where Green verbalizes the need for contestants to behave in a particular way. Elsewhere, his interaction is highly tactile. He has his arm around the shoulder of male contestants and the waist of the females. Only with a newlywed couple does he hold back with his arms clasped behind his back (the husband imitates this stance), but he gently puts his reassuring arm around the wife's waist when the husband is having difficulty with a question.

Green converses with the contestants before the formal contest questions begin, but he follows no conversational logic. He asks a series of questions, repeats

the answer, and then makes a trademark bad joke. One exchange goes badly wrong when he prompts Alan Harding to say that he is a clerk at the Arsenal football club. Green seems unaware of Arsenal's enduring reputation as the club everyone loves to hate, so he asks, "Any Arsenal supporters here tonight?" to which the studio audience replies with some polite applause and plenty of boos. Harding ruefully flaps his hands, acknowledging that he knows his club's unpopularity but trying to move things on. Green's emollient "Well some of them are for you anyway aren't they?" bridges to a question about the club's prospects, ending with a characteristic Green gag ("Well I'm available and I'm only twenty-five") accompanied by some outrageous mugging. Later, when he finds that contestant Polly Matthews ("Mrs. or Miss?") is a physiotherapist, he jokes, "That's interesting . . . we had one at home but we got rid of it [light laugh from audience] . . . yeah, the wheels dropped off." He has his arm round her waist, but she still manages to pull away from him at this point, clearly nonplussed. Green's populist recovery tactic is to appeal for audience applause for the great work done in hospitals by Matthews and people like her.

Such is Green's formula, and it places him at the center of attention. This first edition of *Double Your Money* shows the many levels of adjustment needed in Britain to produce a distinctively televisual form of performance. Green's ideal is demotic, superficially intimate, and dominated by a high level of inconsequential or phatic exchange. However, he encounters problems on many levels with achieving this kind of performance. He has problems with his studio audience (the anti-Arsenal boos) as well as with his contestants. His contestants need guidance on how to stand on stage, how to handle the double address to audience and interlocutor. Contestants do not know what style of exchange to engage in, whether it is a conversation despite the audience or a performance for an audience. They therefore are unsure about how to adjust the normal forms of social intercourse to this new format, beginning with the basic problem of naming in a class-aware society. There is also a delicate and un verbalized negotiation about physical intimacy: Green's tactile style goes well beyond what was accepted in everyday life and is also more marked than that of contemporary British game show hosts like Michael Miles. Finally, there is the inheritance of existing public performance styles, some of which fit uneasily into the new performative regime that Green is trying to usher into being. It is, however, not a straightforward task. The evolution of performance appropriate to television can be observed across the early years of the medium.

Sincerity was not the central aim of television performance at that time, however; rather, it was initially concerned with the management of how to be oneself in public. If anything, the eruption of sincerity was disconcerting, upsetting the process of developing a repertoire of performance styles within the new medium. A clear example can be found in the BBC's *Face to Face* series, each episode of which was devoted to a single interview with a distinguished personality held in close shot as he or she answered delicately probing questions from John Freeman, a former Labour politician who was later the British ambassador in Washington. In 1960 Freeman interviewed Gilbert Harding, a well-known television personality of

the early years of TV in Britain, famous for his no-nonsense approach in the BBC's popular panel game *What's My Line?*⁹ Harding was an irascible, portly, middle-aged figure, once called "the rudest man in Britain." In Freeman's interview, however, he became demonstrably nervous, and in response to the question, "Have you ever been in the presence of a dead person?" he answered with a choking "yes" and began to cry. Freeman did not push the questioning to make Harding reveal himself further. If he had, Harding would have confessed that he was referring to his mother, who had died a few weeks earlier. Instead, Freeman moves quickly to another subject. Even so, the program was extensively criticized for being grossly intrusive (Medhurst 1991). In the revelatory close-up format of *Face to Face*, sincerity was seen as an undesired element, something that disrupted the performance of self rather than confirmed its presence.

Emotionality was, at that time, still a difficult issue for television; many years passed before it emerged as one of the key desired characteristic of factual TV. The process was a slow one and took place both in factual programming and, perhaps surprisingly, in fiction as well. In Britain, the lexicon of performance styles was extended a little later by series like *Man Alive* in the 1960s, which specialized in the frank and moving interview on personal issues (Ellis 2000, 51). The series editor, Desmond Wilcox, encouraged his directors to probe further than any documentary had gone before, to ask ordinary people questions along the lines of "How does it *feel* to be . . ."; the group put a premium on footage in which the interviewee began to cry. Tears were the sign of the depth of feeling being put on display. But this emotionality stayed carefully within certain bounds. *Man Alive* programs were organized around themes (adoption, pedophilia, homosexuality, terminal illness, etc.), and the plight of the characters was tied to a particular issue. The focus of the program is the issue to which it is devoted, and the interviewee's tears attest to the importance of that issue and not, in the first place, to the sincerity of the interviewee.

Industrial Fiction

The second stage of the development of the performance of sincerely felt emotions took place in fictional television as much as it did in factual television. Developments in television fiction made a crucial contribution to the evolution of the televisual performance of sincerely felt emotions. Television has developed an industrial series-based form of fiction that produces many episodes of the same format featuring the same core characters. Initially, these characters were the same from episode to episode for series at a time. But as TV fiction developed, it began to explore the implications of following characters through different incidents and stories. Increasingly, industrially produced series fiction began to show characters who develop emotionally, weaving in "character development" to the onward rush of events.

More things happen to regular TV characters than happen to their viewers. TV series storytelling provides its viewers with frequent resolution of narrative

incidents rather than the definitive closure of a narrative with all the loose ends tied up and the characters dispatched to death or a serene future. It is “off they go back to all their other worries” rather than “they all live happily ever after.” The threat of the sequel hangs uneasily over all their futures. The types of incidents that are contained and resolved within the larger narrative include the resolution of a police investigation or a law case, the reconciliation of arguing neighbors, or the agreement of reluctant parents to a marriage. They provide a sense of narrative closure. The enduring characters in the series may well have learned from them and been changed by them. And they offer the seeds of further narrative incidents: a fresh row between neighbors or the subsequent divorce of the happy couple. It seems that these incidents are enough to satisfy the demand for satisfactory stories and that definitive endings are not essential.

With television, the delay of narrative closure means that characters can learn from their mistakes. What television seems to offer through this process is a modern and secular form of salvation. Characters in TV series are saved in this world and not the next, and they see their rewards in this world. Those who redeem themselves are saved by learning through experience and understanding their experience. Learning, and with it salvation, take the form of the transformation of character. Bad-tempered antisocial characters begin to show signs of consideration and generosity. Aggressive characters rein in their tempers, often with visible effort. Backsliding and major relapses occur as with any reformed sinner, but the characters will be treated as reformed increasingly as the series evolves. This transformation through socialization is a major theme of factual programming and reality TV as much as it is of series fiction.

From the audience point of view, we see all too clearly the imperfections of characters. We know them for their faults as well as their strengths. As TV has evolved, the heroes of yesterday have given way to more vulnerable or damaged people as central characters: the decisive Dr. Kildare gave way to the prevaricating and overprincipled Dr. Green or the weird and edgy Dr. House, the wholesome Saint to *NYPD Blue*'s unsavory Andy Sipowitz. For viewers, the imperfections of the characters are the source of the continuing drama. When this is the case, viewers also learn not to rush to judgment on characters. They may not be what they first appear; they are certainly likely to change and mature as Sipowitz did. TV characters are there for the long term (if not for life), buffeted by the weekly supply of incident, and it is by no means clear how they will end up.

The industrial form of TV series production provides for this double level of narrative. The successful series will be planned meticulously in its individual incidents, so that each episode will work efficiently toward the closure of those particular incidents. But the longer story arcs of the series and of the characters are worked out as the series develops. In the team writing that is necessary for long-running series on the American model, scriptwriters base their work on the “bible”: a defining document that describes the characters and their “back story” (their life before the series began) and a mine of potential revelations as the series evolves. The nature of each character will often be defined in terms of oppositions. But their eventual finishing point, their closure, will be left open to

be defined as the series develops. It will not be determined by the progress of the story itself so much as by the popularity of the character and of the series, by the success or otherwise of the performer's contract renewal negotiations. These industrial factors are external to the fictional world itself, but they frame the potential for storytelling.

Within this industrial form of storytelling, the most intimate and everyday is the soap opera. Soap operas are overwhelmingly domestic in setting and put relationships and emotions at their heart. They provide regular, even daily, episodes involving familiar characters in a serial form, with plotlines carried on from episode to episode. Soap opera characters regularly face new crises and are changed by them. They remember their pasts and, in a few cases, manage to learn from them. Jostein Gripsrud has pointed out that soap characters inhabit a kind of parallel world (Gripsrud 1995). They live their lives at the same pace as those of their viewers, so that the daily or weekly visit to their world shows that the program has moved on by the same period of time. Soap opera characters live in our time, growing old with their viewers. But soap opera characters live a different kind of life, and as all soaps are not identical, the character of those lives differs remarkably between cultures and even within one national broadcasting system. In soap operas, events take place that are frequently beyond the scope of most people's lives. They are often exaggerations of real-life dilemmas, but the characters explore each other's emotions around them in exhaustive detail. The ordinary soap character will go through more traumas in a few years than most people could suffer in a whole lifetime. Soaps dramatize: they are fiction. Soaps exaggerate because they are melodrama, using clearly defined emotions to explore complex moral issues. But soaps are also mundane, involving familiar characters, comprehensible reactions, and an everyday time scale. Soaps have the rhythm of everyday life but the narrative range of fiction.

Long-series fiction and soap operas have developed, slowly over time, a more sophisticated and universally recognizable lexicon of emotions and their expression. They have explored, time and again, the issues of sincerity and duplicity, of emotional honesty and deceit. After a quarter of a century, the lexicon of TV performance styles had likewise developed and settled down. The habits became recognizable, and TV performance had become the source of humor. *Not the Nine O'Clock News* (1979-1983) based many of its sketches on TV formats, from news to youth programming. Spike Milligan's wayward occasional *Q* series (1969-1989) was based on frustrating the conventions of TV performance, from looking down the camera to revealing the backstage to even failing to complete sketches. TV performance, which emerged so haltingly in early shows like *Double Your Money*, had become a recognizable repertoire of ways of being in public. At the same time, the pervasive presence of these televisual fictions has enabled the development of a general cultural knowledge of the performance of emotions. This is now beginning to produce a generalized cultural ability to perform emotions "adequately."

Nowadays, the emotions of ordinary people are explored everywhere in television. In the past two decades, new opportunities have been offered to examine

those emotions and particularly to apply the forensic skills (Ellis 2007) of looking below the immediately apparent (behind the mask) at the emotional displays of real individuals. Factual television has been overhauled by the emergence of “reality TV,” which provides an arena for the examination of the emotions. Reality TV effectively fuses the forms of game show with those of documentary. From the game show, the genre takes the emphasis on explicit rules and the kind of inconsequential exchanges that Hughie Green was trying to develop in the first edition of *Double Your Money*. From documentary, reality TV takes the requirement for the explicit expression of sincerely felt emotions. They are recombined to create the performance of sincerely felt emotions.

Reality TV and the Issue of Sincerity

Reality TV thrives on speculation and participation. It has reinvented participatory television and the television event. By combining elements from the game show (the controlled challenge) and documentary (fascination with real people), it has discovered a fresh way of linking TV into the present moment of its viewers. It creates shows that excite an immediate common interest. Participants become known by their first names, as in “Did you see what Craig did last night?” Reality TV allows unfettered opportunities for gossip and speculation by all the means that are now available in blogs and message boards, radio phone-ins, newspapers and magazines, as well as everyday face-to-face conversation. A successful reality show will have substantial daily coverage in popular newspapers and will receive distanced attention from the broadsheets as well. Its official Web site will keep viewers informed of the latest events and may even charge for access to streamed live footage. In this sense, reality TV is the reality of TV: pervasively present in everyday life.

Reality TV shows encourage speculation about sincerity and the limits of permissible behavior. These are two aspects of contemporary life that TV has been instrumental in bringing to the fore. Sincerity is a constant issue with reality TV participants; with it comes the issue of trust: do we trust that these people are sincere, and would we trust them? Since they have volunteered to take part in the reality TV game, they are to a significant degree performing a version of themselves, or even trying to get away with a constructed persona. In game-based formats, the participants may have a substantial prize to win; in challenge-based formats, they are being offered a solution to problems in their lives. In either case, it is left to viewers to judge how much they are hiding of themselves behind their performance of what they would like us to think they are. Reality TV is based on a paradox. Its situations are unreal or artificial, yet reality is what we seek from them: the reality of the individuals involved. Viewers are keenly engaged in the process of decoding the “real” people, of judging the sincerity of what they are putting on display. They are required to perform “naturally,” to give the kind of performance of self for a viewership that was created in the early years of TV. But it has to be a performance of sincerity itself since it will be

judged harshly if it seems to be evasive, duplicitous, or scheming. Reality TV depends on putting the reality of ordinary people into defined artificial situations and letting viewers discover and condone the sincere and trustworthy. Research has reported that frequent conversations about reality TV events relate directly to this issue: is it a performance, or are they being sincere (Hill 2004)?²

The second set of speculations around reality TV relate to the limits of acceptable behavior. Reality TV formats tend to place participants in stressful situations, and their response to stress can often trigger behavior that many viewers find objectionable. As Annette Hill (2004, 133) points out, “Ethics are at the heart of reality programming. Rights to privacy, rights to fair treatment, good and bad moral conduct, and taste and decency are just some of the ethical issues that arise.” The programs themselves simply display behavior: they have no theme or issue. Anyone who seeks moral guidance from what happens within them is, exactly, taking them out of context. Documentary formats can provide explicit or implicit moral evaluation, but reality TV shows do not. Instead, reality shows provide raw material for comments and discussions that take place around them; these discussions are where moral and ethical questions are worked through. They are worked through in the “public” media, in celebrity magazines like *Heat* or *Closer*, in newspaper coverage, on radio shows. They equally generate comments on message boards and blogs (sometimes attached to the program, sometimes attached to public media), where people speculate freely about the possible motives of participants and what led them to behave in a particular way. They roundly condemn particular behaviors and then have to justify their views. Similar exchanges take place in everyday conversations and are reflected in the comments of radio presenters, columnists, and other media-based commentators. These reactions feed into the commentary programs that surround the most prominent shows (e.g., *Big Brother’s Little Brother*, *Big Brother’s Big Mouth*, etc.). The reality show may be at the core of this process, but its social importance lies in the activities it produces rather than in the series itself. As TV events rather than as TV programs, reality TV enables public, informal discussions about the motives behind particular behaviors and the limits of acceptable behavior.

Reality TV is part of a general social trend toward the blurring of leisure and information. It looks like entertainment; it is treated like entertainment. But it gives rise to conversations that, while still compelling and enjoyable, have wide implications. Reality TV enables social talk about moral values and about how to understand human behavior. Reality TV conversations are different from sport conversations or most other conversations around event TV. Reality TV provides neutral common ground for talking about issues of trust and the credibility of our fellow humans. Conversations about reality TV are gossip that will not get back to the subjects of that gossip and are an opportunity for finding out what colleagues and acquaintances think about interpersonal issues without the need to confront problems together. Issues of trust and sincerity come to the fore and then impact on other areas where these are important issues, not least the realm of politics and how politicians are regarded.

A new emotional complexity has been brought to everyday and public life. TV has blurred the boundaries between the domestic and the public spheres, between leisure and information, and between the emotional and rational in public life. By bringing politicians visibly close to their citizenry, it has given those citizens a new intimacy with their rulers. We now understand their actions by reference to emotional criteria as well as policies, judge them by their sincerity, and even refer to them by their given names as if we knew them.

Politics and Emotional Sincerity

TV has given a new visibility to politicians, bringing them into the everyday world of people on TV, so their every expression and mood can be closely scrutinized (Turnock 2006). Few have ever met a president or prime minister, but everyone knows their voice and style of speech, their hairstyle, their grins and frowns, their particular gestures and involuntary body language. Most people will claim to be able to gauge their sincerity from these indicators, just as they do about people who appear in documentaries or reality shows. Some refer to prominent politicians by their first names only, as though they were actually acquainted, so close is the seeming link to these individuals through television.

The democratic political process has found it hard to adapt to this new visibility brought by TV. Radio broadcasting had proved to be a useful tool for traditional politics. In the 1930s American radio began to provide its political leaders with a new platform, which they adapted to provide “fireside chats” with the electorate, addressing citizens as individuals rather than as a mass in a public meeting. This was simply a new means of achieving an age-old need of those in power: to communicate their decisions to those they govern and secure consent for those decisions. Broadcasting allowed rulers to speak directly to the ruled. However, TV has brought a new personalization of politics, reducing the traditional distance of national politicians from their people. All people now know what their rulers look and sound like. Impressionists have provided instantly recognizable lampoons of British prime ministers since Willie Rushton’s Harold Macmillan on *That Was the Week That Was* in 1962. Yet just twenty years before that moment, it was possible to keep hidden from the American people that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was effectively confined to a wheelchair. Cinema newsreels and radio did not provide the same visibility as TV does.

TV gives us politicians in close-up. By appearing on TV, in broadcasts under their own control or on news or discussion programs, politicians submit themselves to the same regime of understanding as any other TV performer. Their sincerity can be judged just like that of any other documentary or reality show participant. This has thrown the emphasis of the political process onto the question of trust. Now that average citizens can see politicians daily and come to think they know them well, it is natural that they place more emphasis on a politician’s personal characteristics rather than the policies that they claim to represent. We ask not what policies they stand for so much as whether we can trust them to do

the best for us. Politicians have responded in kind, proposing themselves as sincere and trustworthy when seeking election and invoking the bond of trust that they believe they have created. Television enabled British citizens to see Prime Minister Tony Blair furrowing his brow and presenting his decision to join the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 as a struggle with his conscience. He explicitly appealed to the overwhelmingly skeptical British public to trust him. Many citizens (the majority according to opinion polls) responded with the slogan "Not in my name." This ruthlessly highlighted the inherent problem of representative democracy that has been intensified by the development of TV. Blair was appealing to the trust he thought he had won from the electorate. A majority responded that he did not represent their views on this important issue. It was an issue that no political program or set of policies could have foreseen.

Television has exposed a problem at the heart of the process of democratic representation. Two principles of representation are involved: the idea of an individual whom you trust, and the idea of an individual who represents a set of ideas and values that you share. The process of democratic voting is one of picking an individual to represent one's views and desires at governmental level. According to political theory, these individuals are elected as representatives of political programs rather than as individuals. They represent a set of explicit aims (e.g., the Greens) or a general tendency (e.g., New Labour). Under some democratic systems, citizens vote for lists of candidates rather than for an individual. Nonetheless, each list has its stars (who feature at the top of the list and are likely to be elected) and its known individual leaders. In other systems, like the United Kingdom and the United States, voting is for a particular individual as representative of a particular program or party.

The double system of representation (trusted person versus explicit program) exists in an uneasy balance. Television has tipped this balance decisively toward the personal, by creating the feeling of a direct connection with individual politicians, usually the party leader. Voting for a party program has given way to voting for the appeal of a party's leader. Those leaders will propose a particular approach to politics rather than a concrete program. They express themselves across their policy pronouncements and through them. Their programs, such as they are, are more a vehicle for demonstrating their trustworthiness than a firm commitment to a particular course of action. Any politician putting forward a policy with less than total conviction is liable to be found out by the forensic viewing of voters, so those policies still matter. Nevertheless, a shift has taken place in how the democratic process works; democracies are still coming to terms with it. Democracy is beginning to work on the basis of a personal contract of trust between leaders and their citizens, but the system scarcely works well.

Modern politicians mobilize the idea of trust as the bedrock of their relationship with citizens. They will base their appeal on offering themselves as a trustworthy person, a person "like you" or "who you can do business with." They appeal for the trust of the electorate on the basis of a show of sincerity, which viewers may judge according to many other such appeals across TV. Politicians are then forced to present themselves as blameless in matters of personal morality to

justify the trust of the electorate. In the prevailing morality of TV, trust requires that a person be open and sincere: to be caught being two-faced, duplicitous, or hypocritical is one of the worst sins of reality TV. However, politics is a process in which it is unwise to reveal everything that you hope for or intend to do, and this creates problems for many candidates. The area of personal morality is a further problem, as candidates usually want to present themselves as morally blameless rather than risk alienating part of the electorate. This provokes the inevitable investigations into their past or present acts of a dubious or unacceptable moral nature and to the spectacle of attack commercials in the United States at election time. It is a rare politician who declares his or her past mistakes and uses this honesty as the basis of an appeal for trust. Rather, as with Bill Clinton and many others, the problems of personal morality quickly become issues of trustworthiness, not so much because of what they did or did not do but because they lied to cover up.

The politics of seeming sincerity and trust involves a considerable amount of image management. Leaders are taught how to speak sincerely. This was famously the case with Margaret Thatcher, tapes of whose elocution lessons were widely circulated while she was prime minister, precisely to demonstrate that she lacked real sincerity. All senior politicians calculate when, where, and how they should appear and employ teams of advisers whose role is to ensure that some aspects of how they conduct their business remain hidden from their citizens. These image managers, or spin doctors, ensure that their charges continue to give an impression of sincerity and trustworthiness.

Sincerity is a performance for many politicians, not least because they are called upon to make many different kinds of pronouncements in different situations. In negotiations, sincerity is of little use, whereas other characteristics are: stubbornness, the ability to compromise, and the ability to imply something without actually saying it. Public political discourse still remains relatively formal in order to provide a flexible way of communicating on several levels at once, often by implication. Despite their seeming sincerity, politicians still use formal forms of speech most of the time. They frame their pronouncements carefully, even if they spice them increasingly with down-to-earth demotic phrases. Nevertheless, it is still a shock to hear how politicians speak to each other when they think the microphones are switched off. George W. Bush and Tony Blair made the mistake of thinking they were off-mike at a G8 conference in Russia in July 2006. The conversation recorded was also widely broadcast to reveal the distance between their performance as public figures and how they speak in private. Bush's greeting, "Yo Blair," Blair's reference to "this trade thingy," and Bush's proposed solution to war in Lebanon ("what they need to do is to get Syria, to get Hezbollah to stop doing this shit and it's over") all revealed a discourse somewhat less elevated than the average daytime talk show, let alone a TV current affairs program. It equally showed the hesitant and deferential attitude of Blair to Bush, both through his speech and his body language, standing while Bush sits munching a sandwich.¹

Such glimpses of the actual interaction of politicians reveal how little we really know them. Our politicians are visible to us, but they still largely control the terms of that visibility; they determine when and how they are seen. TV may have enabled a visibility and brought a new relationship of familiarity with politicians, but this relationship can still be controlled and manipulated. It also carries with it a danger of disillusion with the political process itself, especially if attempts to manipulate the relationship begun to go wrong. TV has introduced an “up close and personal” approach to politicians that has intensified the representational contract by enabling citizens to make a judgment about the sincerity of politicians and whether they are “sympathetic.” In this new political landscape, disappointment and disillusion with a once-trusted politician is a common experience. It can contribute to a disillusion with the whole process of politics and the negotiation of collective endeavor. The show of sincerity and the appeal for trust are easily abused. The resultant disillusion can be felt more keenly as a personal betrayal than, for example, the attempts by politicians in the past to abandon or revise a central plank of policy. Disillusion with politics, in other words, may not be the result of an increasing distance from those in power at all. It seems more to be the result of the feelings of closeness to politicians that TV has brought about and the subsequent disappointment when that personal relationship is betrayed.

The pervasive nature of television has enabled such a development. It would be wrong, however, to argue that politics has in some way been degraded by this process or that one form of inadequate democratic process has been replaced by another. The process has been far from simple, as it has involved the development of a lexicon of performance styles fitted to the new audiovisual media, along with a greater awareness of emotional expression and a greater cultural confidence in our ability to assess the sincerity of the feelings being bodied forth in particular, and by now familiar, regimes of public performance made universally visible by television.

Note

1. This is a British reaction to the exchange. American reaction tended to concentrate on the president's use of the word *shit*.

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