

## Softer Shows Hard on McCain

By Howard Kurtz | Washington Post Staff Writer | Monday, November 3, 2008; 10:03 AM

The presidential candidates have made it through a two-year media maze that at times dwelled on cleavage, cackling, Paris Hilton, lipstick, haircuts, houses, preachers, pregnancy, flag pins, witchcraft, designer wardrobes and Joe Wurzelbacher.

As they head toward tomorrow's verdict, Barack Obama, John McCain and their running mates have survived hundreds of interviews, from Sunday morning grillings to Sarah Palin's close encounters with Katie Couric and Charlie Gibson.

But daytime and late-night shows have been an underrated factor in this campaign, and an undeniable advantage for Obama. Ellen DeGeneres, David Letterman and panelists on "The View" all confronted McCain, while Obama has basically joked and danced his way through such appearances, including a "Daily Show" stint last week in which Jon Stewart asked him about "the whole socialism/Marxist thing." If anyone doubts there is a liberal entertainment establishment, it has been vividly on display.

What's different this year is that the softer shows have often made hard news, perhaps out of a desire to be taken more seriously, or at least to generate headlines.

"We had a greater impact than any daytime show has ever had on an election," says Bill Geddie, executive producer of "The View." "Daytime is about keeping it light, keeping it fun, and we said, 'Let's go the other way. Let's talk about real stuff.' "

McCain seemed to enjoy making a final pitch on "Saturday Night Live" over the weekend with Tina Fey reprising her role as his running mate. But it hasn't all been fair-and-balanced territory. "Anyone can watch the shows and see how Barack Obama and John McCain were treated and see the contrast. It's as plain as day," McCain spokesman Michael Goldfarb says.

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When McCain was on "The Late Show" last month -- after a spat triggered by his canceling a previous appearance -- Letterman put aside the jokes to press him about his running mate. What would the Republican nominee say, Letterman asked, "if I were to run upstairs, wake you up in the middle of the night and say, 'John, is Sarah Palin really the woman to lead us through the next four, eight years? Through the next 9/11 attack?' "

Letterman also questioned McCain about making an issue of Obama's ties to onetime terrorist William Ayers, asking whether McCain's relationship with convicted felon G. Gordon Liddy was in the same category. McCain replied that Liddy had gone to prison and paid his debt to society.

The tone was very different when Obama did Dave in September. Letterman mainly asked what he thought of Palin and joked about the flap over Obama's lipstick comment. McCain has done fine in some appearances, for example with Jay Leno, who hosted Michelle Obama last week. And he seemed to enjoy demonstrating his rib-grilling skills with Rachael Ray.

**Late-night monologues aren't in the same category, but it's telling that the McCain ticket was the target of 475 jokes by Letterman and Leno from Sept. 1 to Oct. 24, while the Obama ticket was zinged just 69 times, according to the Center for Media and Public Affairs. McCain just can't catch a break in the pop culture wars.**

The fundamental assumption in appearing on such programs is that the candidate gets to relax, banter and skim lightly over the issues. The hosts have every right to inject their ideology; a conservative "View" panelist, Elizabeth Hasselbeck, campaigned with Palin last week, and Oprah Winfrey is famously in Obama's corner. But it does seem to change the terms of the bargain and risk alienating viewers who are rooting for the other ticket.

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