

PARTICIPATION IN THE STATE OF THE ORDINARY:

BEING "YOURSELF" AS A REPRESENTATIVE PER-ANDERS FORSTORP

Abstract

The relationship between the media and politics is often negatively described as being in a state of confusion and turmoil in which new standards of public media performance are eroded by viewer ratings, commercialism and trans-nationalism. In this article, I will give examples from the Swedish setting to show how the relationship between media and politics is generally conceived, by indicating how media-workers and politicians become idealised in stereotypical roles of bad vs. good. "The State of the Ordinary" is what we refer to as a tendency toward everyday practices of "ordinariness" in language use and in the general rule of authenticity in the media, making room for a new kind of politician who claims to be not a "politician" but simply "him or herself" as a politician. Being "yourself" as a representative is a perennial feature of the attempt to legitimise dominant roles at the top of the hierarchy of power distribution.

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The Stereotyped Understanding of Media and Politics

The topic of media and politics is not new. Politics is unthinkable without some kind of medium, whether talk, text or television. What we call media is just a cover term for a wide variety of these communicative tools. Political communication includes the potential to shape language (or media) in a “rhetorical” way, i.e. in a way which is determined by ideology, will-formation, motivation and persuasion. Thus, it is not only today, in what is often referred to as the information age, that we observe a fear of the rhetoric of politics and its persuasive power through the media. This fear has been clearly exhibited in ancient ages as well, for example in Plato’s famous criticism of the sophists among others.

However, the contemporary fear of the combination of media and politics specifically includes the threat that powerful economic media regimes will become the most decisive driving forces in politics due to their ability to dominate the media and through the media also politics. The fear is that market economics rather than democracy will shape politics. Relatively recent examples, ranging from early media moguls such as Hearst to contemporary players such as Berlusconi and Murdoch, exemplify that there might be some currency to this fear of the political implications of media dominance. The very expression “media dominance” is often taken as a threat to the ideological climate of democracy.

The relation of media and politics contains several communicative and moral dilemmas. One dilemma is the variety of ways in which the power over the word can be established and through so many different methods, ranging all the way from the crude power of money to the efficient use of rhetoric to more or less authentic idealism. The relationship between media and politics is often (mis)conceived of in terms of combat metaphor (particularly, during election times): it is a fight, it is about war (cf. the portrait of James Carville, the head of the Clinton campaign, in the documentary entitled “The War Room”), strategic challenges, tactics and exploitation. This combative view depicts media and politics as being involved in thoroughly incompatible activities, as being the antagonists in an ongoing rivalry between powerful agents who fight to destroy each other yet are fundamentally dependant on each other. Using notions from psychotherapy such as “double bind” and “symbiosis” is not too far-fetched in describing how the characteristics of this relation are popularly and also scientifically conceived.

Along with the problematic and sensitive characterisation of the nature of the relationship between media and politics, we also encounter different kinds of idealistic polarisations of the two players in the relationship which only emphasises its problematic nature. Media is often described as being potentially eroded by commercialism and trans-nationalism. This suggests linkages to economic power and the will of the market which are taken as anathema to other forms of ideological loyalty or virtue. Politics, on the other hand, according to this logic is described as the heroic place for a “pure” pronouncement of ideologies and values. This form of deliberate polarisation into bad and good, illusory and pure, is, however, only one possible way the relationship of media and politics can be described. Media and the will of the market can, according to another kind of polarisation, be taken as both the benefactor and guarantor of the pursuit of the liberal ideal of free speech, while politics can be construed as a continuous effort to manipulate and exploit this freedom through lies, half-lies, white lies, promises and other negative uses of speech.

What is often missing from this kind of stereotyped and simplified understanding of media and politics is the concrete presence of the audience. The rivalry of powerful agents is often pitched at a level high above the heads of individuals and their concerns and interests. This view of power and combat taking place at a macro-social level indicates that audiences are only influential through remote forms of control, such as viewer rating schemes and more conventional political voting habits. This notion of the audience, while acknowledging the fundamental power of consumers, is still too abstract and anonymous.

Another Way of Understanding Media and Politics

The need to attract the interest, loyalty and regular attention of an audience (an audience is usually a nation or a part of a nation) is what media and politics have in common. Being skilled in this activity is a measure of their success. It is very important to recognise this common ground. There are traditions of rhetoric at work in both of these “provinces of meaning,” which aim at mobilising the attention of the absent audience. Another way of understanding the relationship between media and politics, therefore, could focus not on the internal combative relation of these powerful agents but instead on how they cooperate, how they stage challenges and conflicts and generally draw on each others professional skills in order to attract and secure an audience. This can be seen, in particular, in the recent development of interactive media formats. Understanding the relationship in this way suggests new concepts which could replace the eschewed language of combat with metaphors of mutual concern: co-operation, collegiality and support (Economou and Forstorp 1996; Economou 1997).

Adopting this view enables us to see that the great divide which we assumed existed between media and politics as each other’s polar opposites may not in fact be valid. Such a divide may also not be gaping between media and politics on the one hand and the audience on the other. Leaving aside idealised stereotypes of “pure politics” and “the exploitative media,” we can understand the dynamics of political interaction in terms of the relationships that are established between representatives of the powerful agents, i.e. media and politics, and the audience.

An awareness of the audience and the way in which such a cognitive orientation implies certain forms of address and rhetoric as well as certain forms of interaction, is not new to the media or to politics. What is unique in the current situation, what could be said to be distinctive today, is the way that the interests of attracting an audience are causing forces to merge and join and are thus blurring the distinctions what belongs in the political sphere and what belongs to the media. There is an awareness of media in politics just as there is an awareness of politics in the media. New scripts are being written and new roles are invented. Actors are changing places. The old duality is being replaced by a new collegiality in which the audience might be left out — as always.

The relationship with the audience, in terms of rhetoric, is dictated by the logic and logistics of goods, values and promises. Crucial for the proper or efficient “delivery” of these goods, to follow this logistic imagery, are the ways in which the audience can be addressed, i.e. it is not merely a matter of courtesy and clever politeness but also of authenticity or what I have called in another context “audienticity” (Forstorp 1995). Audienticity refers to the communicative strategies through which an “authentic” relationship with the audience can be established. The crucial issue in establish-

ing a relationship of trust, confidence, loyalty and regularity with an audience, whether by a talk show host, a news anchor or a politician, is the way the audience is made to feel authentic themselves, i.e. to feel that they actually being “themselves,” not that they are being persuaded to do something or that they are some sort of victims. Instead, they feel as if they are invited, involved and participating.

Could we conceive of a struggle for attention in the realm of contemporary media and politics? I would suggest it can be found in the concrete efforts taken to make the audience feel that they are not passive, that they are not being duped, using the available means for establishing authenticity or “audienticity.”

In this paper, I will introduce a concrete example of this search for authenticity in an effort to support the view of media and politics as mutually reinforcing arenas of communication and to emphasise the interdependency of their practices.

The State of the Ordinary

Imagine a casual evening in front of the TV. People are seated on their sofas chatting, sipping drinks, watching and expecting things to happen to them, to be informed and entertained. They are participating in the media flow of a variety of events which are staged in a variety of ways. Imagine that they start to recognise certain faces and characters as part of the media flow. They come to follow the trajectories of these individuals, most of which develop according to a predetermined schedule. They might realise that certain individuals are moving between a variety of roles, sometimes as opinion maker and politician, later on as housewife, young urban mother and suddenly as a journalist; in other words, a chameleon who takes on unpredictable roles. These roles can be seen in the public biography of Mona Sahlin, a well known Swedish politician (and housewife, journalist, mother, etc.).

Mona Sahlin is a young Swedish politician in the Social Democratic Party. Her remarkable success during the latest decade allowed her to head straight for the highest possible public office as a candidate for Prime Minister. Filling the attractive image of a modern handsome young mother, she managed to transform politics into something which most people could recognise as relevant to their own lives. This was accomplished successfully by using the language of everyday life, especially the communicative idiom of young urban mothers. Her success as a politician in the heat of the news media was widely affirmed as she skilfully coped with aggressive journalists. She was very competent in verbal combat and in giving quick answers to sensitive questions even in times of crisis. Approaching her forties, Sahlin was one of the main candidates to succeed Ingvar Carlsson, the Prime Minister of Sweden and the chairman of the Social Democratic Party. In the fall of 1995, however, she suddenly lost her influential position in politics in a period of less than two weeks, as the result of an alleged abuse of governmental credit cards and the failure to pay parking tickets and bills for childcare promptly. With very little success, she defended herself against hostile accusations by the journalists in various formats which aired in the media. She explained that the failure to pay bills and alleged credit card abuse were caused by the heavy workload of being both a mother of four children and a highly-placed politician and by the fact that she was expected to be in charge in both roles. Paradoxically, her remarkable success as a media-genic politician, was at least halted precisely by those forces in the media that had once made her into their personal favourite. Trying to remain above the accumulating accusations, she tried in vain to capitalise on her previous pattern of success, i.e. her role as an ordinary everyday person. This strategy

did not work but rather served to emphasise the inherent mismatch between what she said and how was lived.

I will present a series of roles, a progression of tableaux, in which Mona Sahlin appeared on TV and link them to a discussion of representativity and authenticity.

Interview with a Politician

Setting: In the turmoil following the accusations of credit card abuse, Mona Sahlin changed from being a very accessible and encouraging media personality into someone who seemed to show greater distance and suspicion, who could hardly be persuaded to participate at all in any form of media. The well-known leftist TV-interviewer Göran Skytte managed, however, to convince her to participate in his programme during the very heat of events. At the end of the interview, Mona Sahlin announced that she would no longer be running as a candidate for the job of Prime Minister, a fact that had hitherto been unknown.

Participants: Göran Skytte is regarded as a bold, consistent and systematic interviewer. He asks all the questions, even the very sensitive ones, but he does not “grill you on all the bills and dates,” referring to the minute details of the continuing controversy. Thereby he fulfils the role of a critical journalist with the right to ask all the sensitive questions but will not do the “dirty work” of validating concrete facts.

Communication: The interview takes place during the heat of the controversy that subsequently led to Mona Sahlin’s refusal to run as a candidate for Prime Minister. During the interview, Sahlin claims that she is experiencing strong emotions due to the stress of the situation and at one moment is even close to tears. Her communicative style is thoroughly mundane and her choice of vocabulary is characteristically sprinkled with slang words, e.g. referring to the Government’s headquarters as “the job.” Her style of conversation is casual and informal. Sometimes she answers questions with just one word though it seems unusual for a politician to choose to have an ongoing interactive conversation rather than keeping the floor to oneself. Her style of conversation and her lexical choices exhibit the style of everyday casual talk and ordinariness.

The Ordinary Person: She also appears to be an ordinary person in respects other than style of communication. Explaining some possible reasons for the mishandling of private economic matters, she refers to the “messiness of everyday life” in a family of six persons where both adults work more than full time. The impression of the ordinary person is also emphasised by her casual hairstyle and attire.

The topic of ordinariness — “ordinary Mona” — as one of her “main political assets” is also brought up by the interviewer who calls her “ordinary, fair, straight, honest.” Sahlin is well aware of this and also of the recent shift in the value given to ordinariness: “first, there were problems with Mona because she was so ordinary that she could never become a Prime Minister, and now it’s the reverse.” They also talked of how her image of ordinariness and honesty is now potentially threatened by another image depicting her as telling half-lies and making all the cardinal mistakes in an effort to save her own skin rather than stating the truth.

Skytte suggests that the virtue of her ordinariness is now publicly contested. Though she used to present herself as a spokesperson for poor citizens, this is no longer possible. Skytte quotes an article written by Sahlin six months earlier in which she criticises the increase in wages by executives in big corporations: “I, along with unemployed mothers in this country, expect something different from you, that you will show moral

superiority and leadership in this time which is so decisive for Sweden, show that you have heard of the power of being an example....”

The discussion of ordinariness is closed by Sahlin with a moving confession of her love for politics and her desire to continue being a politician. The concreteness of her feelings is hard to resist and she comes through as a very authentic person, heartily engaged in what she believes is right.

Addressing Others: Mona Sahlin has the habit of talking about official persons and addressing them by their first name. She shows herself to be fully aware of this by mentioning an interview in which she referred to herself: “it was Carlsson, Bildt, Persson, Westerberg, och Mona (..) is it Sahlin now?” She adds the comment that her own popularity had something to do with “Mona” while her removal from high political positions will be a situation in which she is once again, according to custom, called by her last name. Concerning her decision not to run for the position of chairman of the Party she refers to other persons in the present government by their first name, i.e. “Göran, Janne, Margareta and others.”

In the following exchange with Skytte this way of speaking is exemplified:

MS: Bosse and I were sitting at home thinking when Ingvar had said that he would leave.

GS: Bosse is your husband and Ingvar is Carlsson.

MS: Bosse is my man and Ingvar is Ingvar Carlsson (...) excuse me.

Mona Sahlin has this way of speaking of others in an informal way as if they were members of a family. Therefore, it appears odd when she sometimes talks about herself in the third person, as if distancing herself from herself. She frequently uses the first person pronoun but also talks about herself as “Mona,” e.g. “cheeky Mona;” “and Mona does what she always does;” “because Mona has always been the one who helps.” The interview ends with questions about her future and she answers “now Mona will think about Mona and then we will see what Mona wants to do.” This way of speaking is as strange and unfamiliar as the previous mentioned strategy is familiar.

Roles: This interview takes place the day after a critical press conference in which Mona Sahlin faced the entire press corps by herself and was challenged with numerous questions about her private household economy. This topic is frequently touched upon and there are also many instances of evaluating the behaviour of the media. One of her comments is that “the issue is getting out of proportion,” for instance when they ask her siblings about their private economic affairs, when they dig into the history of her husband, when they confront her kids with questions about their mothers’ credit card habits. Generally, she claims to think that such scrutiny is positive but she requests the establishment of “decent limits” for the interrogation.

MS: I am doing something [criticising the media] that politicians don’t usually do and are not supposed to be doing.

GS: I think absolutely that, that, that you should do it.

MS: You think it is okay.

GS: Yes, of course, it is obvious that you have to be able to attack journalists and argue against journalists (...) but as you say it is very uncommon.

In this interchange, Skytte accepts an alliance with Sahlin, emphasising that politicians should have the right to criticise journalists. Skytte supports the critical comments.

Yet, in the rest of the interview their roles are kept separate as questioner and respondent. Later Skytte refers to “the well-know trick of politicians exaggerating in front of journalists” to which Sahlin responds that they are behaving “like injured little kids.”

Politicians outside Politics

Setting: Over a year after the events of 1995, Mona Sahlin is once again appearing regularly in the media. She is no longer an official spokesperson of the Social Democratic Party although she participates in social democratic policies as a “free entrepreneur” in the area of opinion-making. She defines her role in a new way as an independent politician and lobbyist who works from her own platform (private enterprise). She is a politician who no longer is in office and this sideways step is taken here as yet another indication of the “state of the ordinary,” a step towards what is taken as public opinion.

Participants: In this morning news edition of TV 4, Mona Sahlin appears together with another prominent Social Democrat, the former chairman of the Labour Union, Stig Malm. Both of them share a similar history of being regarded as outspoken and of having left office following spectacular media “affairs.” The interviewers are the staff of the TV 4 Morning Edition, Bengt Magnusson and Annika Hagström. They are seated on two sofas in the studio.

Outlook: As usual, Mona Sahlin appears on the programme as a colourful and lively person. She appears that way, in particular, when contrasted with the “grey politician” beside her, Stig Malm, who is literally dressed in a proverbial grey suit with a discreet tie and has silvery well-combed hair. Sahlin wears colourful lipstick, reddish hair cut short and she is often sharing a warm smile suggesting consensus and agreement. Malm’s face, on the other hand, is strained and almost angry. Her voice has a lively pitch and she talks with a strong urban accent, suggesting modernity. Just in her outlook as a young woman who could be in any kind of profession, Sahlin transforms politics into an everyday affair. This is emphasised by the fact that the person beside her wears the traditional politicians’ garb i.e. the paradigmatic grey suit.

Addressing Others: As already noted, Sahlin introduced into Swedish politics the communicative habit of publicly naming official persons by their first names and not by their last name. Therefore, in this programme, she calls herself “Mona,” her partner next to her on the sofa is “Stig,” and the Prime Ministers are “Ingvar” and “Göran.” This practice is adopted by the others in the show, though they are slightly unaccustomed to it and therefore appear hesitant. This practice of naming is a very efficient means of suggesting familiarity and everydayness, introducing the image of politicians not only as official spokespersons but also as human beings. This practice of naming, common among family, friends, peers and equals, also has the potential ability to shift disagreements from the impersonal bureaucratic realm to the realm of the everyday. For instance, the political consistency of a high politician can then be associated with forms of faithfulness and endurance seen in a family, i.e. either as stubbornness or as deep confidence. Familiarity in turn suggests authenticity.

Political Compromises: This program circles around the topic of some important political compromises made recently between the ruling Social Democratic Party and the Centre Party. Both guests criticise the kind of politics arrived at through compromises made “in secret rooms.” These “secrets” are then sanctioned by the market before “ordinary people” can have a say, and then, it is claimed, it is too late. Both Sahlin and Malm portray politics as something taking place too far away from “ordinary people” (“vanligt folk” in Swedish). According to their critical view, “ordinary people”

do not have any opportunity to participate in the political process at all. “Ordinary people cannot influence politics,” Malm insists. He says that this is very dangerous for a political party who believes that they find their foundation in popular movements as do, for instance, the Social Democrats, the Christian Democrats, the Centre Party and the Green Party in Sweden. “What influence do ordinary people have?” he asks rhetorically as if setting the stage for a scenario in which they can do nothing at all. Malm argues that, as a result, more and more people have turned their back to politics; they don’t even care enough to vote because they regard politics as irrelevant to them.

In this discussion, Malm and Sahlin portray themselves as the critical politicians who, in fact, support “ordinary people.” This association is made through the care which they show for these “ordinary people.”

“New Politics:” Mona Sahlin sees the problem in the agreements made between politicians and the market, high above the heads of “ordinary people.” These agreements stand in sharp opposition to the “rhetorical reality” expressed during election campaigns. She is arguing for a “new politics” not only built on promises but also on more modest invitations to compromise with other political agents. The “new politics” includes the humble ability to give way to others, to be able to listen and to make compromises. The problem is that nobody wants to do this and this is what she refers to as the “problematics of agreements.”

In Sahlin’s language, political conflict resolution sounds like any other kind of domestic conflict management. This takes place between persons addressed by their first names, they do things in secret rooms (like children), they are angry and persistent (like stubborn children). By placing political conflict resolution in the realm of domestic life, Sahlin brings a “maternal” paternalistic note into the act of teaching her kids to behave well.

Sticking to Agreements: In the last twists of the conversation, they talk about the present Minister of Transport and Communication, Ines Uusman. She has come to symbolise persistent political power because of the way she acted during the aftermath of the Estonia tragedy. She came into office only a few days after the tragic event on the Baltic Sea which took nearly 800 lives. The ship itself has never been pulled up from the sea bottom. The government decided that the ship will be covered by gravel and concrete while many relatives and others pled for the retrieval of the bodies even though years had passed since the tragedy took place. This particular event has become symbolic way beyond the limits of the Estonia debate proper and now symbolises the power of politicians to do whatever they want even when, as it does in this case, it goes against the will of the people. Malm and Sahlin are asked to comment upon Uusman’s position. Malm talks first and claims that she is “a bloody good politician who came into office in a difficult situation” and whose position was not made any easier after the Prime Minister, Göran Persson, “poured a barrel of gravel over her,” i.e. by undermining the consistency of her position by suggesting a retreat from the Government’s position. Once again, Malm and Sahlin joins forces with those who are negatively affected by the powerful politicians, this time with a Minister who claimed to be overrun by the Prime Minister. Finally, Sahlin says the following:

MS: My only advice is keep the Ines-agreement since Dennis was never fulfilled (laughter).

AH: Yes, exactly.

MS: So there will **be** something now.

AH: So there will **be** something.

In this exchange Sahlin refers to “Dennis” which is one of the recent agreements referred to above, where the ruling party joined forces with the Centre Party, contrary to previous promises. “Dennis” is the name of a general traffic plan for the capital city (following the name of the chairman of this group) which including new train tracks and freeways. The recent agreement cancelled these plans. Sahlin now claims that it is important for persons in power to stick to their opinions, therefore she refers to the “Ines-agreement,” which is not a common way of expressing this position but rather borrowing from the familiar way of referring to the traffic plan.

The Politician as Journalist

Setting: The setting for the talk show Aschberg & Co is industrial. The vignette shows a welder in his security outfit, preparing himself for doing some rough work on rough surfaces. In the background are seen some other welders already at work in the midst of smoke and fire. The industry look includes raw and unpolished materials; rough edges and surfaces can be seen in the studio where there are also tools from the industrial setting on display. This look is combined with the latest technology exemplified by a laptop computer connected to a mobile phone on the table.

Participants: Robert Aschberg is one of the most popular talk show hosts in Sweden. He is bald and he has the somewhat jaded look of a convict. His role is the truth-teller who fears no one, who is frank almost to the point of being rude and vulgar. Aschberg and his guests — “this evening’s panel” — are seated on three sides of a large table.

The guests are almost always chosen because they are controversial. Each evening new alliances are made around the table, consisting of pop stars, sportsmen, ex-politicians and criticised businessmen in unthinkable combinations. The set-up is unpredictable and exciting.

When the programme started in early 1997, Mona Sahlin, the ex-vice Prime Minister, was presented as a new member of the editorial staff. New to this group of three male journalists was also the ex-wife of tennis player Björn Borg, Jannike Björling. Mona Sahlin is employed as a reporter for the talk show, one of her new part-time jobs. It is unclear what precisely her role consists of apart from what we see on the screen.

The Programme: In Aschberg & Co comments are made on current affairs, both large and small. Aschberg is the one who chooses topics to introduce in the programme and he treats them in a very idiosyncratic way. The formal trip to South Africa by the Swedish Royal family is updated and debated; the death of China’s leader Deng is commented upon; a new stomach virus is talked about; journalists are interviewed after seeing a porno film featuring Marilyn Monroe, etc. Aschberg and his guests are sitting around the table as if around a dinner table. In fact, during one programme they actually eat dinner on the air.

The Politician as a Star Reporter: In the programme, Mona Sahlin, is treated as any other member of the staff. She is not talked about in terms of being ex-vice Prime Minister, neither are topics in her past addressed. Rather, she is introduced as a new journalist. At the same time, everybody is tacitly aware of her former status in the government and in politics. Her first assignment in the show was to cover a film celebration featuring Sweden’s entire population of screen stars. One of the nominated films “Jägarna” (The Hunters) had been strongly criticised by the legendary Swedish film director, Ingmar Bergman. Mona Sahlin was assigned to this story. In Aschberg’s words: “our reporter Mona Sahlin covered this great party.”

Sahlin interviews well-known people in the film business concerning their opinions about Bergman and his critique, selecting a topic in typical fashion which is supposed to be incontestable, i.e. no one is supposed to challenge Bergman's genius. She is making live interviews, putting a large microphone in front of people's faces. Some of the interviewees start laughing, seemingly because they are unaccustomed to seeing Mona Sahlin in the role of entertainment reporter but most act as if she were just any other reporter.

The Politician in the Panel: Another day in the show, Sahlin makes a reportage about a Swedish woman and her relationship to a man living in Africa. The story is about separation and about love and suggests that the Swedish authorities do not understand the situation of ordinary people being in love. The feature is shown to the audience. After this Sahlin takes her place among the panel of guests, next to Aschberg, and they casually talk about the event.

Aschberg asks what the panel thinks; Sahlin is now included in the panel. They talk about immigration and love. One of the guests is a boxing coach, Leif Carlsson. After one of his turns, Sahlin fills in with "it is exactly the way Lefte says," addressing him not only with his first name but also with the usual nick name of "Leif," i.e. "Lefte" even though he is not usually addressed in this way.

The reportage is about the love between people on different continents and the way that the state manages to interfere in such affairs. Sahlin's view on these matters is very clear: "if people are in love with each other the state shouldn't do shit about it"

The Politician as a Labour Market Reporter: In yet another programme, Aschberg introduces a new topic: "We will talk about wage politics. Mona Sahlin, our reporter tells the story of a remarkable situation in the labour market."

In the reportage, Sahlin is shown passing through the gates of a zoological garden. Her voice sets up the problem "The person who takes care of monkeys here earns more than those who take care of our kids in kindergarten (...) I went out into the field to find out if this was true and I met two very competent girls..." In the reportage, she talks to the person in the zoo who works with monkeys, and a woman ("girl") who have worked with kids for thirty years. She lets them describe their jobs and careers. Her conclusion is that the minimum wage of the person in zoo is higher than for the child care worker.

Coming back to the studio, Aschberg's rough comment is: "the monkey tender earns more than the child tender."

Comments in the Press: The debut of Mona Sahlin as a star reporter was covered in the press. The tabloid *Expressen* carries the headlines "Mona Sahlins' debut in the crowd," "Now it is Mona who asks the questions." In other parts of the text, she is referred to as a "crowd reporter" or as "shotgun Sahlin."

In the text, she is quoted saying "I am part of the staff [of Aschberg and company] and then you have to take all kinds of jobs" in response to a question concerning her role as a star reporter. She is presented as a free entrepreneur, lecturer and TV-reporter. "These are," she says "new ways for me to make opinions and it feels good to be on my own," suggesting that being outside of party politics has some advantages in terms of independence. She is asked what are the differences between being the interviewer and the interviewee. "As a politician I was always forced to have an opinion about anything at any time. Now I can choose what I want to talk about. I promise to introduce many and exciting people from Swedish everyday life...."

The State of the Ordinary: Being “Yourself” as a Representative

Mona Sahlin was (and is) a representative of what we would like to call the “State of the Ordinary” (Economou and Forstorp 1996), referring both to the condition of being “ordinary” and to how this condition is used as a means of leading. Her success as a politician is in large part due to her communicative ability — whether deliberate or not, whether real and/or rhetorical — to project herself as a “real” person with family and emotions, firmly grounded in the conditions of life shared by many underpaid single mothers in urban settings. As a politician, she did not appear only as an administrator, not only as a professional decision maker or a bureaucrat, not only as a representative or a stand-in for somebody else, but she represented herself as an ordinary authentic person. To some extent she fulfilled the difficult ideals of representation. Her political success was not only communicative but was also linked also to the specific ideas and values that she advocated and that many people found attractive. But the way these ideas were exhibited was obviously linked to her skills of addressing an audience in an “authentic” way. The strong tendency towards ordinariness (“naturlighet” in Swedish) and authenticity (“Ökthet”) in her political persona made her into an ideal spokes(wo)man for all those (and not only within the Social Democratic Party) who were tired of generally untrustworthy politicians who always made promises but never actually “delivered.”

In this paper I have analysed some settings in which the “state of the ordinary” is displayed, by looking more concretely at how this is done and how relationships with the media are differently conceived and maintained.

Claiming to be oneself — being “yourself” as a politician — is better than being just a politician. This is the rule of authenticity in the media and the state of the ordinary. This insight brings a new recognition to the realm of political participation. In the blurred genres of contemporary media and politics, working parallel to each other rather than in an exclusively antagonistic relationship, we can envision the shifting roles of the journalist with political influence and of the politician demonstrating the skills of a talk show host. This helps to identify new regimes and new forms of participatory politics and is an indicator of the co-operation between media and politics.

Note

1. I use the notion of the “ordinary” in a simplified everyday sense here, momentarily neglecting the intricacies of everyday routine behaviour problematised for instance by Garfinkel (1967) and Sacks (1984).

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