

POLITICS BY KAYFABE: PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING AND THE CREATION OF PUBLIC OPINION

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INTRODUCTION

Professional wrestling offers an excellent analogy for understanding the way politicians socially construct reality to produce changes in public opinion. In most cases, politicians will frame specific events in a way designed to elicit public support for their preferred policies or candidates. They will also use these same techniques to frame those they perceive to be “enemies” in a way that generates fear and antipathy in the population. The creation of reality and incitement to action in a mass population is one function of political propaganda, which is nearly ubiquitous in the age of mass media, big data, and the 24 hour news cycle.²

In many ways, the process of the construction of reality employed by politicians is similar to the creation of angles and storylines in professional wrestling, which has grown into a world phenomenon alongside-- and largely as a result of-- mass media. In its current manifestation, professional wrestling, now called “sports entertainment,” requires the apparatus of mass media as well as the audiences mass media generates to succeed financially. For their part, policy makers and political leaders also use the mass media. In fact, the modern mass-based political Party, which appeals to huge swaths of the population using claims and narratives resonant with the average person rather than traditional political elites would not exist without the mass media. Without widespread dissemination of news, Parties would not be able to effectively disseminate political propaganda or generate public opinion.

This article provides a brief overview of the analog between public opinion creation and professional wrestling. Of particular importance is the concept of the “Kayfabe”, which is the accepted substitution of reality and willing suspension of disbelief that allows fans to buy into often fictionalized storylines, larger-than-life personalities and match results and which makes modern professional wrestling more a form of entertainment than an actual sporting contest. When looking at various political contests and events of the recent past through the lens of the “Kayfabe,” we can gain a better understanding both of how the political landscape in the US can appear to be much more starkly polarized than it actually is, and how politicians are able to sell international conflict to even war-weary populations.

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² Perhaps the most famous and comprehensive discussions on the creation and function of propaganda, and its effects on a mass population is found in Jacques Ellul’s book *Propaganda* (1965). In this book, Ellul systematically defines propaganda, but more importantly, he also discusses the way that propaganda works in the individual to produce action. This work is instructive for those interested in social construction of reality.

THE KAYFABE AND THE SOCIAL CREATION OF “GOOD” AND “BAD”

Central to the discussion of professional wrestling and politics is the concept of “Kayfabe.”³ The term itself is derived from a slang, Pig Latin-like word for “fake” which was originally used by workers at the carnivals, traveling circuses and county fair venues where wrestling events were once held. Over time, Kayfabe has come to refer to the ability of wrestlers to create an alternate reality and to have those viewing the show believe that what they are watching is in fact a “real” contest. To “break Kayfabe” is to let on that the show is not a real contest, an act that could have serious financial consequences for the promoter and could end wrestling careers.

Kayfabe was developed to boost the entertainment value of the spectacle (Beekman, 2006). The switch to a pure Kayfabe show did not occur until the early 20th century. Before that time, wrestling was able to straddle both the entertainment realms and that of the organized martial sports, such as boxing, judo and gymnastics. Wrestlers are and have been highly skilled athletes, many with a background in the amateur wrestling or field sports.

Regardless of venue, for the professional wrestlers the act was a job. As Kerrick, (1980) points out, wrestlers and promoters consider professional wrestling to be first and foremost a business. Before the purely Kayfabe era it was not uncommon to have “shoots” or legitimate wrestling bouts for either a championship title or as a means to create crowd support for a wrestler who may be in line for a shot at a title. In a “shoot,” the outcome was never determined beforehand, and would often lead to a draw or some uninteresting, anti-climactic contest; in these events, “bookers” or promoters, who came from the entertainment background, found that they had to answer to angry spectators who felt they had paid for a spectacle which never materialized. An uninteresting or indeterminate match could, after all, prompt calls for a refund from the spectators, and these demands were often backed up with the threat of very real violence.

To prevent these boring non-spectacles, promoters began to push for matches that were “works” – productions that were not factually true *per se* but rather were “true within the reality of Kayfabe.” These matches were complete with “angles,” or scripted feuds, designed to build “programs.” The earliest programs dating from the mid- to late 19th Century developed from the more organic aspects of competition found in boxing, itself a scandal-prone sport. A program often consisted of several scheduled bouts between various wrestlers or wrestling cliques. These bouts were scheduled based on the angles being run at that time within the promotion. In the days of territory wrestling, before TV became the primary medium through which the fan engaged with the sport, the angle was set to draw on local biases and interests. After wrestling became primarily focused on TV viewership, starting in the 1950s, the angles also incorporated national concepts of race, nationalism, xenophobia and class. A perfect example of the sort of anti-foreign, xenophobic angles that have been with professional wrestling since the advent of Kayfabe is the 1980s feud between Sgt. Slaughter and the Iranian-born Iron Sheik.⁴

³ It is important to remember, when discussing wrestling jargon, that there is no one definitive authority. Many times, as in the use of all languages, the meaning is contextually defined. Often, there is mixing of the argot with specific meanings being transferred from term to term as the situation dictates. However, it is helpful if we have an understanding of the terms used in this paper.

⁴ During the 1980s, when suspicion of people from the Middle East was on the rise in the US, and US-Iranian relations were at an all-time low, the Iranian wrestler known as Iron Sheik gained prominence as a notorious “heel” wrestler. His chief rivals were those who promoted ideals of the “USA”, especially Hulk Hogan, whose national fame and reputation as “the Real American Hero” was launched in a high-profile match against the Sheik, “Hacksaw” Jim Duggan, who riled up crowd with the “USA! USA!” chant, and Sgt. Slaughter, whose character was

Wrestling promoters soon learned that by controlling the outcome they could script or build up regional or national champions which would have big draw potentials. With such a revenue source it became important for promoters to protect, at all costs, the image of a champion wrestler or one who was being built-up for a championship run. At this point, it became necessary for the industry to establish the norm of the Kayfabe. With Kayfabe, bookers could build “heat”, or in-ring hype for a wrestler or storyline, ensure interesting programs, and protect the integrity of champions while still “working” the crowd. It soon became in the industry’s financial interest to keep Kayfabe, as the scripted show became the most reliable source of revenue in professional wrestling.

It is natural therefore that pro-wrestlers consider themselves workers: those who were unable or unwilling to maintain Kayfabe were known as “bad workers” while those who were able to convincingly maintain Kayfabe were “good workers.” Those wrestlers who were experts at keeping or building Kayfabe, producing exciting matches and drawing public interest were often known as “carpenters.” The primary endeavor of the professional wrestler was to “work” in the show. Sometimes this meant doing a “job” or selling the illusion while losing the match. Hence, a “jobber” is a wrestler who routinely loses and often is used to build the image of a top bill performer known as a “main eventer” or “top man”.

Kayfabe also established a system of “good guys” and “bad guys” known as “faces” and “heels” respectively. These roles were completely angle-based and could change several times over the course of a single wrestler’s career. The faces were usually the crowd favorites, but heel wrestlers were also quite popular; these were characters that most fans loved to hate but that many fans also idolized because they represented the breaking of norms with impunity. As wrestling became more of a dramatic spectacle and less of a pure sporting competition, these roles—as well as the role of “tweener” (or someone who could at any moment act as a face or a heel) – became increasingly important to the maintenance of Kayfabe.

One primary concern for promoters was a fear of “shooters” moving into their “territory.” A shooter was a wrestler who treated “worked shows” as if they were legitimate athletic contests. The shooter was particularly dangerous to the business model of professional wrestling, because he was often unwilling to keep the established Kayfabe of the territory. For example, occasionally, a shooter would beat the champion in a match, which undermined the integrity of the promotion and title. The fear of shooters led to tight control over who could be booked in a territory. There was even the cultivation of professional wrestlers who could actually beat any shooters and help to enforce Kayfabe. Over time, the blacklisting of wrestlers who could not be trusted, as well as the apparent financial reward for those that were trustworthy, led to wrestling being primarily an entertainment spectacle consisting of scripted outcomes and promoted champions.

Given the financial incentives and the entertainment guarantee of worked shows, even spectators soon gained an interest in keeping Kayfabe. Few watched professional wrestling because they wanted to observe athletic prowess. Instead, most relish in the spectacle, whether they know it is Kayfabe or not. Today, everyone who watches and enjoys professional wrestling understands that the show is almost completely scripted, and that the old Kayfabe, which insisted that the matches were actual athletic events, is broken. Nobody who watches the WWE thinks that the match outcome was not determined in advance. In fact, a new Kayfabe has taken the

based primarily on a US Army Drill Instructor. Later, following the First Gulf War, The Sheik, now known as Col. Mustafa actually teamed with Slaughter as Iraqi sympathizers, despite their long standing feud, and despite the fact that Iran and Iraq were still bitter rivals in the non-Kayfabe world.

place of the old, where people willingly pretend that professional wrestling is something more than a soap opera being played out by people with large muscles. Today, a professional wrestler is as much an actor and business person as he or she is an athlete. And thus, like soap operas, enjoyment of professional wrestling, with this new Kayfabe becomes a form of escapism, in much the same way as reading comic books is. As such, Kayfabe and fan interaction with professional wrestling has come to mirror the way many people engage with political discourse.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF POLITICS

Like professional wrestling, the world of politics utilizes a Kayfabe to boost public support for policies and politicians. The public is propagandized on a constant basis by political leaders. Jacques Ellul (1965) noted that propaganda is ubiquitous, even when it is not intentionally employed, because it is quite functional. On the one hand, politicians cannot rely on the fickle nature of public opinion to guide their policies, but on the other hand, especially in western democracies, politicians are constrained in their policy making to those policies which appear to have public support.

The public, for their part, want to feel like they support the policies of their government, but at the same time, insist that they have some input in the matter, however illusory that input truly is. The result is that both politicians and the public have an interest in the political spectacle- The politicians need it to appear to have taken the interests of the people into account, while the people need it to feel a sense of ownership in the government and its policies without actually having to participate in any meaningful way (Ellul, 124-128).

Politics-by-Kayfabe is not crass cynicism: Like professional wrestling, the Kayfabe has become necessary for all interested participants. In wrestling, the Kayfabe provides a vehicle for fans to accept the spectacle as real. The business itself relies on the public buying into the story just as much as the public requires a story to buy into. The fans at a wrestling match are, in a sense, there to be taken. They want the drama, which so happens to be centered on men and women throwing each other around in the ring.

But at the end of the day, the motivation for seeing a professional wrestling match is no different than the motivation for going to see a popular movie or play in the theater. At no point does the audience assume that anything they see on the stage or screen is actually real—"real" is unimportant. Those actors, directors, and special effects artists who can make it *look real* are given awards for their talent. So it is unreasonable that anyone should complain that professional wrestling is fake. Nobody involved, be they the wrestlers themselves, or the bookers, or the crowd thinks professional wrestling is "real" in a strictly factual sense-- Kayfabe allows professional wrestling to *become* real by acting as a vehicle that allows fans to buy into the spectacle and enjoy it. When non-Kayfabe accidents do happen in or out of the ring, this amounts to a tragedy or a scandal, partly because it breaks the illusion that the crowd has bought into.⁵ Even when accidents are not involved, there is still a norm against breaking Kayfabe, because it then denies the crowd of their ability to enjoy the spectacle, which in turn undermines the business model of the promotion.

⁵ For example, in 1999, a tragedy in the wrestling world occurred when a crowd favorite, Owen Hart, was set to make a comedic entrance on a line suspended above the ring. Hart was tethered to a line by a harness, which was equipped with a quick-release. The quick release failed unexpectedly, and Hart fell from the line, suffering mortal injuries. As Hart was being attended to by medical professionals, the announcer repeatedly announced that what was happening was not an angle. Hart subsequently died from his injuries.

Conversely, what has come to be known as “political theater” is held up to a completely unrealistic standard. The problem with the political Kayfabe is that most of those who make up the audience actually believe that what they are seeing before them is real, in the sense of treating political campaigns like “shoot” matches, and this in turn guides their reactions to events. The reason, possibly, is that the policies made by the government, which themselves are only incidentally related to the political theater, actually affect people’s lives. The difficulty comes when people attempt to divorce the experience they have when they are exposed to *political propaganda* crafted for them by interested actors from the *outcomes of policy making*—they see those two things as intricately connected. In fact, the spectacle of a publicly-aired political debate or a political campaign is as far removed from the actual policy outcomes as the “worked program” is from “shoot wrestling.”

And yet, it is that spectacle which people tune in, by the millions, to experience. Millions of people will view MSNBC or Fox News for hours *every single day*. Rush Limbaugh’s syndicated political talk show alone reaches 600 radio stations and as many as 20 million listeners daily: that figure says nothing of the vast assortment of other politically-related talk shows which are somewhat less popular (Farhi 2009). Political news and talk radio, it is important to note, does not offer much in the way of *policy education*. For that, one must tune into C-SPAN, which 47 million Americans do *at least once a week* according to one recent survey (Harper 2013).⁶ These numbers aside, the audience for political entertainment, analogous to sports entertainment, dwarfs the audience for coverage of actual political policy making.

What we have then is a population which is largely conditioned to see heroes and villains in politics the same way they see heroes and villains in professional wrestling. The “script” which casts our political leaders as “faces” or “heels”, domestic and foreign policy as “angles,” and the process of government in general as a “worked program,” is written for the population by the “bookers” of politics: those who gain from the population continuing to pay attention and continuing to buy into the political Kayfabe. The bookers may be the commentators who require political spectacle to generate revenues from commercials-- there can be no doubt that they contribute to the script. Bookers can also be the politicians themselves, and their combined staffs, who benefit electorally and financially from the manufactured outrage by significant segments of their constituency, or from those who make their living raising money for political candidates. These people instrumentally benefit from the social construction of reality, and use the fact that this exists to create the opinions of men and women, the same way that wrestling bookers generate “heat” for pro-wrestling champions.

Political “angles” are scripted in much the same way as wrestling angles are. Political “bookers” make claims which are designed to produce both movement in public opinion and social action for a particular candidate or policy. In doing so, they present issues in a particular way which offers a coherent framework. A narrative is built on that framework which is designed to generate a specific response in certain segments of the population by presenting relatively mundane policy disputes as if they were Armageddon scenarios. These narratives paint one’s political opponents as reckless, corrupt and malevolent “others”, while presenting one’s friends as hardworking, patriotic and legitimate. The “other” is an important concept in the social construction of political reality and identity. An “other” becomes a trope- something

⁶ Unfortunately, the survey does not differentiate between the coverage of political debates on the floor of the Congress, and the various other programming and lectures presented on the channel.

that defines a person by defining what that person is not.⁷ Interestingly, a single person can be cast as a hero or a villain in politics, depending on who is doing the framing- What is important for the claims-makers in politics is that their selected segment of the audience buy into the narrative, whatever it happens to be.

We reiterate: these creators of political reality do not need to craft their narrative to attract all people, or even a majority of the population. Often political bookers only need to channel the interest and the ire of a small, but vocal minority who will then attract the media and make it appear that a nascent sentiment held by a marginal segment of the population is actually a fully-fledged national social movement supported by a strong majority. The news media reports on this small group's activities, because the news media require viewers and need content to fill up space on their 24-hour long news programs. That reporting, in turn, serves to reinforce the framework set up by the political claims-makers. A more general audience predictably responds, as if on cue, in a way which translates to predictable news consumption habits, more reliable votes for candidates, and increased political activity, usually in the form of political contributions for campaigns. This response, reflected in endless polls, then generates more news coverage. Nothing is strictly "true" in this process, but then, from the standpoint of the audience, it becomes "true", and they respond as if it is and has always been true, until they are somehow convinced otherwise- but even then, the Kayfabe of politics has to be broken, often by a scandal of some sort or a consistently terrible public performance on the part of the politician, before a counter-narrative will begin to build "heat" and become salient.

As in professional wrestling, the audience benefits from the maintenance of the Kayfabe, even if some people are not yet aware that it is all a scripted spectacle. It is possible that if they knew, they would not care anyway. The population, which is largely consumed by their own parochial interests, nonetheless craves the feeling that they are part of the collective political decision making process, or as Ellul writes, "... to have wanted what the Government is doing... the government almost always conducts its [policies] on its own initiative, but where the public is interested in a particular question, it can only proceed with the *apparent* support of a substantial majority of the people" (Ellul, 127-128). According to Ellul, this support in the population is manufactured by political propaganda, just as, we add, a wrestling program is scripted by bookers.

The political bookers benefit, the news media benefits, and the population, who gets to feel as if they are participating in a meaningful way in their democracy, also benefits. Nobody has any interest in altering this feedback loop created as a result of the complimentary needs of politicians to generate public support for their activities, political news to raise revenue from advertisers, and the public to be quasi-"involved" in a democracy. Even the people who are perpetually shut out of the system benefit from the maintenance of the Kayfabe: they get to see their own struggle as just, and everyone on the "inside" as somehow wicked or corrupt. For, those who support third Parties are the "jobbers" who serve to further validate and legitimate the hegemonic ideology of "majoritarianism" in a democracy.

⁷ An excellent discussion of the "other" as a construct is found in Schwalbe et al (2000, 422-426). The "other" can be constructed for the instrumental purpose of gaining some economic or social advantage, but it can also be used to perpetuate social and political inequality. For our purposes, the creation of the "other" in professional wrestling is important to give the crown someone to dislike, for the purpose of generating support for the champion or contender, while in politics, the "other" is necessary to drum up support for a particular candidate, by generating hate and fear of his or her opponent.

Thus, political Kayfabe represents political reality—as real as anything-- for the vast majority of the interested population. Meanwhile, the mundane process of actually crafting and enacting public policy is not nearly so interesting, nor does it actually require the input of the public at all. Not surprisingly, despite all the drama and polarization reported on by the political press and repeated back to reporters and pollsters by endless streams of frustrated and angry citizens, the government still functions, it still pays its bills, citizens still receive their social security checks on time, politicians still receive their paychecks, and the military still operates on dozens of bases overseas-- as if nothing that happens in the political spectacle actually matters one bit when it comes to passing and executing policy at home and abroad.

FOREIGN POLICY BY KAYFABE

Two cases are particularly illustrative of the use politicians make of Kayfabe to craft attitudes among the population. The first is an example of the use foreign policymakers make of Kayfabe angles to get the public to buy into policies over which they actually have very little input, as illustrated in long standing antipathy between the US and Russia. The second involves the employment of racial and nationalistic prejudices of an audience to generate support for the narrative surrounding the 2008 election. In both politics and professional wrestling, these tropes are used because they work: in professional wrestling, they generate ticket sales and help the crowd develop an investment in the show, while in politics, these tactics help to drive popular support for policy and elections.

Promoters' use of racial, class and xenophobic stereotypes to draw crowds is well documented. Since the early days of professional wrestling, the “foreign menace” has been a standard go-to tactic used by promoters to draw crowd interest. Examples of this can be seen in famous “American vs. foreigner” rivalries as Frank Gotch vs. George Hackenschmidt from the latter 19th and early 20th centuries. The appeal of the foreigner by new immigrants to the US was also exploited in the early decades of the 20th century with wrestlers like Jim Londos, whose Greek heritage made him a hero to the immigrant populations in New York City. He would be regularly pitted against, and defeat some “foreign menace” to the delight of the crowd. (Shoemaker 2013, 22-24)⁸

The best example of the usefulness of a “foreign menace” in wrestling as a reflection on foreign politics is the storyline featuring Hulk “Real American” Hogan and the Russian/Soviet tag team aptly named “The Bolsheviks”. The Hogan-Bolshevik Kayfabe rivalry used the Cold War in the 1980s as its backdrop and coincided with a sharp rise in hostile public rhetoric between US and the USSR. Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the hopeful period of *détente* between the two superpowers suffered a major setback. With the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan to the US presidency, there seemed to be a new era of aggressive Cold War rivalry. Reagan, campaigning as a hardened Cold Warrior who would be tough on the Soviets, came into office, faced bad economic news at home and seemingly aggressive Soviet Union

⁸ As current opinion and biases changed, so too would the “home” country of the foreign villain. In the immediate post-World War II era, the foreign villain would often come from Japan or Germany. One example is the wrestler Martin Hisao “Duke Kiamoka” Tanaka, whose ability to use “oriental trickery” to blind his opponents enraged crowds made up of former GIs just home from the War. His gimmick was later expanded upon very successfully by Akihisa “The Great Kabuki” Mera, who blew green mist into the face of his opponents, temporarily blinding them. The “us vs. them” angle was profitable, and from it we get many famous wrestlers like the Von Erich family, whose ring names came from the creation of the character Fritz Von Erich, in an angle that set a tag-team of pseudo-Nazi characters against American good guys. Fritz von Erich's real name was Jack Adkisson, and he was born in Texas.

abroad. This “reality” that antagonism was increasing was ripe for exploitation by the entertainment sector and those engaged in international diplomacy.⁹

Throughout the 1980s, the actual antagonism between the US and the Soviet Union cooled. During Regan’s Presidency, there was an increase in both communication and cooperation between the two superpowers. For example, following the rise of Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev, the US seemed more willing than ever to discuss and agree to nuclear weapons reductions in summits and to conclude trade deals with the Soviets. But this reality did not alter the anti-Soviet rhetoric coming from the White House: The Reagan Administration famously described the Soviet Union as an “evil empire” and called Nicaragua under the leftist Sandinistas a “communist dungeon.” Interestingly, President Reagan is still given credit for being “tough” on the Soviets and for being a man who knew how to beat his foe into submission. His aggressive and militarized response to the Soviet Union is still seen in some political circles as being responsible for ending the Cold War. This position has become mythicized in modern American popular culture, especially for political conservatives. As is as almost always the case when myth is put next to factual truth, the truth in all its nuanced and haphazard reality is much harder to identify and relate to than the straight-forward and simplified myth.

Back in the ring, Hogan and the WWF were in full xenophobic spin. The epic battles between Hogan and “communist” foes Nikolai Volkov and Boris Zhukov, better known as the tag-team The Bolsheviks, were packing houses and generating revenue in the new highly profitable, pay-per-view events. Hogan would whip the crowd into anti-communist/anti-Soviet frenzy by waving the American Flag in the ring, adopting and using extreme anti-Soviet rhetoric in promos, dressing in patriotic garb and extoling viewers to be “real Americans”, something that they could achieve by training, eating vitamins, praying, and remaining “true to themselves” and their country (Hogan in the WWF promo, 2012). Hogan went on to defeat his anti-American foes in a televised “Flag Match,” where, to the delight of the crowd, he spat on the Soviet Flag in disgust, used it to shine his boots and then proudly waved the American Flag as he victoriously left the ring.

Hogan’s fame also inspired various pro-American characters, like the Hart Foundation, whose feud with the Bolsheviks led to a major anti-Soviet angle in the financially lucrative *Wrestle Mania IV*, as well as “Hacksaw” Jim Dugan, who famously brought the still-widely used “U-S-A! U-S-A!” chant to professional wrestling. Along with these angles, other popular storylines seemed to be ripped from the international section of the *New York Times*. Americans cheered on Hogan in his epic battles with the Iranian-born Iron Sheik and applauded his in-ring crumbling of the portrait of Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi, because Hogan was seen as everything “American,” deserving of applause and praise, while the Bolsheviks and the Sheik were “others” deserving of the crowd’s hatred. In all, the “us and them” mentality of the crowd was exploited by promoters to generate interest and more importantly, profits. It should be noted, the biographies of wrestlers were always well known: Hogan was from Florida, the

⁹ See, for example movies like *Rocky IV* (1985), where the Communist hero Ivan Drago, played by Dolf Lundgren, after delivering a lethal knockout to the American boxer Apollo Creed (who arrived at the ring dressed as Uncle Sam and wore American flag shorts for the match) famously and coldly says, “If he dies, he dies...”. Another example of bellicose Cold War politics portrayed in film is the 1984 movie, *Red Dawn*. This movie was particularly terrifying to audiences because it portrayed a scenario where Communists from Cuba and Nicaragua, supported by the Soviet arms, advice and tactical nuclear weaponry, were able to occupy most of the US. That movie was also notoriously the product of US foreign policy planners- The director, John Milus famously drafted former Secretary of State Alexander Haig, then on the board of MGM-UA to consult on realism of the scenario presented (Sirota, 2011). Haig, for his part, praised the realism of the final version of the film.

person who played Volkov was from Croatia, and Boris Zhukov, the other half of the Bolsheviks tag team, was born Jim Harrell in Roanoke, Virginia.

As the 1980s came to an end, progress towards nuclear disarmament between the Soviets and the United States became increasingly clear. The populations of both countries began to see each other less as enemies than they had before. This was in large part due to the fact that Mikhail Gorbachev was now leading the Soviet Union and was not subjected to intense US Government vilification. Reagan's successor, George H. W. Bush, whose perceived Cold Warrior status was not seen as "tough" as Reagan's, was able to push and achieve the START treaties of the early 1990s. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the rapid retreat of the Soviet Union from Eastern Europe the American entertainment consumer was ready for a new bad guy. So the foreign menace role began to shift from Soviet/Communist bad guys to other types of official anti-social imagery. Hogan himself would later become a "heel" and while this reversal would be notable in other mediums, fans of wrestling took it in stride and learned to love to hate the new bad guy. In the end, just as in wrestling, the Kayfabe antagonism between the US and the Russians had run its course, and as in wrestling, the American people were startlingly quick to adopt a new narrative about their old enemies.

ELECTIONS BY KAYFABE

Domestic politics also benefit from framing of a narrative about one's opponent using an "us-vs-them" narrative to help create identity. The 2008 election provides an excellent example of politics-by-Kayfabe. Before it was clear that Senator Barack Obama would be the front runner in the 2008 election, few people outside of the State of Illinois had heard of him. If Obama had been a professional wrestler in 2006, he would be a mid-card wrestler, who only ever wrestled in local venues, and rarely ever made it on to television. He would have had a small, dedicated fan-base within his region, but would be next to unknown outside of Illinois, and therefore would draw few supporters nation-wide.

The 2008 primary contest with Hillary Clinton had the effect of battle-hardening Obama and exposing him to a national audience for the first time. But the showdown with Clinton was essentially the show-before-the-Show. And at this point, the real Kayfabe kicked in. Early in the primary contest, questions about Obama's citizenship began to emerge. These questions were initially associated with Clinton's campaign (Smith and Tau, 2011), but the effect was to raise a doubt in the minds of voters who were looking for some excuse to disqualify Obama from office. Wherever the challenge to Obama's citizenship began, it was ultimately picked up by the "bookers" on the political Right, who inaugurated various whisper campaign tactics to spread the idea that perhaps Obama was not from the US in the minds of Republican voters. The challenge around Obama's birth certificate was absolutely necessary to create a storyline that Obama was a dangerous "other", to be feared, then hated, then opposed. For those who saw him in these terms, Obama became a "Kenyan Muslim Socialist", somehow not truly "American".¹⁰

These insinuations, which did not necessarily need to be substantiated, were stoked nonetheless, to some degree by the Republican Campaign of John McCain and Sarah Palin, who were playing on the pre-existing prejudices and fears common in certain segments of the

¹⁰ A Reuters article, from January 2008, demonstrated that the association of Obama with a Kenyan "socialist" who also seemed to support Islamic interests was already fairly widely trafficked even by this time. The article went to lengths to demonstrate that the connection was not accurate, according to an unnamed "uncle". But this did not stop the rumor from spreading among Obama's opponents: in fact, it was useful to help them construct their own identity by constructing Obama as an "other". (Mukoya and Malherbe, 2008)

American population. This framework was reinforced by commentators on political radio. It got so bad that in mid-October, McCain went off script and tried to walk back comments from spectators at one Minnesota rally. There several people vocally repeated the points coming from the McCain campaign and those who affiliated themselves with the campaign which suggested that Obama was not American, and inspired fear among McCain's supporters. McCain, a long time public servant and former POW, was by this point probably quite chagrined. But if he thought the optics of people repeating the talking points his own campaign had encouraged were bad, the results of him breaking the Kayfabe angle were even worse. He grabbed the microphone from one woman who said she could not trust Obama because he was an "Arab", called Obama a "decent" man, and was subsequently booed by the crowd.¹¹

But where did this perception come from? We argue that painting Obama in these terms, to the point where the argument that he was a foreigner, or a "socialist" or that he was pro-Islam was useful to both McCain and Obama campaigns in 2008. McCain and Obama could have debated policy the entire campaign, and then very few people would have tuned in. However, when the election became about the spectacle, this is when the temperatures rose and the activists came out in support for their chosen candidate. In other words, when the narrative was fixed that either Obama was some untrustworthy "other" in the minds of his opponents, and was therefore a danger to the country or conversely, that McCain courted the support of fanatical idiots, and was therefore a danger to the country, then people became invested in the election. We can look at data to find out essentially when this happened. Gallup's Daily Tracking Poll for 2008 follows the trends from that year. Between the March and late June, there was very little difference between popular support for the two campaigns. Obama looked like he would jump out ahead in the summer, but his lead was erased in time for the convention. It was not until after the conventions, late in September that Obama began to pull away and the "undecided" voters disappeared from existence, for all intents and purposes. (Gallup 2008)

Our argument is that at this point, the message of both campaigns became fixed in the minds of those answering the polls. The narrative had become a self-perpetuating story. The campaigns built talking points around it and crafted them into standard stump speeches. News media covered those stump speeches as if they were "news", and then the talking points were repeated back to pollsters by the electorate as if they were a reflection of reality. In the 2008 elections, voters were acting like spectators to a wrestling event. For them, the storyline became real, and it generated action. The campaigns benefitted because voters had internalized their message, the media benefitted because people were glued to constant coverage of the campaign, and the voters benefitted because they felt an ownership for their campaigns. Each group of supporters had their own "face", and the opponent was the "heel."

By the time the woman at the McCain rally called Obama an Arab, factual reality did not matter: She was going to proceed in her life as if he had always been an "Arab", with all the connotations that go along with that term in the minds of those for whom that label is salient. In her mind, Obama was the "heel of all heels", a completely untrustworthy and illegitimate foreign "other". And when McCain broke the Kayfabe, and explained that he thought Obama was a decent man, he was ridiculed by that crowd. McCain had been thus far successful in framing Obama in terms he was now directly contradicting. He disabused the crowd, for one moment, of their illusions that Obama was some sort of monster which needed to be stopped at all costs. After that day, he never did it again.

¹¹ CBS news reported this, while making sure to also report Obama's connection to William Ayres, so opponents have called a "terrorist". (Bentley, 2008)

CONCLUSION

As these two cases demonstrate, politicians use the same techniques that wrestling promoters use when developing support for their chosen narratives and actors. Professional wrestling then becomes an excellent analogy for the creation and the mobilization of mass opinion, most especially in advanced democracies. The result can be called “government by Kayfabe”, where everyone buys into the narrative that while the rivalries are not nearly as exciting as they appear to be, nonetheless the people, political leaders, and news media outlets all benefit from a willing suspension of disbelief. The people get to feel as if they have some investment in public policy when their opinion is actually rarely taken into account. The politicians can drum up support for both political campaigns and for policies, which is necessary in a democracy. And the news media outlets get to sell commercials and underwrite their own revenue stream. Like the knowledge that professional wrestling is all a “work”, Government by Kayfabe does not appear to present too much of a problem for most of the players involved.

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