

A Candidate Commodified: Linda McMahon as a WWE Product in the 2010 Senate Campaign

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This article examines the commodification of Linda McMahon, former CEO of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), in her 2010 campaign for the U.S. Senate in Connecticut. Much campaign discourse, including print media coverage and texts from both the candidate's critics and allies, drew attention to McMahon's wrestling background and constructed her experience in negative ways. Moreover, these multiple sources of discourse commodified McMahon as an actual and symbolic product of WWE. In addition, rhetoric produced by the campaign and WWE further promoted McMahon as a commodity "for sale" and marketed by the company in the context of the election. Through an examination of various forms of campaign discourse, this essay examines McMahon as a commodity of the WWE cipher. In a literal sense, this essay examines McMahon as a product of the WWE cipher alongside an assortment of commodities such as action figures, video games, t-shirts, and DVDs. In addition, this essay discusses McMahon as a symbolic product similar to concepts and ideals marketed by WWE, such as sex and violence.

Keywords: Cipher, Commodification, Politics, Wrestling, WWE

On September 20, 2011 Linda McMahon, the former CEO of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), announced her intention to run for U.S. Senate in her home state of Connecticut. While McMahon is an early frontrunner in the Republican field for Joe Lieberman's soon-to-be-vacated Senate seat, some remain skeptical about the candidate's ability to win the race.¹ McMahon previously ran as the Republican nominee for Chris Dodd's vacated senate seat in 2010, ultimately losing by a 12-point margin in the general election to Democrat Richard Blumenthal.² A 2009 newspaper article accurately predicted the issues that would plague McMahon in her first campaign, asserting that "Pro-wrestling's reputation for overly lewd and sexist performances, allegations of steroid abuse and YouTube clips of McMahon performing in the ring will likely provide her opponents with a fruitful source of material for negative ads."³ Indeed, McMahon's oppo-

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¹ Daniela Altimari, "Republican Linda McMahon Announces U.S. Senate Bid," *Harford Courant*, September 20, 2011, accessed December 18, 2011, http://articles.courant.com/2011-09-20/news/hc-mcmahon-announces-0921-20110920_1_democrat-richard-blumenthal-jobs-plan-campaign-strategy.

² "Election Results for U.S. Senator," *Statement of Vote*, accessed December 18, 2011, <http://www.statementofvote-sots.ct.gov/StatementOfVote/WebModules/ReportsLink/USSenTownView.aspx?Parameter=11/02/2010-General>.

³ Daniela Altimari, "WWE's McMahon Seeks GOP Nod for Dodd Seat, Promises Good Fight," *Hartford Courant*, September 16, 2009, accessed November 20, 2011, http://articles.courant.com/2009-09-16/news/hc-mcmahon-senate-announcement-0916.artsep16_1_linda-e-mcmahon-vincent-moscardelli-world-wrestling-entertainment-empire.

nents in the general and primary elections joined with other critical voices to disparage McMahon's history with the controversial professional wrestling industry. In addition to the numerous critical voices, media sources continually linked McMahon to professional wrestling. While the media typically refrained from offering overt criticism, many news articles briefly mentioned McMahon as a "former WWE CEO," while others focused specifically on her experience with the company.⁴ By merely associating McMahon with WWE, these articles reminded viewers and readers of previous coverage of professional wrestling, which for many years often focused on high death rates, concussions, steroids and other performance enhancing drugs, and the controversial product of professional wrestling itself.

As McMahon and her opponents proceed through the early stages of the 2012 campaign, they can learn much by examining the discourse that helped prevent McMahon from succeeding in her last political endeavor. This essay analyzes discourse from the candidate's 2010 opponents, in addition to news articles, arguing that these texts often constructed McMahon and WWE in negative ways. Moreover, this essay argues that these multiple sources of discourse commodified McMahon as an actual and symbolic product of WWE. In addition, this essay examines rhetoric produced by the campaign and WWE, which further promoted McMahon as a commodity "for sale" and marketed by the company in the context of the election.

WWE and McMahon: Cipher and Commodity

Ono and Buescher explain the commodification process through the definition and theorization of the cipher. The authors define the cipher as the "mechanism by which commodity culture thematizes concepts...and via this process, markets myriad products to consumers."⁵ The authors also describe the cipher as the referent, adding "products refer to it, and its existence depends on its relationship to a field of products. Hence, the cipher is an effect of the many images and discourses referencing it."⁶ The authors specifically use the example of Disney's film *Pocahontas*, arguing that the title character serves as a cipher which markets a variety of products, such as toys, books, and clothes. In this instance, products refer to the figure of Pocahontas, but also "proliferate . . . the cipher's meanings and our understandings of them."⁷

In the most literal sense, we can see the ways in which WWE becomes a cipher for an assortment of commodities; action figures, video games, t-shirts, DVDs, and a barrage of other products both refer to and add meaning to the WWE cipher. Ono and Buescher clar-

⁴ Daniela Altimari, "McMahon Hopes to Undermine Blumenthal's Image," *Hartford Courant*, September 9, 2010, accessed November 20, 2011, http://articles.courant.com/2010-09-09/news/hc-blumenthal-media-ctsen-20100908_1_dick-blumenthal-chris-healy-campaign; Christopher Keating, "Anti-incumbent Mood Could Help Republicans in State Legislative Races," *Hartford Courant*, October 18, 2010, accessed November 20, 2011, http://articles.courant.com/2010-10-18/news/hc-house-senate-1018-20101018_1_state-legislative-races-legislative-seats-democrats; Daniela Altimari, "UConn Students Confront Linda McMahon about WWE's Programming," *Hartford Courant*, November 1, 2010, accessed November 20, 2011, http://blogs.courant.com/capitol_watch/2010/11/uconn-students-confront-linda.html.

⁵ Kent A. Ono and Derek T. Buescher, "Deciphering Pocahontas: Unpackaging the Commodification of a Native American Woman," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18 (2001): 25.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

ify, however, that the cipher is both a literal figure *and* a social concept that can market both material objects and “objects that can be metaphorically consumed.”⁸ WWE marketed commodities then are not limited to the officially designated items available on store shelves, but include concepts, such as sex and violence, and individuals, such as Linda McMahon.

The commodification process began with McMahon’s own rhetoric as she entered the race. As a candidate with few traditional political qualifications, McMahon cited her experience as WWE CEO as the reason she should be elected. A candidate running on business experience is clearly not an anomaly in American politics, with recent examples of former CEOs running for office including Herman Cain, Steve Forbes, and Meg Whitman. McMahon’s rhetoric echoed the appeals of most business leaders turned politicians, claiming that her experience making money and creating jobs in the private sector would serve her well in office. Upon entering the race she announced, “I have spent the past 30 years growing what began as a 13-employee small business into a publicly traded, global entertainment company that now provides over 500 jobs here in Connecticut.”⁹ Unfortunately for McMahon, media descriptions of WWE were not always so positive. For instance, Altimari described the organization as a “low-brow diversion long known for its buffoonery, bawdiness and violence, both mock and real.”¹⁰ So while McMahon attempted to utilize strategies similar to other former business leaders, she faced very different constraints. Some might criticize a Whitman or Forbes for their business practices, but would usually stop short of criticizing their company’s products and image. But McMahon, by claiming WWE’s successes as her own, inadvertently opened the door to attacks on her experience with a company and industry already prone to negative criticism.

Criticism throughout the campaign largely dealt with two facets: WWE’s controversial product and health-related issues. Of course, this criticism was nothing new for the professional wrestling industry; people have taken wrestling to task over a variety of issues since its inception. WWE, in particular, constantly withstands criticism from individuals concerned with wrestling’s violent content. Perhaps more significantly, the national media reported on several major negative news stories pertaining to WWE over the last two decades, including the 1994 steroid distribution trial and the 2007 Chris Benoit double murder-suicide. Linda McMahon’s campaign does not mark the first time this criticism spilled over into the political arena, as media attention focused on the wrestling experiences of Jesse Ventura, a former wrestler who ran successfully for Governor of Minnesota in 1998, and Jerry Lawler, a wrestler, announcer, and promoter who ran unsuccessfully for mayor of Memphis, Tennessee in 1999. But where Ventura and Lawler were mostly criticized as wrestling performers, McMahon was criticized as a governing authority of a wrestling company, directly responsible for WWE’s product.

The state Democratic Party was one of the first sources of criticism to bring up WWE’s controversial product during the 2010 election. Spokesperson Colleen Flanagan stated, “As WWE chief operating officer, Linda McMahon presided over programming that showed simulated rape, public sex, and necrophilia, and now she wants to be our

⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁹ Altimari, “WWE’s McMahon Seeks GOP Nod.”

¹⁰ Daniela Altimari, “Linda McMahon Wrestling in New Ring: Politics,” *Hartford Courant*, December 20, 2009, accessed November 20, 2011, http://articles.courant.com/2009-12-20/news/hc-mcmahon-retrospect-1220.artdec20_1_linda-mcmahon-vincent-k-mcmahon-new-ring.

U.S. senator? People across this state . . . would be horrified and embarrassed to know that the person who seeks to represent them condones this kind of behavior.”¹¹ Other critics levied similar condemnation throughout the campaign. For instance, David Haseltine, a member of the University of Connecticut’s Violence against Women Prevention Program, asserted, “When she was CEO...WWE either tacitly or explicitly endorsed programming—much of which denigrated women or promoted violence against women.”¹² Richard Blumenthal, McMahon’s opponent in the general election, also criticized WWE programming during the candidates’ three debates. He said, “I have fought to protect children from abuse and neglect. My opponent has . . . marketed sex and violence to children.”¹³

Criticism related to health problems in professional wrestling also originated from the onset of the campaign. In reference to the high death rate of young wrestlers in professional wrestling, former WWE wrestler “Superstar” Billy Graham argued, “Linda McMahon’s hands are as bloody as her husband’s [current WWE CEO Vince McMahon] because she is aware of every move in the ring.”¹⁴ McMahon’s primary and general election opponents also addressed the issue. Jim Barnett, the campaign manager for McMahon’s rival for the GOP nomination, Rob Simmons, stated,

the sheer number of deaths raises serious questions about whether or not Linda McMahon, as CEO, has done all she can to stop them . . . I think most CEOs, if they saw their employees and former employees dropping dead in their 30s and 40s at this astonishing rate would be compelled morally and ethically, if not legally, to get to the bottom of it.¹⁵

Sources also brought up other health concerns facing professional wrestling, including the lack of adequate drug testing policies and healthcare packages. One vocal critic and wrestling journalist, Irvin Muchnick, took WWE and McMahon to task on all of these issues, calling the company a “public health menace.”¹⁶

Discourse criticizing McMahon’s links to wrestling’s controversial product and related health issues served as integral pieces in the commodification process. As Ono and Buescher state, “the cipher is the culminating effect of various discourses surrounding

¹¹ Christopher Keating, “Controversial Wrestling Videos Taken Down,” *Hartford Courant*, October 17, 2009, accessed November 20, 2011, http://articles.courant.com/2009-10-17/news/hc-mcmahon-wrestling-videos-1017.artoct17_1_linda-mcmahon-mcmahon-s-spokesman-wrestling.

¹² Daniela Altimari, “UConn Students Confront Linda McMahon about WWE’s Programming,” *Hartford Courant*, November 1, 2010, accessed November 20, 2011, http://blogs.courant.com/capitol_watch/2010/11/uconn-students-confront-linda.html.

¹³ Daniela Altimari, “McMahon-Blumenthal Debate Turns into Character Battle,” *Hartford Courant*, October 13, 2010, accessed November 20, 2011, http://articles.courant.com/2010-10-13/news/hc-ct-sen-debate-1013-20101012_1_mcmahon-and-blumenthal-wwe-connecticut.

¹⁴ Christopher Keating, “Political Smackdown: Former Wrestler Takes on McMahon,” *Hartford Courant*, November 18, 2009, accessed November 20, 2011, http://articles.courant.com/2009-11-18/news/hc-mcmahon-opposition-1118.artnov18_1_linda-mcmahon-vince-mcmahon-world-wrestling-entertainment-empire.

¹⁵ Neil Vigdor, “Former WWE Champ’s Death Provides Ammunition for McMahon Foes,” *Connecticut Post*, December 9, 2009, accessed November 20, 2011, <http://www.ctpost.com/news/article/Former-WWE-champ-s-death-provides-ammunition-for-282043.php>.

¹⁶ Daniela Altimari, “WWE Critic Takes Shots at U.S. Senate Candidate Linda McMahon,” *Hartford Courant*, March 24, 2010, accessed November 20, 2011, http://articles.courant.com/2010-03-24/news/hc-ww-irv-muchnick-0323.artmar24_1_benoit-murder-suicide-ww-irvin-muchnick.

commodities marketed around a common theme.”¹⁷ Critics of McMahon constantly produced discourse that “marketed” McMahon around the central theme of controversy associated with professional wrestling. These pieces of discourses also culminated in the construction of WWE as a cipher. But while these texts were critical components of the commodification process, rhetoric generated by the McMahon campaign and WWE may provide the strongest argument for the candidate as a product of the company.

McMahon typically addressed criticism by deflecting blame and changing topic. When attacked by Rob Simmons, campaign spokesperson Ed Patru stated, “Rob Simmons . . . is a Washington insider who has never created a single job . . . He’s in full-blown attack mode.”¹⁸ Similarly, when addressing Billy Graham, Patru charged, “That rhetoric is so over the top and so outrageous that it’s not credible and not believable.”¹⁹ In one of the few instances in which McMahon addressed the criticism directly, she only conceded that WWE had “pushed the envelope” at certain points.²⁰ Largely, in an effort to draw attention away from criticism, the McMahon campaign continued to question the credibility and character of their detractors. However, the campaign was never able to fully address or stop criticism because McMahon was in a double bind of sorts: she needed to cite her experience with WWE as a qualification for election but did not want to be held responsible for wrestling’s controversial issues. In dealing with this double bind, McMahon engaged in what Shawn Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles call “the politics of personal destruction.”²¹ McMahon treated her WWE past as a “private” matter and only exploited the topic when it made sense politically. Meanwhile, when facing information from her past with WWE that could potentially tarnish her image, McMahon asserted that the matters were unimportant and/or private. McMahon’s rhetoric typified the “relentless tension between public and private” and resulted in opponents labeling her as hypocritical and disingenuous.²²

While McMahon deflected wrestling-related criticism throughout the majority of her campaign, WWE refused silence and offered counter-arguments to those condemning the company. Comments from WWE propagated through many stories; often when McMahon offered a “no comment,” a response from WWE would be cited instead. This further tied McMahon and WWE together as having joint authority in responding to criticism. As the election neared, WWE-produced discourse increased in quantity and assertiveness. During the week of October 17-23, WWE launched the “Stand Up for WWE” campaign, which called “for fans of the professional wrestling company to write letters to the editor, forward YouTube videos and take other actions to defend the WWE against ‘negative and inaccurate attacks.’”²³ While WWE and the McMahon campaign denied allegations of illegal coordination, the efforts by WWE were interpreted by opponents and media

¹⁷ Ono and Buescher, “Deciphering Pocahontas,” 27.

¹⁸ Vigdor, “Former WWE Champ’s Death.”

¹⁹ Keating, “Political Smackdown.”

²⁰ Altimari, “McMahon-Blumenthal Debate.”

²¹ Shawn Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles, *Constructing Clinton: Hyperreality and Presidential Image-Making in Postmodern Politics* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002), 10.

²² *Ibid.*, 119.

²³ Ed Stannard, “State Dems Complain WWE Events are ‘Illegal Coordination’ by McMahon Camp,” *New Haven Register*, October 26, 2010, accessed November 20, 2011, <http://new-haven-register.vlex.com/vid/dems-complain-wwe-coordination-mcmahon-224805503>.

members as Vince McMahon “coming to his company’s and his wife’s defense.”²⁴ The “Stand Up for WWE” campaign produced video footage featuring celebrities at WWE events, in addition to WWE performers doing philanthropic work for organizations such as the Make a Wish Foundation. By highlighting these aspects of the company, WWE attempted to recast themselves (and Linda McMahon) in a more positive light.

In conjunction with the “Stand Up for WWE” campaign, the wrestling organization announced two events in Connecticut leading up to Election Day: a fan appreciation night in Hartford on October 30 and a television taping in Bridgeport on November 2 (Election Day). In addition, WWE announced that the company would give away free merchandise at select polling locations on Election Day.²⁵ WWE begrudgingly canceled their “give-away events” in response to warnings from the U.S. Justice Department. In a statement on the withdrawal of the “give-away,” Vince McMahon said, “This is clearly heavy-handed bullying from big government and would appear to be desperate political activity in closely contested elections in Connecticut.”²⁶ While the “give-away” did not occur, the very announcement of one, in combination with the wrestling events surrounding the election, added to the commodification process. As Ono and Buescher state, “Commodities and ciphers mutually support one another in a feedback loop in which the cipher imbues the commodity with a particular kind of value, while the purchase of the commodity in the context of an entire field of related commodities further strengthens the overall desirability of produces associated with the cipher.”²⁷ Through marketing material commodities (i.e., wrestling events and wrestling merchandise) in the context of an election, WWE attempted to strengthen the overall desirability of the cipher (WWE) and primary commodity of concern (Linda McMahon). In a way, voters could “buy one, get one free” by voting for McMahon and acquiring another product at no charge. Unfortunately, for potential voters who did not identify as WWE fans and viewed wrestling negatively, the attempt to support McMahon with other WWE products continued to construct the candidate in unbeneficial ways.

Implications

While WWE and the McMahon campaign were separate entities in actuality, discourse produced by the media, McMahon critics, WWE, and the candidate commodified Linda McMahon as a product of WWE. In other cultural contexts, the wrestling organization might have been associated with more positive meanings. However, as Ono and Buescher note, “a cipher may have meaning in one cultural context, but when imported for use in another wholly different context, the substance of a cipher may be altered dramatically.”

²⁴ Brian Lockhart, “Vince McMahon Fights Back as Dems Attack WWE,” *Connecticut Post*, October 16, 2010, accessed February 23, 2012, <http://www.ctpost.com/default/article/Vince-McMahon-fights-back-as-Dems-attack-WWE-709523.php>.

²⁵ Neil Vigdor, “WWE to Give Away Merch at Polling Places, Thumbing Nose at Bysiewicz,” *Connecticut Post*, October 28, 2010, accessed November 20, 2011, <http://www.ctpost.com/news/article/WWE-to-give-away-merch-at-polling-places-735443.php>.

²⁶ Ed Stannard, “Justice Department Says ‘No’ to WWE Poll Giveaway Plan,” *New Haven Register*, November 1, 2010, accessed November 20, 2011, <http://www.nhregister.com/articles/2010/11/01/news/doc4ccf3daaf01f9354865948.txt?viewmode=fullstory>

²⁷ Ono and Buescher, “Deciphering Pocahontas,” 26.

²⁸ The campaign's multiple sources of discourse constructed WWE, as a cipher, and McMahon, as a commodity, in largely negative ways. This leads to the question: why, when exported to the context of the election, did the substance of the cipher change negatively? Black asserts that the cipher may act as "a type of empty container that the powerful fills with whatever values, images, and meaning it wishes."²⁹ In the context of the election, the powerful consisted of the media, Blumenthal, WWE, McMahon, and others. Wanting to attribute conflicting values to WWE, the powerful could not simply fill the cipher with whatever it wished in this case. In a battle to ascribe meaning to WWE, critical voices prevailed due, in part, to inconsistencies by the McMahon campaign in dealing with "private" issues.

McMahon's inconsistencies in dealing with her professional wrestling background points towards implications related to private and public matters. Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles write, "By definition, politicians at the presidential level sacrifice a large measure of their privacy in order to achieve electoral success."³⁰ Clearly, given the advancements in technology over the past few years, this can now apply to politicians running for any level of office. Less clear is the question of what constitutes a private or a public issue. McMahon and many of her supporters made the argument that her past with WWE was essentially private and unworthy of critical attention. Shannon Thurston, a wrestling fan and McMahon supporter wrote, "They're attacking her family business, which is not really fair . . . She's not going after Blumenthal's family."³¹ However, as discussed through an analysis of the assortment of criticism launched towards the McMahon campaign, the candidate's experience seemed to be fair game. This largely stems from the fact that McMahon was the CEO with governing authority of a publicly traded company who then sought election to a public governing office. In an era of 24/7 news channels and new social media outlets, all candidates must expect increased scrutiny of their private lives. In this and other cases where the lines between public and private are already blurred and are further confounded by a candidate's manipulation of a private persona, politicians must be prepared for the dissemination of allegedly private information.

As the 2012 campaign progresses, McMahon appears to face challenges similar to those of her 2010 race. Just before McMahon announced her candidacy, the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee came forward with a familiar attack, calling her a "greedy CEO . . . who made her fortune by putting her own profits before the health and safety of her workers and marketing sex and violence to children."³² As a living commodity in her last campaign, McMahon embodied "WWE," "premature deaths in wrestling," "use of steroids and other drugs," and other products of the greater WWE cipher. Meanwhile, public and private tensions in McMahon's own rhetoric prevented her from constructing a more positive meaning of WWE as a cipher or herself as a commodity.

²⁸ Ibid., 25.

²⁹ Jason E. Black, "Sacagawea as Commodity, Currency, and Cipher: Consequences of the U.S. Mint's Gold Dollar for American Indian Women," *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics* 1 (2005): 227-228.

³⁰ Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles, *Constructing Clinton*, 9.

³¹ Christopher Keating, "WWE Fans Urged to Vote," *Hartford Courant*, October 30, 2010, accessed November 20, 2011, http://articles.courant.com/2010-10-30/news/hc-gop-campaigning-1031-20101030_1_vince-mcmahon-ed-patru-cast-votes.

³² Altimari, "Republican Linda McMahon Announces U.S. Senate Bid."

McMahon currently seems to be pursuing a strategy similar to her failed 2010 campaign. She continues to try to distance herself from WWE, and is even distancing herself from her last name, which is associated with wrestling.³³ To further detach herself from her wrestling ties, McMahon must prevent WWE from inserting itself into the campaign and must try to shift the focus of the campaign away from her past experience and onto other issues. However, as evidenced by the 2010 campaign, McMahon is unlikely to succeed in completely stopping the media and her opponents from discussing her WWE ties. Another strategy, so far not pursued by the candidate, is for McMahon to completely embrace her experience with the company. While a risky strategy, McMahon could hope to further utilize her experience to enhance her image as a Washington outsider. In addition, McMahon could then better take part in the imbuing of the WWE cipher, hoping to give it more positive meaning. Regardless of the strategy the campaign chooses, McMahon must find new ways to avoid being marketed as a product of a negative cipher once again.

³³ McMahon's campaign website rarely uses her last name, instead using phrases like "Linda: U.S. Senate 2012," "Like Linda," "Follow Linda," and "Join Women for Linda."