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The personal, the political and the popular

A woman's guide to celebrity politics

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ABSTRACT This article looks at articulations of gender, politics and citizenship by examining two European female heads of state: Tarja Halonen (Finland) and Angela Merkel (Germany). It discusses their personae in the context of emerging public debate about the merits and shortcomings of what is nowadays called 'celebrity politics', constituted by popularization and personalization. The analysis suggests that the increasing presence of popular culture in politics presents a complex and often unfavourable arena to women because of its inbuilt and extreme polarization of femininity and politics. It shows how Tarja Halonen and Angela Merkel have bypassed the personalization of politics and present a thoroughly political and professional persona to the public, rigidly concealing their private lives. As a result, female politicians – at least the two heads of state analysed here – tend to represent a classic ideal of political citizenship with clear boundaries and singular codes and conventions.

KEYWORDS *Angela Merkel, citizenship, gender, political communication, Tarja Halonen*

Introduction

The phenomenon of women as heads of state seems to have become less uncommon in the past decades. Countries as diverse as Finland, Ireland and Latvia have had female presidents, in both Ireland and Finland for the second consecutive time. In Germany, the Christian Democrats saw their female leader Angela Merkel elected as *Bundeskanzlerin* in 2005, a position never held by a woman before. In the same year, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was elected in Liberia as the first female president on the African continent, while a little later Michele Bachelet won the Chilean election to become the first female leader of the country. After having seen Condoleeza Rice ascend to an unprecedented position of power for a woman, the US is in continuous discussion and anticipation of Hillary Rodham Clinton running for president in 2008, possibly in direct



competition with Rice. Historically and currently, feminists have hailed women in such positions of political leadership as potential agents of change, likely to produce new attention for women's issues in international and national politics, to modify the detached and rational style in these fields and to transgress the rigid separation of public and private life (e.g. Kruks, 2001). Complementary, feminist political theorists have expected the potential of women in the political field to disrupt traditional exclusive codes and conventions of good (political) citizenship, and open it up to a more inclusive understanding of citizenship as an intersection of political, cultural and social dimensions of inclusion (e.g. Mackay, 2001). This article takes up these claims by examining two European heads of state – Tarja Halonen (Finland) and Angela Merkel (Germany) – in the context of emerging public debate about the merits and shortcomings of what is nowadays called 'celebrity politics'. Halonen and Merkel were selected because both had just run a winning election campaign in which they had to present a convincing articulation of 'woman' and 'head of state', and in which the demands of celebrity politics were highly visible.

While discussions of gender, politics and citizenship have accompanied the emergence of female political leaders ever since the feminist movement of the 1900s, what distinguishes the current generation from their predecessors is their ascendance to power in profoundly mediated contexts. The key trends that presently distinguish mediated political cultures are popularization and personalization, which are enabled by the still-increasing proliferation of entertainment, the internet, mobile telephony and all combinations of these. Popular US television series that are watched across the globe, for example, have come to offer new horizons for political imagination by portraying a black president in the widely acclaimed Fox thriller *24* and by suggesting the even odder possibility of a female president in the 2005 ABC drama series *Commander in Chief*, in which Mackenzie Allen (played by Geena Davis) weekly shows a US audience of some 30 million that a woman can survive the political bickering of Washington and lead the international community. Similarly, during the seven years of its existence, NBC drama series *The West Wing* gave US viewers a diverse and more inspiring view of political office than traditional political journalism has done (Holbert et al., 2003). Next to such popularized renditions of politics for mass audiences, one-to-one connections with numerous and widespread citizens also have become common practice because of digital technologies, in particular the internet and mobile telephony. Political leaders, representatives and candidates have personal websites, weblogs, email and Short Messaging Service (SMS; 'text') set-ups which make it possible to address and communicate with their constituencies in often informal and casual ways. The greeting of the Belgian prime minister, Guy Verhofstadt, to his website visitors is representative, saying that the internet is a gift from God for politicians, which



makes it possible 'to diminish the ever-threatening distance between governors and citizens'.¹

Popularization and personalization together constitute what habitually has been called 'celebrity politics' and which has evoked strongly contrasting assessments. Current European authors such as Elchardus (2002) and Meyer (2002) have resituated Neil Postman's (1985) judgement of American political culture as colonized by entertainment and warn against a mixture of pop cultural and political discourses in their respective countries (Flanders and Germany). Such 'politainment', as Meyer (2002: 99) calls it, would only tolerate a pseudo, celebrity politician who

counts on his immediate physicality and its hold on the media. It is as though he were projecting a media-ready astral body, and the public, grateful not to be bored by any arguments or factual information, shows its enthusiasm for the sheer entertainment value of his appearance. (2002: 78)

While there are few authors who wholeheartedly embrace the articulation of entertainment and politics, there is a growing movement to explore its possible ramifications in the context of waning political involvement and participation. For example, Corner and Pels write that

consumerism, celebrity, and cynicism (or political indifference), thus together restructure the field for political representation and citizenship, downplaying traditional forms of ideological and party-based allegiance and foregrounding matters of aesthetics and style. (2003: 7)

In this emerging and intensifying dispute, there is very little attention for the gendered corollaries of celebrity politics. Combating male scholars tend to ignore the gender dimensions of the debate altogether; feminist political scientists have looked at other aspects such as issue and campaign strategies, press coverage and the experience of female politicians (e.g. Norris, 1997a); scholars of female celebrity have examined the stars of popular culture and sports (e.g. Gledhill, 1991) but have not looked at politicians. In my own research, I have examined the limitations and opportunities that the personalization of political culture produce for female politicians in some detail (van Zoonen, 1998, 2000), and explored gender subtexts of popularized politics (van Zoonen, 2005). This article combines these two lines of work in order to examine whether and how the presence and representation of female political leadership in celebrity politics articulates new dimensions to societal inclusion and exclusion, and new forms of good political citizenship. First, the articulation of celebrity, gender and politics will be discussed in more detail, then there will be a focus on the presence and representation of Tarja Halonen and Angela Merkel to identify and analyse the processes of popularization and personalization in which they engage and are confronted.



Politics, fame and celebrity

Looking up the word 'celebrity' in any standard English dictionary generally produces a definition along the lines of 'being famous', which moves the search to the meaning of 'fame'. Fame is regularly described as 'public estimation', 'reputation' or 'renown'.² In the common sense understanding that dictionaries reflect, fame and celebrity are considered to be dependent upon the recognition of others and upon a certain degree of public visibility. Thus, fame and celebrity become unmistakably gendered qualifications because public visibility is not evenly distributed among women and men, and because they do not carry the same meanings. In more theoretical understandings of fame and celebrity, the two are defined regularly as distinct from each other. 'Celebrity' is a product of the publicity produced by the 20th and 21st century mass media, whereas 'fame' has a longer history as the typification resulting from outstanding and publicly recognized achievements (see Giles, 2000). Building on this distinction, one is tempted to suggest that fame is primarily a man's preserve for it is built on public achievements, whereas celebrity would be a woman's domain because it is predicated on being (in the media) rather than doing. Although one does not find such a crude distinction in the celebrity literature, it is common to see the distinction between 'fame' and 'celebrity' described in the gendered terms of fame being contingent on a culture of production and celebrity connected to a culture of consumption (see Marshall, 1997). Yet both fame and celebrity tend to exclude women from the political field, albeit in different ways.

The public-private divide on which the exclusion of women from politics has been built has prevented women's achievement of 'fame'. Marshall (1997) describes how great achievement in pre-modern times resulted in public reputations of heroism and genius. The realms in which these could come about were religion, politics and the arts – all fields not particularly open to women. In fact, as Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1988) shows in her history of public speech, women were actively excluded from achieving fame not only because of their discursive and social position as private persons, but also because of vigorous restrictions on their speech. Jamieson goes through a variety of material and discursive means that were used to silence women: ducking stools, gagging and the gossip's bridle were all physical measures exercised in public to enforce women's silence: 'Long after ducking stools and gossip bridles had become curiosities in museums, the silence they enforced and the warnings they imposed continued to haunt women' (Jamieson, 1988: 68). The means to do so changed from physical to discursive: women engaging in speech acts considered inappropriate, especially those directed against institutional representatives such as the clergy, science or the law, were labelled 'whore', 'hysterics' or 'witches'. And, of course, they would be vulnerable to prosecution. As a result, Jamieson argues, a specific 'feminine style' of speech



developed which was consistent with women's role in the family and traditional notions of femininity. Although one would think of these as processes of times gone by, Templin's analysis of press cartoons about Hillary Clinton suggests that they are still firmly in place:

That the fantasy of silencing Hillary has great power is seen in the many cartoons . . . picturing a restrained and silenced Hillary – muzzled, a zipper for lips, in a box with air holes. The message is that the country would be better off if Hillary kept quiet. (1999: 32)

As the public recognition of exceptional achievements, 'fame' is a quality that is difficult for women to obtain because of their historical exclusion from the public sphere. 'Celebrity' is a no-less problematic attribute, because it confines female politicians to notions of femininity which are not easily transposed to the political field. Celebrity refers to being well known because of mass media exposure. That exposure can be the result of extra-media fame, and in that case, celebrity and fame collapse; but celebrity is also an independent product of the media themselves. The Hollywood star system is commonly seen as the historical source of celebrity culture. Biographies of stars and histories of studios have shown how Hollywood tried to transfer movie codes of masculinity and femininity onto male and female actors and their real lives (Dyer, 1979). Although not always successful, and although stories of actors trying to escape from their image abound, 'celebrity' is built structurally on the confluence of media appearance with the real lives of performers. As a result, female celebrity is articulated primarily with the codes and conventions of media representations of women; of Hollywood conventions initially and an amalgam of television, pop music and advertising images later. MacDonald (1995) argues that these representations can be brought back to four popular myths of femininity: as enigmatic and threatening, as nurturing and caring, as sexuality, and as a bodily practice. Inevitably, female celebrities will be constructed from these mythologies. For Gledhill (1991: xv), who takes Hollywood cinema as her frame of reference, this means that the female star will become necessarily 'a focus of visual pleasure for an apparently masculine spectator, the epitome of the male fetish'. Similarly, taking a broader media ensemble as his departure point, Gamson (2001) argues that female sexuality and female celebrity are interlinked within an incessantly reworked 'virgin-whore' discourse.³ One might contend that recent female celebrities have subverted myths of femininity by explicitly playing with them and reinventing them. Madonna, the female megastar of the 1980s and 1990s, did not build her celebrity on a stable myth of femininity but on a continuous change of styles and performance (Schwichtenberg, 1993). In fact, contemporary femininity seems to have become about the constant recreation of the self



through changing hairstyle, dress, appearance and – ultimately – plastic surgery (Davis, 1995). Yet, however provocative such transgressions might have been, the volatility of contemporary female celebrity does not offer a helpful cultural frame for female politicians any more than previous, more stable models of female celebrity did. Female celebrity remains built primarily on the appearance of the body, and the instability of changing appearances is not the kind of reliable image that a politician would want to project for herself. Thus most notions of female celebrity do not travel easily to the political field. Writing about political ‘superstars’, Schwartzberg (1977) says that female politicians have only limited options in celebrity politics. They need to mask their femininity and imitate men, otherwise accusations of being frivolous, coquettish and – worst of all – loose, will be their lot.⁴ As a result, Schwartzberg continues, charming leadership – a definite style for male politicians based on an understanding of politics as the art of seduction – is no option for women because of the sexual connotations. According to Schwartzberg, the only feminine model of celebrity available to women in politics would be that of the mother, tying into myths of femininity as nurturing and caring.

Mother Finland

Finland was the first European country to hand women the right to vote and be elected (in 1906). In 2000, social democrat Tarja Halonen was elected as the first female president of Finland; in 2006 she was the first woman to be re-elected as president. Halonen’s political persona contains a number of issues that are pertinent to the position of women in politics, and the specific challenges that celebrity politics poses to them. As a ‘first woman to’, immediately after her election Halonen became an international celebrity. By virtue of being a woman in an unusual position and without doing much yet, she became news in the international papers and on TV. At that moment she was in her mid-fifties and mother of a grown-up daughter. Her marital status was an instant issue: while the Finns did not seem to object to Halonen’s long-term relationship with her second partner, in order to clarify his status abroad the couple married immediately after the 2000 elections.

Halonen’s age and life-cycle when she came to power is fairly typical for women in similar positions; either they do not have children or their children have grown up. Mothers with young children are hard to find in upper-level politics because of both practical and cultural obstacles. In Halonen’s case, the less acute tasks of real motherhood were easily replaced with those of symbolic motherhood to the whole country. Her unwavering popularity is said to be rooted in her easy contact with the Finns, her sense of humour and her nurturing qualities. With such qualities it was inevitable that Halonen would soon acquire praise for being a



mother to the nation, and apparently she has benefited from this culturally-approved model of female leadership. Finnish citizens are said to have re-elected her because of her nurturing and caring qualities, because of her being a president to all Finns. Yet, while the mother role presents a safe and productive image for female leaders, Halonen's case shows that it is not an invincible bastion, especially not in confrontation with other mainstream expectations of femininity. Halonen's former role as chair of the organization Seta, the Finnish national organization for gay rights, armed her opponents with easy ammunition to undermine her presidential persona. In popular conversation (locker rooms, bars, schoolyards, etc.), jokes about Halonen's sexual orientation were not uncommon. However, national outrage broke out when the populist member of parliament for the right-wing True Finns Party and former boxer, Tony Halme, said in a 2003 radio interview: 'We have a lesbian as president and me as parliamentarian. Everything seems possible' (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tarja_Halonen). It was widely considered malicious and Halme was forced to apologize. In the 2006 elections, Halonen's campaign was confronted with a more complex challenge that was articulated also on hegemonic expectations of femininity – in this case, physical beauty. US late-night talk show host Conan O'Brien, whose show also airs on Finnish TV five days a week, 'discovered' in autumn 2005 that his looks resembled those of Tarja Halonen and that therefore they must have been twins separated at birth. O'Brien is 42 years old and generally considered good-looking; Halonen is in her sixties and not thought of as particularly handsome. The similarity became a running joke in the show which intensified during the elections. O'Brien endorsed Halonen's candidacy and when asked why, he said: 'Because she's got the total package: a dynamic personality, a quick mind, and most importantly – my good looks' (see <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/01/15/AR2006011500987.html>). O'Brien's team also produced mock political advertisements in favour of Halonen, one showing him fishing on a frozen lake with two Finns, discussing the elections. When mentioning Halonen's opponent, a fish jumps out of the fishing hole and kills itself on the ice, the joke being that fish recognize bad leaders. Each joke about Halonen in the Conan O'Brien show was repeated and blown up in the Finnish tabloids the next day, creating an unexpected intermedial political carnival around her candidacy and looks, the electoral impact of which was hard to predict (and has not yet been established).⁵ Halonen's opponents were not amused and accused O'Brien of making fun of Finnish democracy. However, the Halonen campaign chose to go along with the joke and placed its real advertisements in the commercial breaks before the show. Halonen herself met with O'Brien briefly when he came to Finland after the elections (see <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/01/15/AR2006011500987.html>).

Halonen's case shows how discourses of femininity can be both an asset 293

and a threat to female leaders. Maybe this two-sided articulation of gender is the reason why female leaders often opt for a low-key performance of femininity. While Halonen has presented herself in connection with symbolic expressions of motherhood (Vuorela, 2003), her overall presentation does not bring her gender to the fore; her style and colour of clothing, for example, is usually unobtrusive. Her presidential website (www.tpk.fi/english/), designed in dark blue, white and a touch of beige in classic typography, presents an image of her as a thoroughly politically-engaged woman who, from her student and trade union activism to her current position as head of the Finnish state, has taken on issues as diverse as social equality, justice and foreign affairs. The site contains mostly information about upcoming events, press releases and constitutional information about the institution of the presidency and past Finnish presidents. Under the link 'spouse', one finds a sober biography of her husband. The link 'pictures' connects one to pictures of state visits, of the presidential 'cats and turtles', to the official wedding picture and to her 'private album'. There one finds a rather formal portrait of her husband, a medium close-up portrait of her daughter holding a cat, a portrait of Halonen herself in official wear in the presidential quarters, and more pictures of cats. While one might have expected more informal snapshots of family life in a section called 'private album', one does not find photos of the president in informal settings with her family members. The pictures are all placed against a simple white background and contribute to the overall solemn and restrained character of the website. It is tempting to conclude that the site reflects the no-nonsense attitude of the president herself and, partly, this may be the case. However, there is another personal website for Tarja Halonen (<http://www.tarjahalonen.fi/>), which consists of a main page only containing a portrait of Halonen, wearing make-up and smiling into the camera. The orange, white and blue colours of the site match the colour of Halonen's hair and jacket in the picture, and mirror the white and blue colours of the Finnish flag. This page is not so much a website as it is an online poster for campaign purposes – the 'j' in Tarja is embellished with a red dot, which presents a softer Halonen than the presidential persona to the electorate, telling them in words and visuals that Halonen is 'Koko kansan presidentti' (the people's president).

Kohl's girl, or Germany's 'Iron Lady'

Angela Merkel, the German *Bundeskanzlerin* since 2005, also has two personal websites: one dedicated to her as officeholder, the other to her as Angela Merkel, Christian Democratic Union (CDU) politician (<http://www.angela-merkel.de/> and <http://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/>). The *Bundeskanzlerin* site is remarkably similar to Halonen's presidential site; it is soberly designed with grey and cream text blocks against a white background. The site contains constitutional information about the office,



press releases, interviews, speeches and upcoming events of the *Bundeskanzlerin*. It also contains a link, 'Person', which leads to a simple A4 image of a typed CV, listing her professional functions since finishing her studies. Her other website positions her in her role as CDU candidate, welcoming visitors in their role of citizens ('Liebe Bürgerinnen und Bürger'). The site has a livelier design, with stylized portraits of a smiling Merkel and sections entitled 'Politik', 'Person' and 'Aktuelles'. The political section is the most extensive; in the personal section one finds information about her career, political motivations and how she spends her leisure time. There are no photos from her private life nor pictures of her husband, pets, friends or family members.

Apparently, Angela Merkel and Tarja Halonen have bypassed the personalization of politics, so lamented in current political cultures. They both present a thoroughly political and professional persona to the public and rigidly conceal their private lives. For Merkel, the invisibility of her private persona and private life was such that it became an issue in the election campaign. Her political career was known well enough: raised in East Germany as a daughter of a Lutheran pastor, she was a high achiever at school and university. She studied at the Berlin Academy of Sciences and wrote her dissertation on 'The calculation of speed constants of elementary reactions in simple carbohydrates'. While she was a member of communist youth organizations, she only became politically active after the fall of the Berlin Wall and joined the CDU. Then-*Bundeskanzler* Helmut Kohl adopted her politically, because – as the story has it – as a young, former East-German woman, she combined three features otherwise absent in the old boys' network of the CDU. Kohl habitually referred to Merkel as 'Das Mädchen' ('The Girl'), which quickly earned Merkel the nickname of 'Kohl's girl'. She must have had some other capacities as well, since she survived the CDU financial scandals and was the catalyst for the downfall of Kohl and other implicated CDU prominents; she rapidly rose to power, becoming CDU's chairwoman first and their main candidate for the elections in 2005. The national and international press then wondered whether she would become Germany's 'Iron Lady', drawing an inevitable parallel to Margaret Thatcher, who also has an intellectual background in the sciences, outdid the male old guard of the UK Conservative Party and campaigned on economic reforms.

Merkel's nickname was not the only thing that changed in her climb to the CDU leadership. Her appearance and style has been the butt of jokes since the beginning of her public career. There seems to have been a special gesture for her in German deaf language, signalling a rectangle reflecting her hairstyle. While Merkel herself does not care much about her appearance and style – she once snapped at a comment about her dull looks that one was fortunate if one had so few worries – her position as CDU leader forced her into a complete make-over. Her pudding-basin haircut was transformed into a Hillary Clinton-like soft wave, and while



her usual black trouser suits matched the CDU colours well, she also began to wear softer orange-shaded jackets (also a CDU colour), complete with matching make-up and jewellery. That the image did not fit her well became clear when a photographer caught her waving to the crowd in a peach gala dress with a sweat spot under her armpit. An intense debate followed, in which alternately her unfashionable persona and the national obsession with her style were criticized.

The style change was part of a larger attempt to temper Merkel's image as a rational, cold, non-compromising politician who lacked the smooth manners of the West. Although this presented an appealing contrast to the increasingly distrusted flamboyance of incumbent 'Medienkanzler' Gerhard Schröder, Merkel did need – in campaign terms – an agreeable and especially visible private life and persona. Merkel is in her second marriage, does not have children and has always been extremely reserved about her private life. CDU observers have attributed this to her past in East Germany, where every disclosure of private thoughts and experience could become the subject of Stasi persecution (see Langguth, 2005). However reasonable this may seem as an explanation, it also assumes that the private life and personalities of politicians should be public features of German political personae, and if they are not, it can only be an aberration due to East-German state oppression. Merkel's terse and rational performance may match well with Habermasian notions of public debate and deliberation, but it obviously conflicted deeply with the way that the CDU spin doctors envisaged a successful candidate. And thus, *Bild und Sonntag*, never the most thorny of the CDU community, published a spread about Angela Merkel's private world, in which she was presented on a fishing trip with her husband. The story (particularly the picture) backfired, because Merkel was shown wearing baggy tracksuit bottoms and worn cheap sneakers.

Merkel's case, like Halonen's, shows clearly what perilous grounds female politicians tread when trying to comply with the requirements of celebrity politics, namely personalization and popularization. While the upgrading of Merkel's image to softer and more personal tones was rather obvious to journalists and voters and on the verge of overproducing the candidate, the adoption of the Rolling Stones' song *Angie* as Merkel's campaign anthem produced an explicit mismatch between the woman and her promotion. The Rolling Stones and the CDU were not a very likely combination to begin with, and in a public statement drawing widespread international attention the band threatened to sue Merkel and the CDU if they did not stop using the song. In addition, the song lyrics were not very auspicious either. The first lines of the song lyrics could be read as an expression of the need for political change ('Angie, when will these clouds all disappear?'), but the question further in the song ('Angie, ain't it time we said goodbye?') enabled her opponents to make fun of Merkel and hijack the song for their own purposes. Merkel herself, finally, known for



her lack of interest in popular music, was visibly not at ease with the musical spectacle around her public manifestations.

With Merkel's tight election to *Bundeskanzlerin*, the storm around her persona has faded and after some successes in foreign policy and diplomacy, at the time of writing (March 2006) she is leading the German political polls. The Germans elected the word 'Bundeskanzlerin' as the best word of the year in 2005, and it may be that her performance as head of state is now taking precedence in public opinion over her performance as a woman.

Gender, celebrity politics and citizenship

While Halonen and Merkel are fairly different women with opposite political allegiances, their encounters with celebrity politics contain remarkable similarities. Both women are reticent about opening up their private personae to the scrutiny of the media and public, which the latter mostly find problematic; both women are subject to continuous comment and derision about their appearance and style; both women ran into risky confrontations with popular culture, with Halonen handling her encounter with Conan O'Brien with humour and Merkel being apprehensive and ill-advised about her articulation as 'Angie'. Several questions emerge from a double case study such as this one, the first being which parts of the results are due to the particular biographies of the two individual women, and which ones allow for a more general assessment of the articulation of gender, politics and celebrity culture.

The sheer exceptionality of Halonen, Merkel and other female heads of state certainly necessitates situated analyses which do not contrast biographies and gender discourse, but which instead examine the particular articulation of these two dimensions in particular instances. For example, looking at the increased attention given to appearance and style, the Halonen and Merkel cases may suggest that a formerly particularly gendered phenomenon has become a general obsession now. Earlier generations of female heads of state have been subjected to similar jokes and comments about their looks, as have Halonen and Merkel (e.g. Norris, 1997b). However, current celebrity politics makes political leaders appear on the platforms of entertainment, sports, music and other pop cultural venues where dress and looks are key measurements of success. Both Halonen and Merkel were caught off-guard by popular culture's style pundits, with Merkel on a red carpet with a sweat spot, Halonen by an American talk show host. Increasingly, male politicians are faced with similar mania. Popular and serious media harassed the former German *Bundeskanzler*, Gerhard Schröder, for months with the question of whether he had dyed his hair or not. Critics of the Dutch social democrat leader Wouter Bos have said that his success is due to his good looks and his 'cute little ass' – qualifications which have not left him. Yet, while



individual male and female politicians may have to come to terms with the same kinds of pressures, on the level of gender discourse celebrity politics seems to produce a stronger symbolic distance than before between hegemonic ideas of femininity and the political sphere. The hyper-femininity of current celebrity culture and post-feminism, with fashion, sexuality, glamour and consumption as core ingredients (Hollows and Moseley, 2006), construes female politicians as exceptions to the feminine mainstream, who are part of another distant world. As a result, female heads of state and female politicians in general, more extremely than before, are 'others' to dominant images of femininity while remaining 'others' in the political sphere, due to their minority position. As Merkel's and Halonen's cases testify, exceptionality can work to particular women's advantage, but it is always a potential source of problems.

In this context, it is interesting that neither Halonen nor Merkel use their websites for personalized one-to-one contact with their people, which would facilitate a more individualized perception of them, contrasting the gender deviance articulated by celebrity politics. The mode of address of the sites is formal, there is no obvious invitation for interaction or feedback other than inconspicuous links to 'contact'; the personal motivations and gratifications of these two heads of state are almost absent. Here, one might suspect an unspoken denial of stereotypical gender expectations, with Halonen and Merkel consciously presenting their rational, pragmatic, issue-oriented characters rather than a more affable political persona inviting visitors to an amiable chat. The latter possibly would fit the informal mode of celebrity culture better, but inevitably would be framed in traditional stereotypes of femininity, a connection both women seem to avoid persistently. A similar reluctance is demonstrated in the way that Halonen and Merkel handle attention to their private lives, another key resource in celebrity politics. Both Halonen and Merkel more or less refuse to show, let alone exploit, their private personae and life as a political asset. The information they present on their website is thin and symbolic rather than revealing. This could be easily interpreted as a result of a particular individual's preference rooted in their respective biographies and generations, if it were not that other leading female politicians have shown the same reticence. Hillary Clinton, for example, refused to make her private life a part of her campaign for the New York senate; Dutch Green leader Femke Halsema resents the way that election campaigns force her to talk about her newborn twins and discuss her youth with journalists. Their unwillingness may rest on tacit knowledge that attention given to women's private lives often signals the tension that they themselves and society experience between private and public duties. Male politicians may show their private lives to suggest that they are complete human beings combining caring and working responsibilities. That does not necessarily mean that all politicians will call upon their private personae and private lives to enhance their political opportunities; on the contrary, many of them



resent this as much as the women discussed here. Nevertheless, it is a possible political resource, while the private lives of female politicians mostly signify their odd position as unusual family members (or lacking a family altogether) and as unusual politicians (see van Zoonen, 2000). Like appearance, private life is a potential site of trouble for female politicians, not because it contains the danger of sexual scandal as it does for men, but because it is a continuous reminder of women's odd choice of public mission instead of private fulfilment. There are individual and cultural specificities complementing this general picture: adding to Merkel's reluctance may be, for example, her husband's straightforward rejection of the 'First Husband' position. He hardly appears with her in public. The Finns did not necessarily need Halonen to marry her male partner, but the international community, less at ease with Finnish relational mores, did. Hillary Clinton's need for privacy has been exacerbated by her husband's public humiliations. No wonder then that so many female politicians seem to have thought it better not to have a family than one presenting such recurring hazards to their public persona.

The analysis presented here begs for further research in order to produce more definite understandings of the articulation of gender, politics and citizenship in celebrity culture. The tendency found in the Halonen and Merkel cases suggests that women – willingly or not – may end up as the last keepers of traditional modernist ideas of politics as a separate sphere in which rational actors and representatives publicly deliberate and decide on the course of society. The confluence of the popular and the political, typical for celebrity politics, presents a complex and unfavourable arena to women because of its inbuilt and extreme polarization of femininity and politics. A further feature of celebrity politics which tends to work out better for men than for women is the convergence of personal and political life into a hybrid political persona. In fact, the prominent attention given to the private persona and family life of female politicians runs the risk of attracting attention to their non-standard gender choices, which may be the reason why so often female politicians tend to retreat within the boundaries of the political sphere. Thus celebrity politics seems to work in two gendered ways. For male politicians, it makes a transgression of the dualisms of modernist politics and political citizenship possible, mixing the personal, political and popular and showing how contemporary (political) citizenship is located at the intersection of political, cultural and personal concerns. In contrast, female politicians – at least the two heads of state analysed here – represent a more classic ideal of political citizenship, with clear boundaries and singular codes and conventions. Therefore, one may want to conclude that celebrity politics is a pop-cultural realization of feminist ideals about the personal being political and new hybrid forms of citizenship which (paradoxically) excludes women once again. Whether more feminist articulations of politics and popular culture than the ones found in



Halonen and Merkel are accessible or even feasible is a matter for further research and reflection.

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Notes

1. Original quote: 'Voor de politicus is het een "godsgeschenk" dat bovendien de altijd dreigende afstand tussen bestuurders en burgers kan verkleinen. Daar ben ik het internet zeer dankbaar voor. Wat mensen dichter bij elkaar brengt, brengt ook de overheid dichterbij' (see <http://www.premier.fgov.be/nl/>).
2. All these definitions have been taken from <http://www.dictionary.com>.
3. Although Gamson uses the concept 'female publicity', his arguments apply similarly to 'female celebrity'.
4. Paraphrase based on the Dutch translation of Schwartzberg (1977).
5. Personal communication with Tom Möring, political scientist and campaign watcher, University of Helsinki.

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