

Did we do that? The media's responsibility of reporting on celebrity politicians

Most of my college career has been spent in one form or another in a newsroom.

Now I spend a great deal of my time in newsrooms revolving around blunder after blunder of Donald Trump and his administration. Every day there seems to be media coverage of some outlandish quote, tweet or action Trump has shared with the world. While we as the media dutifully cover such events, I have never heard anyone ask why? More importantly, why are we so surprised by this position, when we in the media have put ourselves there?

I have noticed a difference between covering Trump as a politician and covering Trump as a celebrity in several popular national publications. The same publications that have opinion pieces bashing Trump's lack of professionalism are the same ones reporting on him as a celebrity.

From the Boston Globe tracking his every move for his [first 744 hours](#) in office, to CNN making [bulleted lists](#) of his most laughable quotes, to NBC's [real time ticker](#) counting how many days he's been golfing instead of in the White House, reporters appear to be functioning like the paparazzi.

With evidence showing the media had a deep, maybe even complete, impact over the 2016 election results, the media should ask ourselves if we can do better going forward. We have had a deep hand in the success of an arguably unstable celebrity being in the white house, so do we as a whole change our strategy when it comes to reporting on celebrities running for office?

We cannot report on these “celebrity politicians” by putting their faces on the front page and using their notoriety for page hits, and then act shocked when they are elected. We are living in an age where our audience has less-than-perfect media literacy. We must be careful what we let go viral. We must create a line between celebrities with political interests and politicians.

A [study](#) by the Harvard Kennedy School’s Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy shows that in early 2015 Trump received a high amount of media coverage – which was unusual given he was so low in the polls. A “normal” candidate would have never gotten so much attention. This mixed with the fact it was mostly “good” press resulted in a firestorm, bumping Trump’s numbers tremendously. Trump was covered as a celebrity. Softball questions, benefit of the doubt, literally patting him on the head – you name it. The media put out a high volume of “good” press on Trump. Regardless of what he was saying, we were posting.

It didn’t help that most of what he was saying was finger-pointing accusations against his opponent Hillary Clinton. The Shorenstein study showed the media were covering Trump’s comments on “crooked Hillary’s” emails, but gave no context to support the email investigation.

The audience witnessed Trump say it was bad, thus it was bad. The media had a heavy hand in this wave of reality TV stars joining politics, and we need to take responsibility and actively do something about it in the 2020 election, where already, celebrities have committed or are being convinced to commit to the campaign trail.

The most glaring and timely example is #Oprah2020. This hashtag that has been used more than 20,000 times and is a topic being reported on publications such as BuzzFeed, Huffington Post and People. And don’t

forget about CNN's business section, the Washington Post, Fox news, and CBS. She's being covered up there with Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren.

A piece in the Washington Post by Aaron Blake ranked the top 15 most likely candidates for president in 2020 listing Oprah, Mark Cuban (star of reality show Shark Tank) and founder of Facebook Mark Zuckerberg as some of the most likely runners. In a revised version, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson was added to the list.

I can provide no immediate answers, but I think I know the first step. The media must stop feeding into social-media popularity and leave the trending hashtags to Twitter articles when it comes to celebrities running for president. Oprah has denied all intentions of running, so why are news outlets still posting articles on it? Why is the Washington Post naming her as a top contender?

The media have begun to morph into an extension of social media trends in this regard. We need to see that just because people are tweeting it doesn't mean it is credible, relevant or newsworthy. The media have been proven to sway the minds of voters and we in the profession need to take more responsibility for that.

Michelle Zelli is an undergraduate at Southern Illinois University Carbondale studying journalism, political science and creative writing.