

# Show Business in Politics

Robi Chakravorti

Show business influences politics as media for communication changed from print form to radio and television.

Historically, in feudal times, monarchs and feudal lords organised elaborate ceremonies, but since communication technology was not as advanced as now, the influence of these ceremonies was not as extensive as today. While some similarity persists between the past and the present, between the feudal and modern methods of how various emotion-stimulating spectacles are presented in politics, modern communication technology has made the process a costly fundamental part of politics.

Here are some illustrations from American politics. The inauguration ceremony following the election of the President involves millions of dollars. According to a report, George Bush's Presidential inauguration ceremony cost over \$40 million funded mostly by wealthy persons and business houses. The inaugural ceremony involved various functions such as swearing in ceremony, a parade, black-tie ball which only wealthy citizens could afford to attend. According to a report in the *New York Times*, attending all the events celebrating the Inauguration ceremonies will cost at least \$10,000 in tickets and other expenses. It is unlikely that an ordinary citizen can afford to spend that much money instead of watching the event on TV.

The U S President presents himself in colourful settings which are ornamented with lots of money when some dramatic appearances are needed for political reasons. Three years ago, George Bush gave a speech at a historical memorial place named Mount Rushmore which has large visages of four past Presidents carved on the hillside. Appropriately placed TV cameras presented Bush's face in profile alongside legendary stone statues of four past famous Presidents. Such adroitly manipulated ceremonies are carefully crafted and managed before the actual event unfolds.

The change in media forms is an important factor involved in the strategic manipulation by politicians. The shift of public attention from print media to radio took place over 80 years ago. While radio did have influence on the public mind, lifestyle was simpler then with fewer opportunities for travel nor were cultural activities so widespread as now. In 1920 when radio became popular most people had little avenues for entertainment except reading and listening. Radio journalism was created and shaped during second world war. TV news in America developed from three sources: radio journalism during second world war, the long tradition of documentary films and the model of theatrical newsreel that combined elements of entertainment and journalism. This viewpoint was presented by Steven Barkin in *American Television News*. A famous American writer Norman Mailer once made a witty comment that modern day news generally turn into info-tainment (information as entertainment).

In print media, one reads the speech of a leader accompanied by some descriptive notes and pictures, on radio one hears the voice of the speaker, but on TV one sees the well-prepared and well-dressed speaker against a special background. The viewer's perception is likely to be more diverted to the visual

image of the speaker and the setting than the content of the speech. The development of TV and its widespread use influence 'image candidates' according to George Wyckoff (*Image Candidates : American Politics in an Age of Television 1968*). According to another study on TV's influence in Politics (*Technology as Magic : The Triumph of the Irrational* by Richard Sivers, 2005) the pervasiveness of visual communication increasingly replaces text and language influencing emotional rather than reasoned communication.

An interesting comment in the *New Yorker* magazine (Sept. 4, 2004) on US President Bush's TV appearances in public is self-revealing. "There is an appealing physicality about him. Where he says he wants your vote, he just does not mouth words but follows them through the entire body, rising to his toes, tilting to you yearningly. When he walks his way along the edge of the stage, waving, shaking hands, he has the concentration of an athlete in the thrall of the game."

Important political events often take simple stage forms. In speeches delivered by politicians in Parliament, Congress or organised public meetings, hand-clapping applause is frequently presented by the audience brought by the party or Governmental organisations. When U S President addresses the Congress, Congressmen frequently applaud almost twice or thrice a minute. This kind of applause can be called political ritual.

This type of political show is organised as a strategy supported by modern technology in all countries. Unless a serious disturbing political issue bothers the entire nation, one will rarely find even small elements of protest in organised public meetings. Government and Party meetings thus can be seen as theatrical showcases of their organisers. The infra-structure of public appearances and speeches by political leaders is an important part of politics in modern times. The large number of people apparently listening to the political speaker like school-children are brought in by scheduled modes of modern transportation. In Third World countries where few ordinary citizens have cars or are willing to pay for personal public transportation, the crowds in public political meetings are brought in by party-organised public transportation system.

Some degree of manipulation of public opinion is a common feature of all political systems, whether democratic or authoritarian. In authoritarian systems, manipulation can be crude and often monotonously repetitive. In a democratic system, dominated by visual media and behind the scene operation of influence and power play, it can be colourful, diversionary and often delusive.

Speeches are generally written by ghost writers carefully tailored to reflect the mood often gathered from opinion polls. Sometimes, modern methods of teleprompters are used to give the impression that the speaker has memorised the speech or speaking impromptu. According to a critical commentator of American politics today, most people do not have the time, intelligence or interest to think through political issues by a careful reading of news, reports, analyses and speeches of politicians. The majority tend to "think visually" and TV media and the widespread use of colourful pictures alongside headlines in common newspapers divert their attention from careful, concentrated study of political issues to casual and emotional preferences and dislikes. If TV media and

photo journalism did not play the role as today, one wonders what format and content political conventions will take.

English poet, Coleridge once made a witty comment, "Actors are the world's most genuine hypocrites". He meant that theatre actors play roles, not what they actually are. In the context of the manipulation of modern media, one wonders whether political actors can be included in this category. □□□