



INTIMATE POLITICS

JAMES STANYER

Intimate Politics

Contemporary Political Communication

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Intimate Politics

Publicity, Privacy and the
Personal Lives of Politicians in
Media-Saturated Democracies

James Stanyer

polity

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Introduction

Politicians' Personal Lives in the Media Spotlight

If you are applying for the presidency of the United States of America, then by definition you have given up your privacy; people are going to want to know what you have done in your life and what you stand for.' (Barack Obama, on the stump in Oregon, the 2008 US presidential campaign, *BBC World at One*, 19 May 2008)

I think people have a right to know a bit about you and your life and your family, what makes you tick, and what informs your thinking. (David Cameron, ITN interview, cited in Winnett & Prince, 2008)

It is often remarked that the personal lives of politicians, like those of sports, film and television stars and hosts of other celebrities, have become a familiar part of the public's daily media consumption. The public, it might be said, know more detail about politicians' personal lives than their policy stance or voting records. Like celebrities in other fields, they have willingly surrendered their privacy, or have been unable to defend it from a celebrity-obsessed media.

Across democracies, academics have observed the increasingly personal nature of political communication (see, for example, Stanyer & Wring, 2004; Van Zoonen, 2005). In many democracies, studies show that politicians are increasingly prepared to disclose aspects of their personal lives. Research by Dakhliya (2010) has documented the 'peopolisation' or celebrityization of French politics in the 2000s, a key aspect of which has been personalized self-disclosure. Leading French politicians make regular carefully

choreographed appearances on television talk shows and in glossy celebrity magazines (see Chenu, 2008; Dakhliya, 2008, 2010; Neveu, 2005). For example, Errera (2006) found that leading politicians' relationships, personal health, their home and family life, personal financial issues and their past life were very much to the fore in magazine coverage in the 1990s. In the run-up to the 2007 presidential election the Socialist candidate, Ségolène Royal, appeared in her bikini in *Voici*, *Closer* and *VSD* (Dakhliya, 2008). The former President Nicolas Sarkozy exploited his private life for political purposes, openly using his family to bolster his presidential ambitions (Kuhn, 2010, 2011). Indeed, Kuhn notes, the extent to which he exploited his spouse and family was considered groundbreaking in a French context (Kuhn, 2010). His subsequent very public divorce from his second wife, Cécilia, and courtship of and marriage to supermodel and singer Carla Bruni, were conducted very much in the media spotlight. Photo opportunities of the new lovers were staged for the media, and intimate interviews given (Chrisafis, 2007; Kirby, 2010). In the UK, Deacon (2004) observes that Prime Ministers have been quick to use their personal lives as a resource. Tony Blair has frequently disclosed aspects of his private life to the public and might be accused of over-sharing some of the more intimate aspects. For example, in an interview with Tony and Cherie in the *Sun* during the 2005 general election campaign, Tony confessed he was 'up for it' at least five times a night, a point corroborated by Cherie, who, when asked if he was 'up to it', said he always was (Marrin, 2005). There is some evidence of a broader trend; research by Langer shows that coverage of UK Prime Ministers' private lives increased in *The Times* over the post-World War Two period, rising from around 1 per cent of leaders' coverage in 1945 to 8 per cent during Tony Blair's tenure in office, a trend David Cameron has continued (Langer, 2007, 2012).

In the US, personal self-disclosure has become normalized on the presidential campaign trail; indeed, politicians feel that they have to reveal aspects of their personal lives or will be greeted with suspicion. Perloff observes that, 100 years ago, presidential candidates hardly spoke in public; now they 'trip over each other

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to disclose psychologically correct tidbits from their personal lives' (Perloff, 1998, p. 279). Intimate moments from candidates' personal lives are shared with an audience of unknown others; for example, during the 1992 race for the White House, Al Gore discussed the near-death of his son, while Bill Clinton shared stories of his brother's battles with drug addiction (Perloff, 1998; see also Gamson, 2001; Hart, 1999). In 2004, both candidates for the presidency, and their wives, talked about their families and a range of family-related matters on the *Dr Phil Show*; George W. Bush and Laura Bush were asked openly if they had spanked their children (see Van Zoonen et al., 2007).

In Italy, numerous authors have remarked on the personalized nature of political communication since 1994 and the formation of the Second Republic (Allum & Cilento, 2001; Campus, 2010a; Mancini, 2008, 2011; Paolucci, 2002). Silvio Berlusconi is the most high-profile politician to have used his private life to promote himself to the Italian people. During the 2001 general election campaign, he distributed a *Hello*-style glossy brochure to millions of households; entitled 'An Italian Story' (Una Storia Italiana), the publication featured his family and life story (Campus, 2002). During the 2006 Italian general election campaign, his main rival, Romano Prodi, and his wife released their autobiography. Both Berlusconi and Prodi appeared on a variety of entertainment talk shows where they discussed aspects of their private lives and other matters (Campus, 2006).

Research shows that in Germany, government ministers' personal relationships are more visible than ever before (Holtz-Bacha, 2004). For example, in 2000, the then Defence Minister, Rudolf Scharping, and his new lover granted the popular magazine *Bunte* an exclusive interview in which they spoke openly about their love for each other. The following year they appeared again in *Bunte*, this time on holiday in Majorca (Holtz-Bacha, 2004). In the Netherlands, leading politicians share personal moments and intimate aspects of their lives with the celebrity media, and the demand for such intimate details has increased. Such coverage often focuses on their family life and the tensions that emerge between career and the family (Van Zoonen, 2005). Studies in

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Australia show politicians, like celebrities, are increasingly keen to parade their personal lives in the media. They have been quick to use their family lives to enhance their electoral appeal. As a new leader of the Australian Labor Party, Mark Latham used his family to project a family-friendly image to the electorate in 2004 (Muir, 2005b). Australian politicians are also increasingly aware of the importance of non-traditional media in connecting with voters. Shows such as *Australian Story* regularly feature prominent politicians. In 2001, the show went behind the scenes to provide an intimate look at the home life of John Howard, then Prime Minister, and leader of the opposition, Kim Beazley (Bonner & McKay, 2007). Popular celebrity magazines provide another outlet for politicians to parade their personal lives before the voter. Federal Senator Natasha Stott Despoja underwent a fashion makeover for magazine *Cleo* and, during the 1998 general election, Australian Labor Party MP Cheryl Kernot used an appearance in a woman's weekly magazine to pose in a variety of gowns and talk as much about 'her family life' as her 'public prominence' (Turner et al., 2000, p. 135; see also Muir, 2005a).

In some democracies the literature points at the increased proclivity of certain media to intrude into the private lives of politicians (Sabato et al., 2000; Tumber & Waisbord, 2004a, b). The peccadilloes of leading politicians find their way into the press. Bill Clinton's presidency was dogged by a series of allegations and revelations concerning his fidelity. In 1992, while campaigning for office, the supermarket tabloid the *Star* disclosed that he had been unfaithful to his wife (Gronbeck, 1997). After he was elected, there was an almost constant stream of rumours concerning spurned lovers and children out of wedlock, much publicized in the tabloid media. In 1998, sexual revelations, drip-fed through gossip-based websites, published in the press and the *Starr Report*, provided an extremely intimate insight into his extra-marital affair with Monica Lewinsky (Maltese, 2000; West & Orman, 2003). The media digging for and publishing dirt on politicians is now a permanent feature of US politics at all levels, not just the presidency (see Neiwert, 1998; Sabato et al., 2000; Splichal &

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Garrison, 2000). For example, court divorce records are now a newsworthy source of personal information that news outlets have been keen to exploit. In 2004, divorcé Jack Ryan withdrew from the contest for the Republican nomination for an Illinois Senate seat after a Californian judge was persuaded by Chicago news outlets to unseal his divorce files, revealing intimate details about his split from actress Jeri Ryan (Chase & Ford, 2004).

In the UK in the 1990s, the Major government was subject to a raft of media revelations about marital infidelity of government ministers and MPs (Parris & Maguire, 2005). One of the most colourful concerned the then Heritage Minister, David Mellor, whose sexual antics in his Chelsea FC football strip and penchant for sucking toes received wide coverage in the tabloid press (Tunstall, 1996). Research by Bob Franklin found that, between 1990 and 1994, sex scandals and misconduct involving politicians were the third most popular subject in press coverage, with almost 10 per cent of the 820 news items examined focusing on it (Franklin, 1997, p. 236). Indeed, the sexual exploits of Tory politicians were even fictionalized, in the 1995 Channel Four-produced *The Politician's Wife*, a drama based loosely on actual events. Since the 1990s, tabloid press intrusion into the private lives of politicians has become normalized (Deacon, 2004). Within a year of winning office, three UK ministers in the coalition government – William Hague, Chris Huhne and David Laws – have been forced to issue public statements about their sex lives when confronted by revelations and rumours in the media.

In democracies where the private lives of politicians have been very much legally protected, certain media outlets seem increasingly eager to publish gossip about public figures, and to challenge existing privacy norms and the ability to control access to their private lives. For example in Finland, in 2006, Finnish Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen's former girl friend Susan Kuronen appeared semi-naked in a gossip magazine, where she suggested that Vanhanen was a boring lover. The following year, she then went on to write the country's first kiss-and-tell memoir, *The PM's Bride*, based on her relationship with Vanhanen, revealing the most intimate details about their relationship (Laine, 2010). The

ensuing coverage of the book and attempts to quash its publication dominated the media for months (Juntunen & Valiverronen, 2010; Karvonen, 2009). Other Scandinavian countries, despite strict laws designed to protect the privacy of public figures, have also seen a growth in the media exposure of politicians' private lives (see Allern et al., 2012). In France, Kuhn (2011) notes, that despite strict privacy laws there has been a 'striking' decline in the control politicians exercise over the press in the last decade, especially regarding the Internet. Dakhli (2010) observes that, over the last decade, celebrity magazines have not shied away from publishing paparazzi pictures of leading politicians in their swim suits, something that would have been unheard of before. Often, recourse to privacy laws does not prevent exposure in an increasingly transnational news environment. For example, in January 2003, lawyers acting for the then German Chancellor, Gerhard Schroeder, tried to stop the British tabloid, *Mail on Sunday*, publishing the rumours about his supposed marital difficulties. The original *Mail on Sunday* allegations were then reprinted in German newspapers, which cited the *Mail on Sunday* as their source (Holtz-Bacha, 2004). In March 2010, rumours emerged on Twitter that Nicolas Sarkozy, then President of France, and his wife, Carla Bruni, were having affairs (Kirby, 2010). While the French press at first hesitated to cover the allegations, the global news interest meant that the story could not be ignored as the President wished, and it was eventually reported in the French media.

These different nationally focused examples, I would argue, cannot be ignored; they point to a potentially significant development in democratic political communications, namely the growing focus on the personal lives of politicians. They suggest that across a range of advanced industrial democracies the personal lives of politicians are no longer a purely private matter but are instead an increasingly ubiquitous feature of the mediated public sphere. The zone of privacy which once surrounded politicians and those in public life seems to be slowly disappearing with and without politicians' consent. These documented incursions of the personal into the public sphere are an indication for some of a public realm that 'no longer has anything to do with civic commitment' and

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is increasingly colonized by the trivial and inane (Rössler, 2005, p. 170). In other words, the growing flow of personal information about those who govern us has important consequences for the nature of information citizens receive in advanced industrial democracies.

However, while the above examples provide a tantalizing glimpse of recent developments, they are far from conclusive; it is hard to determine whether there is a trend across advanced industrial democracies and difficult to identify the consequences of such developments – in short, more evidence is needed. This book sets out to examine the personalized nature of mediated political communication across a range of advanced industrial democracies. It seeks to tease out developments, drawing on a wide range of primary and secondary sources, assessing the extent to which the personal lives of politicians have become a prominent feature of political communications. The book seeks to comprehend the shifting boundaries between the public and private and whether these developments are indeed universal. This introductory chapter sets the scene for the rest of the book, starting with existing attempts to conceptualize developments and comprehend the wider processes involved.

Conceptualizing developments: personalization or intimation?

While concepts are of primary importance to social science research (see Goertz, 2005; Sartori, 1970), the robustness with which concepts are defined varies. It is sometimes the case that the same concept is defined differently by different authors – in other words, there is a lack of conceptual agreement (see Sartori, 1984). This is particularly the case with the concept of personalization, increasingly used in political science and political communication research (see Van Aelst et al., 2012). For example, one might instinctively think that what the above examples show is evidence of the personalization of politics; after all, they document growing media coverage of politicians' personal lives in different countries.

However, the way the term ‘personalization’ has often been applied, especially in political communication research, means that matters are not so straightforward. The majority of studies conducted on personalization do not deal with the flows of information and imagery about politicians’ private lives (for synoptic accounts, see Adam & Maier, 2010; Karvonen, 2010). Rather, most focus on the visibility of individual politicians, especially party leaders and candidates, compared to political parties or institutions; indeed, Plasser and Lengauer (2008) define it as ‘an increasing focus on candidates at the expense of their parties or even policy issues’ (2008, p. 257; see also Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000; Kriesi, 2010; Mughan, 2000; Reinemann & Wilke, 2007). Rahat and Sheafer (2007) observe that, in the personalization literature, personalization does not mean the growing disclosure of information about politicians’ private lives; in fact, the ‘personalization’ of politics would perhaps be a more accurate description of how the concept is defined. The growing visibility of politicians compared to parties, however important, is only part of the story. The personalization literature, with noted exceptions (see Langer, 2012), overlooks the flow of personal information and imagery. With the concept being operationalized in such a way by numerous studies, the utility of redefining it for the purposes of this book is limited.

If the use of the term ‘personalization’ is problematic, what other concepts might be used? Several authors make a distinction between personalization (meaning the visibility of politicians) and what they term ‘privatization’: ‘a media focus on the personal characteristics and personal life of individual candidates’ (Rahat & Sheafer, 2007, p. 68; see also Holtz-Bacha, 2004, pp. 48–9). While ‘privatization’ captures the process by which information and imagery about politicians’ personal lives enters into the public domain, it is problematic for several reasons. First, it is a word most commonly associated with the sale of state-owned assets to the private sector, which distracts from its explanatory potential. Second, the word in that context has a different meaning: it does not mean making the private public, but the reverse, privatizing of something that is public – the opposite of what is meant

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in Rahat and Sheaffer's or Holtz-Bacha's definition (see Benn & Gaus, 1983, and Weintraub & Kumar, 1997, for a discussion of the term). Third, it has little to say about questions of intrusion and control: for example, on the extent to which the focus on the personal characteristics and personal life of individual candidates is the product of intrusion. While not explicitly acknowledged, the research overwhelmingly focuses on examples which are benign, or at least could not be described as damaging, although we do know from the examination of sex scandals that politicians are not always in control of such flows (see Adut, 2008; Thompson, 2000).

The developments described earlier might be better understood by drawing upon the varied literature that has examined the changing nature of intimacy in contemporary societies. Take for example Sennett's seminal work *The Fall of Public Man*, whose central concern is the emergence of what he terms the 'intimate society' and its consequences. This is a society where the display of personality comes to dominate the public realm and group (class) interests become subordinate to the belief in the innate abilities of the individual. Sennett's concern is how such an ideology emerged in capitalist societies in the nineteenth century and how the public have been seduced by it and have come to accept it and the withering of an impersonal public realm. While his concern is not primarily with changing political communication, he is clear what role the media plays in promoting personality, especially in the political sphere. He argues that television shows a 'compulsive' interest in personality, arousing amongst audiences an interest in the personality of the politicians they see before them (Sennett, 2002[1974], p. 285). Television is crucial to the promotion of personality politics that deflects public interest away from effective public action to questions of personal character; for Sennett, politics becomes something more akin to the Hollywood star system, its function to routinize the selection of charismatic leaders (2002).

Other studies have approached questions of intimacy and communication technology more directly, examining television's ability to create a new form of intimacy. The notion of tele-mediated/

non-reciprocal intimacy gained much attention in the 1950s; as Lang and Lang note, this is not intimacy in the proper sense – there are ‘no two way responses and exchange of feelings’ – but rather it is illusory: the viewers believe they know what public figures are really like, based on tele-mediated experience (Lang & Lang, 1956, p. 110). Horton and Wohl, in their now-classic 1956 study, observe that the audience comes to see the person on television as directly addressing them. Like the Langs, they note television gives the ‘illusion of a face-to-face relationship with the performer’; the audience enjoy what they call a ‘para-social relationship’ with the person they see before them (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). They go on to suggest that television enables them to ‘know such a persona in the same way they know their chosen friends: through direct observation and interpretation of his appearance, his gestures and voice, his conversation and conduct in a variety of situations’ (1956, p. 216). Joshua Meyrowitz, several decades later, in his account of how television has undermined traditional political leadership, observes that television ‘brings the politician close for the people’s inspection . . . [and] brings a rich range of expressive information to the audience’; it can show politicians perspiring, their facial gestures, intonations and mispronunciations (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 272). Schickel, similarly, in his 1990s examination of celebrity, observes that ‘thanks to television and the rest of the media we know [celebrities]. To a greater or lesser degree we have internalised them, unconsciously made them a part of our consciousness, just as if they were, in fact, friends’ (Schickel, 2000, p. 4). They are no longer seen ‘from the alienating distance of the stage or the lecture hall, which is where we were forced to view them in the pre-electronic age’ (p. 10). He notes ‘we are able, over months and years . . . , to learn these faces as we learn those of our best friends and relatives’; we come to know ‘their tics, blinks and glances’ (p. 11; see also Perloff, 1998). One could even, perhaps, go back further in time to the mechanical reproduction of photographs in the mass-circulation press in the 1880s, which meant that the public would see not only the name and face but also realistic images of political actors, in the course of the daily consumption of media output (Gamson, 1994; Murdock, 2010).