
Political Performance and Active Spectatorship: Symbolically Organizing the Polity During the 2012 Democratic National Convention

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of an ethnographic study of the 2012 Democratic National Convention. We argue that literatures on journalistic and political fields can be combined with scholarship on performance theory to provide an interpretative framework for understanding conventions as contemporary media events. Empirically, we detail the layered production of performance in the journalistic and political fields, arguing that performances were directed both internally and across fields for strategic advantage, as well as for the public at-large. We conclude with a discussion of the implications for democratic practice. We argue that performances are both a way for actors to coordinate work and provide shared, integrative spaces for the polity. We conclude by arguing that media events provide forums for practices of ‘active spectatorship’ that serve as paths to political authority and ultimately consent, if not necessarily political power.
There, at the end of a dark, cavernous walkway ringed by restaurants and stores hawking designer clothes, rose an enormous stage flanked by a large video screen on stage right and a three story tall banner wrapped around elevator banks on stage left. On the banner were the visages displayed on mock political pins of MSNBC anchors Chris Matthews, Al Sharpton, Ed Schultz, Rachel Maddow, and Lawrence O’Donnell. Chris Matthews, visible from the back as I approached, sat hunched over a massive half circle-table, a scrolling teleprompter displaying white sentences in the recesses of stage left. Around the stage, which rose approximately five feet into the air, stood a crowd, fifteen deep in parts. Cheers erupted when, right before commercial breaks, a massive boom mic swept over the crowd from three stories above. The audience around me waved and jumped up and down as the video cameras on stage panned the crowd before and after commercial breaks. Mobile phones repeatedly shot into the air to capture Matthews’s lanky, hulking form and the profiles of his guests. Field notes, September 5, 2012.

In their classic 1953 study of MacArthur Day, Eugene Lang and Gladys Engel Lang captured a time when the mediated audience for political events was becoming more important for political actors than live audiences. In turn, the Langs (1953) demonstrated how media itself shaped the embodied experience of the event. In the 60 years since this work, scholars have extended these insights, showing how media shapes perceptions of movements among participants (Gitlin, 1980), activists train themselves to conform with perceived news values (Sobieraj, 2011), and a range of political actors orient themselves to journalistic norms (Cook, 1998).

Despite the extensive insights of this body of work, it goes only so far in helping us understand the scene described in the field notes above. In the literature, it is the spectators, activists, and elected officials at political events who perform for journalists, not the other way around. And yet, in the four official days of the 2012 Democratic National Convention, and the swarm of gatherings around Charlotte that preceded it, the scene above was echoed, albeit to a more modest extent, at physical locations throughout the city. Near the MSNBC stage was the ‘CNN Grill,’ a former Mexican cantina commandeered for live broadcasts by personalities such
as Piers Morgan. The grill routinely featured a ‘private party’ sign after 5 p.m. Bloomberg News took over a former Gold’s Gym and set up a multi-media center called “Bloomberg Link” which played host to cocktail parties, panels, and live broadcasts, and which was closed for private events every evening researchers tried to gain access with their media credentials. The Huffington Post, a relative newcomer in the journalism world, hosted a meditative relaxation studio called ‘Oasis,’ the walls and furniture of which were drenched in luminous white. Google built a multi-media space replete with free candy, a coffee bar, futuristic chairs, and a YouTube broadcast studio (tellingly, the Google Hangout was open to the public for just a single day before being restricted to those with official DNC media credentials.)

These spaces were highly visible, ornamental accents on the more traditional forms of journalistic production that took shape around the speeches of the Democratic Party’s influential figures inside the Time Warner Cable Arena. Here, most journalists, celebrity and non-celebrity alike, stood on perches high above the stadium floor, or sat behind desks in skyboxes looking down upon, or being framed by, the proceedings below. Others obtained press credentials that provided them with access to the arena floor where they could comment upon the proceedings and interview participating delegates. Meanwhile, production teams of reporters, researchers, and analysts toiled away in the basement of the Charlotte Convention Center, a carefully demarcated space apportioned according to purchase. Some of these heavily curtained spaces were large enough to encompass rows and rows of long tables with journalists and editors toiling away behind desktop computers; other, smaller outlets occupied closet-sized rooms barely large enough to fit a folding table; still other, seemingly independent journalists worked at long communal tables with desk lamps and a few electrical outlets.
This paper argues that these disparate scenes, all drawn from ethnographic fieldwork, should be interpreted as performances propagated by an array of actors, directed towards multiple audiences, that took shape across diverse spaces, and for varying ends. We define performance in terms of sociologist Jeffrey Alexander’s (2004, 529) developed body of work:

Cultural performance is the social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation. This meaning may or may not be one to which they themselves subjectively adhere; it is the meaning that they, as social actors, consciously or unconsciously wish to have others believe. In order for their display to be effective, actors must offer a plausible performance, one that leads those to whom their actions and gestures are directed to accept their motives and explanations as a reasonable account.

We conceptualize the Democratic National Convention as a series of nested and overlapping embodied and mediated performative spheres. While we address both, embodied performance is of particular interest here given the extensive work on media events (Dayan and Katz, 1992) and their digital extensions (Kirk and Schill, 2011; Lipscomb, 2012) that generally overlooks how events are produced at specific locales. Through ethnographic data, we show how the convention was a defined and ritualized moment when the performative infrastructures of the journalistic field and the political field became spatially co-located. We argue that actors in these separate, yet intersecting, fields performed for their own fields and for one another to vie for status, authority, and strategic advantage vis-a-vis competitors. In turn, these actors constituted and performed for a wider mediated public sphere that was not co-present at the convention, but that they needed the consent of to legitimate their authority and role in democratic processes.

We also argue that the new forms of mediated co-presence on social platforms such as Twitter encouraged by all these actors constitute what we call ‘active spectatorship,’ a concept that combines the integrative framework of media events with the trials of legitimation and
authenticity that are central to performance theory. While journalists are often quick to dismiss them as ‘mere theatre,’ conventions are highly ritualistic, integrative events where political contests are legitimated and heroes fashioned (Dayan and Katz, 1992). Alexander (2010) shows how conventions provide stages for political performances aimed at fusing candidates, cultural values, and audiences in ways that enable politicians to become “collective representations” that are vessels for civic hopes and desire. We argue that networked, social media provide new opportunities for citizens to exercise performative scrutiny over political actors.

This paper proceeds in four parts. We begin by discussing the literature on the political and journalistic fields and a body of work on performance from within cultural sociology. We argue that these disparate literatures can be productively combined to provide an interpretative framework for contemporary media events. We then provide a discussion of our methods for this study, which we believe to be the first multi-sited ethnography of a contemporary political convention, conducted in Charlotte over a period of five days. We then present two empirical sections that detail the layered production of performance in the journalistic and political fields, arguing that performances were directed both internally and across fields for strategic advantage, as well as for the public at-large. We conclude with a discussion of the implications for democratic practice. We argue that political and journalistic performances are both a way for actors to coordinate work and provide shared, integrative spaces for the polity. Although media production within these fields limits access to the potential to speak to mass publics, contrary to viewing these performances solely in terms of exclusion, we argue that they provide forums for practices of active spectatorship that serve as paths to political authority and ultimately consent, if not necessarily political power.

**Media Events, Performances, and Fields**
The nature and role of the party convention has changed over the last century. As a result of the nominating reforms set into motion by the McGovern-Frasier Commission following violence at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, the drama of producing a nominee began to play out in the voting booth, not horse-trading on the convention floor (Polsby, 1983). As a result, Farrell (1978) argues that the 1976 Democratic and Republican national conventions served as “legitimation rituals” for their parties, which anointed candidates who embodied and enacted a central theme for governance (see also Pomper, 2007). Smith and Nimmo (1991) read conventions through the lens of spectacle, analyzing the rhetorical strategies that manufactured political unity.

While the conceptual and empirical approaches of these scholars differ, they share common ground in noting a transition from the institutional roles of party conventions (selecting nominees and conducting party business) to the symbolic roles of conventions. Accordingly, the mediatization of conventions has become a key concern in much scholarly work (Edwards, 2005; Edwards and Smith, 2003). For example, an influential body of work has analyzed contemporary conventions as ‘media events.’ Panagopoulos’s (2007) edited volume charts the rise of conventions as media events and details the work of the image specialists involved in their production. This work builds from Dayan and Katz’s (1992) classic book on media events, which they define as shared rituals that interrupt daily life, are broadcast live, follow pre-planned scripts that both reveal and reify social order, and ultimately build social solidarity. To these authors, conventions are integrative events that legitimate democratic contests. The dark side of ritual is the potential for social control. Couldry (2003) argues that mass media create and propagate a “myth of the mediated center” of legitimate authority. In other words, mass media
exercise power in sanctioning official actors to consecrate the body politic (Hepp and Couldry, 2010).

And yet, there are limits to social control in that no one actor controls the conditions for publicity. Dayan and Katz point out that media events such as conventions are premised upon the co-production of organizers, broadcasters, and audiences. Organizers produce the basic script, storyline, and stage for the performance, and then must convince broadcasters to adopt their understandings of the event. Journalists are guided by their sense of news values, professional self-understandings, commitment to serving a generalized public, and routines of media production. Finally, audiences must tune in and embrace their interpellation as citizens of a legitimate social order. By no means is this alignment assured. Journalists can reject the staging of the media event entirely in refusing to cover it, or can provide their own gloss onto its significance. Citizens can refuse to watch or re-interpret the dominant message of the mediated event.

A related body of literature on cultural performance can help us analyze media events such as conventions, although scholars have only taken initial steps at combining the two bodies of work (Alexander, 2004). Theorists have detailed a number of elements to performances, which as discussed above refer to the attempts of social actors to convince others of the meanings of situations and the legitimacy of their actions within them. There are background “collective representations” (ibid.) that provide the shared cultural context for performances, as well as foreground scripts that recombine deep cultural codes in new ways. Real life actors craft and perform these scripts, while audiences observe and evaluate these performances from their own particular social and cultural locations. The success of a performance lies in the alignment or fusion of all these elements.
It is useful to illustrate some of the insights of performance theory through a detailed discussion of Alexander’s (2010) *The Performance of Politics*, which is a developed application of his theoretical work in the context of electoral politics. In Alexander’s formulation, politicians and journalists, as well as their respective audiences, are embedded within a larger “civil sphere” governed by a distinct cultural logic (see also Alexander, 2006). The civil is but one of a number of distinct spheres in a pluralistic society which constitute its boundaries and which its actors must be attuned to, such as religious, market, and family spheres, etc. The civil is distinct from these other domains in that it encompasses the cultural logic of democracy, organized around the values of equality, liberty, and justice.

These values and their attendant ideal expressive practices (such as rational debate, deliberative and truthful expression, and rule-bound impersonal governance) are premised upon deep cultural backgrounds that shape what is legitimate in public life and the scripts that candidates can perform. Successful political performance means fusion between what particular actors do and these background representations. Candidates strive to become the vessels for the civic hopes and desires of citizen audiences through symbolically achieving identification with civic qualities. For example, candidates craft performances in the hopes that audiences will consider them honorable, rationale, and inclusive. Conversely, candidates seek to pollute opponents by linking them to anti-civil qualities, for example portraying opponents as self-interested, irrational, and parochial. Elections are about the symbolic clash of actors who derive scripts from the civil background and vie to become a collective representation of the body politic.

Journalists, in turn, channel performances to wider publics. In this way, journalists, and their political counterparts, enact the ‘performance of politics’ that secures legitimate rule on the
basis of the meaning and morality of the civil sphere. Importantly, journalists also insert themselves as intermediaries between candidates and the public. Journalists critique the performances of candidates, which checks the ability of political actors to manipulate the public and the power of these representations (unchecked cultural power would slide into fascism.) This accords with journalists’ own self-conceptions as being channels for political performances while serving as antagonistic public representatives that strive to keep power accountable.

Sobieraj (2010) captures this dynamic in her study of activist groups that seek to leverage media coverage around conventions to gain visibility in the public sphere:

Unlike national nominating conventions of the past, in which delegates gathered, battled it out, and ultimately anointed a presidential nominee, contemporary conventions are relentlessly choreographed infomercials for the major political parties, offering little in the way of substantive political news. The nominees are predetermined. The speeches are crafted, vetted, and circulated in advance. And delegates serve a symbolic rather than political role as extras on set, micromanaged by staff who ensure perfectly coordinated signs are waved at the appropriate moments. Quadrennial objections come from journalists who decry them as pseudo events amounting to free advertising for the major parties. This objection was most infamously expressed in 1996, when Ted Koppel and his crew walked out on the grounds that there was simply no news to cover.

Koppel’s rejection of the political performance captures how media events are premised upon the buy-in of journalists, as noted above. The party does not control its own means of publicity in being reliant upon the journalist to view the convention as newsworthy and of public interest. One way to conceptualize the interactions of and negotiations between journalists and political actors around events such as conventions is through the concept of ‘fields.’ Since Bourdieu’s (1997) formative body of work, scholars have conceptualized domains of organized activity from movements (Crossley, 2003) to journalism (Benson, 2006) as ‘fields.’ As Fligstein and McAdam (2012, p. 9) argue, a field is a
mesolevel social order in which actors (who can be individual or collective) are attuned to and interact with one another on the basis of shared (which is not to say consensual) understandings about the purposes of the field, relationships to others in the field (including who has power and why), and the rules governing legitimate action in the field.

Fields are composed of a number of different individual and organizational actors that recognize each other, interact, contend for resources, and see themselves engaging in a coherent domain of social activity. Fligstein and McAdam argue that actors vie for resources within fields through cognitive, cultural, and organizational processes such as developing appropriate courses of action, creating shared identities, and developing coalitions. These processes help produce routine contestation and mobilization, as well as work to reproduce and stabilize the contours of the field. Fields in different domains of social activity can both overlap and have relations of dependence and interdependence. Actors can also have cross-cutting relationships with members of other fields, whom they seek to influence for strategic gain, and multiple identities that span different fields (Heaney and Rojas, 2007, 2011).

In their edited volume Benson and Neveu (2005) and their contributors have detailed the workings of the journalistic field, its different axes of cultural and economic capital, and sites of contestation within it. These scholars have also detailed the intersections of the journalistic and political fields. Journalists are reliant upon political actors for information and access, which shapes both content and the distribution of cultural and economic capital in the journalistic field. At the same time, however, political actors are reliant upon the journalistic field for validation, the means of speaking to mass publics, and even resources in the governance process itself. For example, writing from an explicitly new institutionalism perspective, Cook (1998) conceived of journalism as a coherent organizational field that is inextricably interlinked with the political. Journalists occupy a distinct field with a coherent logic, but are also part of the governance
process itself, as they are reliant on the informational subsidies and organization of those they cover. Importantly, journalists also shape the workings of the political field, as actors are attuned to organized and consistent news and production values and seek to leverage journalistic attention for partisan, personal, or policy gain.

Cook’s work goes far in analyzing the dynamic interdependencies of these fields, but little is known empirically about the processes that shape status and cultural power within the journalistic and political fields, the interactions that take shape across fields to influence this, and how fields with unique claims to represent the public maintain their legitimacy. In combining theories of media events, cultural performance, and fields, our goal is to understand the performances of journalists and political actors on their own terms, explicate the stages and scripts they crafted for themselves and for the wider public, and detail the collusion at the site of overlapping performances. We seek to both offer our own normative framework on the convention, and provide a detailed analysis of the embodied experience of the event as a geographic site for the performances of the overlapping fields that broadly constitute the civil sphere.

Further, we seek to understand how conventions, as embodied and mediated events that are produced by journalistic and political actors, are also sites of media production by a far greater range of actors than was present at the time of Dayan and Katz’s writing. As Anderson (2013) reveals, the 2000 conventions saw the launch of the independent activist news platform IndyMedia, making the organization one of the first “to directly pose the question of who counted as a legitimate journalist in an era of low-cost, digital information gathering and distribution.” In 2004, in recognition of the growing resource base of partisan bloggers and in a challenge to professional news producers, the parties began formally credentialing their most
fervent online supporters (Kreiss, 2012). In 2008, the parties expanded their credentialing further, providing opportunities for a host of non-legacy media to cover the event, including bloggers, advocacy organizations, and new media journalistic outlets. While some scholars (Cornfield, 2007; Roberts and Golan, 2005) see in these practices increased openness and participation, we discuss our own empirically-grounded idea of ‘active spectatorship’ that we believe best captures the phenomena of networked media events.

Methods

In the years since the Langs’ (1953) powerful case for field research, the study of mass mediated events such as conventions has largely remained the provenance of scholars using rhetorical and qualitative discourse and content analysis, as well as a few works based on interviews with producers (Garrett, 2007). While these methodological approaches offer great insight, we know little about how contemporary conventions (and media events more generally) are produced and experienced as embodied events that exist in a physical location for a defined period of time.

To explore these dimensions of media events, we conducted what we believe to be the first ethnography of a contemporary political convention. The convention unfolded across five days of official and unofficial events at hundreds of sites throughout Charlotte. We focused our multi-sited observations on locales that we inductively determined to be the major loci for political and journalistic actors once we were in the field: the convention hall that hosted workspaces for the press and delegates; the office space for citizen and credentialed journalists called the PPL; the Charlotte EpiCentre, the massive four-story complex featuring restaurants, shops, and other amenities that was the site of media production for outlets such as CNN, MSNBC, and Bloomberg; and, the convention arena where Democratic Party actors delivered
their speeches and from which the press broadcast daily. The researchers received media credentials for the convention, which provided access into all the official DNC-related sites, including the hall and arena, as well as sites such as the Google Hangout and the FOX News broadcast area. We also received credentials to access the PPL workspace. We did not have access to private media work and entertainment spaces such as the CNN Grill, which we attempted to access as members of the public.

The research team arrived in Charlotte on September 1, 2012 to observe the Occupy Wall Street South rally and march. We spent the remainder of the week attending DNC-related events in Charlotte. Each of our research days in downtown Charlotte began around 9am at The PPL and ended after the arena activities at approximately 11:30pm. Though the arena was the focal point of the convention, we also conducted observations at several additional sites throughout the city. We observed the downtown area that was a major thoroughfare for delegates, political actors, and journalists, including the pre-convention activities that happened at the DNC-sponsored CarolinaFest music and food festival on Monday. We circulated through the convention hall and the Charlotte EpiCentre, as well as conducted observations at the staging area for FOX News and the huge temporary structure made of colorful boxcars that Google had built for journalists to work and socialize.

Throughout the convention, the researchers split up strategically to maximize observations of these various sites. During the day, some researchers conducted interviews with individuals working out of the PPL space, where we spoke with independent journalists, representatives of civil society organizations, reporters from community newspapers, and students pursuing various reporting projects around the DNC. At the same time, other researchers were inside the convention center interviewing delegates about their media use and
observing the workspaces of the legacy media outlets. Others observed a broadcast at the FOX News stage, which was setup in a closed off area behind the NASCAR museum and accessible only to individuals with media credentials. All three researchers also spent time observing sites within the EpiCentre on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday of the convention.

On Tuesday and Wednesday, the first two evenings of convention speeches, two researchers went inside the arena and one watched the convention on MSNBC while observing the Twitter hashtag #DNC2012. In the arena, these researchers observed interactions between media representatives and delegates, work in the designated areas for print and radio journalists, and the conduct of journalists and producers in the temporary studios that large networks set up to showcase their presence at the convention. As media attendees sitting in the third tier of the arena, we observed the speeches, staging, jumbotrons, and crowd work and reactions of the convention itself. Through this design, we were able to compare the experience of live and mediated spectatorship and see how what we observed inside the convention differed from what was broadcast and present on social media such as Twitter.

On Thursday, the convention’s final day, we conducted observations at several sites in and around the convention area. First, we observed the sparsely populated arena floor during the morning, which enabled us to see the media’s use of the space outside of broadcast hours and the convention organizers’ setup of the arena for the evening events. During the evening, all of the researchers were in the arena, yet situated at different locations. Two researchers sat opposite the stage at different locations to observe the event straight-on. One researcher sat in the media work area, which was located almost behind the stage, with a diagonal view onto the back of the podium. This afforded the observation of many of the staging activities that had not been visible from the main part of the arena.
In the pages that follow, we present the results of this ethnographic observation. We argue that there were a range of performances that social actors engaged in for other actors within their fields and for actors in adjacent and overlapping fields. Even more, we argue that actors within these fields also performed for the public at-large to realize an extended, yet active spectating public from which both fields must gain consent to legitimize their social standing.

**Journalistic Production**

Performances in the journalistic field at the convention took shape on three levels. First, journalistic actors performed for the embodied public that flowed through spaces such as the Charlotte EpiCentre, as well as the mediated public at-large. Second, actors within the field performed their status for one another. Third, actors within the field performed for the adjacent and overlapping political field. A note of clarification is in order here. As a field undergoing significant transition, there is no one stable understanding of ‘journalism’ that is broadly shared among actors such as cable broadcasters and newspaper journalists. Our assumption here is that the journalistic field’s varied institutional history can give rise to the many different cultural scripts detailed below. What unifies these disparate actors is a common positionality vis-à-vis the political field. While what it means to be a journalist may be fraught, all the outlets discussed here adopt a common stance of *differentiation* from the political. This differentiation forms the grounds upon which journalistic actors recognize themselves and their legitimacy survives. Even more, stable news values, presentation formats, and genres themselves work to solidify the field and perform the credibility and authority of journalists. Even ideologically partisan outlets such as FOX News claim to be “fair and balanced” – the language of the journalistic field.
A casual walk through downtown Charlotte on any given day of the convention revealed many instances of journalistic production. From local broadcast reporters interviewing lively and provocative delegates to the imposing CNN Grill sign and the innumerable media trucks lining the streets, journalistic production was omnipresent in the host city.

For delegates and other party actors, as well as the general public visiting Charlotte, no media outlet created as extravagant a staged event as MSNBC. Soon after arriving in Charlotte, we came upon the ‘media zone’ set up in the Charlotte EpiCentre. At the center of the complex was a massive MSNBC space that featured a sizable broadcast stage, a jumbo screen broadcasting the network’s programs, and signage that transformed the EpiCentre into a wall of promotional advertising for MSNBC. From massive “Lean Forward” (the network’s tagline) banners to the promotional images that cloaked the four-story elevator bank, MSNBC effectively took over the courtyard of the EpiCentre (See Figures 1, 2, and 3).
Figure 1: MSNBC Space, Wednesday, September 5th
Figure 2: MSNBC Space, Wednesday, September 5th
Figure 3: MSNBC Space, Wednesday, September 5th
Visitors to the MSNBC Space were enthralled by the performance. A sizable display featuring mock campaign buttons that spelled out “Lean Forward” consistently attracted crowds of people taking photos with their smart phones and cameras. Other visitors posed for pictures in front of the stage, careful to be sure that the network’s logo was properly positioned in their shot. Even when the stage was empty, throngs of people idled beside and in front of it, curiously investigating the set up.

The main attraction, however, was Chris Matthews, who performed his 5:00pm broadcast live from the stage. Hundreds gathered for these events, with many enthusiastically reacting to Matthews and the cameras that panned the crowd and boom mic that swooped overhead. At some of these broadcasts, employees handed out old-fashioned campaign hats featuring the MSNBC logo, which were ubiquitous throughout the city during the convention. Employees also distributed campaign-style buttons with the network’s logo, slogan, and the faces of its featured pundits through the assembled crowds. These crowds were also part of the network’s performance for its mediated audience. MSNBC sought to create an aura of excitement and enthusiasm around its convention coverage by using the embodied audience as a backdrop and incorporating those in attendance into the broadcast. While watching one of Matthews’ live convention broadcasts on television, for instance, the researchers observed all the camera work that went into staging shots of Matthews and his guests so they were framed by people cheering and waving wildly toward the cameras.

We observed a similar scene during an early morning taping of MSNBC’s “Morning Joe.” While anchors Joe Scarborough and Mika Brzezinski were broadcasting live from another location, the network used a restaurant in the Charlotte EpiCentre to stage what they called the ‘MSNBC Experience.’ Convention visitors were seated at tables, served coffee and tea, and
watched the show on several televisions set up throughout the restaurant. Cameras were also set up throughout the restaurant. Occasionally, based on cues from the camera operators, the assembled audience would cheer for certain anchors or guests. The activities at the Experience were incorporated into the morning program, creating the impression of enthusiasm and audience participation in the broadcast.

FOX News offered a qualitatively different performance of its own identity as a news brand. Ideologically counter to MSNBC and serving as a “national social movement organization” for conservatives (Williamson & Skocopol, 2012), FOX News set up its comparatively minimal stage directly in front of the NASCAR Hall of Fame. The location was both outside the center of the city and required media or delegate credentials to access. On the day researchers visited to view a taping of “Fox & Friends,” there were no more than 20 people assembled near the stage, none of whom were part of the broadcast due to the cameras being focused away from the crowd. These cameras framed the network’s pundits in front of a large, empty expanse, with the building’s NASCAR logo visible in the background. The effect of watching a broadcast on television was to create the impression that FOX News was deep in enemy territory, but bravely broadcasting the truth nonetheless. In other words, FOX’s decision to set up its live broadcast stage outside of the city center, in an area restricted to causal passerby, and to associate itself with the cultural connotations of NASCAR, seemed like a deliberate decision given the ideological distance between FOX and the Democratic Party.

In addition to performing for their embodied and mediated audiences, actors in the journalistic field performed their status for one another and for actors from the overlapping, yet distinct, political field. As noted above, the most prominent actors in the field occupied the most imposing performative spaces, which seemed directed not only at embodied and mediated
audiences in the public at large (and certainly among delegates), but for other journalists. On one level, this was apparent in the positioning and adornment of the purchased workspaces within the convention center. As a reporter for Charlotte Magazine described:

Most media are assigned workspace at the Convention Center, where significance, or lack of it, is painfully obvious in an old-school way that just doesn't comport with the Internet's flattening, everyone's-a-journalist effect. Here, you descend via an airport-scale escalator to the blimp hangar/cavern of Hall C, home to many of the media hordes. Once in the hall, there's no question about which are viewed as the institutions worthy of respect — and therefore enough space to build a three-bedroom colonial with yard — and which get a closet-sized nook with an unplugged lamp and no outlets (Lacour, 2012).

Media work spaces in the Convention Center were located in a massive, concrete basement. Outlets paid for the size of their spaces, which they could outfit however they chose. Some news organizations simply used heavy curtains with small banners; others engaged in more elaborate staging including public displays and wrap-around branding (see Figures 4 and 5). As is clear, Lacour perceives this functional convention work space as outwardly performative of the status of certain outlets (although given that they are purchased spaces, it is a performance of news outlets for other news outlets that is at issue here – not the convention organizer’s perception of journalistic status.)
This performance of status for the field was also apparent in the sites that broadcasters occupied. CNN installed a large, lighted “CNN Grill” sign above the first floor windows of a restaurant in the EpiCentre, and draped the second-floor windows with massive red and blue posters that listed the fifty states. The space resembled an ESPN Zone for politicos. What is important for our purposes here is the intermingling of journalistic and political actors at spaces such as the CNN Grill, especially the subject positions of journalists on the outside looking in.

As humorist Dave Barry (2012), writing in the Charlotte Observer, details:

There is an innocent explanation for how I wound up on the floor of a bar with the governor of Montana. I was engaging in journalism. The key to political journalism is to gather insider information, and to do that, you need to go where the political insiders hang out. We’re talking about sophisticated, discerning people who are deeply immersed in analyzing the issues of the day. They do not hang out just anywhere. They hang out where there is free liquor.

At the political conventions, this means many of them hang out at the CNN Grill, a temporary bar/restaurant set up by CNN that serves free food and drinks. You need a special pass to get in. I don’t have one of these passes, because I am not seen as a political insider. I am seen as more of a writer of booger jokes. Maybe if I wrote positive things about CNN – such as “CNN is easily the finest achievement in human history,” or “without CNN, the Earth would quickly become uninhabitable” – I would get a pass to the CNN Grill. But for now, my journalism strategy is to stand around outside looking sad and homeless and thirsty, hoping that a pass-holder will take pity on me and invite me in.

Spaces such as the CNN Grill and the “Bloomberg Link,” located on the fourth floor of the EpiCentre in a converted Gold’s Gym, were created by elites in the journalistic field. These were sites of exclusive access that both performed and solidified the status and authority of these elites. For one, as Barry captures, the CNN Grill was an object of envy among journalists not fortunate enough to work for the network (or other elite incumbents in the field). The CNN Grill clearly performs the power and insider status of the network for others in the field, as well as for those in the neighboring political field who traversed its spaces. And, while distinct from some
of MSNBC’s more direct marketing ploys (i.e., campaign buttons and hats), these spaces were also about marketing and branding. This is how CNN signaled to the field (and the delegates and other members of the public in attendance) that they matter.

These sites also provided the performative infrastructure for the intermingling of elites from different fields, which served to reify their status. CNN seemingly created a space that was coveted among political actors. Presumably, not every political actor could gain entry, just as not every journalist could gain entry. Only the elites of both fields could gain entry, the access to which was both a performance and function of that status. Barry reveals exactly such elite intermingling of the political and journalism fields at these liminal spaces. This happened to such an extent that CNN (2012) publicized a list of celebrities, journalists, and politicians who appeared at the Grill, making visible this elite intermingling (in addition to broadcasts that had these elites as their audience backdrop.) In this sense, having access to the elites of another field is what makes one an elite in one’s own field. At the same time, the CNN Grill served a number of practical purposes. For a network looking to secure interviews and access to the major players and celebrities at the convention, the Grill provided both encouragement and a ready-made stage (and, the Grill was also perhaps an argument for CNN’s relevance given the network’s recent viewership woes.)

Despite the intermingling of these actors at spaces such as the CNN Grill, at sites of explicit political performance journalists reverted to the core organizing logic of their field: professionally organized skepticism of political actors in the public interest. This is perhaps the most obvious part of the journalistic performance, and the one the public is most familiar with. It is, however, worth noting explicitly that this is how journalistic production was institutionally organized in the spaces of political performance. The logic of the journalistic field requires an
organized skepticism in order to appear legitimate in the eyes of political actors, the general public, and other journalistic actors. This performance was evident in the detached commentary of the anchors who sat in judgment of the political performances in the arena. Anchors are put forth to secure and demonstrate the credibility of the news and the organization producing it. It is a performance of objectivity and public accountability, yet with accessibility and familiarity as certain well-recognized on-air personalities take center stage to judge the performances of their political counterparts (Cathart, 1969; Connor, 1995; Csigo, 2010; Miller and Kurpius, 2010). This professional skepticism and public authority also existed in the framing of the cameras according to the genre of convention coverage: anchors looked down onto the stage to scrutinize political performances (see Figures 6 and 7). From the perch of the researchers, high atop the Time Warner Arena, the authority of broadcasters was clearly visible from their overlooks that are more routinely occupied by sports journalists.
Figure 6: Convention Arena on Wednesday, September 5th during Vice President Biden’s speech. Media platform on the floor is on the lower left. Skyboxes with the press are visible directly perpendicular to the jumbotron.
Figure 7: Convention Arena on Wednesday, September 5th. Close up of arena broadcast studios and promotion of networked media.
The Political Field

Before speeches from major actors, neon-yellow vested workers passed out signs through all of the section (Tuesday - all the sections on the first tier, Thursday - all the sections on both the first and second tiers.) When Governor O’Malley gave his speech on Tuesday, which featured a back-and-forth chant with the crowd of “Forward / Not Back,” Forward / Not Back signs were passed out to the crowd. “We Love Michelle” signs were passed out before Michelle Obama’s speech on Tuesday. “Thank You” signs were passed out on Thursday after a major tribute to the armed forces. A series of “Fired Up / Ready to Go” signs were passed out after a particularly moving video featuring campaign supporter Edith S. Childs. The effect of these signs on television of a raucous and supportive audience working with spontaneous enthusiasm is juxtaposed with the reality that these moments are carefully scripted and artfully, diligently coordinated. For instance, the signs that coordinated with O’Malley’s speech were handed out just a few minutes before his speech. The last few sections received theirs just moments before he spoke. Field notes, Thursday, September 6th.

Delegates occupied a liminal space at the intersection of the journalism and political fields. They were simultaneously political actors, media producers, and part of the public appealed to by journalists, which was evident in the discussion above. As explicitly political actors, the 5,556 delegates formed part of the live audience that convention organizers sought to coordinate through things such as distributing signs in unison to the crowd before the important speeches. At the same time, these delegates were performers in their own right, generally embracing their roles of live audience in cheering at the appropriate moments, goaded on by the coordinating work of producers of the event. The Obama campaign and Democratic Party’s media production within the arena was also directed towards this audience. Videos designed to keep the live audience engaged and introduce new themes such as healthcare or an upcoming speaker were interspersed with speeches throughout the convention.
In addition, we learned that many delegates were media producers in their own right through interviews with more than 35 individuals from approximately a dozen delegations. Delegates noted that they were documenting their convention experiences for their local communities using Facebook and Twitter. As one Pennsylvania delegate said, “I try not to get too political, but I want to share my experiences of the convention…I’ve gotten a ton of comments!” The Democrats Abroad delegation resolved to create a “strong online presence during the convention,” and created a Twitter hashtag to allow members who could not be there to have easy access to their mediated experiences. C-SPAN even contacted several delegations to gather Twitter handles so that the network could incorporate delegates’ media production into its broadcasts.

Organizers also highly touted the convention itself as being an ‘open’ event. On one level, this meant that there was media production directed at the live audience designed to spur people to use social media to provide networked audiences with a firsthand sense of its workings. For example, on the digital screens that ringed the stadium there were promotions urging the audience to tweet to the official hashtag at #DNC2012. Organizers recognized that members of the live audience were alternative media producers at the event, and could extend the performances on stage outward through their social networks. As one convention staffer working on the digital team stated, “Communications are more authentic when they come through your social networks. We want to people to be excited and communicate with their friends and family.” On another, #DNC2012 served to create a forum for discussion among the wider public watching the event online or on television. The hashtag gathered networked audiences (including the delegates and spectators in the arena using social media), and facilitated the critical practice of ‘active spectatorship’ that we detail in the next section (see Figure 8).
While the convention was, on one level, a live performance by political actors staged for delegates and other individuals in attendance, the primary audience was journalists and their mediated audiences. This was especially the case during the crucial 10-11pm hour when the major broadcast networks guaranteed commercial-free coverage. The other hours of the convention were for the political ‘undercard’ (to borrow a boxing metaphor): featured speakers from the party’s extended network of civil society and advocacy groups such as Planned Parenthood, unions, and elected officials across the country. The major networks offered no
coverage of these speeches, although cable broadcasters used them as a backdrop for their anchors or pundits to talk over, occasionally tuning in to listen to particularly engaging speakers (especially between the hours of 8pm-10pm; For the history of convention coverage, see Wrighton, 2007).

The production of conventions for mass mediated audiences has received most of the attention from scholars, so we will not spend much time on analysis here beyond saying that the staging of the convention was produced with the production values of television in mind. The soaring, three-story stage, for example, had very defined backdrops that framed speakers perfectly for their television close-ups. The speeches and videos were timed to fit within the allotted hour of coverage (so much so that it was a significant topic of conversation when a speech went over, such as Bill Clinton’s).

The practices around ‘credentialing’ clearly indicate the primary audience for the political performances at the convention. All the performative spaces within the political field were carefully managed by a scripted set of access points delineated by a technical mediator: the credential. The credential is what marked the member of the media from the delegate, and both from members of the public at-large. Credentials were essential for accessing and moving across sites from the Convention Arena and Center to the FOX News broadcast area and the Google Hangout. Credentials determined the ability of actors to move across the front and back stages of the political performance. They were worn at all times by members of the media, delegates, DNC guests, and political actors as they moved through the city. Credentials were a source of status and authority, as they determined possibilities for witnessing and movement. (MSNBC capitalized on this by creating logoed lanyards with a “credential” that gained the holder access
to the MSNBC Experience – these incredibly popular marketing creations were seen on visitors all over Charlotte.)

The media credential, in turn, was essential to securing access to the political performances of the convention. The primary audience of political actors was revealed beyond any shadow of a doubt the final night of the convention. When the threat of inclement weather necessitated moving the last night of the convention from the Bank of America, Carolina Panther’s stadium to the smaller arena, this meant that tens of thousands of people holding ‘community credentials’ (which were given out by local field offices to people who volunteered for the campaign) lost the opportunity to see the president speak. On that day, we witnessed hundreds of people standing in line to attend the alternative convention ‘watch parties’ the DNC hastily arranged in Charlotte. These people were generally older African Americans, often much more formally dressed than the credential media. Credentialed media (including the research team) were unaffected by the move indoors:

Before we entered the arena, we passed through lines of people that had still come to Charlotte although they could no longer get in. I was struck both by a feeling of privilege and guilt. In large part because these people holding ‘community credentials,’ the lowest on the totem poll, were lined up in the humid air around the Convention Center. They were primarily African American; some were dressed up, others in knock-off Obama gear. It is telling that when the performance moved inside it was these people who were left out; it shows that it is the mediated public that was important. Us with media credentials had no problems accessing the event. Field notes, September 6, 2012

Mediated Performances, Field Maintenance, and Democracy

In the years since Dayan and Katz’s formative work, a number of scholars have detailed how technological change has shaped the production and experience of media events. For example, Liebes and Katz (2007) argue that shifts in media technologies have resulted in audience fragmentation; the proliferation of channels has made collusion between journalists and
organizers less likely; and, the rise of cheap, mobile video technologies has made non-routine disruption more common. As a result, there is a widespread, society-wide decline in trust of institutions and “cynicism, disenchantment, and segmentation” (157).

We still see the enchantment of the political. Our ethnographic data suggests that conventions still serve as ritualistic media events that anchor political processes and focus the attention of political and journalistic actors as well as the broader public. Conventions structure political time and provide shared points of reference that actors and the public convene around. Conventions are still integrative, in Dayan and Katz’s sense, in that they focus the attention of a pluralistic society and produce a collective public.

In addition to giving shape to political processes and fostering social solidarity, it is the particular civic values that political actors give voice to during convention performances that are important. Conventions are one-way, mass mediated performances that are firmly rooted in the civil sphere. As such, they are sites for both the dissemination and continual reinterpretation of civic values by actors and audiences. The nuance of Dayan and Katz’s argument provides a useful guide here. Conventions are not spectacles that provoke quiescence, although that is a danger that scholars of media rituals are well aware of; they are aspirational in the civic values and forms of life they perform. As media events, conventions are performative of a society actors claim we should value, not necessarily a reflection of a society that is. Journalists and citizen audiences demand that performers live up to their civic expectations. In this sense, journalists and audiences stand in judgment of the ceremonial tendencies of the political center at conventions and are called upon to provide the authentication of the ritual.

Meanwhile, fields texture the civil sphere, setting bounds on collusion between political and journalistic actors and providing differing standards for public evaluation. Political actors
and journalists are both accountable to the underlying civic values of equality, liberty, and justice, but they are organized under different field logics and their claims for public legitimacy rest on different grounds. For political actors, civic discourse and performance at conventions are simultaneously parochial (the party) and public (society). Party actors have to organize on behalf of partisan interests, yet use rhetoric and performance to claim these are broader, generalized public interests. This is especially the case given the deep distrust of faction and strain of anti-party fervor that underpins much of civic life (Rosenblum, 2008). Americans are deeply skeptical of partisanship in all of its forms, yet much of political life could not function without it. In this context, political actors wield the language of bi- and post-partisanship rhetorically to advance different values and interests. Partisan actors use conventions to make the case that party values are broader American and deeply rooted civic values; they strive to perform their party as the broader public, encompassing all Americans.

The performances of actors in the journalistic field have a different cast and character and ultimately derive their legitimacy from a different set of cultural backgrounds. Journalists generally cannot be seen by the public that interprets their field as making a case for any particular set of partisan values, although journalism itself is a deeply moral enterprise that makes and remakes the boundaries of the social order (Ettema and Glasser, 1998). The fraught response to FOX News within the field reveals its underlying normative logic (and, we would suggest, also reveals a field that is deeply unsettled). That said, even FOX makes broader claims as to its status vis-a-vis the political. Journalists, at least those at the center of a field still dominated by legacy media, in their own performances producing the mediated convention adopt the role of an outsider to the political field. They present themselves as the public’s witness and
interpreters; they are outside referees who stand in judgment of political power. Their cameras are positioned off-stage, looking down.

Conventions, as embodied and mediated events, provide occasions and sites for political actors to engage in ritualized forms of combat to win the consent of spectators. Conventions provide parties with organized ways to critique the performances and values of their competition. All of these performances are organized forms of contestation and debate to secure the legitimacy to govern. They are also organized ways for journalists to critique performance and power, providing a check on the capacity for political spectacle, despite the entangling of actors at sites such as the CNN Grill. Professional journalists must claim to be outsiders and represent and speak for the ‘public’ as a whole.

In all of this, the public audience remains in a spectator role. In valuing conventions as political rituals produced by the center, it is useful to consider Peters’s (2001) critique of normative theories of communication that privilege “dialogue over dissemination.” Peters’ formulation is particularly insightful given the explosion of much normative participatory and deliberative democratic theory over the past five decades, and especially in light of the underlying valuing and, seeming empirical fact, of social media and its attendant practices as enabling wider participation. While not monolithic, these traditions generally value active participation and communicative dialogue. Peters, on the other hand, reminds us that there are reasons to value dissemination. Using the metaphor of the sowing of seeds and channeling the Gospels, Peters argues that dissemination is about the one-way disclosing of and making the world known so that it can be interpreted. Unlike dialogue, there is no reciprocality that strives to arrive at shared understanding or common, shared meaning. One-way communication
ultimately leaves interpretation as the responsibility of the audience; it treats the audience with fairness and respect in sowing the seeds for thoughts to blossom of their own accord.

At the same time, spectatorship is newly active given social media platforms and networked media more generally. Conventions provide a diverse array of social media users with a common occasion for media production and an anchoring in the democratic values of the civil sphere. New practices of what we call ‘active spectatorship’ emerge around these occasions. The context of production is oriented to established institutional politics and processes, but it does not simply work to reify the existing order. Conventions provide opportunities for the airing of partisan conflict, dissensus, and questioning of the prevailing social order, but it does so in deeply civic ways.

These practices of active spectatorship take shape through social media and are generally free from the strictures of professionalism and economic structures. As political theorist Jeffrey Green (2010) argues in his attempt to reclaim the democratic value of spectatorship, political actors do not control the means of their own publicity, which would be a characteristic of fascism. While Green does not mention new or social media in his emphasis on professional journalism, the networked spectators that convene around mediated conventions provide a source of public accountability. Given that conventions are important ways that democratic politics is symbolically organized and contests institutionalized, networked publics convene around these ritual events and engage in critical practices of active spectatorship.

In calling these practices active spectatorship, we make the simultaneous argument that the public is ‘active’ is voicing critique or endorsement, but also remains in a spectator role. Contra-scholars of fragmentation, media events still do command significant attention across a stunning array of platforms. Over 25 million viewers watched the first two nights of the
convention, and the third night was watched by nearly 36 million viewers. Indeed, these events colonize much of political discourse, providing the context and focal point for political communication. The volume of tweets during the DNC demonstrates this. During Michelle Obama’s speech Twitter traffic peaked at over 28,000 tweet per minute; Barack Obama’s Twitter traffic peaked at 52,576 tweets per minute. All told, there were over 9.5 million tweets about the DNC in three days. And yet, the public utilizes these events and their networked instantiations such as hashtags on Twitter as forums for dissensus, the clash of competing moral values and political programs. There is a marked range of debate that plays out over social media, as civil society and movement actors, rival party factions, and citizens convene around hashtags such as #DNC2012 to contest the performances of political actors and journalists. In turn, these actors can variously reject reverent narration, contest political values, and refuse to accept conciliatory broadcast narratives. At the same time, the public is cast in a spectator role. Citizens are not participants in these media events except in superficial ways, such as being rhetorically invoked by political actors, or parties’ display of scrolling tweets on jumbotrons inside arenas.

Active spectatorship is premised upon a pluralistic media sector where the public has control over at least one means of publicity of the powerful, including those who collude to produce media events. Social media offers opportunities for public critique and accountability over both political and journalistic actors. Active spectating has de-centered journalistic authority and control over images and narratives from scripted political rituals. However, this power is not all encompassing in being bounded by the civil sphere and discrete performative contexts, which differentiates our notion of active spectatorship from recent re-conceptualizations of media events (Lipscomb, 2012) and alternative formulations such as ‘virtual agora’ (Kirk and Schill, 2011) that both place too much emphasis on non-institutional
actors and lose the tethering to the material sites of performance that Dayan and Katz captured with the focus on pageantry.

**Conclusion**

Dayan and Katz’s theorization of non-routine media events that disrupt regular life remains relevant today. Outside of the daily flow of political communication during a presidential race are the larger events that organize the temporal rhythms of electoral politics and provide defined gathering spaces for political actors, journalists, and the mass and networked publics. Presidential announcement speeches, debates, vice presidential announcements, and conventions focus attention and provide event-driven, time bound spaces of concentrated debate. These are atypical moments that are significant by their very ritualistic nature. We expect them to unfold in a particular way, according to a pre-established routine, and according to a pre-established script in a knowable genre.

As our fieldwork reveals, the sheer scale of the mediated event continues to fulfill what Dayan and Katz long ago saw as the integrative function of these events. Even in an age of media fragmentation, conventions continue to command the attention of large publics. Conventions convene the political and journalistic fields and their attendant publics, set the agenda for political communication, and establish themes that are returned to in the weeks before November. Conventions are about social solidarity. As an integrative performative event conventions create, enact, and reproduce civic values, while also providing a space for their renegotiation. The fact that conventions are not performances aimed only at particular partisan publics means that political actors need to situate their rhetoric within broader American and democratic frameworks. Convention performances provide delegates with a range of normative arguments, frames, and orienting values that guide their work in their home communities. At the
same time, political parties make the case for why their particular political, moral, and policy views should be embraced by all Americans. Journalists cover conventions through the frame of the nation-state and evaluate performances through the lens of general, not particularistic, appeals. They also must perform their own role as the neutral arbiters of the political, and guardians of civic values. Performances are aimed at fusing these particular actors with their public audiences within the general background of civil democracy.

At the same time, as our fieldwork shows, conventions are embodied events that serve as the ritualized gathering spaces of the political and journalistic fields. It is here that actors negotiate their roles with respect to one another and the wider public, and engage in the work of stabilizing and contesting the positions and understandings of their own field. In other words, conventions provide embodied forums for actors to gather. Conventions provide ritual opportunities for actors to make hierarchies visible and known. They also provide opportunities for challengers to contest the status of incumbents and for the latter to solidify their position and authority. Conventions are opportunities for actors to reify or undermine dominant understandings and logics. These fields are not the sum total of the performance, not are the audiences that sit in attendance wholly passive. Technological change has provided more opportunities for active spectatorship, allowing citizens to offer critiques and challenge the performative spectacle.

Conventions work, in short, as embodied events where the civil sphere is drawn and held together.
Works Cited


