Entertaining is a key factor for any electoral campaign. Bill Clinton played the sax and said his underwear were “slips” [briefs] during the 1992 campaign to win the elections, and fifteen years later, his wife Hillary cried in public to win a complicated victory in New Hampshire.

Whether those tears were real or not does not matter. The important thing is that they captivated the public and voters, and that’s the key because elections have much more to do with feelings than with deep analysis of the candidates. The images of Hillary, with her voice breaking, on the Monday before the elections in New Hampshire, were great entertainment, and Martin Kaplan, director of the Norman Lear Center, part of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California, thinks that “entertainment is the most important force in contemporary society.”

Obama’s rallies are also entertainment. People go to see him for his charisma and emotive strength. He is a personality that would fit perfectly in a TV series.

During a conversation in Barcelona, Kaplan explained that it is because the media, politicians and others that depend on the public sphere to succeed promote, for the sake of entertainment, a strong mixture of reality and fiction. Americans call the mixture of information and entertainment infotainment. It is a pejorative term because it implies superficiality and sensationalism.

Kaplan, however, believes that there is a dimension beyond infotainment, where entertainment, presented very subtly but also forcefully, is useful to sell a candidate. That is the strategy Kennedy used against Nixon in the 1960 debates. Nixon was more brilliant but TV cameras showed him sweaty and with a double chin. Kennedy was more entertaining, which gave him a better image.

Because of all this, Kaplan, who wrote speeches for Vice-president Walter Mondale during his 1984 campaign, thinks it is very useful to use entertainment techniques to distribute information without losing the audience. “We can use it to emphasize difference. Journalists are story-tellers and it is possible to tell a story about something serious with the same techniques we use to entertain. Politicians do it frequently. Politics is a theatre and politicians launch their messages with the same techniques that a studio uses to sell a film.” Kaplan thinks that messages are best transmitted by way of humour: “Comedy communicates much better than tragedy. The success of You Tube shows this, people post their home videos and there is much more humour than drama”. In this way the Internet contributes, according to Kaplan, to making the relationship between citizens, media, and politicians, more equal.

The presidential campaigns, as Kaplan anticipated, are seeing a great deal of citizen participation, not only through blogs, but also through news reports—the majority in video form—that are posted on the web, changing the foundation of the electoral arena. This democratization of public space on the Internet, according to Kaplan, imposes more transparency and efficiency on the politicians and the candidates.

Good journalism, as it explains the ideas of those seeking the White House, also returns to the techniques of entertainment. The journalist adds order and rhythm to history to create a fictional show. This strategy is visible in the most in-depth political reports that the American press publishes for reference and, according to Kaplan, it has nothing to do with the frivolization of information. On the contrary, it allows an extension of the space dedicated to news, as much in newspapers as in television reports, because the audience remains alert.

We will never defeat entertainment, Kaplan says, because it is inside us: “We are animals with the brain of a lizard and we cannot avoid getting hooked by tragedy, sex and sensationalism. It is in our nature. The TV business consists of selling eyeballs to advertisers; it is very good at capturing and maintaining our attention. We are guilty for the contents television. But we can also put on, if we desire it, alternative contents.”

“Entertainment is the most important force in contemporary society”