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The Problem with Being Joe Biden: Political Comedy and Circulating Personae

Don J. Waisanen & Amy B. Becker

This project examined comedic representations of US Vice President Joe Biden to analyze persona rhetoric in a media environment filled with circulating personae, or the many roles both created by and attributed to such figures. While sometimes supportive of the politician's intended roles, we found that circulating personae can disrupt the first persona, complicate the invitations and control exerted over the second persona, propel strategic and non-strategic authorships deflecting or silencing a third persona, and provide an undertow of multiple meanings supplementing a fourth persona. Several implications are drawn, including how circulating personae may neuter roles important to political rhetoric and public culture.

Keywords: Circulation; Persona; Rhetoric; Political Comedy; Biden

Imagine a vice president's life. You spend all day generating support for the president's causes, but during a State of the Union address cameras catch you falling asleep (Obama needs, 2011). You turn on late-night television and find comedians like Conan O'Brien editing video footage of your speeches, making it appear you've just begun a romantic relationship with the president of China (Joe Biden's shocking, 2012). Or in a moment when you surely can control your image, you step up to the microphone for a House Caucus speech and out comes: "If we do everything right, if we do it with absolute certainty, there's still a 30% chance we're going to get it wrong" (Joe Biden's stimulus, n.d., para. 1). If you're the 47th vice president of the US, Joseph Biden, all of these events actually happened.

If only it stopped there. Sites like *Tumblr* and *Buzzfeed* are replete with satirical content about Biden (Johnson, 2013). A fake *Twitter* account, @VeepJoe Biden, routinely sends joking messages on behalf of the vice president, and *Comedy Central* has an

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Ann Landers style advice column written by a comedian posing as Biden (Gerner, 2013). *The Onion* even printed a book titled *The President of Vice*, which characterizes Biden as a partier, brawler, and philanderer.

When you both speak and are spoken for on so many fronts, what does it mean to communicate an identity in this crowded media environment? Over two decades ago, McGee (1990) proposed that the texts and contexts of rhetoric were fast disappearing into the *mélange* of postmodern life. Like a Prezi presentation, citizens now bounce between and zoom in and out of “discursive shards” of media experience to construct an understanding of politics, a process some have likened to a “drunkard’s search” for information (Hart, 1994, p. 310; Popkin, 1991, p. 92).

Politicians have hence turned to popular culture to appeal to broader swaths of the electorate and negotiate meanings between diverse and diffuse media representations (Brummett, 2010). Quite simply, the circulation and remediation of rhetoric have intensified, creating “messy rhetoric[s]” that are “persistent and nonlinear in terms of when and how participants engage ... via textual fragments” (Grabill & Pigg, 2012, p. 99). Social media have added fuel to the fire, with rapid circulations of influence crossing different publics with “rhetorical velocity” (Penney & Dadas, 2014; Ridolfo & Devoss, 2009, p. 2). Given these evolving logics, Stuckey (2012) has urged scholars to explore issues of rhetorical authorship and audiences in our circulating digital environment.

As such, this essay analyzes circulating representations of Joe Biden to forward understandings of persona rhetoric. The idea that people play varying roles in everyday life has long informed scholarship, with the creation of a textual “persona” seen as distinct from the actual “person” behind one’s rhetorical constructions (Booth, 1983, pp. 169–264; Goffman, 1959). In other words, critics can see “the ‘I’ created in a speech or writing as something constructed by the speaker or writer,” and interrogate the degree of this construction (Brooke, 2001, p. 569). For example, a politician’s speech emphasizing her or his God-fearing and patriotic nature attempts both to persuade audiences to accept this self-definition and to take on these characteristics themselves.

Given representations by and about Biden, we examine persona rhetoric in an environment distinguished by *circulating personae*, or the many roles created by and attributed to such figures across media spaces. We use representations of Biden in the context of political comedy as one avenue for exploring these trends. Aside from Biden’s own discourses, many individuals, institutions, and audiences have produced volumes of rhetoric about the vice president in this area. The presidency in general is a focal point for public circulation—as a “‘permeable space’ both produced by discourses and a source of recirculated discourses”—and vice presidents have increasingly acted as a voice for the administration, particularly in foreign policy and the media (Baumgartner, 2008; Heidt, 2012, p. 624). Comedy about Biden further exhibits a range of “real” and “fictive” elements that exert their own pressures on public discourse, underscoring Fiske’s (1996) point that “we can no longer work with the idea that the ‘real’ is more important, significant, or even ‘true’ than the representation. A media event ... has its own reality” (p. 2).

Vice presidents must also produce and negotiate fluid personae. Since John Adams's complaints against the role's weaknesses, vice presidents have been forced to employ subordinate characteristics and often support policies they previously assailed to project unity with the president (Bostdorff, 1991, pp. 1–7). In this regard, vice presidents play both authorities and clowns, asserting a power and powerlessness that generate the type of multiple frames and role-playing ripe for comedy (see Waisanen, 2015).

As much as Biden may attempt to project a certain political persona, associations of Dan Quayle's mishaps, Sarah Palin's tortured syntax, and even Dick Cheney shooting a friend in the face may also quickly come to mind, highlighting how circulating discourses can neuter or reformulate role strategies. Although the circulation of identity rhetoric has intensified with the speed and reach of new technologies and the number of people who have access to such tools, circulating personae are not new. Thinking about the ways Spiro Agnew and other vice presidential predecessors have circulated in public culture underscores that, to varying degrees, all political figures have likely faced the challenges and opportunities such rhetoric affords. Biden may be representative of the problems vice presidents and other political figures face in being at the center of so many circulating personae, but we will limit this essay's scope to Biden for the sake of depth and to establish this line of inquiry.

We conducted an extensive search of comic data about Joe Biden, using terms like "Biden" to examine all material generated and archived on the vice president from *The Onion*, *The Daily Show*, *Saturday Night Live*, *Funny or Die*, and many similar sources across the comedic landscape.¹ For context, we also conducted broad internet searches using terms like "humor" and "Joe Biden," from which we snowball sampled articles about the subject from sources like *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Huffington Post*. Overall, we initially collected and analyzed 334 representations by and about Biden.

Since modern media "audience members do not experience entertainment media or news in complete isolation" (Holbert & Young, 2013, p. 484), this range of data captured diffuse representations of Biden, in a fashion similar to the way many viewers experience the vice president. At least in Biden's case, we argue that persona discourses should be supplemented with an understanding of the circulating personae that work with these rhetorics—especially in crafting excess roles that disrupt implied authors, creating tensions that complicate implied auditors and those disregarded by discourse, and forwarding polysemic texts that compete for attention. In the following sections, we first situate Biden's case with relevant literature on personae rhetoric. Second, we construct three key personae evident across the comedy data to focus on the circulating roles informing and being informed by Biden's messages. We then conclude with several implications about circulating personae in public culture.

Personae and Circulation

Studies of personae have analyzed the relationships between authors and audiences. The "first persona" projects an identity that authors strategically imply through

their texts, as persuasive acts and identity arguments (Turner & Ryden, 2000, p. 86). An individual's public appearances may, for instance, be marked by a "meticulously constructed, carefully tailored, fastidiously decorated, highly polished façade calculated to achieve a precise effect" on others (Darsey, 2007, p. 501). Moving beyond this implied author, Black (1970) outlined how a "second persona" further characterizes the "implied auditor" or audiences in texts (p. 111). Discourse always promotes ways of seeing that preclude other ways of seeing, so the second persona is premised upon how we also "look to one another for hints as to whom we should become" (p. 113). In other words, authors offer audiences texts as invitations to see and act from their ideological viewpoints.

The "third persona" spotlights the selectiveness of playing and inviting audiences to assume certain roles. It characterizes audiences who are rejected, negated, or simply absent in the text or situation—the "summation of all that you and I are told to avoid becoming" (Wander, 1984, pp. 209–210). In this approach, critics examine elements such as who is not talked about in a text, the hidden or material factors influencing a rhetor's choices (institutional funding, social circles, etc.), and any other parts that deflect attention to certain discourses and power relations. Cloud (1999) extended this concept through the "null persona," or "the self-negation of the speaker and the creation in the text of an oblique silhouette indicating what is not utterable" (p. 200), particularly silences that bear the marks of the "extradiscursive" pressures individuals or groups face (p. 179).

The fourth persona describes passing, or rhetoric confronting two different audiences, one who does not get the coded message and another who gets it and, in some cases, is silenced through the discourse (Morris III, 2002, p. 230). While an audience of "dupes" misses the rhetoric's double-coded nature, another audience is constituted by the "textual wink[s]" and "subversive enthymemes" offered through an author's rhetoric (p. 230).

In essence, each persona shows how selecting roles can function to create or support ideologies. To gain support for a healthcare policy, a liberal politician could construct a speech full of medical language to fashion themselves as an expert (first persona), creating an impression that audiences should approach healthcare policy as rational, fact-seeking citizens (second persona). But in that process, she may exclude or silence important alternative treatments, medical communities, or logics operating outside dominant healthcare institutions (third or null personae). If the politician layered civil-religious language into the speech to appeal to audiences for whom faith is an authority—appeals often lost on more secular crowds (Domke & Coe, 2007)—alternate, coded personae may also be at work (fourth persona).

Turning back to Biden, consider how each persona informs and is complicated by media circulation. Biden certainly seeks to maintain first personae as the president's supporter, a policy expert, a down-to-earth interlocutor, and more. Yet his falling asleep during the president's speech inadvertently adds a role of "lazy sidekick" to these representations. That internet audiences and networks like CBS flung the video across the far reaches of media space only solidified this role further (Montopoli, 2011). Although the news media have long obsessed over gaffes, Biden's unintended

humor swirls with media discourses to create *surplus personae* that disrupt an “implied speaker” and, to a certain extent, interrogate where the very category of “first persona” begins and ends. While Biden attempts to create a certain image of himself, the lazy sidekick role competes for attention, holding the potential to coexist with intended representations or to usurp them completely. In political comedy contexts, even when audiences affirm a speaker’s projected first persona, all the excess rhetoric created about that image can act back on the speaker, who may find him or herself having to play up the role they created in exaggerated and proliferating ways.

The second persona underscores the implied auditor invited by rhetoric, but the circulation of discourse by and about Biden puts into question what roles and ideologies are being invited. During a speech, if Biden asks an audience to take seriously how the Affordable Care Act will help people without healthcare, he invites them to inhabit a persona of concerned citizen or grateful recipients. Yet both the first and second personae presume a degree of control greatly curtailed by Biden’s unintended gestures and, more important, the glut of comic and other circulating discourses offering amended or rival personae. Over time, every textual offering of a persona by Biden sits atop fragmented subtexts calling forth the many other personae media spaces make available. In Internet comment forums and social media sites where Biden is photoshopped, whatever Biden invites an audience to become is met with the symbols audiences enact, bringing *multivocal tensions* to a second persona. The multiple roles ballooning across media challenge Biden’s requests to inhabit certain texts. That the public figure has tended to leak accidental personae into these spaces, which audiences recursively act upon in a way that Biden must continually confront, further confounds these matters.

In a circulating media culture, the third persona’s elements certainly play out in the selectivity of Biden’s discourse highlighting some characters or events to the exclusion of others. Biden could demonize political opponents, and the extent of what is utterable might be measured by his silence about donors who have funded his campaigns. But here, too, the media territory complicates one text’s strategic choices to include or exclude. If Biden’s public personae become as much a mix of others’ texts as his own, who controls the evasions of third personae? Third personae may become more contested in such spaces, or simply cluster across texts in ways that reproduce existing, dominant structures of interpretation (see Cloud, 1992). At the very least, burgeoning parodies of Biden’s words and images fashion third personae through *joint negations*, where producers and consumers of rhetoric blend together in mutual, non-strategic authorships that silence, subordinate, or ignore others and their discourses.

Juxtaposing Biden’s discourses with the fourth persona highlights the polysemy of media circulation. Strategic passing can still remain a part of a speaker’s repertoire, but since many other ways of seeing Biden continue to float around media spaces, a circulating environment not only shifts some interpretive control to audiences but threatens to bring further *polysemic undertow* to Biden’s acts in both present and future moments. Rhetoric may be double-coded to communicate different messages to audiences, but audiences may already come to Biden with the multiple personae public culture has offered during his absence, and the potential to add “links” to whatever “winks” the vice president

asserts. Circulating personae focus how attempts at irony interact with heightened contextual and social ambiguities about a public figure.

Each of these considerations emphasizes how first, second, third, and fourth personae remain core components of identity rhetoric. We explore how circulating personae both work with such roles and move beyond their conceptual scope. To show how circulating personae work, we next analyze a range of personae generated by and about Joe Biden in comedy contexts.

The Many Joe Bidens

We constructed a number of personae across the comedy data. For scope, the following constituted the most pronounced roles, and are organized from representations that appear closest to what Biden seems to want to project, to more outlandish depictions.

A Folksy Guy

One persona projected by Biden and supported by others is that of a folksy guy. Interview segments from programs like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* show Biden as a jovial, down-to-earth politician who can easily segue between personal and policy talk (Jefferson, 2010; Joe Biden Pt. 1, 2009). Many references to Biden's blue-collar hometown and his ability to fit-in with the neighborhood further this persona (Friar, 2012; Vice presidential, 2008). Supporting this interpretation of an amiable guy who embraces humor, Biden has even responded to comic portrayals of himself through his *Twitter* profile, other social media outlets, and television. Although *The Onion* often portrays Biden as someone who likes to tune up his Pontiac Trans-Am, he has amiably chided the comic news source by suggesting that he is really a Corvette guy (Luippold, 2013; Shirtless, 2009).

Biden asserts this valued persona on as many fronts as possible and capitalizes on affirmations of the role. Far from a strategy at the periphery of vice-presidential image-making, here humor functions both to ground a "real," wanted construction by Biden with fictive exaggerations that paradoxically reinforce the same role. In a video sketch recorded for the White House Correspondents Dinner, Biden picks up his fictional doppelganger, Julia-Louis Dreyfus (who plays vice president Selena Meyers on HBO's *Veep*) in a yellow Corvette (Shetty, 2014), showing that one way to regain some image control in a circulating media environment is to join with fictional representations. Since viewers have to toggle between the real and fictive in looking at such texts, the video nudges rather than pushes audiences toward the idea that Biden is a folksy, fun guy. Close to the fourth persona's qualities, Biden's ironic winks to comedy viewers seek to constitute an audience by activating involving links between fact and fiction—as forms of polysemic undertow that pull viewers into spaces where multiple meanings about his persona can be considered. But different than "subversive enthymemes" (Morris III, 2002, p. 230), these winks seek to clarify and promote rather than hide Biden's folksy persona, as a figure who gets

and can play along with the joke. That Biden is *in* a highly edited video is of no small consequence either; seeing the embodied figure in a product largely under his control places greater weight upon the “real” grounding of his folksy persona than his ironic, fictional exaggerations.

Circulating media discourses consistently sustained this implied persona. A *Funny or Die* segment on Biden winning a pancake eating contest points to the vice president’s willingness to have fun and come across as an average citizen (Dean, 2011). Even when comedians make less complimentary, satirical digs at this role, they often support the persona. Biden has made multiple mentions of his years commuting to Washington, DC from Delaware on Amtrak’s Northeast corridor line. A *Colbert Report* segment reinforced this informal persona by mocking Biden as an “everyman” who made the cover of *Amtrak Magazine*—in comparison to Obama who made the cover of *Newsweek* (Obama gets, 2010). Despite Colbert’s use of the classic “the vice president is powerless” premise to guide the joke, the satire still buttresses Biden’s “I’m not a pretentious elite leader” first persona.

The comedy is anchored in what Biden seems to want to imply as much as other, less accurate interpretations, showing that a first persona can be sustained across media platforms despite the environment’s fragmentation. Whether comedians praise or mock him, humorous representations of Biden establish the folksy persona, with Biden’s own performances of self-directed humor further amplifying this presentation. In turn, the role acts back on Biden, who went on *The Colbert Report* as Mr. Vice President, “the Hot Dog Guy,” appearing in patriotic vendor garb to serve ballpark franks to troops assembled in the studio audience (Cunningham, 2010). In essence, Biden’s first persona grows a longer tail. By submitting a role into public culture, having that role confirmed, but then having to play that role even more because of all the excess rhetoric about this image, the first persona becomes recursive. Biden’s next role retains but also stretches elements of this persona, demonstrating a loss of image control.

A Gaffe Machine

Over the years, Biden has become known for his gaffes. Many texts focus on Biden’s gaffe-prone behavior, referring to both actual stumbles he made as vice president *and* exaggerated versions of fake gaffes to draw in comedy viewers. John Oliver notes that Biden has “been saying stupid things to America for thirty-five years” (Debate gaffes, 2008), while Stephen Colbert asserts that the vice president is a “klutz” (Joe Biden’s same, 2012). Biden’s gaffes have been as innocuous as calling custard “ice cream” to, in a more egregious violation, asking a person with a disability to stand up during a political rally (Custardy battle, 2010; Epstein, 2012).

Biden’s circulating role as a gaffe machine is important for its advertent and inadvertent nature. Biden’s missteps become synecdoches in the media sphere, which are influenced by Biden’s unintentional contributions to continuing the trend. Whether Biden creates gaffes or the media constitute Biden’s imperfections is a chicken and egg scenario. What is clear is that these circumstances provide second and third personae with additional considerations—people are not really invited to be gaffe

machines through Biden's willful control, nor are they asked by him to avoid becoming a bumbler (although circulating discourse may have this effect).

In a tussle with circulating media, instead interactional rhetorics are at play, where comedians mocking Biden use a representation the vice president has assumed while implicitly urging audiences to not become the target of gaffes—a combination of second and third personae asserting the image while negating it at the same time. Constellations of this gaffe imagery crystallize across a variety of sources in a manner that paradoxically subjugates Biden's very ability to break free from the cascading construction. If Biden tried to highlight his vast experience as a serious policymaker, he may find himself silenced by the media confluence. This persona hence exhibits joint negations grounded in Biden's original gaffes, but with features that are largely uncontrollable.

As grounded in Biden's slip-ups as many of the comedy clips may be, circulating comic media have a tendency to exaggerate such incidents, amplifying the persona further. Jon Stewart argued that the vice president has “no” filter (Gaffe-in, 2008), overstating and extending the persona to all of the vice president's situations. Some commentators went so far as to assert the potential gaffes Biden “might” say as a result of this image (Hartsell & Luippold, 2012). Circulation creates conditions where unintended personae are not only taken up, but stretched and reinforced. Where Biden produces gaffes in a way that has little simultaneity in his daily life, one common comic tactic has been to string together as many Biden gaffes as possible, making the persona seem defining and frequent in the vice president's life (e.g. Walk softly, 2012). While audience effects research could help answer the question of whether some of these fragments carry more weight with audiences than others, the assembling of many similar texts across different media seems to indicate that not all fragments are created equal. In comic media circulations, the gaffe machine persona compounds in a way that may crowd out other roles.

In general, viewers find political comedy programs persuasive in nature (Becker, Xenos, & Waisanen 2010; Hoffman, 2013; Holbert, Tchernev, Walther, Esralew, & Benski, 2013). Some persuasiveness is likely located in Biden *losing* a first persona; that is, he has lost some control of his speech and behaviors while media representations further pronounce his inadvertent actions on multiple fronts. Audiences may find such representations persuasive for their contingency and *non*-strategic emphases. Especially in a media environment where handlers carefully craft political images, Biden gains by seeming less than slick and manipulative. Yet he also loses since the images are not flattering and, in circulating media, often support a second persona that says “don't be like Biden.”

Circulations of the gaffe machine persona gain traction from the nature of comedy. Comedy is predicated on incongruities or seeing phenomena in at least two, incompatible ways (Koestler, 1964; Waisanen, Friedman, & Friedman, 2014). The gap between Biden as serious public official and unserious klutz, and subsequent media extensions of these incongruous personae, creates the humor. At least in Biden's case, humorous contexts appear especially amenable to the circulation of multiple personae. But even a cursory look at how Biden circulates in other contexts show that such gaps are not

unique to comedy. In political journalism covering Biden's potential presidential run in 2016, contradictory representations of Biden as both a fearless leader and defeated follower have circulated in pre-election coverage (see Fineman, 2014).

Ultimately, the gaffe machine persona moves forward by positioning the vice president in a tug-of-war with media circulations, but in which the latter has an advantage. The vice president is preceded by comments about his hair plugs, foot in the mouth problem, and tendency to ramble (Yeich, 2013), highlighting how little power he has while functioning as excess rhetorics that meet and tussle with whatever first, second, third, and fourth personae the vice president may intend. The next role spotlights the undercurrents rhetoric faces in a circulating environment, with personae moving even further away from Biden's control.

A Party Animal

With little reservation, many comedians completely untethered their representations from the politician's life. Doctored photos show Biden sunbathing on the White House lawn or catch him engaging in lewd behavior at holiday parties (Lisi, 2012)—so much that Obama sometimes has to pardon Biden to get the vice president out of jail (Abramson, 2010; Barth, 2013; Obama issues, n.d.). Biden's wild side runs rampant across the Internet. For those who get the joke, the fake, exaggerated persona is funny for its very distance from the figure. Compared to the slight, hyperreal tweaks between real and comic representations that *The Onion* often uses (Waisanen, 2011), here its writers employ an opposite tactic. The print version of *The Onion* frequently presents Biden as a drunkard who lives for the moment (Biden receives, 2010). An *Onion* editor commented that this made up approach to Biden as boozy and brash attempts to generate bigger laughs by moving beyond the typical "buffoon" persona (Peters, 2010). Yet he noted that it is also a risky path to pursue since many people may not know that Biden is not like this.

More broadly, the competing images of a circulating media environment largely collapse rhetorical and surplus personae. When one thinks about Biden, the differences between fact and fiction become less significant than the many associations comic and other discourses may bring to mind automatically. Surplus personae connote that the stable, discrete boundaries assumed by first, second, third, or fourth personae hold the potential to destabilize at any moment amidst an excess supply of circulating media representations. One's persona becomes the circulating personae about him or herself, roles that precede, swirl, and act as putty for further shaping from many directions at once. In this regard, the proliferation of comic representations unmoored from political figures' actual lives invite polysemic undertow—many personae that could unsettle Biden's hoped for personae. Relative to personae rhetoric, many citizens could not distinguish between Sarah Palin and Tina Fey's pronouncements about being able to "see Russia from my house" during the 2008 U.S. presidential election (Baumgartner, Morris, & Walth, 2012; Cacciatore et al., 2014). Similar undercurrents from popular culture make Biden's first, second, third, and fourth personae less an artist's chiseled statue than a network's patchwork quilt.

As part of the party animal persona, and despite Biden having been a family man in real life, comic outlets portray Biden as a womanizer. He can be seen visiting strip clubs off the beaten path in Mexico, employing female bodyguards known as Joe's Guardian Vipers, and using foul language to refer to female body parts (Biden to cool, 2010; Biden's handlers, 2012; Joe Biden introduces, n.d.). In essence, portraying Biden as a philandering, less than savory character makes the first persona again notable for its absence—Biden does not project this persona, nor would want to. The surplus personae have a life of their own. If anything, the Biden as a womanizer persona stands as a construction to be overcome on the politician's part, highlighting how efforts to construct a political persona can swim upstream in media spaces defined by "spreadability" (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). Although some audiences may discount the false personae, the potential force of such roles are not necessarily diminished in a circulating territory. Some research demonstrates that fictional messages can bypass audience scrutiny and counterarguments more than non-fictional content (Young, 2008). As in "fake" news programs like *The Daily Show*, humor's force tends to be less tied to the "real" and the "true" than the speed and pressure with which messages fashion a role. The veracity of Biden's portrayal as a party animal thus may be irrelevant for viewers who are simply looking to laugh at the presented jokes rather than evaluate the content, bringing extra pressures to Biden's attempts to construct certain roles.

From interviews where Biden can largely project his own image, to comedy where audiences have more leeway to construct the figure's persona—e.g. through invitations to tweet captions about and photoshop Biden photos (McGlynn, 2011; Photoshop fun, 2009)—media circulation bears upon the construction of rhetorical personae. In the last section, we focus on several implications from this analysis.

Conclusion

What do rhetorical personae become in a circulating media environment? When the boundaries of strategic, discrete personae are broken, political personalities both assert and are subject to the force of broad digital spaces and actors. In the literature, personae reflect an author's many different projections (see Denham, 2007), but circulation and recirculation bring more audience agency and contextual force to these matters than has been recognized. To advance this scholarly conversation, we conclude with several observations.

First, circulating personae further our understandings of the surplus rhetorics brought to and often competing with conceptions of first, second, third, and fourth personae. Circulation and recirculation complicate straightforward identity assertions. While sometimes supportive of a rhetor's intended roles, open spaces for representation can disrupt the first persona, complicate the invitations and control exerted over the second persona, propel strategic and non-strategic authorships deflecting or silencing a third persona, and provide an undertow of multiple meanings supplementing a fourth persona. Circulating personae add networked "links" to personalities and persuasion. Through an author's and audiences' representations,

circulating personae account for the variety of gestures that can figure into these constructions.

Yet personae may also solidify through constellations of influence. With and without Biden's rhetoric, the vice president's roles became subject to multivocal formations imitating the folksy guy, gaffe machine, and party animal personae. As Stuckey (2010) highlights, we can now "all participate in the creation of presidential speeches—we can participate in the construction of a president. All we need is a computer" (p. 46). Vice presidents too become something of our own. In a sense, how moored such representations are in Biden's own intentions becomes increasingly moot. At least in Biden's case, diffusion characterizes circulating personae across new media spaces, but also evidences how rhetorical clusters can form that present as much of an opportunity as a challenge for the vice president.

Second, along similar lines, circulating personae may neuter roles important to political rhetoric and public culture. According to polls, much of the US public has a hard time thinking about Biden as president (Cillizza, 2013). This for a man who beat a two-term Senator at the age of 29, stayed in the Senate for 36 years, chaired the Senate Judiciary and Foreign Relations Committees, has had multiple presidential runs, and has worked on major initiatives with the economy, clean energy, and gun control laws since becoming vice president (Joe Biden, 2013). Some combination of Biden's rhetoric and his media representations could prevent this kind of persona from gaining more traction. First persona rhetoric may not stand a chance against the digital information cascades now circulating the planet. For Biden to overcome popular misperceptions about his lack of electoral viability as a presidential candidate, the question further arises of whether vice presidential candidates like Dan Quayle could have overcome his misspelling of "potato," or if Sarah Palin could address the slew of persona rhetoric she both created and had attributed to her during the 2008 US presidential election.

Circulating personae could encourage citizens to perpetuate their own misperceptions, advancing a warped opinion climate (see Glynn, Ostman, & McDonald, 1995). Not lost on politicians themselves, the amount of comedy content devoted to mocking Biden and other senior figures, and the rapid, viral diffusion of this material has created an environment in which public figures must regularly respond to comic critiques and engage in joke telling to win over key segments of the voting age population (Becker, 2012; Becker, 2014a). While many have lauded humor as a catalyst for democratic engagement, particularly among younger voters, others question what political humor means for citizen cynicism—a concern that circulating comic personae magnify (see Hariman, 2008; Hart & Hartelius, 2007; Becker, 2011, Becker 2014b).

Last, circulating personae put the production and consumption of rhetoric itself up for view. Turner and Ryden (2000) express a concern for "*how* individuals are constituted as subjects or subject positions via personae in public argument" (p. 87, emphasis added). Biden's examples highlight that who, what, where, and when representations occur (as well as an agent's own representations) all play into role developments. In this light, speakers and audiences collapse into what some have termed an advancing "prosumer" ecology, where audiences have become as much producers as consumers of online and other types of content (Ritzer, Dean, & Jurgenson, 2012). Biden's case

demonstrates that speakers and authors are also prosumers, as figures articulating and being articulated on multiple fronts.

Where a politician's persona begins and ends will perhaps never be pinned down, but we hope to have extended a conversation about the contours of role rhetoric in contexts where sharp distinctions between entertainment and politics, communicators and audiences, and the intended and unintended have become less tenable. It is thus little wonder that in recent speeches the vice president has been urging audiences to "assume every microphone is on" (Biden, 2014, para. 1)—telling advice for what everyone may now face in navigating a circulating media environment.

Note

1. Specifically, we searched the term "Joe Biden" and all results on websites for *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, *College Humor*, *Funny or Die*, and *The Onion* (restricting the range of findings from July 2001 through January 2013 in our initial analysis). On *Google* and *YouTube*, we searched for "Joe Biden" and each of the subsequent terms in isolation: "Jimmy Fallon," "Conan O'Brien," "David Letterman," "Jay Leno," and "Larry King." On *YouTube*, we searched for "Joe Biden" clips from *Saturday Night Live*. We also examined the first 60 (of 370) articles on *The Huffington Post* generated from the search terms "Joe Biden" and "comedy," and have snowball sampled other links and pieces from related sources since January 2013.

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