

**Squared Circle, Oval Office:
Vince McMahon and U.S. Politics**

Michael Scibilia

Monash University

michael.scibilia1@monash.edu

In November 2016, Donald Trump became the first member of the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) Hall of Fame to be elected U.S. president. His exalted status within the professional wrestling company was the result of a series of appearances on WWE's global television programming, highlighted by a storyline feud with company chairman and CEO, Vince McMahon. This article examines the relationship between McMahon, WWE and Trump's 2016 electoral success. It uses McMahon as a case study to argue that he and Trump share a political and cultural lineage that highlights the significance of professional wrestling beyond being a form of popular entertainment. McMahon was directly linked with the pursuit of political power during the 2010 and 2012 Senate campaigns of wife and former WWE president and CEO, Linda McMahon. Though the campaigns were unsuccessful, Vince McMahon's relevance to U.S. politics emerged throughout the 2016 presidential race. Trump's rhetoric, demagoguery, strongman leadership, machismo and nationalist ideals created a post-truth political spectacle that resembled professional wrestling. This fusion of politics and professional wrestling took McMahon's brand and persona to the highest level of politics in America.

Keywords: media; Vince McMahon; entrepreneurship; Donald Trump; politics

The political ascendancy of U.S. president Donald Trump has seen conventional policy discussion and the notion of objective truth overshadowed by a media spectacle comparable to professional wrestling. Trump's brash personality and pitching to a white, blue-collar, nationalist America befits wrestling's exaggerated rhetoric and tendency to juxtapose working-class, patriotic heroes with privileged and foreign villains. Further underlining this intersection between U.S. politics and the spectacle of wrestling is the fact that Trump has made appearances for market leader World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) and is a member of the company's Hall of Fame.

This article examines the relationship between WWE and the pursuit of political power. While culminating with Trump's election, this power is contextualised through a case study of WWE Chairman and CEO Vince McMahon, who became directly associated with political power in December 2016 when his

wife, Linda McMahon, was nominated to head the Small Business Administration under Trump. Prior to her accepting this position, she ran for the U.S. Senate in 2010 and 2012 as a Republican candidate in Connecticut. Linda McMahon was previously WWE president and CEO.

The article posits a connection between the entrepreneurial power of Vince McMahon, the political aspirations of Linda McMahon and the political ascendancy of Donald Trump. McMahon is framed within a political and cultural context in which the subsequent political success of Trump can be located. Trump's political persona has a direct link with WWE given his prior involvement with the company as an on-air performer and is also shown to be reflective of McMahon's performances on WWE television as Chairman "Mr. McMahon" (hereafter, "Mr. McMahon" is used when referring to McMahon's scripted television character).

McMahon is contextualised within the history of the demagogue. The figure has a long history within U.S. politics and the employment of populist rhetoric that fits within the paradigm of "politics as spectacle" (Lasch). The demagogue emphasises a performative brand of politics, focusing on the power of oration in mobilising disenfranchised voters. Trump not only marks the return of the demagogue but does so through a strong man style of leadership that resembles Mr. McMahon. Comparisons are made between Trump's campaigning and the brand of machismo, violence and misogyny that has historically been associated with WWE and Mr. McMahon. This brand is also particularly white, with WWE and Trump both depicting the threat of racial otherness.

Several rhetorical analyses have recognised the connection between Trump's political persona and his WWE experiences. Theye and Melling's "Total Losers and Bad Hombres" demonstrates that Trump's rhetoric is characterised by repetition, single-syllable words and an attack on political correctness. His refusal to conform to conventional political rhetoric gives him a sense of authenticity in contrast to his opponents, whom he insults as being metonymic of a corrupt and dishonest political establishment. His performative persona is a significant part of his political appeal, and Theye and Melling acknowledge that "his many appearances on television shows like WWE helped him develop his boisterous, over-the-top political style" (331). Mendes' "Digital Demagogue" describes Trump's rhetoric as an amalgamation of political demagoguery and the "skill and style of a reality television star." She states that Trump's "demeanour at rallies and even on debate stages echoes the familiar tropes of professional wrestling" and "the violence of his rallies, his outrageous insults of his opponents, and his crass references to the size of his genitals ... make perfect sense in the context of Trump the WWE entertainer" (72). Hall et al.'s "The Hands of Donald Trump" combines rhetorical theory with cultural

anthropology and linguistic anthropology to consider Trump's comedic appeal. Gestural methods are shown to be a means of demeaning critics and opponents, with the authors attributing the pistol hand gesture—as well as other tactics such as imitating and nicknaming opponents—to his wrestling connection.

Though the studies mentioned here were rhetorical analyses of Trump, this study is drawn from a broader semiotic and document analysis of McMahon that illuminated his relevance to U.S. politics. The analysis explored the cultural and ideological meanings of McMahon, similar to other works on the mythologization of public figures such as Nick Trujillo's "The Meaning of Nolan Ryan" and Ellis Cashmore's *Beckham*. Trump emerged as a point of comparison in which the cultural context of McMahon extends to politics. The analysis endeavours to highlight the cultural significance of McMahon and WWE by showing its relation to politics through power and persona.

McMahons and Republican Politics: Linda McMahon in 2010 and 2012

The McMahons' politics are aligned with the Republican Party. Vince and his wife Linda donated \$365,000 to the party during the 2011-12 election cycle. They also donated \$75,000 each to Restore Our Future, which was a pro-Mitt Romney Super Political Action Committee (PAC) (Vigdor). According to the OpenSecrets website, the couple's donations during the 2014 election cycle reached \$3.3 million, all of which went to Republicans and conservatives. As an organisation, WWE became politically active in 2000 when it hired political consulting firms. It reportedly wanted to improve its image after the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) investigated the advertising of violence to children (Beatty). WWE presented itself as socially responsible by launching a "Smackdown Your Vote!" campaign, which encouraged its audience to register to vote. Though Linda McMahon and WWE star The Rock were guests at the Republican National Convention that year, she claimed that her husband was an independent (Williams).¹

Vince McMahon has been conspicuously quiet in publicly expressing political views, but in some instances his company has scripted characters on its television programs to make statements. Lana, the Russian manager/valet of Bulgarian wrestler Rusev, stood on stage during the 9 June 2014 episode of *WWE Raw* and criticised president Barack Obama (WWE, "Zack Ryder vs. Rusev"). She said Obama was a "sissy" who "oozes weakness." She labelled him a "girly man" before throwing to a video clip that had been leaked of him working out in a gym. The video showed the lean Obama lifting light weights in a manner that could be considered humorous. The implication was that Obama was a weak president because he did

¹ The Rock and Chyna also appeared at the 2000 Democratic National Convention (Therre).

not signify hypermasculinity. The president, wearing a black tracksuit, did not possess bulging muscles like McMahon and was seemingly incapable of lifting anything heavy. Arguing on *Cageside Seats* that the segment was McMahon's way of taking petty shots at Obama, Harris said the WWE chief probably harbored a grudge against the president because it was the Democratic Party that held a Congressional inquiry into WWE's steroid policy in 2007. Harris claimed that McMahon verbally attacked Obama during backstage meetings with his creative writers, criticising him for the decline of the country's economy.

Another on-air disparagement of Obama occurred on the 16 December 2013 episode of *WWE Raw* when the commentary team was shown taking a group selfie during a live match. The joke was reportedly a means of mocking Obama for taking a group selfie with British Prime Minister David Cameron and Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt at Nelson Mandela's funeral a week earlier (Isenberg). Furthermore, on 21 April 2008, WWE aired a "Democratic Primary Presidential Smackdown" match during *WWE Raw*. An Obama impersonator wrestled a Hillary Clinton impersonator (accompanied by a Bill Clinton impersonator). There was no winner and both candidates were assaulted at the end of the match by wrestler Umaga, which was a telling way to symbolise the fate of two Democrat politicians. All of the segments mentioned here show that while McMahon does not overtly engage in political commentary, perhaps in an attempt to be an apolitical corporate leader, his programming instead provides a tool through which political opinions and views are expressed. It is reasonable to claim that WWE programming is reflective of McMahon's politics due to the control he exerts over the creative writing process. Though the company employs a team of writers, McMahon has final say over scripts. As his son-in-law and WWE executive Paul "Triple H" Levesque says, "The final call is Vince. He gets all these suggestions and ideas, and he weighs in on them. It's a collaborative effort, but there's one general" (qtd. in Snowden).

The McMahons' political allegiances and aspirations became clearer in 2010 and 2012 when Linda ran as a Republican Senate candidate in Connecticut. She had been a key figure in WWE, taking on the position of president in 1993 and CEO in 1997. She resigned from the chief executive position on September 2009 to run for the Senate (Satrang). Her political interest was said to have been activated by the 1994 federal trial which saw Vince McMahon indicted (and ultimately acquitted) for distributing steroids, later claiming the company was an "easy target" without any allies (qtd. in Beatty).

After announcing her first campaign, McMahon made a stark attempt to distance herself from WWE. Her initial advertising avoided direct mention of WWE,

instead making generic mention of the “successful company that’s traded on the New York Stock Exchange” (qtd. in Kraushaar). It was also apparent, however, that her connection to WWE would be used as political ammunition by her opponents. During the course of the campaign, 36-year-old former WWE wrestler Umaga died of a heart attack. The death drew attention to the history of drug-related deaths in the industry. Umaga had been released by WWE in June of that year after committing a second strike against the company’s Wellness Policy on drugs.

The Democrats referred to WWE’s drug-troubled history in their campaign advertising. In one advertisement the narrator declared, “Seventeen of her former workers under age 50 have died. Linda McMahon. A bad CEO. A worse senator” (qtd. in Farley). The party also focused on controversial content produced by WWE in its past. WWE had shifted to PG-rated programming the previous year. Vince McMahon said the move was a result of the company listening to its audience and offering “a more sophisticated product” (qtd. in Bauder).

These efforts ultimately proved unsuccessful in terms of the election result, however, with Richard Blumenthal receiving 636,040 votes to McMahon’s 498,341 (“Election 2010”). Linda McMahon returned to contest the 2012 Senate election but was again unsuccessful, receiving 637,857 votes to Chris Murphy’s 815,077. She reportedly spent nearly \$100 million over the course of the two campaigns (Altimari, “McMahon Spends”).

There was no showmanship in Linda McMahon—she sought conventional political credibility through an ostensibly sound economic plan and a personable image. Altimari (“Wrestling in New Ring”) observed in the early stage of her first campaign that her persona “contrasted sharply” with her husband’s, as she came across as an “intensely devoted grandmother” with “intelligence and warmth.” If she was ever defensive or aggressive during her first campaign, she was “gentler and easier to like” in 2012 (Reindl). Her husband’s wrestling histrionics contrasted with her attempts to construct an image of political respectability.

As the following sections demonstrate, the politics of the McMahons and WWE were closely connected with the 2016 U.S. presidential election through Donald Trump’s candidature. Whereas Linda McMahon shied away from WWE and her husband’s showmanship, Trump made it his brand. He provides a conduit through which the cultural influence of McMahon can be seen from a political perspective. Trump has a strong connection with WWE and marks the fusion between politics and a McMahon-like brand of entrepreneurship. The result is a political spectacle that discards truth in the same manner that professional wrestling discards the legitimacy of the sporting contest.

Trump in WWE: The Beginnings of “Politics as Spectacle”

Vince McMahon—or “Mr. McMahon” as he is known when performing in WWE storylines as an egotistical, power-hungry company chairman—stood face-to-face with Donald Trump during a 2007 episode of *WWE Raw*. Trump brought the fighting words befitting a professional wrestling program. He told Mr. McMahon, “I’m taller than you. I’m better looking than you. I’m stronger than you. And I’m here to challenge you to a match in WrestleMania” (WWE, “Mr. McMahon and Donald Trump Announce”). Mr. McMahon expressed surprise at the challenge, saying, “Wait a minute. I know you have an ego, but I had no idea it was that big. You wanna challenge me to a match at WrestleMania ...” Trump confirmed, “Absolutely right. One hundred percent I will kick your ass.” The high-profile match set for WWE’s annual pay-per-view showcase event was not a direct contest between Mr. McMahon and the real estate tycoon and reality television star. Rather, the two chose a wrestler to represent them. Whoever’s wrestler lost would be forced to have his head shaved bald, a prospect presented as terrifying to both men. Trump had become recognisable for his distinct blond hairstyle and has reportedly been strongly opposed to the thought of ever going bald. He once said, “The worst thing a man can do is let himself go bald” (qtd. In D’Antonio 245). He has also previously undergone a surgical procedure to close a bald spot (D’Antonio 245). For McMahon, the fear most likely stemmed from the fact that he was known for sporting a muscular physique that belied aging. To lose his hair would be a sign of mortality that his image had otherwise sought to defy.

The feud meant Trump had a strong presence on WWE programming leading up to WrestleMania. Trump and Mr. McMahon held an in-ring contract signing to make their match official. Mr. McMahon came to the ring first and declared, “This is Vince McMahon’s world. I created this world. I created WrestleMania and I’ll just be damned if I’m gonna be embarrassed” (WWE, “Mr. McMahon and Donald Trump’s Battle”). He claimed that Trump would not come to the ring because he had “the grapefruits to give him a patented Mr. McMahon billionaire bitch slap.” Mr. McMahon was proven wrong as Trump’s music (a WWE-produced theme song titled “Money”) played, signifying his arrival. He walked to the ring with a WWE Diva on each arm. He was heavily cheered by the live crowd, which chanted “Don-ald! Don-ald!” Mr. McMahon responded angrily, yelling, “You people shut up!” The machismo continued with Trump stating, “First of all, Vince, your grapefruits are no match for my Trump Towers.”

Given the hypermasculinity at play, a physical confrontation between the pair seemed inevitable. After the contract had been signed, Trump asked Mr. McMahon to come back to the ring. Mr. McMahon returned and removed his suit

jacket. Trump pushed Mr. McMahon who fell backward over the top of the table set up in the middle of the ring for the contract signing. Announcer Jim Ross said excitedly, “Oh my God! Mr. McMahon just got shoved on his billionaire butt!”

Trump had chosen African-American wrestler Bobby Lashley as his representative for the WrestleMania match. Mr. McMahon had selected the “Samoan Bulldozer” Umaga. Lashley won the match and Trump shaved Mr. McMahon’s head. The event attracted 1.2 million pay-per-view buys, a WWE record (WWE, “WrestleMania 23”). The success of the event, along with Trump previously hosting WrestleMania 1988 and 1989 at his Trump Plaza in Atlantic City, New Jersey, meant he was inducted into the celebrity wing of the WWE Hall of Fame in 2013.

Trump returned to WWE television in 2009 as part of a storyline where he bought *WWE Raw* from McMahon. The storyline began with Mr. McMahon standing in the ring and telling the audience that he had done some “soul searching” and “sold the program to a man with whom I have a history with” (WWE, “Donald Trump Buys RAW!”). Trump then appeared via satellite on the big screen, revealing that his first act as owner of *Raw* would be to make the next week’s episode commercial-free. Indeed, he was ever the populist babyface (industry term for “good guy” as opposed to a bad guy “heel”), even showering the live audience with cash that fell from the ceiling on another episode of *Raw*. His unabashed populism was a harbinger of an entry into politics six years later.

Trump Runs for President: Politics and Wrestling Converge

When Donald Trump announced in 2015 that he would be running for the U.S. presidency as a Republican candidate, the spectacle of excess was projected into politics. Trump had signalled his interest in running for presidency in the past, including 2000 when he was a member of the Reform Party. The party had seen former WWE wrestler Jesse Ventura elected as governor of Minnesota two years earlier, forging a connection between the spectacle of WWE and U.S. politics. While serving as governor, Ventura appeared on WWE television as a special guest referee and became a regular member of McMahon’s XFL commentary team. According to Kranish and Fisher, Trump was keen to learn how Ventura managed to beat established politicians and become governor despite being portrayed as a “joke” (287). Though factional infighting meant Ventura resigned from the Reform Party and Trump chose not to pursue candidacy (Stone xxviii), Trump’s own WWE-like political persona became evident when he began campaigning for the Republican Party’s presidential nomination in 2015. Sam Nunberg, a Trump campaign aide until August 2015, said, “I would say to him (Trump), we’re going to be the WWE of the primary with the smash-mouth adrenaline pumping” (qtd. in Dawsey). He added,

“There are a lot of similarities between Vince McMahon and Trump.” Comparisons emerged between Trump’s persona and professional wrestling, and there was a perception that he had learnt from his WWE experience. His campaigning rhetoric became notorious for the ruthless mocking and insulting of his opponents in a style that resembled the way wrestlers speak when performing. Jim Ross, WWE’s lead play-by-play announcer at the time of Trump’s WWE involvement, said on Fox Sports that the Republican candidate was “vintage WWE” in the way he delivered his speeches. He said Trump, a “natural-born communicator (and) showman who seamlessly integrated into the WWE lexicon,” knew how to manipulate crowd reaction through his mannerisms, such as stepping away from the podium to encourage noise.

Rolling Stone also featured an article on its website headlined, “Donald Trump and WWE: How the Road to the White House Began at WrestleMania” (Oster). Covering Trump’s history with WWE, the article included a prescient quote from McMahon. When inducting Trump into the WWE Hall of Fame in 2013, McMahon told the audience, “When you think about it, second only to me, Donald might very well be a great president of the United States.” Though it was most likely intended as a flippant remark (I was at the ceremony and did not give it a second thought), McMahon’s comment spoke to a perception that the charismatic authority of an entrepreneur could be a legitimate pathway to public office. Furthermore, placing himself in that category showed the comparability of the two.

There are strong similarities between Trump and McMahon’s television performances as “Mr. McMahon.” Poniewozik, whose *Audience of One* shows how the Trump’s rise as businessman, reality television star and president is shaped by changes in U.S. media culture, says Trump’s campaign rallies “were pure WWE spectacle” (199). Moon wrote that Trump was “doing nothing more than what Vince McMahon and his WWE empire have been doing for decades.” He referred to the creation of binary oppositions of good and evil to stir an audience’s emotions. Norman argued that Trump’s speeches were a reflection of his “well-known affection for wrestling,” as he would pause to look towards a section of the crowd chanting his name at his rallies, which consequently encouraged the rest of the crowd to join in. Glassman said his experience at a Trump rally was “akin to a WWE match,” while Sucke said that Trump “learned his campaign persona from his experience in WWE.” Similarly, Lyons wrote that Trump’s campaign was “straight out of the WrestleMania playbook.” Zogby likened McMahon’s belief that his audience is a monster that he needs to keep feeding with Trump’s ability to play with his audience and know what it wants to hear.



Donald Trump delivers his induction speech at the 2013 WWE Hall of Fame ceremony at Madison Square Garden, New York. Author's photo.

Politics as Spectacle: The Demagogue, Wrestling and Anti-Elitism

The Trump phenomenon marks the convergence of the spectacle of professional wrestling and politics. Through this phenomenon, it has become possible to identify the way politics and McMahon's presentation of professional wrestling blend. The type of politics at play resembles the formula of the wrestling genre and the characteristics of McMahon's persona on WWE programming. The formula defines babyfaces and heels through binary oppositions of good versus evil. It cultivates support through fantasies of subverting corrupt authority, jingoism and the threat of foreign otherness. The persona emphasises machismo and excessive performance rather than an empirically grounded reality. Linda McMahon detached herself from that persona, instead playing the part of an orthodox political candidate. Trump's candidacy showed the political potency of the formula and persona. The widely acknowledged similarity between Trump's rallies and a wrestling event has a historical context. Trump has been labelled a demagogue, including by President Barack Obama at the 2016 Democratic Convention (Lopez).

The demagogue refers to a populist orator. It is a performance-driven figure, seeking to mobilise and mesmerise audiences through speech. In the history of U.S.

politics, the figure can be traced back to the late eighteenth century. Luthin's "Some Demagogues in American History" documents the emergence of this form of politics in 1776 when Pennsylvania allowed men without property to vote. This constitutional change gave rise to populist orators who claimed to represent the interests of the "common man" who was now a voter to be lured. The fierceness of Trump recalls descriptions of early demagogues. Henry A. Wise of Virginia was noted for "rancorous jibes and biting invective" (Adkins) and as someone who "speaks excessively loud and twists his face into all kinds of shapes" (Eaton). Ohio politician Tom Corwin held rallies that were attended by up to 15,000-20,000 people. He was considered a stump orator, which referred to someone who would deliver loud public speeches that were emotive and populist. Auer argues in "Tom Corwin: King of the Stump" that the stump orator has scarce interest in discussing policy, instead favouring the derision of existing power structures and political opponents. At the 2016 Republican National Convention, Trump was accused of adopting the same characteristic and was criticised for spreading fear and a dystopian picture of American life (Waldman).

A demagogue considered influential in shaping American politics is William Jennings Bryan. A presidential candidate in 1896, 1900 and 1908 for the Democrats, Bryan became Secretary of State under President Woodrow Wilson. He was renowned for his powerful rhetoric as a skilled orator. He has been labelled the first "celebrity politician" and was a clear populist (Murphy 83-98). His most famous oration, known as the 1896 "Cross of Gold" speech, opposed the gold standard and advocated the use of silver instead. While he was pro-government and anti-business (unlike Trump), Bryan's significance to contemporary U.S. politics rests on the adoption of his populist tone by the Republican Party. The party, particularly through Trump, has adopted a blue-collar appeal that is contrasted with the Democrats as an untrustworthy elite and "limousine liberals" (Miller and Schofield 446).

The Republicans' positioning is consistent with McMahon's WWE texts, which have often featured babyfaces espousing blue-collar values opposed to aristocratic power. Mr. McMahon's arrival to arenas is often signified through a backstage shot of him stepping out of a limousine, instantly associating the character with privilege. As the Mr. McMahon character uses his authority to stack the odds against babyfaces or attempt to humiliate them, the wrestling text presents power in the possession of the corrupt and self-interested. Trump follows the same script. During the 2016 campaign, he constantly referred to Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton as "Crooked Hillary" and has since insulted rivals through nicknames such as "Sleepy Joe" for Joe Biden, "Cryin' Chuck" for Chuck Schumer, "Lyin' Ted"

for Ted Cruz and “Rocket Man” for Kim Jong Un (Silverstein). In this sense, Trump not only resembles Mr. McMahon from the perspective of being a brash billionaire; he is also appealing to U.S. voters through the populist appeals evident in McMahon’s WWE. He may not be the “smiling and waving white-meat babyface” that existed when there were purer distinctions in wrestling between good and evil (Solomon), but he is ostensibly virtuous in seeking to rid a system of deception.

Wrestling and Politics as Post-Truth Phenomena

The conditions for a demagogue to turn politics into a spectacle resembling professional wrestling are part of a post-truth era of politics. The term is often attributed to David Roberts’ “Post-Truth Politics,” which described the process behind the Republican Party’s partisan opposition to the Obama Administration’s policies. According to Roberts, the Republicans’ opposition was tailored to the emotions of its supporter base instead of being argued on the basis of evidence. He claims that voters adopt the position of the party they affiliate with and then search for facts that can support their argument rather than objectively gathering facts to form an opinion. The result of this process in affective politics, whereby emotion and ideology play a stronger role in political arguments than evidence-based truths.

The sheer volume of information disseminated through media furthers the post-truth phenomenon. Andrejevic’s *Infoglut* states that it is difficult for consumers to process and ascertain an objective truth. He cites Žižek’s theory of “symbolic inefficiency” to describe the gap between symbols and what they claim to represent. While Andrejevic does not speak in semiotic terms, this equates to a semiotic gap between a sign and its intended signification. The disillusionment felt by consumers not knowing what to believe as a result of an “infoglut” encourages cynicism and oppositional readings. More than just symbols, the inefficiency of meaning also affects “the power of narrative, deliberation and explanation” as they are all looked upon with suspicion (Andrejevic, *Infoglut* 95). Such suspicion can be seen through the denunciation of “expert” opinion by political figures through populist rhetoric. Along with these attacks comes conspiratorial, fear-mongering politics and a focus on affective political performances rather than a concern for truth. It is a form of politics that paves the way for demagoguery—populist orators who cultivate mass support for speaking out against perceptions of corruption and self-interest in the political system, as well as threats of foreign otherness.

An important point here is that the concept is often associated with the Republican Party. The Democrats are typically considered pro-government because of their advocacy for what they can do for voters through services such as health care (Mayer 541-58). The Republican view, conversely, can often be summed up by

Ronald Reagan's famous claim, "Government's not the solution to our problem; government's the problem" (Mayer 543). A performative and charismatic leader can elicit emotion through ideological narratives laced with nationalist rhetoric. Any proclamation of truth sitting beneath simplistic ideological claims is deemed to be derived from vested interests (Andrejevic, *Infoglut* 66).

The McMahons' political allegiances are with the Republican Party, and though Linda McMahon was a conventional political candidate the connection between Vince McMahon and professional wrestling to post-truth politics became most vivid in 2016 when the Republican Party nominated a demagogue, Donald Trump, as its presidential candidate.

Trump embodies this distrust of truth, as seen through his partiality to conspiracy theories. He questioned the birthplace of then-president Obama and the eligibility for the presidency of Republicans Cruz, given he was born in Canada, and Marco Rubio, despite the fact he was born in Miami. Trump suggested the scheduling of his presidential debates with Hillary Clinton was "rigged" because two of them clashed with NFL games that were likely to reduce the debates' viewership (Lima). He also predicted the federal election would be rigged. Furthermore, despite controversies such as Trump's birther conspiracies, mocking of a disabled reporter, and divisive policies such as halting Muslim immigration and building a wall across the Mexican border, he still defeated Republican rivals for the party's presidential nomination before going on to become forty-fifth president of the U.S.

An explanation for Trump's capacity to survive gaffes and controversies is that the spectacle is paramount in post-truth politics. It is also a by-product of the internet age, which not only contributes to the copious amount of information that causes distrust but also encourages shallow representations of politics as a form of entertainment (James 49). Whether or not Trump's words are exposed for being misleading or overtly offensive misses the point. His brand is built on a spectacle that needs crudeness to be sustainable.

Professional wrestling provides an established cultural formula for Trump to emerge as a post-truth phenomenon. In wrestling, the question of whether the athletic contest is real or fake has never been of concern to its audience. In fact, its popularity only increased after WWE acknowledged that its matches were pre-determined in order to avoid paying taxes to state athletic commissions. Wrestling audiences are instead drawn into a simulation of an athletic contest. It is a mediatised performance that flaunts the excessiveness of spectacle rather than concealing it in an attempt to seem "real." Mr. McMahon is an individualised manifestation of this process. The character performs Vince McMahon, the legitimate WWE CEO and chairman, in an excessive manner that often borders on

comical. He does not walk to the ring—he struts in a signification of arrogance that is so profound it would be difficult to read it in any other way. He is braggadocios, but his character would be unrecognisable without hyperbole.

For Trump, a campaign without an excess of hyperbole would have seen him “play the political game” that he attempted to subvert. Competing on the conventional terms of policy discussion would be a validation of the system that he claims is corrupt and self-interested. His motive is to instead attack the entire system, such as allegations of the federal election being rigged or the news media having a bias against him. This approach establishes the narrative that mobilises the disenfranchised—the political aspiration of any demagogue.

The attacks described here are directed toward elitism and the establishment. Father Charles E. Coughlan, a populist anti-Semitic radio broadcaster in the 1930s, was seen as nativist and anti-elite through his isolationist lectures that attacked international bankers (Cremoni). Cremoni said Coughlan was “captivating” for the “man on the street” and had audiences said to be anywhere in the range of five to forty million people (27-28). His success showed the capacity for the marriage of media and a nativist, populist orator to enchant a significant number of Americans. Trump can be located within the same lineage of anti-elitism—as can McMahon. Rachman’s “How Donald Trump Has Changed the World” states that a theme of Trump’s presidential campaign was “a relentless assault on the ‘elite’, including Washington, Wall Street and the universities.” These attacks were reflective of Mr. McMahon. The character mocked Congress over its steroid investigations. He said “Wall Street can kiss my ass” when it responded negatively to the XFL, an unsuccessful football league he founded in 2001. He also disregarded critics as “out of touch moral crusaders who don’t have a clue and egghead professors with flimsy studies” (qtd. in McShane). He said a regular critic, *New York Post* journalist Phil Mushnick, was a “miserable S.O.B” (qtd. in Mooneyham). His theme song even mentions “greedy politicians buying souls from us.”

The mobilisation of the disenfranchised further connects the spectacle of Trump to the spectacle of professional wrestling. This resemblance is not just seen through the anti-elite tone but also the representation of racial otherness. Dolgert described Trump’s rallies as a “nightly spectacle of angry white Americans” who see government as deserting their interests in favour of “grumbling African-Americans, illegal immigrants, feminists, gays, Muslims, and intellectuals.” His anti-immigration stance included presenting Mexicans as “rapists” and “killers” who needed to be kept out of America via a border wall (qtd. in Sakuma).

The fear generated by Trump plays on professional wrestling’s characterisation of otherness as a threat. It emulates a nativist stance that has

appeared in various formations in the U.S. and constitutes a branch of paranoid politics that employs “exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy” (Hofstadter 77-86). There is a precedent for racial stereotyping on WWE programming. Taylor explores WWE’s whiteness through one of the promotion’s top babyfaces, John Cena. She contends that Cena embodies a brand of whiteness that signifies the merits of hard work, patriotism and “respecting white patriarchal authority” (309). In fact, Taylor states that Cena’s hip hop clothing and on-air rapping in the early years of his WWE career embodied a multicultural whiteness, in which racial inclusion is ironically signified through a white lead character. Indeed, she argues that this purported inclusion is countered by racial stereotypes. Describing these stereotypes, Guttman claims that African-American WWE wrestlers are likely to be characterised as “a rap star, racist, sex addict, All-American Athlete or animal of some sort” (181). This analysis is consistent with Hart’s *Textual Analysis of Class, Race and Gender in WWE Televised Professional Wrestling*, which finds that WWE’s African-Americans are often stereotyped as either minstrel entertainers (such as singing, dancing and making jokes) or angry and animalistic.

The 2003 feud between the white heel Triple H and the black babyface Booker T was an example of WWE’s offensive representation of African-Americans. Booker T was challenging for Triple H’s World Heavyweight Championship at the company’s biggest show of the year, WrestleMania XIX. During a segment on the 3 March 2003 episode of *WWE Raw*, Triple H (played by Paul Levesque, who is Vince McMahon’s son-in-law and currently a WWE executive) told Booker T, “Somebody like you doesn’t get to be a world champion” (WWE, “RAW 510”). In the same segment, he also said Booker T was in WWE to be an entertainer rather than a competitor and asked him to “do a little dance for me.” He added, “You’re here to make people like me laugh.” These comments further aligned WWE’s portrayal of blackness with minstrel entertainment. Triple H went on to win the match, meaning the feud did not end with a feel-good triumph of the unjustly vilified African-American underdog.

Booker T was also involved in another racially charged WWE segment in 2005. During the company’s Survivor Series pay-per-view event that year, Mr. McMahon and Cena were backstage. Mr. McMahon pretended to adopt a hip-hop persona similar to Cena’s, asking, “What’s good in the hood?” Cena replied, “Just holding it down, trying to take care of business.” Mr. McMahon responded, “Keep it up, my nigger!” Cena’s facial expression suggested confusion. As Mr. McMahon turned around, Booker T and his wife Sharmell were shown standing nearby. The African-American couple looked disgusted after presumably hearing Mr. McMahon’s remark. Mr. McMahon, sporting a smile, greeted them and walked

away, oblivious to the offence he had caused. Booker T looked at Sharmell and said his catchphrase, “Tell me he didn’t just say that!” (“Vince McMahon Says”).

During this period, WWE also had a trio of Mexican performers called “The Mexicools” on its roster. The group claimed to challenge the association between Mexicans and cheap labour in the U.S. by declaring upon their arrival, “We are not just about ... washing toilets. We are not just about crossing the river” (WWE, “Smackdown 305”). They were a self-parody of Mexican stereotypes, wearing overalls and making their way to the wrestling ring on a John Deere ride-on lawnmower, which group member Psicosis called the “Mexican Limo 2005” (WWE, “Smackdown 305”). As O’Brien found in her study of Latinos and Asian Americans in the U.S., the former are most commonly stereotyped as maids and landscape workers (144).

Mobilising audiences through narratives of racial otherness as a threat, in addition to the anti-elitism inherent in McMahon’s entrepreneurialism, shows how WWE becomes relevant to the body politique of the U.S. The WWE spectacle is highly significant as a form of politicised popular culture. It shows the modes of storytelling that came to resemble Trump’s brand of politics. Further underlying this point is the way McMahon and Trump perform this style of leadership in a highly gendered fashion.

Strongman Leadership and Misogyny

Mr. McMahon and Trump exhibit a “strongman” style of leadership. For McMahon, being a strongman leader is signified through the muscular body, such as his front cover appearances on *Muscle & Fitness* magazine and his involvement in physical violence on his wrestling programs. Trump has shown how this form of authority fits within politics. Rachman’s “Trump, Putin and the Lure of the Strongman” identifies Trump as a strongman leader in the same ilk as Russian president Vladimir Putin, general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Xi Jinping, Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Philippines president Rodrigo Duterte. He describes these leaders as indicative of a global trend whereby men “build up a cult of personality, emphasising the strength and patriotism of the new man at the top.” A commonality among these strongman leaders is “trading on feelings of insecurity, fear and frustration.” It is the mobilisation of a disenfranchised audience that has been a mode of McMahon’s entrepreneurship. He has presented a product that speaks to blue-collar resentment through babyfaces that rebel against authority figures and foreign otherness.

Part of the strongman persona shared by Mr. McMahon and Trump is the character trait of the misogynistic showman. Mr. McMahon’s humiliation of WWE

characters as part of the company's television storylines has included women. He has wrestled his daughter Stephanie and passionately kissed female wrestler Trish Status while his wife Linda watched on in a catatonic state due to a nervous breakdown. He also ordered Stratus to "bark like a dog" and strip to her bra and underwear ("Vince Strips Trish"). Trump, meanwhile, described Fox News host Megyn Kelly as a "bimbo" who could not be objective when she had "blood coming out of her wherever" (qtd. in Luce).² He called Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton "disgusting" for needing to go to the toilet during a debate, and when discussing Republican Carly Fiorina he said, "Look at that face. Would anyone vote for that?" (qtd. in Luce). He has even said he would date his daughter Ivanka if she was not related as she has "a very nice figure" (qtd. in Andrejevic, "Jouissance"). During the 2016 election campaign, a tape was also leaked where Trump was heard telling *Access Hollywood's* Billy Bush in 2005, "When you're a star ... you can do anything (to women)." Trump added he could "grab [women] by the pussy" (qtd. in Fahrenthold). The attitudinal similarities between Trump and Mr. McMahon suggest a style of chauvinistic leadership that is pitched at a male-dominated audience and in these instances displays power through the subjugation of women.

Mr. McMahon and Trump are also alike in inciting violence. In wrestling, it is a natural component of the genre for Mr. McMahon to either resolve disputes through physical combat or encourage others to do so on his behalf. Trump has encouraged the same practice during his rallies. He told his audience, "If you see somebody getting ready to throw a tomato, knock the crap out of them, would you? Just knock the hell ... I promise you, I will pay for the legal fees. I promise" (qtd. in James 86). There was another instance of Trump saying, "I'd like to punch him (a protester) in the face" (qtd. in James 86). This behaviour demonstrates that this brand of leadership is heavily gendered, providing a distinct masculine order that positions the male body as a weapon.

The similarities between Trump and McMahon underline the significance of the brash, hypermasculine media entrepreneur as culturally significant rather than an idiosyncratic novelty. It was pertinent that a speaker at the 2016 Republican National Convention was Dana White. The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) president, often outspoken, is another proprietor of a product that showcases violence and further aligns masculinity with an American brand of entrepreneurship. White used the metaphor of fighting to support Trump's credentials, saying he was a "fighter" who would "fight for this country" ("Watch UFC's Dana White").

² Trump later insisted he was referring to blood coming out of Kelly's nose and/or ears, rather than menstruation (Bradner).

Conclusion

This article has shown how the case study of Vince McMahon can be used to explain politics in a post-truth era and more specifically the period of Donald Trump's presidency. There is a strong correlation between the McMahons as Republicans and the post-truth spectacle that the party has come to embody through Trump. It is a spectacle of the binary opposition of good versus evil. It utilises similar narratives and rhetoric to mobilise an audience, such as a brand of nationalism that portrays foreignness as a threat and a style of strongman leadership that equates hypermasculinity with power.

Just as wrestling allows for its audience to revel in the subversion of corrupt authority, Trump's appeal includes speaking of authority in conspiratorial terms. For Trump, notions of truth are aligned with traditional sources of power that are purportedly corrupted by self-interest. The excessive frequency through which he causes offence shows that his performance has little interest in political tact and instead acts as a means to lure people into a spectacle. He is a product of a post-truth spectacle that long preceded him in the context of professional wrestling.

Though from a Trump perspective this article's scope was mostly contained to the 2016 election campaign, its analysis has remained applicable throughout his presidency. The demagoguery has continued with Trump staging rallies in predominately working-class regions where his populist, blue-collar storytelling is most effective. He has dismissed a litany of scandals in conspiratorial terms that are reflective of the post-truth phenomena described by this article and argued to be culturally linked to the characteristics of professional wrestling and Mr. McMahon. Indeed, the connection between Trump and the McMahons was solidified in December 2016 when the former nominated Linda McMahon as Administrator of the Small Business Administration. Though she resigned from the position in 2019 to join a Trump super PAC (Wagner and Dawsey), the 2020 presidential election will provide further scope for scholarly research into the continued significance of professional wrestling to U.S. politics.

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