

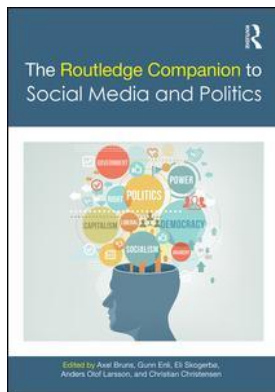
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### “Trust Me, I Am Authentic!” Authenticity Illusions in Social Media Politics

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# “TRUST ME, I AM AUTHENTIC!”

## Authenticity Illusions in Social Media Politics

*Gunn Enli*

### Introduction

The most crucial element of a politician’s image building is the construction of trust; in a media-centred democracy, nothing is more important for a politician than being regarded as authentic, genuine, and real. If a politician is considered trustworthy, voters might disagree on certain political issues, but they will believe that he or she is guided by an integrity and a personal motivation that ensures a degree of reason; and, conversely, if a politician is considered untrustworthy and fake, it does not matter much if the voters agree with him or her in certain political matters.

Although it definitely helps not to be caught lying or misleading people, trust is not solely earned as a direct result of being an honest politician but is also gained through various kinds of image-building strategies. In this chapter, I will investigate one such image-building strategy, namely, the use of social media and online campaign videos to construct an image of the politician as authentic.

In social media, content with an appeal as authentic, often portraying ordinary people in seemingly unscripted moments, has been proven to be exceptionally spreadable, as it tends to connect emotionally with the users who make it into a viral phenomenon (Enli 2009). This chapter will explore what has been termed ‘the paradox of mediated authenticity’, referring to the fact that “although we base nearly all our knowledge about the world and the society in which we live on mediated representations, we remain well aware that the media is constructed, manipulated, and even faked” (Enli 2015a: 1). Mediated authenticity is a social construction but claims legitimacy as a representation of raw and unscripted reality.

Mediated authenticity is constructed by *illusions of authenticity*; these illusions take place in mainstream media through various degrees of scripting of the performances of ordinary people. Through various production techniques, raw material is manipulated in order to be compatible with media logics and format criteria (Ytreberg 2004; Enli 2015a). This chapter investigates authenticity illusions in political communication in social media, with emphasis on online campaign videos and the visual representations of

political candidates. Based on insights from the analysis, the chapter discusses the possible effects of an increased focus on authenticity illusions in political communication, in terms of both imposing changes on the mediated representations of politicians and thereby also representing a new arena for negotiations of politicians' trustworthiness.

In this study, I will draw on a textual analysis of two political campaign videos: the BuzzFeed video featuring U.S. president Barack Obama, titled 'Things Everybody Does But Doesn't Talk About'<sup>1</sup>, and the online video with the Norwegian prime minister Jens Stoltenberg, referred to as 'The Secret Cab Driver' or 'Norway's Prime Minister Turns Taxi Driver'<sup>2</sup>. These videos were made, respectively, to promote a U.S. health-care program and a re-election campaign for the Norwegian Labour Party. There are three main rationales for selecting these particular campaign videos. First, they are both examples of *personalised campaign videos* in the sense that they focus on the politician, even though the aim of the campaign videos is to promote health reform or a political party. Second, they represent two *different political cultures*, as U.S. politics is highly candidate-centred while Norwegian politics is party-centred (see Enli and Skogerbø 2013). Third, the videos originate in very *different media systems*, as commercial companies dominate the U.S. media system and political TV advertising is a central element in political campaigns, while public service companies are more central in the Norwegian media system and political TV advertisements are a marginal phenomenon as a result of political regulation.

This chapter has four main parts, following this introduction. The first part presents a theoretical discussion of authenticity illusions and their role in the self-presentation of politicians in social media. The second part analyses authenticity in social media, with an emphasis on U.S. president Barack Obama and the former Prime Minister of Norway, Jens Stoltenberg, and discusses key authenticity markers in social media. The third part presents a comparative analysis of authenticity illusions in the two selected political campaign videos for Obama and Stoltenberg. The fourth part discusses to what degree authenticity illusions under-communicate power relations in politics, and to what degree illusions of authenticity might contribute to restoring public trust in politicians.

### Authenticity Illusions

The obsession with authenticity, and its expressions in concepts of 'the real', 'the genuine', 'the intimate', and 'the inner self', dominates contemporary culture (Dovey 2000; Guignon 2004; Baudrillard 2008). A prominent reason why the fascination with genuine, real, and unstaged moments has intensified is that the media have become increasingly unreal, staged, and manipulated, not least as a result of new technologies. As a counterweight to phenomena such as virtual reality, video games, and advanced special effects, the seemingly unproduced and unprocessed has become appealing in the context of popular culture.

While we in our role as customers are approached by the authenticity argument in the form of, for example, 'genuine coffee', 'original blue jeans', and 'authentic tourism', we are approached in our role as citizens with arguments in the form of an 'authentic politician', a 'trustworthy candidate', and a 'genuine political leader'. Following from this, authenticity has become a currency in the branding of politicians, and the use of authenticity illusions therefore flourishes in contemporary political communication, not at least fuelled by the rhetorical potential of social media.

Social media have established certain conventions for authenticity illusions, partly based on genre conventions from traditional media, such as the observational fly-on-the-wall documentary and reality TV productions. Authenticity illusions are, for the most part, accepted by audiences. Television viewers, for example, understand that canned laughter is a technique for enhancing the comedy show and not a precisely timed outburst of a real audience.

This tacit understanding or agreement between producers and audiences might be defined as ‘the authenticity contract’: a social construction where both parties agree on a set of conventions and techniques (Enli 2015a: 2). However, occasionally, the audience realises that what they believed was an authentic story or unscripted reality was, in fact, produced and constructed. One recent example is the ‘First Kiss’ (2014)<sup>3</sup> video, in which 20 strangers were filmed when they kiss for the first time, with the intention to capture moments of authentic intimate encounters. Tatiana Pileeva was credited as having made the film, and it was soon revealed that the purpose of the film was to market her new clothing line, and that the ‘ordinary people’ kissing were, in fact, actors, models, and artists who were paid to participate. Even though the encounters between the couples caught on camera were authentic in the sense that they had never met before, and that the embarrassment and awkwardness in the scenes was genuine, they were also cast and the authenticity was constructed. When these authenticity illusions became publicly known, the reactions from the ‘Internet hordes’ were infused with disappointment and feelings of betrayal, according to a comment in the newspaper *The Globe and Mail*:

The “strangers” were in fact models, actors, indie musicians and even a member of the Hemingway clan, all thrown together for staged passion.

Once again, the Internet hordes complained, another corporate gimmick disguised as authentic moment proffered by the Web. (Bielski 2014: paras. 2–3)

As we shall see in the analysis, similar disappointment is found in the reactions against political campaign videos using a similar set of authenticity illusions, such as the use of casting, or street casting, rather than randomly picked participants. The appeal of the seemingly emotional rawness and the unrehearsed meetings in front of a camera seems to be partly devalued as it becomes known that the media content is actually produced.

‘First Kiss’ can be classified as a post-modern marketing stunt, as “the whole thing was an ad shilling clothing for a hip, Los Angeles-based retailer named Wren” (Bielski 2014: para. 2). Highly influenced by tools from commercial marketing, political communication has been quick to include authenticity narratives into its storytelling. Image building in politics is closely related to contemporary branding and advertising culture, the practices of which influence not only consumer markets but also political communication (Maarek 2011; Banet-Wiser 2012). Recent branding studies argue that Barack Obama is *the* U.S. president who, more than any previous president, is promoted as a brand in line with ‘Nike, Starbucks and Apple’, and that authenticity is a prominent aspect of the brand (Klein 2010; Scott 2011).

From an historical perspective, authenticity is a fairly recent tendency and has gradually become more important in political communication and other realms of communication since the emergence of modernism and self-reflexivity. The rhetoric of authenticity was, for example, not a virtue of any significance in ancient Greece and its ideals for political speeches. Rather, the opposite: speeches were supposed to

seem natural, but it was considerably more important to seem prepared, systematic, and competent in politics than to seem authentic and genuine. Consequently, a claim to authenticity is not an inherent quality of political rhetoric but rather related to technological, political, and cultural changes.

With the introduction of every new media technology, politicians have adjusted their rhetoric and communicative styles and, moreover, the understanding of what is authentic and genuine changes. In politics, innovations such as the microphone and audio-visual broadcasting have reduced the distance between politicians and their audiences, and as a consequence political rhetoric has changed quite quickly. The new political rhetoric was characteristically more personal, open, and conversational, and, in turn, the ideals of the 'authentic' and the 'sincere' politician became more dominant (Jamieson 1988; Jamieson and Waldman 2003).

### Performing the Role of an Authentic Politician

A key criterion for being elected as a politician in most media-centred democracies is to come across to voters as a trustworthy and honest person, who has genuine and positive intentions. However, for voters, their knowledge about a politician is primarily, if not exclusively, derived from the media: how they perform in the media, how they are portrayed in news media and other media genres, and how they are promoted in various forms of advertisements (Thompson 2000; Jamieson and Waldman 2003; Trent et al. 2011; Sides and Vavreck 2013).

Being an honest politician is about speaking the truth and never telling lies to improve one's social status or to avoid uncomfortable situations. However, being an authentic politician is about *performing*. According to the philosopher Lionel Thrilling (1972), there is a distinction between being genuine and being authentic; while the former is about being true to others, the latter is about being true to your inner self (Thrilling 1972).

'Authenticity' is a complex term and relates not only to psychological dimensions, behaviourism, or ethical dilemmas but also to sociological dimensions. The main theorist in the field of performance and self-presentation in everyday life is sociologist Erving Goffman (1959; 1967), who argues that human interactions always involve a degree of performance and that people adjust their behaviour according to social norms and expectations. Goffman (1959) is well-known for developing the dual terms 'front stage' and 'back stage', referring to, on the one hand, the arenas where a formal or official performance is required, and on the other hand, the arenas where an informal and relaxed performance is allowed.

A couple of decades later, Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) suggested the term 'middle-region behaviour' as a description of the arenas where the distinction between 'front region behaviour' and 'back region behaviour' becomes blurred. The main example of the 'middle region' in Meyrowitz's theory was television, the audio-visual broadcast medium which was, and still is, used by politicians to come across as personalities and to demonstrate their character to the voters.

Elite politicians are often competent performers, either trained by PR consultants or more naturally gifted, and they often gain popularity from their appeal in the 'middle region'. Former U.S. president Ronald Reagan, who was a movie actor before he entered politics, exemplifies this point, and he is famously quoted to have answered 'How can a president *not* be an actor?' when asked how an actor can be president.

Likewise, in Norway, and in spite of a fairly different political culture, Carl I. Hagen, a former party leader who is among the nation’s most visible politicians, is quoted to have said: “Every politician is an actor. When the famous former Norwegian Prime Minister Einar Gerhardsen gave a speech at the actors’ association, he started off with ‘honourable colleagues’ (author’s translation) (Juul 2015).

Yet, ‘middle region behaviour’ is also associated with risk and might be a threatening arena if politicians fail to communicate authenticity, or come across as dishonest or shady. One politician who suffered from television’s merciless close-ups was former U.S. presidential candidate Al Gore, who was regarded as inauthentic by commentators and viewers because he wore too much makeup in a TV debate and also seemed scripted and cautious (Jamieson and Waldman 2003: 29). Moreover, when shifting from avoiding environmental issues to promoting these issues heavily, Al Gore failed to come across as consistent, which is key in performed authenticity; consistency in mediated appearances will make politicians seem more grounded and predictable. In contrast, Al Gore’s opponent in the 2000 U.S. presidential election, George W. Bush, was called ‘Mr. Consistency’ because he was consistent to the degree that he repeated himself like a parrot throughout the campaign (Johansen, 2002, 75). In the context of the logics of ‘middle region behaviour’ and with authenticity as a key to the public’s trust, George W. Bush might have compensated for seeming less knowledgeable by seeking to appear trustworthy. Since then, however, the rapid spread of social media as tools for both mundane and political communication has imposed changes, and added new dimensions, to the rhetoric of authenticity.

### Authenticity in Social Media Politics

In social media politics, defined broadly as political communication in social media, the notion of authenticity is essential. First, social media are associated with *symbolic authenticity*, as user-generated content is framed as more authentic than mainstream media content simply by being produced and posted by individuals rather than media companies. Although political communication in social media is no less commercial and professional than in mainstream media, particularly when produced by top staffers, social media are associated with authenticity. The effect of this symbolic authenticity is that it builds an image of the politician as willing and able to adapt to contemporary culture’s emphasis on networked communication, sharing, and participation.

A second aspect of authenticity in social media politics is related to *self-presentation*, meaning that politicians themselves—in collaboration with their campaign staff—decide how to present themselves rather than the presentation being a result of journalistic gatekeeping and decision making. According to previous studies, most elite politicians rarely or never update their social media statuses themselves, and to the degree that they do, the politicians’ posts are presented as authentic by the use of a signature (such as ‘-bo’ in the case of Barack Obama). They do so to fend off criticism, as the press were eager to announce the news that ‘Obama Is Actually Writing His Own Tweets Now’ (Ho 2011). Still, during the 2012 election campaign, these initials were used in only a fraction—about 1 per cent—of the total tweets posted to the @BarackObama account (also see the chapter 26 in this volume).

A key strategy against criticisms of inauthenticity is transparency, and for that reason the @BarackObama account bio has since January 2013 informed Twitter users that “This account is run by Organizing for Action staff. Tweets from the President

are signed –bo”. These lines indicate that once Obama’s second term started, a non-profit, non-partisan entity called Organizing for Action (OFA) was given control over major parts of the campaign, including the social media accounts, the website, and the email list. Previously, the account had been managed by the campaign Obama for America, run by staffers but under the ultimate direction of the president. Even though the account is verified as official (with a blue badge), the account is not really an account related to the president or his political team but is completely outsourced.

In a critical article in *The Atlantic*, political commentator Philip Bump questions whether this manoeuvre is ethical, or even legal, and makes the comparison that “the President, mid-conversation, handed over his phone to a telemarketer who does a great Obama impression” (Bump 2013: 2). The legal grey area here is, according to Bump, that the OFA as a non-profit organisation is allowed to raise money but not advocate for a political candidate. The ethical dilemma is that Twitter users are not sufficiently informed that they are, in fact, following not Barack Obama but the OFA, and that this could be made clear through a name change and a change of profile images.

The need for President Obama to make his Twitter use more authentic led the way to the launch of a new account with the Twitter username @POTUS on 18 May 2015. The profile was a hybrid of the intimate: “Dad, husband, and 44th President of the United States,” and the formal: “Tweets may be archived: <http://wh.gov/privacy>”. The message is mixed, and it seems clear that the new Twitter account is an attempt to handle the challenge of living up to the official statement from the White House to create an “unprecedented level of openness” in government, and to “ensure the public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration.”<sup>4</sup> Obamas first Tweet from the @POTUS account was: “Hello, Twitter! It’s Barack. Really! Six years in, they’re finally giving me my own account.”<sup>5</sup> The following six tweets were also more or less in the same tone, and play on a combination of humour and symbolic interaction.

In smaller nations, such as the Nordic region, it is more common that elite politicians update their own social media accounts and even engage in Twitter debates with selected users. In research interviews with Norwegian party leaders, I found that they were indeed concerned with being recognised as authentic, and even the sitting Prime Minister, Jens Stoltenberg, claimed that

I do almost everything on social media myself. That is important to me, because it has to be real. I would never be on Facebook or Twitter if my social media presence were based on an advisor who sat there and pretended to be me. I think people would see through that. (Stoltenberg, e-mail interview, 3 September 2013, my translation)

Such statements by Nordic elite politicians must, however, not be interpreted as an indication of total authenticity in social media but rather of a partial authenticity in which politicians delegate some of the updates while managing others themselves. Moreover, they should be read as intending to come across as authentic and ‘real’, an aim that is rooted in Nordic political culture where consensus and egalitarianism are key values (Syvertsen et al. 2014). Still, elite Norwegian politicians are not as authentic and accessible in social media as they claim to be in interviews regarding the democratic potential of social media. In practice, they rarely engage in extensive conversations with ordinary people (Skogerbø and Moe 2015; Enli and Skogerbø 2013).

Self-presentation in social media is not dependent only on a genuine author but might also be a result of a negotiation between the politicians and their consultants. The element of self-presentation is key in social media, and the construction of online personas in profiles and updates has been proven to generate more engagement than, for example, the presence of a political party or an organisation (Bruns and Highfield 2013; Enli and Skogerbø 2013). Consequently, the rhetoric and communicative modes of social media invite the personalisation of politics—for politicians and their teams, social media first and foremost represent an opportunity to communicate a more personal, and even intimate, side of the politician, compared to more formal presentations of politicians. Certainly, these images of ‘the genuine politician’ are also pre-planned and staged, but they are manufactured to come across as authentic backstage versions of the politicians, drawing extensively on illusions of authenticity.

Third, a technique to construct authenticity in social media is to seemingly display an unrehearsed ‘backstage’ by performing *spontaneity*. A key advantage of politicians’ seeming spontaneity is that they can come across as innocent and honest, or at least less cynical and dishonest than if they seem scripted at all times. A typical way to construct the image of a trustworthy politician is to post images and quotes from the private arena, seemingly spontaneous and heartfelt.

This illusion of authenticity is found in the social media presences of both U.S. President Barack Obama and Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg, but the seemingly spontaneous moments selected for exposure are highly different. In the U.S. case, the intimate images of Barack Obama tend to show him playing with his children, traveling on a bus, or hugging his wife. A characteristic of these images is a documentary aesthetic—a fly-on-the-wall style—when the politician is not posing or looking into the camera but seems unaware of the photographer and is busy doing something else. The ‘Michelle and Barack hug’ image (see Figure 8.1) was posted on Obama’s



Figure 8.1 Barack and Michelle Obama Hugging on the Campaign Trail in Iowa  
Posted on Twitter and Facebook 06 Nov. 2012. Photographer: Scout Tufankjian. Permission holder: Polaris Images<sup>6</sup>. Reprinted by permission.



social media accounts on election night in 2012 to announce his victory, with the three words: 'Four more years'. The tweet became the (at that point) most retweeted post in history and has received nearly 4.5 million likes on Facebook.

This image was inauthentic in the sense that it was *not* taken in the moment when President Barack Obama and his wife had finally realised that they had succeeded in their campaigning and expressed their happiness with a long, intimate hug. Rather, the image was previously posted on the account and re-used for the purpose of the victory tweet. Even the photographer was surprised that this image was posted as the first victory statement from the President (Nanos, 2012). The choice of using social media before the news media and the traditional press conference to announce the election victory might be motivated by social media's potential to spread content more quickly and more engagingly. Through their engagement with the post, social media users did the job of spreading the message and added a portion of authenticity by sharing it directly through their networks rather than via the mass media.

In the Norwegian case, the spontaneous images of Jens Stoltenberg tend to show him engaging in the national sport, cross-country skiing, or as a cyclist, being ordinary and sensible by using a helmet. Some of the images seem spontaneous because they are amateurish while others give a glimpse of privacy and intimacy that seems authentic, such as the hug with his father (see Figure 8.2). This image was followed by a message about his transfer to Brussels in the role as Secretary-General of NATO: "Goodbye. Ready for new missions and to live in Brussels" (Jens Stoltenberg Facebook page: 29



Figure 8.2 Photo of Jens Stoltenberg Hugging His Father Thorvald Stoltenberg Posted on Facebook 29 Sep. 2014. Photo: Daniel Sannum Lauten<sup>7</sup>. Reprinted by permission.

September 2014). The image of father and son resonated well with followers, both because it seemed like an authentic goodbye hug, given that the public knew that Stoltenberg was leaving for the NATO job in Brussels, and also given that they were familiar with the father–son relationship from previous media stories, as the father is also a well-known politician.

This post was well received, with 40,405 likes, 242 shares, and nearly 200 comments, and among the most liked user comments was: “The best Prime Minister ever!” In comparison, a photo of Stoltenberg with the Danish Prime Minister (20 April 2015) was ‘liked’ 6,129 times, and a photo of Stoltenberg and Obama (26 May 2015) 16,444 times<sup>8</sup>. This demonstrates that intimate and private family photos appear to connect better with users than photos of official meetings between state leaders.

Comparing the authenticity illusions in the Obama hug photo and the Stoltenberg hug photo, there are similarities in the motive; a hug between two celebrities who are also intimately related. This implies that there is a generic way of communicating intimacy and spontaneity among Western state leaders. Nevertheless, the two images are indeed also very different: first, the U.S. version portrays the President and the First Lady as a team and a couple, while the wife of a Norwegian Prime Minister would be a more distant public figure, and less associated with the political leadership than in America. The second difference is that the U.S. version is more cinematic and glamorous and that the Nordic image is more naturalistic and melancholic.

### Political Campaign Videos and Authenticity Illusions

In addition to intimate images, short videos presenting the candidates have been an increasing trend in online political communication in recent years. There is support in research for the argument that videos elicit a high level of trust, ahead of audio, photos, and text (Riegelsberger, Sasse, and McCarthy 2005).

The length of these videos is a factor that influences the chances of becoming a viral phenomenon through massive sharing. According to a recent survey, users are more likely to watch and share videos that are shorter than 30 seconds, and the risk that users stop watching increases gradually and significantly for every additional 30 seconds the video lasts. In general, the shorter the video, the more likely users are to watch the entire message (Ruedlinger 2012).

In this section, I analyse two selected political campaign videos, made for marketing purposes, within two different political cultures: North American candidate-centred politics and Norwegian party-centred politics. First, I briefly present the two videos separately, and thereafter I compare them to identify authenticity illusions in the videos and discuss the rhetoric of authenticity utilised here.

#### *Obama Video: ‘Things Everybody Does But Doesn’t Talk About’ (2015)*

‘Things Everybody Does But Doesn’t Talk About’ (2015) is a video featuring US President Barack Obama, published by the online news site BuzzFeed in February 2015. The video (which also aired on national TV stations and was covered in mainstream media) is 1:58 minutes long, and as of 10 April 2015 had reached 51,367,464 views. The title promises a glimpse of authenticity, meaning moments in the powerful politician’s life which are commonly not addressed in public because of their personal, intimate, and embarrassing character. The video’s title insinuated that viewers could meet one of the

world's elite politicians 'backstage', meaning that he would be performing in line with this arena's requirements for informality and spontaneity.

In contrast, elite politicians such as Barack Obama are most commonly seen in various types of 'front-stage' performances, such as public speeches, press briefings, and televised interviews. Among the manifold expectations of social media was that they would provide a new arena of networked communication with more authentic political communication, less infused with PR consultants and political spin. In recent decades, elite politicians' 'front-stage behaviour' had become predictable and dictated by the formulas of media logic, and so when social media entered politics from the mid-2000s, they represented a timely turn towards 'backstage behaviour'. Social media tapped into participatory culture and had an aura of authenticity, which connected well with key trends in society.

The campaign video was produced to promote the U.S. government's health-care program, and to encourage citizens to enrol in the program. The infotainment video thus had a clear message, but this was not in any way explicitly addressed. Rather, it was communicated implicitly as a hidden message, with the main narrative of the video being that of Obama preparing for a meeting with the press to inform them about the health-care program. In this process of preparing, Obama is portrayed as having a private moment; and, as the title indicates, he does 'things everybody does but doesn't talk about' such as trying to look cool in front of a mirror.

The Obama BuzzFeed video is presented almost as a fiction movie, with Obama introduced as if he were an actor rather than a politician. The secondary title of the video is 'Featuring President Obama', as in a movie trailer (such as, 'Featuring Meryl Streep'). Moreover, the video includes much-used features from fiction movies, such as the cross-cutting between two main characters who meet in the last sequence, and a funny scene when the young journalist steps on a brick and spills his take-away coffee on the sidewalk.

The main criticism of the video came from the President's political opponents, in particular the conservative press, who argued that the informal language and use of the selfie stick totally undermined his political authority. The blog Media Matters for America has collected these reactions from conservative journalists and politicians: 'At Some Point, We Stopped Having a Fire Sale on Presidential Dignity', 'What President Says YOLO?', and 'America's Commander-in-Chief Is Goofing Off . . . While the World Burns' (Power and Rogers 2015). The message seems to be that the president should have better and more important issues to deal with than to communicate his coolness and easy-going attitude in a marketing stunt.

### ***Stoltenberg Video: 'The Secret Cab Driver' (2013)***

"The Secret Cab Driver" (2013) was an election campaign video produced by the largest political party in Norway, the Labour Party, and was launched by the party through social media in August 2013, about a month before the upcoming election. In the video, the incumbent Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg, is presenting himself before the camera and explains that he usually spends his days in formal meetings, but that this is going to be an extraordinary day, as he will dress in a uniform and take on a role as a cab driver, in order to meet everyday people and get a better understanding of what politics the country needs.

The video went viral and reached a high number of social media users as well as achieving broad coverage in the Norwegian and international press. The video was

shared in spite of its length, which, at 3:41 minutes, was almost two minutes longer than the Obama video discussed above. This might be explained by two factors: first, that Norwegians might be more tolerant of lengthy clips as they are not regularly exposed to audio-visual political advertisements (which are prohibited under existing broadcast TV regulations). Second, that the two years between these videos might have had some impact on the length, as campaign strategists might have become more aware of the impatient logics of social media use during this period.

Among the criticisms towards the secret cab driver video was that the Prime Minister was a bad and even dangerous driver, and that it requires a specific license to serve as a cab driver in Norway, and that Stoltenberg thus broke the law. This criticism was quickly dismissed as irrelevant because he did not earn money as a cab driver, and none of the passengers paid for their journeys. A much more serious criticism was that the video was inauthentic as it became publicly known that some of the passengers in the back seat were cast, and not random customers waiting for a cab. This criticism pinpoints how expectations of authenticity are communicated by the audience, as they connect with the films because of the authenticity in the human reactions and therefore feel betrayed when the authenticity illusions are uncovered. In the next section, I will compare the use of authenticity illusions in the two videos.

### Authenticity Illusions in the Campaign Videos

In the book *Mediated Authenticity* (Enli 2015a), I distinguish between seven types of authenticity illusions, of which four are particularly evident in the campaign videos studied in this chapter. First, *predictability* is an essential element in rhetoric intended to seem authentic. In the BuzzFeed video, for example, Barack Obama plays basketball and draws Michelle Obama on a piece of paper. Viewers will already know that he likes to play basketball and that he is married to Michelle. Likewise, they will already know that Jens Stoltenberg had been in office as Prime Minister for eight years when he drove the taxi and that this explained his bad driving, as he himself also mentioned in apologising to a passenger for a sudden stop.

A second authenticity illusion in the social media videos is *spontaneity*, or more precisely, pre-planned spontaneity. Barack Obama, for example, suddenly starts to play with a selfie-stick and improvises seemingly spontaneously with various angles and shots, and also suddenly starts to play air-basketball at a time when he should be ready for meeting the press. In the taxi, the spontaneous responses from the very astonished and surprised passengers in the backseat once they recognise the prime minister behind the wheel are adding an essential layer of authenticity to the Stoltenberg video.

Although the reactions from all the passengers seemed authentic, some of them—five out of fourteen—had been ‘street cast’, meaning that they were recruited on the street, offered a small remuneration, and informed that they would partake in an election campaign video (but without knowing that they would meet the Prime Minister). The rest of the passengers were real passengers entering a regular cab and did not have any reason to expect that the cab ride should be included in a produced event (Johnsen 2013). Their spontaneous reactions indeed constituted much of the appeal in the video, and created scenes of humour, humanity, and authenticity.

The third authenticity illusion is *ordinariness*, which is a well-known and much-used rhetorical mode in political communication. A trustworthy politician needs to come across as an ordinary person, who can relate to everyday life and the issues regular

people struggle with. In the Obama BuzzFeed video, the main narrative is precisely built around a portrayal of the president as an ordinary person, just like everyone else. Presented through the parallel storylines, the video portrays two persons of different status—the U.S. president and a young journalist—preparing for the same press meeting. In spite of their different roles, the two men prepare for the meeting with fairly backstage behaviour: they both make faces and try to look cool in front of a mirror, they both rehearse their pronunciation of common words (such as ‘February’ and ‘Wednesday’), they both take funny selfies, they both make practical mistakes, they both make amateur drawings, and they both play air basketball. Moreover, the last scene explicitly demonstrates Obama’s ordinariness by having the journalist enter the room while the president is still in his play mode. Surprised by seeing the president in such an informal and unexpected mode, the journalist exclaims: “Mr. President?!” and Obama answers with arms wide open, and a question: “Can I live?” and later to a laughing, but invisible crowd, “Yolo, man” (referring to the phrase ‘you only live once’). The message to users is that Obama is just like everyone else, and that he also likes to have fun and does not just spend his life as a formal and upright politician.

Similarly, when Norway’s Prime Minister talks to ordinary people in the taxi video, the message to the voters is that he is not ignoring the concerns of everyday people but rather engages in their problems and effortlessly discusses their concerns and responds to their problems. In the video’s introduction, Prime Minister Stoltenberg speaks directly to the camera and explains with a pedagogic tone his motives for taking on the role as a taxi driver: “In my job as the prime minister it is essential to know people’s *true opinions*, and if there is one place people really speak their mind, it is in the taxi.”

Another shared feature in both the Obama video and the Stoltenberg video is the message that political leaders have limited power and should not be blamed for everything. In the Obama video, the ironic phrase: “Thank you, Obama!” is declared both by the reporter and by Obama himself when they face practical challenges, and the message is that they unfairly blame the president because there is nobody else to blame. Transferred to real politics, the message is that Obama is not to be blamed for everything that is wrong and unfair in society. Likewise, the taxi video includes an elderly woman’s complaints about the high salaries of top-level managers: “They should not have all this money!,” to which Stoltenberg explains that this is difficult to regulate even for a Prime Minister, because, as he says: “I do not have the power to decide the salaries in these companies.”

A fourth authenticity illusion in the two videos is *imperfection*. In the Obama video, elements of imperfection are included to communicate realism, such as the dirty spots on the mirror Obama is performing in front of, and the untidiness in the bookshelf behind Obama when he plays with the selfie stick. Moreover, the President struggles with pronouncing the word ‘February’ correctly, and thus demonstrates that he is not perfect. Likewise, the secret cab driver video exposes Stoltenberg as a bad driver when he abruptly steps on the brakes, so that the passenger is pulled out of her seat and screams before the situation normalises. Moreover, when one of the passengers expresses scepticism against the taxi driver, Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg, and his political party, it adds trustworthiness to the video by including also non-supportive arguments. The inclusion of the passenger’s statement “I did not vote for you” served to make the video more authentic than a more polished campaign video where the producers would make sure to cast supporters rather than attackers.

## Authenticity Illusions in Social Media Under-Communicate Power Relations

The above analysis identified a set of authenticity illusions in the campaign videos, and how these were used to communicate a ‘backstage’ image, as if users were given personal access directly to the politicians. Yet the rhetoric of authenticity might be a disguise for highly staged, pre-planned and expensive productions, and a way to make politicians seem like harmless and likeable everyday people ‘like you and me’ rather than powerful politicians with control over economic resources and influence over our lives. As such, politicians’ use of social media and self-presentations in informal settings (as in the role of a cab driver or a playful slacker) might be a way to under-communicate the real power relations between politicians and voters.

Portrayals of celebrity politicians in the role of an ordinary person are nevertheless also appealing, and bring an element of ordinariness and recognition into politics, which might help voters to identify and relate more to those politicians. Moreover, as in the ‘First Kiss’ video, there are authentic elements in the political campaign videos which cannot be dismissed as entirely staged and faked, as they provide glimpses of authentic encounters between people (as in the secret cab driver video) and of a president who allows the camera to film him in awkward settings (as with the selfie stick or air basketball scenes).

The current relationship between politicians and citizens has been characterised as a ‘Wall of Suspicion’, meaning that both parties mistrust the other and that the media are adding fuel to the fire by running stories about politicians who fail to deliver as promised (Coleman and Wright 2008). However, the media might also offer a kind of remedy for mistrust: political communication might also construct an image of politicians as trustworthy, authentic and likeable. Authentic talk has even been characterised as a ‘guarantee of truth’ (Montgomery 2001). Following this line of thought, Margaretten and Gaber (2012: 3) argue that authentic communication is both a goal and a requirement for trust in politicians: “without the perception of authenticity, trust cannot be established.” In politics, trustworthiness is of key importance, and, quite paradoxically, the search for authentic moments has increased as a result of the professionalisation and commercialisation of political communication. Voters want to believe that they are told the truth, “without the spin and manipulation all too common in political communication” (Margaretten and Gaber 2012: 3).

In theory, politicians acquire their mandate as a result of the authenticity, sincerity, and consistency they display (Coleman 2006). Yet, being authentic in a mediated context is not directly related to being honest or sincere in their actions and decision making, but rather to coming across to voters as authentic. Therefore, being authentic has become a strategy in its own right, and Hillary Clinton, for example, is quoted to have said: “I believe in being as authentic as possible” (Rosenbloom 2011: para. 6), and Michele Bachmann told ABC News that “I am authentic” (Rosenbloom 2011: para. 1). Being authentic has thus turned into a slogan that politicians can use to promote themselves, and social media are perhaps the most accessible tools to communicate authenticity in contemporary politics.

In this chapter, I have analysed how elite politicians in two Western democracies of differing size, system, and political culture have emphasised symbolic authenticity in their social media strategies. Research has suggested that authentic talk from politicians

might reduce mistrust in politicians and that if voters feel less distance between themselves and the politicians, trust might be regained (Margaretten and Gaber 2012).

Thus, social media were expected by some to provide precisely for this kind of authentic expression, without interference from media producers, political journalists, or the political spin apparatus. However, as demonstrated in this analysis, politicians are staged as authentic in social media, and political advisors calculate that by making the politicians' self-representations seem real and authentic, voters will come to trust them, and, in turn, vote for them. Voters do not however gain access to the genuine politician, but to an image, partly staged as authentic and partly based on elements of the real politician.

The implications of this increased focus on authenticity in political communication require further research, but based on the findings of this study I will point to three possible implications. First, mediated politics becomes increasingly personalised, both in candidate-centred and in party-centred countries. In turn, voters will be increasingly concerned about candidate's seeming authenticity and trustworthiness, compared, for example, to their skills in leadership and knowledge about the society. Second, the role of media and communication advisors, and especially social media experts, might be strengthened in relation to the political party organisation. Third, and related, the use of social media as an image-building strategy will probably be professionalised over the next decade, and the production of mediated authenticity and strategies to make highly manipulated material seem authentic will expand. Paradoxically, authenticity will require advanced production techniques, a point which can be related to a famous quote by Dolly Parton: "It costs a lot of money to look this cheap."

## Notes

- 1 [www.buzzfeed.com/andrewgauthier/the-president-uses-a-selfie-stick#.nyEdDRW3r](http://www.buzzfeed.com/andrewgauthier/the-president-uses-a-selfie-stick#.nyEdDRW3r)
- 2 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=uqsoWbQewIo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uqsoWbQewIo)
- 3 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=IpbDHxCV29A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IpbDHxCV29A)
- 4 [www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/TransparencyandOpenGovernment/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/TransparencyandOpenGovernment/)
- 5 [www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/05/18/407721123/president-gets-his-own-twitter-account-its-barack-really](http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/05/18/407721123/president-gets-his-own-twitter-account-its-barack-really)
- 6 <https://twitter.com/BarackObama/status/266031293945503744>
- 7 [www.facebook.com/jensstoltenberg/photos/pb.21646763580.2207520000.1432045286./10152415368468581/?type=3&theater](http://www.facebook.com/jensstoltenberg/photos/pb.21646763580.2207520000.1432045286./10152415368468581/?type=3&theater)
- 8 Likes/shares/comments numbers are per 28 May 2015.

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