

**Scolding John Q: Articulating A Normative Relationship Between Politics and  
Entertainment**

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Abstract:

The 2002 hostage drama *John Q.* triggered a discussion among journalists, the public, and the policy community about the proper relationship between politics and entertainment. In this debate the criteria for good journalism and good political discourse were frequently invoked to evaluate this Hollywood film. This discussion, which spilled out of the film criticism pages into news and commentary pages, shows how public sphere models of political discourse are privileged even though they may not be a good fit for fictional media. *John Q.*'s success in triggering public discussion and awareness about health policy issues seems to illustrate DeLuca & Peeples' (2002) claim that the "public screen" is a more useful metaphor for thinking about politics than the public sphere (Habermas, 1989). *John Q.* seemed to particularly raise the ire of critics because of its unambiguous critique of domestic policy and its implicit suggestion that collective solutions are needed.

In February of 2002 New Line Productions released *John Q.* starring acclaimed actor Denzel Washington to critical reviews but decent box office success. The movie tells the story of a working class family denied a life-saving heart transplant for their son because they are underinsured, the hospital refusing to place their child on the organ transplant waiting list without a \$75,000 deposit. These extenuating circumstances push decent, hardworking father John Q. Archibald, played by Washington, over the edge. The second half of the movie sees him holding the hospital's emergency room hostage in an effort to negotiate a place on the heart transplant list for his son.

Many critics tore the movie apart. A search using the Lexis-Nexis and Dow Jones (now Factiva) databases for all articles featuring "John Q." in the full text from January to July of 2002 in major U.S. and international newspapers and periodicals yielded seventy-seven articles that dealt substantially with the film. Thirty-six of these articles were film reviews, and the rest included letters to the editor, commentary, features on the actor or director, and articles on medical or health insurance issues that dealt substantially with the film and public reaction to it.

The balance of the critical response to *John Q.* was quite negative. While eight of the thirty-six reviews could be considered completely negative, a further 20 were mainly critical of the film, reserving some limited praise for certain aspects of the movie. The remaining reviews were more positive, although most of them expressed serious reservations about the film, save one quite glowing review in the New Orleans Times-Picayune (Kleinschrodt, 2002). The mixed reviews generally reserved praise only for Washington's performance and for the movie's political message -- that health insurance in America needs reform to make it more equitable and humane -- while bemoaning the film's execution. Many reviews

vociferously attacked the film, critiquing both its political goals and its entertainment value. The vocal response to *John Q.* spilled out from the entertainment pages of newspapers into opinion pieces, letters to the editor, and responses from the health insurance industry, all focusing on how the film had treated a hot political issue – that of access to health care – in a Hollywood format.

This paper examines the main themes in the talk surrounding *John Q.* not only as an example of entertainment media impacting political discourse, as illustrated by its frequent appearance in the press outside of the film review pages, but as a touchstone moment where the proper relationship between entertainment and politics was held up and examined by both the journalism and policy communities. In July of 2002 the Kaiser Family Foundation<sup>i</sup> held a conference titled “John Q. Goes to Washington: Health Policy Issues in Popular Culture” in which some of the major players in this discussion met to consider the impact of Hollywood storylines on health policy debates, including *John Q.* screenwriter James Kearns, medical technical advisor to *ER* Dr. Mark Morocco, AAHP (American Association of Health Plans) President and CEO Karen Ignagni, Executive Director of Families USA Ron Pollack, and communication scholar Dr. Joseph Turow (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002a). The discourse prompted by the politics of *John Q.*, as it appeared at this conference and in the pages of newspapers, magazines, and health industry trade publications is the corpus for analysis in this paper. As different observers grappled with how to make sense of why the film made them so uncomfortable, ideas about what the proper relationship between politics and entertainment *ought* to be, and the various ways that *John Q.* had succeeded or failed to meet those criteria (more often the latter) were aired. Here I investigate the most prominent themes of that conversation to see what this particular example contributes to the larger

debate about the blurred boundaries between news and entertainment, non-fiction and fictional programming, and informational versus recreational mass media.

Delli Carpini and Williams (2001) have argued that media industries and the academy have constructed these distinctions between news and entertainment, and that scholars need to move beyond them in order to think productively about media effects and the public sphere. They note that the direction of influence is not just the treatment of “news” or “reality” in entertainment and fictional programming, but the adoption of the conventions of fictional programming in informational formats. When a film tackling political subject matter is generally thought to fail both in fulfilling its political agenda and in being an effective piece of Hollywood entertainment, as so often argued in the case of *John Q.*, the ensuing discussion articulates or prescribes a normative relationship between entertainment formats and political subject matter that the film has violated. However, as the discourse surrounding *John Q.* makes clear, no identifiable consensus exists in Hollywood, the academy, or the policy world about what this relationship should be. This uncertainty was part of the impetus for the Kaiser Family Foundation to commission research and organize their conference. In responding to *John Q.*, observers used various standards of evaluation to critique the film, invoking by turn the criteria for good journalism, civil political talk, and entertaining filmmaking as they argued for or against the value of the film. The use of multiple evaluative frames illustrates the extent to which Hollywood’s role in contributing to political discourse remains contested and unclear.

I track how the non-fictional worlds of journalism and politics were frequently called upon as the bases of comparison for the film’s project, normally without an explicit recognition that this evaluative approach fails to compare like with like. Critics grappled with

the question of whether Hollywood films, like journalists, have a responsibility to the public in terms of accuracy and “balance” when presenting political subject matter. They considered whether the movie, like a politician or political advocate, should remain realistic in the discussion of a problem and in the solutions it offers. Less frequently did commentators consider what the criteria for journalism and politics might be leaving out as models of political discourse, and how entertainment media can offer a different approach to political talk that is more accessible, personal and morally-inflected.

Scholars such as DeLuca and Peeples (2002) and Macdonald (2000) have argued that the mass media are too often evaluated in terms of the criteria for Habermas’ (1989) model of the public sphere, which privileges the use of words, reasoned and focused dialogue, the building of consensus, and assumes equal access to the arena of debate. DeLuca and Peeples (2002) argue that this approach ignores the realities of our social and technological environment, where our modes of perception are shaped by a mass mediated culture in which images, spectacle, emotion, and distraction are the order of the day, a state of affairs they label “the public screen” (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002). Access to the “marketplace of ideas” is fundamentally unequal, so those with new or controversial ideas are well-advised to tailor their message to the tendencies of the public screen if they hope to be noticed by a broader public. The poor reception that *John Q.* had among cultural elites compared to its relative success with the viewing public seems to illustrate De Luca and Peeples’ (2002) observation that much contemporary political discourse is thought to fail by the criteria of the public sphere that are a poor fit for our contemporary media environment. For her part, Macdonald questions whether personalization and “tabloidization” in the media

automatically mean that emotion replaces analysis and that democratic debate is impoverished (2000, p.251).

I am not going to argue in this paper that *John Q.* is a good movie. I tend to agree with most of its critics that it is clumsy and overly melodramatic. However, I would argue that the vociferous response of critics to how *John Q.* attempted to address a political issue is out of proportion with how badly it did it. I suggest that the scale of the response can be attributed to the fact that the movie addresses a domestic political issue related to class inequality, and questions the right of the market and its values to organize and dictate our access to health care. In melodramatic movies about other kinds of political issues, such as American military involvement abroad, the mixing of political issues and entertainment seems to go un-remarked upon. When the Arnold Schwarzenegger vehicle *Collateral Damage* came out in early 2002, its familiar ‘vengeance against foreign terrorists action thriller’ format only became noticeable and a focus for critique among reviewers because of how it resonated with the then recent terrorist attack of 9/11 (e.g. Mathews, 2002b; Morgenstern, 2002; Ebert, 2002b). The “cartoon good guys stage a high-noon shootout with cartoon bad guys” plotline, so long standard Hollywood fare, was not as palatable when it resonated so strongly with recent experiences of actual terrorism and political revenge (Hinckley, 2002, p.38). The political contexts against which these entertaining films normally take place, in movies like *Rambo II* (1985) and *III* (1988), *Under Siege* (1992, a Steven Seagal vehicle), and *The Siege* (1998, starring Denzel Washington and Bruce Willis) normally go relatively unnoticed by most reviewers. The marked reaction to *John Q.* suggests that while these other, arguably political, Hollywood films reside squarely in the sphere of consensus, resting on political assumptions that are thought to be widely shared, *John Q.*’s politics venture into the

sphere of legitimate controversy, and for some, even the sphere of deviance, to use Hallin's (1986) categories for describing journalistic frames. Certain political backdrops have become virtually invisible in Hollywood, while others draw attention to themselves.

Compared to the foreign enemy plotlines, audiences of Hollywood film are not as accustomed to seeing the kinds of issues that *John Q.* raises, specifically domestic politics relevant to questions of class inequality and capitalism, very often. Certainly reviewers and critics identified *John Q.*'s similarities to populist films of the past, from *Erin Brockovich* (2000) to *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), but *John Q.*'s appeal to collective, institutional solutions rather than an appeal to nostalgic individualism may have contributed to its relatively unpopular reception with critics (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001).

### **Criticism of John Q.**

*John Q.*'s artistic and/or political failure was often attributed to the techniques of Hollywood entertainment – melodrama, fictionalization, and personalization – being used inappropriately to convey a political message. Critics complained that the film eschewed subtlety in favor of shameless manipulation of the audience's emotions. They appealed to the ideals of the public sphere in their fear that the emotions stirred up by such a sentimental, melodramatic film would get in the way of rational consideration of how health care should be distributed in America. The way *John Q.* used melodrama was often characterized as taking a “cheap shot” at an easy target: the HMO industry. The narrative tools commonly used in Hollywood film to immerse audiences in the story and have them identify with protagonists become “manipulation” and “propaganda” in these critiques, such as in this review in the San Francisco Chronicle:

“John Q.” is not a serious pronouncement on the state of health care in America. To the extent that it seems as though it was intended to be, the picture is naïve, obvious and, at times, even ridiculous. Instead “John Q.” is a melodrama that presses all the buttons – presses them hard – and has a way of grabbing the attention of viewers, even ones who, a minute before, were rolling their eyes and smirking. (LaSalle, 2002, p.D1)

Like many others, this review acknowledges the popular appeal of the film while criticizing it for using the tools of Hollywood to address a serious issue. Many reviews pointed to the film’s use of formula, stock characters, and lack of subtlety as evidence of shameful audience manipulation in the service of a political goal. A nice example of the use of caricature in the film occurs when John Q. approaches his son’s cardiologist to ask why his son is being discharged from the hospital. The surgeon, played by James Woods, is chatting with a recent heart transplant recipient who is recovering well, and his wife. The couple are presented as snooty and rich, the wife with big, blond hair and jewels, and the husband doing a Thurston Howell III impression, complete with neck cravate. In contrast John Archibald and his wife are represented as the salt of the earth who work hard and attend church regularly.

Interestingly, Washington’s wide appeal as a leading man appeared to draw attention away from the racial politics of an African-American family struggling against a largely White medical establishment, as few reviews commented on this casting decision, although past research suggests that film reviewers rarely comment on portrayals of race relations in films (Entman & Rojecki, 2000).

Other reviewers leveled similar critiques about melodrama, but with the opposite complaint that these features let down the film’s potential to make a powerful political

statement, such as in the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel where the reviewer argued that the film's simplicity hurts its bid to be taken seriously: "This film aims to show how desperately America is in need of health care reform. But is that possible to convey through such a cartoon character as John Q. Archibald?" (Bozelka, 2002, p.9E), or in the Wall Street Journal which read: "The issue of how to assure that all Americans have access to quality health care is a complex one with few easy answers. It is not a case of bad guys vs. good guys, as action drama movies must portray" (Noelker, 2002, p.A17). Here the conventions of Hollywood film are deemed to be unequal to the task of exploring this, if any, political issue. The fact that other good guys vs. bad guys kinds of films have their own political content, such as in films like *Collateral Damage*, is seemingly forgotten. For political issues in the sphere of consensus, simple plotlines, cartoon characters, and melodrama go largely un-remarked on, thereby reinforcing the consensual nature of the political issue at hand (Hallin, 1986).

The bulk of the film's press suggests that *John Q.* crossed a line with many reviewers for taking an unambiguous stand on a political issue in the familiar format of a Hollywood film. Regardless of which of the two orientations the reviewers held, the partisan, closed-ended nature of the text posed a major problem. The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette complains, "More than once, their discussions [the characters in the hostage situation] turn to a roundtable discussion of nefarious HMO practices that foreshadows the outright campaigning for a national health insurance system near the end of the movie" (Weiskind, 2002, p.15). The reviewers' desire for a film that fully addressed complexity and avoided an explicit position on the issue seem to rely more on criteria for good journalism, specifically that of objectivity, than of film per se.

Turow and Gans' (2002) analysis of health policy content in medical dramas on television suggests why these programs have generally not attracted as much ire as *John Q.* did. They found that the shows dealt with policy issues in quite complex ways, and that there appeared to be some "balance," in that viewpoints for and against the status quo were about evenly divided (Kaiser Family Foundation 2002a; Turow & Gans, 2002). By having two characters debate the pros and cons of a controversial policy decision, the TV shows usually represented a public sphere model of political discourse better than *John Q.*, which "stacked the deck" towards one point of view. Their research suggests that medical shows appearing on network and cable television "play by the rules" of the public sphere better than *John Q.* did.

The importance of accuracy in both journalistic and political advocacy discourse dominates as an implicit criterion for evaluation in reviewers' and commentators' complaints that *John Q.* fails the test of realism or accuracy, with a consensus emerging that any perceived inaccuracies or exaggerations (in the service of dramatic license) only undermine the movie's message. A number of commentators questioned the film's premise of a child being denied a place on the transplant waiting list because of being underinsured. The debate, even within the medical profession, about the realism or feasibility of the film's plot made this discussion all the more contentious because the *John Q.* plotline resided right on the borders of believability.

The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette complained about the film's lack of realism in their headline reading, "Film fails reality test: Hospitals say their safety net would prevent a 'John Q.' transplant crisis" (Haynes, 2002, p.D1), and the New York Times reports that, "Although some patients may still fall between the cracks of public and private coverage,

many health care experts say a real-life John Q. would not have run out of options so quickly. All transplant centers have full-time financial co-ordinators to help patients with financial options” (Stryker, 2002, p.6). Health care professionals and industry representatives were quick to write in to set the record straight about how unlikely the film’s scenario was, but claims that it was actually impossible were rare. Even Susan Pisano, spokeswoman for the American Association of Health Plans, had to admit to the San Francisco Chronicle that although “unlikely.... with more than 40 million Americans without health insurance, the character’s dilemma is not impossible” (Colliver, 2002, p.A1). Some health care professionals claimed that lack of funds would never preclude someone from being placed on an organ transplant list, but representatives from the National Foundation for Transplants and the National Minority Organ and Tissue Transplant Education Program suggested that it may be more common than people realize for disadvantaged candidates to have to fund-raise in order to qualify for lists, or to essentially give up pursuing the transplant when they encounter huge financial and bureaucratic obstacles (Noelker, 2002; Davis, 2002). Writer James Kearns insisted that his plotline was based on information he received from within the medical and health insurance industries indicating that similar cases had in fact occurred, although he conceded that depending on the insurance company or the region in which one lived, the details might not apply (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002a).

While some experts claimed that the scenario could never happen, others argued that it was unlikely or rare – more a question of those who happen to fall through the cracks than something that a majority of Americans need concern themselves about. These critics’ essential complaint was that the movie was built around an “isolated case,” such as in the St. Petersburg Times which read: “Director Nick Cassavetes takes the cracks that some patients

fall into and exaggerates them into canyons swallowing us all” (Persall, 2002, p.6W). Critics worried that Americans would erroneously extrapolate from this case and see themselves equally vulnerable to such poor treatment at the hands of HMOs.

This discussion raises questions about what responsibility Hollywood has to current events and social issues that they represent in entertainment films. Given the number of people exposed to major Hollywood films, as well as the even greater number exposed to the general ideas and images of films through advertising and the echo chamber in news, public affairs, and entertainment media, many argue that Hollywood should take into account their impact on public opinion and aim to represent political issues in a fair and representative manner.<sup>ii</sup> The panel members of the Kaiser Family Foundation conference discussed this issue at length, pointing out that policy makers are also impacted by representations in popular culture, both directly and indirectly through the force of public opinion. Diane Rowland, Executive Vice President of the Foundation, observed how powerful anecdotes and stories from “real people” seem to be influencing policy in Washington. Statistics seem “dry and faceless” without compelling visuals and real faces to flesh them out (Kaiser Family Foundatin, 2002a, p.2). The panel members seemed to agree that while Hollywood has no formal or legal obligation to be accurate in its fictional representations, there is a moral obligation not to overly distort “facts” in the service of making a more entertaining, and therefore more profitable, movie or TV show.

This critical response to *John Q.* echoed a health insurance industry complaint about their treatment in the press in general. They argue that because most people are satisfied with their care, it is unfair and misleading to report on the supposedly isolated cases of people who are refused treatment, or treated poorly (Bozell, 1995; Kertesz, 1998). This complaint

appears to be corroborated by a 2002 Kaiser Family Foundation survey which found that 72 percent of respondents who had seen or heard of the movie *John Q.* believed that, in real life, health insurance companies refuse to pay for medical procedures or treatments a lot or some of the time (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002b). The survey did not indicate how this result compared to respondents who had not heard of the movie. However, this kind of polling result causes health insurance companies and advocacy organizations to complain that the public's view of managed care is formed more by what they see in the media than on the direct experiences of themselves, their family, and friends (Bozell, 1995; Kertesz, 1998).

It is unclear, however, why a fictional film should be held to these journalistic standards, or if these expectations are even realistic for journalism. News routinely reports on the unexpected, the unusual and the shocking, and films also frequently set out to tell unusual or remarkable stories. The industry's argument fails to explain why Americans should remain unconcerned about that percentage who do "fall through the cracks," or why they should be convinced that they won't get unlucky and end up as one of them. Many reviewers seemed to fixate on the realism of the heart transplant storyline, rather than consider the more general message about profit-driven HMO's controlling patient access to medical care. While screenwriter James Kearns explained that he was looking for a story that would illustrate the drama of being denied care because of an inability to pay, he may have been unwise in picking a transplant storyline as the issue of organ transplantation is itself so charged.

Critics held *John Q.* to the standards normally reserved for politicians by complaining that the movie didn't offer any realistic solutions, as if films that represent social or political issues must back up this bold move with policy recommendations. A number of reviews

chose to take the fictional story literally, taking issue with the “suggestion” that violence is the answer, such as in the Sydney Morning Herald which wrote: “The film deserves points for tackling a difficult subject – the inequities of the American health system – but it hasn’t a clue about fixing those problems. Threatening your local casualty nurse with a gun doesn’t seem a helpful suggestion” (Byrne, 2002, p.10). Similarly, the St. Petersburg Times complains that, “John Q. takes a serious problem and finds only the most irrational solution” (Persall, 2002, p.6W). In response to these complaints Cassavetes explained that with his fictional story, “I’m not trying with this movie to offer an explanation on how to fix the American health care system” (O’Sullivan, 2002, p.T45).

In fact, it’s somewhat strange that this complaint appeared in reviews so frequently considering that the end of the movie consists of a montage of “factual” images of political speeches and demonstrations on health care reform, ostensibly in the lead-up to John Q.’s trial, thereby seemingly advocating a movement of grassroots political activism around health care in contrast to John Q.’s armed act of desperation portrayed in the film. We see political figures like Hillary Clinton and Arianna Huffington critique the current health care system and advocate for change, and Bill Maher argues that the enemy is not the HMOs but us, because as citizens we have failed to push for meaningful reform. More surprising still is the fact that reviewers would take the clearly melodramatic, over-the-top depiction of a hostage situation as the director’s suggestion for a realistic solution. A number of reviewers seemed irritated that a film would criticize an aspect of American society without illustrating a quick fix that they could stand behind and applaud.

Reviewers also used politics as an evaluative frame when they complained that the melodrama of the film and the “violent solution” lacked civility, a bedrock of the public

sphere ideal of political discourse. This approach seems to be in danger of holding filmmakers to higher standards than politicians themselves are usually capable of meeting, such as when the Plain Dealer complains that “Director Nick Cassavetes and writer James Kearns go beyond stacking the deck in their story; heck, they do everything but stick the label Axis of Evil on the triad of hospitals, doctors and insurance carriers that are the movie’s villains, while turning John Q. into a modern-day Job” (Connors, 2002, p.4).

Whether the true target of this critique was the film itself or the polarizing political rhetoric it’s being compared to remains unclear.

On the flipside, some observers noted that the movie was “just as bad” as political discourse, which they argued routinely violates public sphere ideals of rationality and civility, instead resorting to the manipulative techniques of Hollywood. For example, the Boston Globe writes, “How crude is the film’s argument? As crude as the insurance companies’ fight to defeat Clinton’s health care proposal” (Carr, 2002, p.C11) alluding to the Health Insurance Association of America’s infamous Harry and Louise ads. Similarly Roger Ebert wrote in the Chicago Sun-Times: “I agree with its message – that the richest nation in history should be able to afford national health insurance – but the message is pounded in with such fevered melodrama, it’s as slanted and manipulative as your average political commercial” (2002a, p.34). This type of commentary complained that *John Q.* failed to embody the ideals of a rational public sphere, while acknowledging that not even the public sphere conforms to those ideals anymore (if it ever did).

By and large, those unsympathetic with the film’s politics felt that the movie’s message undermined its entertainment value, while those who sympathized with its politics felt that attempts to make *John Q.* entertaining and accessible had gone too far, leaving the

film politically ineffective. Over and over again, reviewers applied standards normally used for journalists – to be objective, balanced, and accurate – and for politicians – to be civil and offer realistic solutions – to this Hollywood film. One writer complains about the film, “Unfortunately, the only counterargument gets lost in the cathartic avalanche,” apparently expecting the movie to mimic an idealized public sphere, with all viewpoints getting equal airtime (Gowans, 2002, p.12F).

Critics consistently decried how the film “pushes people’s buttons.” Their characterization of the film as pushing emotional buttons is hard to argue with when the whole scenario hinges on our sympathy for a man who would do anything to save his only son. But this complaint betrays certain assumptions about political rationality, wherein reason is valued over emotion, and political participation is conceptualized as cerebral, disinterested, and impersonal. What audience reactions to the film suggest, however, is that people do have emotional and personal connections to issues like health care, a fact that *John Q.* capitalizes on. In fact, the importance of the “human” or emotional element of politics has been recognized by practitioners and theorists of the news. Journalists and scholars have argued that so-called “entertainment” values can make news or policy items more compelling to audiences, and that gripping narratives and human-interest angles can sometimes stimulate interest and debate more than the restrictive conventions of hard news (Campbell, 1991; Ettema & Glasser, 1998; Macdonald, 2000). Activists and public relations professionals are also well aware of the importance of entertainment values, and are well-known for appealing to emotion or spectacle in order to gain access to the public screen (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002).

### The Case For John Q.

Recognition that entertainment values play a role in political discourse brings us to the minority of journalists and commentators who praised *John Q.*'s fictionalized treatment of a political issue. Most critics' disapproval for the film clashed with accounts of how audiences all over the country received it. Although not a huge runaway hit, *John Q.* did respectably at box office. It made seventy-one million dollars during its release, spent a week at the number one spot, ten more weeks in the top sixty, and was the thirty-eight biggest grossing movie of 2002 (The movie Times). Further, reviews described audiences cheering and yelling in theatres at John Q.'s antics (Persall, 2002; Simon, 2002; Verghese, 2002), screaming and pounding on seats (Edelstein, 2002), and even weeping at one press screening (Mathews, 2002a). For example, the Seattle Times reported that people laughed "loudly and bitterly" in a scene where John Q. is told that his job application will be kept "on file" (Macdonald, 2002, p.H31).

My own experience seeing *John Q.* at a Saturday matinee in a Philadelphia movie theater reinforces these accounts of vocal audience responses. When Denzel Washington's character takes out his gun to shut down the hospital's emergency room, saying "Hospital's under new management now. From now on, free health care for everybody" – the audience clapped and cheered. The showing I went to appeared to be attended mainly by working class African-Americans, people in a similar class position as *John Q.* himself and those most likely to find themselves in a similar situation. Director Nick Cassavetes argued that the movie may have mainly spoken to those who have already suffered unfairness in the current health care system. Whereas he sometimes tried to distance himself from any politicization of the movie, here he pulls no punches saying: "This movie is splitting people along the lines

of money.... The people this doesn't affect find it to be an overly fantastic melodrama. But play this movie in a middle class or poor area and people are angry and yelling at the screen. They get it" (Stryker, 2002, p.6). This assessment resonates with an observation offered by Clive Callendar, a transplant surgeon who heads the National Minority Organ and Tissue Transplant Education Program, which educates minorities about organ transplants. He told USA Today, "Rich white people may not fall through the cracks. But a lot of people fall through the cracks. This happens more than you can imagine," perhaps particularly to those who experience the double oppression of race and class (Davis, 2002, p.16B).

*John Q.* encourages audiences to engage with its story and politics through identification with its main character and, as has been discussed already, an attention-grabbing, melodramatic storyline. It's no secret that the average audience member is meant to identify with John Q., and then draw a line from the personal to the political. In an early scene we see John sitting in his modest, rented house, with his wife complaining about how his reduced hours have meant that she has had to return to work, and yet they are still living check to check. While President George W. Bush discusses the economy on the TV, John's car is being repossessed by the bank. Not only is John Q. the clear protagonist of the movie, and not only is he played by perhaps the most well-liked actor in Hollywood, Denzel Washington, but by calling himself John Q. during the hostage situation later in the movie (his real name is John Quincy Archibald), we are clearly meant to conclude that any one of us could find ourselves in his shoes. A number of letters to the editor suggest that some audience members did buy into this identification, such as one from the Chicago Sun-Times that read:

We are all “John Q.” or Jane Q. We are all held hostage by the current non-health care system and the insurance industry...The rest of society has to fight with our health plans to get the care we need – just like John Q....Any one of us can lose our health coverage at any moment. (Duffett, 2002, p.30)

The populism of *John Q.* that many reviewers found so distasteful is seen as potentially valuable, or even necessary by some commentators. The film’s most positive review argued that *John Q.* actually succeeds in its political goals, and that if its release had been timed differently, it might have impacted the health care reform debates of the early 1990s. In the New Orleans Times-Picayune the reviewer writes:

“John Q.” is every bit as political a film as Ken Loach’s recent “Bread and Roses,” which looked at the problems of illegal immigrants. Unlike that earlier film, however, “John Q.” manages to be entertaining as well as informative. There’s no denying the gripping nature of the drama, even if certain aspects of the medical industry’s behavior are exaggerated to strengthen the movie’s case for national healthcare.

(Kleinschrodt, 2002, p.5)

Other commentators point out that the “exaggeration” in the story and the main character’s heartfelt speechmaking merely place *John Q.* in a long and venerated tradition of well-meant, populist films like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *The Grapes of Wrath* (Byrnes, 2002; Carr, 2002). David Denby writing in the New Yorker makes an interesting suggestion when he says that *John Q.* merely takes the emotional, simplifying rhetorical techniques of the right and applies them to a progressive point of view. He writes:

My guess is that “John Q.” has been pitched low in order to rouse an audience that the filmmakers view as somnolent. Many Americans, they may have reasoned, are

too easily distracted by patriotic symbols and by right-wing attacks on “elitists.”

These people don’t vote according to their own interests; therefore we have to reach them at a gut level. (Denby, 2002 p.90)

Rebel progressive Michael Moore has made similar arguments, defending his antics and media stunts by saying that the left has failed to capture the wider public’s imagination, without which they have little chance of achieving their political goals (Moore, 1997). Here, Denby and Moore argue for accepting the realities of our “public screen” society rather than holding on to nostalgic ideas about the public sphere, and crafting media messages accordingly. Denby’s description of the American audience’s state of distraction resonates with DeLuca and Peebles’ (2002) argument that in the current media environment, distraction is not just a prominent but a necessary mode of perception for dealing with the multiplicity, the fragmentation and the sheer spectacle of our mass-mediated culture.

The Washington Post’s assessment of *John Q.*’s appeal seems more tuned in to actual audience reactions than most reviews, when it writes: “It is a film that taps a deep well of resentment, and despite all its flaws, it is highly effective entertainment. Call it feel-bad filmmaking at its best” (O’Sullivan, 2002, p.T45). Those who think that *John Q.* offers a good model of how an entertainment film can deal with politics don’t focus on the lack of practical solutions it offers, or its lack of balanced, rational debate, but on its potential to raise awareness, mobilize sentiment, and spur debate. This aim is the one that Director Cassavetes himself espouses, telling the Ottawa Citizen:

Someone has got to get people talking about it.... The problem will only get wider and wider and more and more people will not be able to afford it, and then we will

have horror stories like the one in this movie. Think of it as a cautionary tale.

(Portman, 2002b, p.B1)

Here again, he disavows the notion that the film is meant to be taken as strictly realistic. The amount of discussion of *John Q.* outside the film criticism pages of the newspaper suggest that, to some extent anyway, Cassavetes achieved his goal.

Whether this debate and heightened awareness can translate to political action remains an open question, as this commentator in the New York Times suggests:

Movies like “John Q.” tap into the public wellspring of frustration and anger. But are we, the public, frustrated enough to agree to raise taxes or to use some of our wages to buy supplemental insurance? Are we ready now to vote for comprehensive health care for all? The Enron story has given a push to campaign finance reform; perhaps “John Q.” can do the same for universal health coverage. (Verghese, 2002, p.15)

Similarly, a reader writing to the editor of the Chicago Sun-Times echoes the New York Times contributor, saying: “How's this going to end, John?” That’s the question the good cop...asks in the movie. In the real world, it’s up to us. We can’t write the ending to the movie, but we can write an ending in real life that sends us all home healthy and safe” (Duffett, 2002, p.30).

Those who think *John Q.* has some redeeming qualities point to its use of narrative, drama, and strong characters as necessary techniques in mobilizing interest and support among an apathetic, depoliticized public. These are precisely the techniques of entertainment that news outlets, politicians, and advertisers have increasingly turned to, in order to compete for attention on the public screen.

## The Fallout

The initial reviews and vocal audience reactions prompted another layer of response to the film's controversy: from those involved in the movie to the various critiques, and from the health insurance industry to their negative portrayal in the film. For the most part the studio, the director, the writer, and the lead actor responded to critics' complaints by denying that they set out to make a political movie. Rather, they argued, *John Q.* told a story that was "important" and "personal." Even though the film seems to make a clear association between John Q.'s individual plight and larger socio-political issues, they suggested that the movie was merely the story of one man facing a moral dilemma who makes a bad choice. Writer James Kearns emphasized that he had not set out to change public opinion, but rather, to capture the drama and human-interest of similar, "real-life" stories of people being denied access to healthcare by their HMO's (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002a). The health insurance industry publication *Modern Healthcare* (2002) reported that, "New Line Cinema, which released *John Q.*, declined to comment on the healthcare financing debate the movie may fuel. "It is a dramatic thriller," said a spokesman flatly" (p. 48). Kearns, Cassavetes, and Washington cited personal reasons for being interested in the script, pointing to their experience as parents and how that helped them empathize with John Q.'s situation. Relating to the story on a personal level was much safer than allying themselves with the perceived political agenda of the film. Washington in particular was careful to distance himself from John Q.'s actions and the politics of the film. The *Ottawa Citizen* reports that "It was the human rather than the political dimension that drew Washington to the project.... He sees John Q. as ultimately the highly personal story of how love for his child clouds one man's judgment" (Portman, 2002a, p.B1).

Cassavetes convincingly demonstrated his personal connection with John Q.'s character through his own experience with his daughter who has a heart defect and has required many surgeries. However, the director wasn't as careful or consistent in depoliticizing his involvement in the film as its star or the studio. On the one hand he says "I saw the film as a very simple one, a family unit trying to stay together" (Schaefer, 2002, p.S29). However, he also justifies the film's critique of the health care situation in the US, saying:

...inherent in the story is the difficulty of dealing with some of the bureaucracy of the medical establishment here in the U.S. I'm not a terribly political guy, but I think we would have been remiss if we had just walked through the movie and not paid attention to it. (Portman, 2002b, p.B1)

Certainly the fact that Cassavetes decided to add the montage of news footage advocating political change near the end of the story, something that writer James Kearns would have preferred to exclude, undermines his occasional protests that he just wanted to make a great story about an individual's choices.

The way these moviemakers attempted to distance themselves from the political implications of the film illustrates the uncertain legitimacy of Hollywood treatment of political issues, at least about these kinds of politics. Their experience with *John Q.* mirrors director Alan Parker's experience making the death penalty film *The Life of David Gale* (2003) in Hollywood. He told reporters that "the key to getting major studio backing for films with political content is to create a multi-layered product with mass appeal" and argued, "If you stand on a soapbox, no one's going to listen to you anyway" (Yeung, 2003, p.2). Whereas journalists are expected to contribute to political discourse, filmmakers stand on much

shakier ground when it comes to their perceived legitimacy and their right to weigh in on political discussions.

The health insurance and HMO industry had plenty to say on the subject of their portrayal in *John Q.* Still smarting from the bad press they received when audiences cheered Helen Hunt's character's diatribe against HMOs in *As Good As It Gets* (1997), the health insurance and managed care industries' public relations wheels were quickly set in motion. The AAHP (American Association of Health Plans) launched a print advertising campaign in Hollywood (in publications like *Variety* and the *Hollywood Reporter*) and the Capitol Hill publication *Roll Call* deflecting the movie's critique of the US health care system onto Washington policymakers (Martinez, 2002; American Health Line, 2002). It read in part, "John Q. It's not just a movie. It's a crisis for 40 million people who can't afford health care," and "Sometimes it seems like health plans are the only ones trying to make health care more affordable" (AAHP, 2002). The ads argued that the federal government should make more funding available to give uninsured Americans some coverage, and stop making laws that require insurance to cover so many procedures, thereby preventing HMOs from making premiums more affordable. While the ad focused on critiquing Washington, D.C. for not coming up with solutions for the uninsured, CEO of the AAHP Karen Ignagni presented a more complex picture of her organization's strategy at the Kaiser Family Foundation's conference. She said that she would have liked the spotlight to shine on what happens, not just when people lose their insurance coverage, but when employers scale back insurance coverage, which is what actually happens to John Q. Archibald in the film. She couched the problem as one of expectations, where John Q.'s knowledge of the extent of his coverage no longer matches the reality (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002a). Although, even if he had been

aware of the reduction in his coverage, it's not clear what options he would have had to procure adequate insurance that would cover such an expensive procedure. The American Association of Health Plans framed the movie as an illustration that the fault lies not with HMOs putting profit margins over patients' health, but with the government failing to create a strong enough safety net to fill in the gaps that the HMOs cannot or will not serve.

The swiftness and strength of the industry's response to their negative representation in *John Q.* shows that they take the power of entertainment media to shape public opinion seriously. This belief is also demonstrated by recent initiatives on the part of industry organizations to consult with Hollywood on television plotlines that could be more "insurance-friendly" on shows like *ER* and *Law & Order* where relevant stories come up with some frequency (Fong, 2002, p.C1). Ignagni spoke about the industry's awareness of the power of film and television to influence public opinion at the Kaiser Foundation conference (2002a), although she was careful to say that they recognize that the entertainment media don't have the same responsibility to be accurate and "fair" as the news media. She argued that organizations like AAHP don't seek to unduly influence the creative process of entertainment writers, but to make them aware of good stories and relevant information that may lead to more balanced representations (Kaiser Foundation, 2002a).

A rare, and perhaps unusually honest response to the film from within the medical profession was published in the *Denver Post* by physician Pius Kamau, who argued that, "There'll always be procedures and cures and drugs that will remain outside the reach of the ordinary citizen. And in some ways, it's the fallacy of the hypothesis behind the movie – that everyone deserves everything available in the medical bag of tricks" (Kamau, 2002, p.B7). Although Dr. Kamau is clear that he believes all citizens should have access to a *reasonable*

level of medical care regardless of their ability to pay, he does suggest that there might be limits. On a similar theme, Sid Paulsen, president and CEO of IHC Health Plan Inc. in Salt Lake City, complained to his peers in the health insurance industry in the pages of *Managed Healthcare Executive*, that “Healthcare is seen as an entitlement.... Consumers don’t understand the cost of care” (Edlin, 2002, p.41). What the insurance and HMO industries may have particularly disliked about *John Q.* was that it hit a little too close to home, because their business models depend in part on restricting recipients from the most costly drugs and procedures. Exactly what impoverished, or even average working-class and middle class citizens have a right to in terms of medical treatment (and what society can afford to pay for) are questions that have gone relatively un-debated in the United States in large part I would argue because the belief that the market will provide the best solutions is so strong that it stifles this debate. Karen Ignagni implies in her contribution to the Kaiser Family Foundation conference that it’s the role of government to figure out how to provide treatment to people who don’t fit into the business model of healthcare delivery, and that not enough discussion has taken place about how best to do this. Many of the world’s developed countries are currently struggling to keep health care taxes or insurance premiums affordable while ensuring that their citizens have access to a reasonable standard of care. The question of whether health care ought to be treated like a consumer good or as a human right gets raised and dealt with head on in *John Q.*, an unusual topic in any medium, let alone in a mainstream Hollywood film.

### ***John Q.* and the Proper Mix of Politics and Entertainment**

Scholars, activists and politicians are increasingly interested in the potential for entertainment media to contribute substantively to political discussion. Delli Carpini & Williams (2001) point out that “entertainment media often provide factual information, stimulate social and political debate, and critique government, while public affairs media are all too often diversionary, contextless, and politically irrelevant” (p.161). Gans & Wardle (2003) suggest that socio-political issues addressed in entertainment media can introduce a moral framework that is often missing from straightforward news accounts.

*John Q.* would seem on its face to be a shining example of Hollywood film dealing with political subject matter, but it appears to have failed in the eyes of many as an effective treatment of politics in an entertainment medium. Although it is difficult to prove empirically, I would argue that the film’s vociferous attacks were as much a function of people’s discomfort with a film that is critical of a domestic problem related to the free market as they were a reaction to heavy-handed filmmaking. It’s notable, for example, that while TV medical shows frequently feature policy content, the majority of issues dealt with are purely ethical, whereas questions of cost and insurance are far less frequently depicted (Turow & Gans, 2002).<sup>iii</sup> Although *John Q.* certainly depended on caricatures and melodrama to deliver its story, plenty of other caricatures and melodramatic storylines pressed into the service of praising American domestic or foreign policies go relatively unnoticed.

*John Q.* is not the first movie to criticize corporate America, but it may be unusual in the extent to which it leveled a generalized critique, not focused on one particular corporate sinner, such as in *A Civil Action* (1998), *The Insider* (1999) or *Erin Brockovich* (2000), but against an entire industry. The movie makes this larger critique even more explicit than it arguably

already is in the narrative through the montage in which various political and media personalities encourage viewers to engage politically with this issue. The stories of Jeffrey Wigand and Erin Brockovich, on the other hand, fit better with the tradition of “nostalgic individualism” that tends to undermine the political message of a film (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994).

Echoing the observations of film scholars like Nichols (1981), Stead (1989) and Sefcovic (2002), Delli Carpini & Williams (1994) argue that entertainment formats can raise controversial socio-political issues while essentially preserving the *status quo* by suggesting, through their plotlines, that governmental or other kinds of collective action are ineffective compared to the actions of the individual. Although admirably encouraging individuals to take responsibility for societal problems, these strategies arguably also discourage collective political action and let governments, corporations and other institutions off the hook. *John Q.* conforms to the trope of nostalgic individualism in that the main character rebels and takes hold of the situation in the manner of the iconic reluctant hero from the Wild West, but his actions are so extreme and difficult to condone that the film ultimately seems to undermine the cult of individualism. The message of the movie, picked up on so well by some critics, is that individual violence is an untenable solution to the dilemma and that realistic solutions must be debated and arrived at collectively, through political action. Whereas films like *A Civil Action*, *The Insider* and *Erin Brockovich* could be accused of seeming to critique the establishment while actually reinforcing the *status quo* because of their reliance on individual heroes to find solutions, *John Q.* does a less convincing job of upholding the prevailing definition of the situation. The system really does fail him, and the “solution” he arrives at is unrealistic and irresponsible. Compare the scenario in *John Q.* to that in *Collateral Damage*,

where Arnold Schwarzenegger's character is also a "regular Joe," a fireman, who seeks revenge for his wife and son's murder. Similar to John Q., Arnold's character takes the law into his own hands, seeking justice because the American government and proper authorities are incompetent and therefore incapable of doing anything themselves (a theme that Schwarzenegger used to his advantage in his bid for the California governorship). Arnold's fireman ends the movie vindicated and the true hero, whereas John Q.'s heroism is tempered, not only because he is sentenced to a jail sentence for kidnapping and wrongful imprisonment, but because his "victims" in the emergency room are humanized.

A few distinct messages seem to come out of the flap surrounding *John Q.* regarding what most people regard as an "appropriate" treatment of politics in an entertainment medium. Critics seemingly want to hold movies to the standards of journalistic discourse when they dare venture into the territory of contemporary politics, arguing that they ought to be balanced, accurate, eschew partisanship, and let viewers make up their own minds. And yet, presumably what entertainment media can contribute to political discourse that might be missing from many news accounts are powerful narratives, a glimpse into others' experience, passionate arguments, and moral frameworks. If movies avoid offering these elements when dealing with political subject matter, what are they really offering that's different than news discourse?

The objections to *John Q.*'s political stance illustrate widely held assumptions about what political talk ought to look like, regardless of the format in which it appears. Reviewers and other observers seem to want political talk to be detached, impersonal, to acknowledge both sides of every argument, and to conceal partisanship. Political talk should be polite. Although there is certainly value to the kind of political talk these assumptions embody,

there is often not an accompanying acknowledgement of the value in strongly held political convictions that have grown out of personal experience. The impersonal vision of rational political discourse encourages us to suppress our personal connection to the political and to buy into the idea that political views are private, a stance which discourages political association and organization among groups of people. The fear of the soapbox brought about by privileging rationality over emotion and experience, so amply demonstrated by the response to *John Q.*, may impoverish debate about society-wide issues that we all have a stake in. If critics and audiences make it uncomfortable for Hollywood filmmakers to betray their political agendas in their work, then both films and political talk are the worse off for it.

The flap over *John Q.* illustrates DeLuca and Peeples' (2002) observation that contemporary media are often found lacking when evaluated according to a public sphere model of political discourse. The strong images, threat of violence, and melodrama of the movie *John Q.* make it a good example of media that provide, in their words, "Critique through spectacle. Not critique versus spectacle" (p.134). Just as the protestors' symbolic violence at the World Trade Organization (WTO) protests in Seattle in 1999 brought the world's attention to the anti-globalization movement by "puncturing" and "interrupting" the familiar media flow, so did *John Q.* refocus attention on issues of healthcare reform through its melodramatic, somewhat outrageous storyline (p.145). The discourse surrounding the film illustrates how unclear we are as a culture on what set of criteria for political discourse, that of the public sphere or the public screen, to use in evaluating the increasingly blurry categories of news and entertainment.

DeLuca and Peeples' (2002) impulse to describe the current media environment, rather than judge it according to predetermined criteria, is a useful strategy to keep in mind

when looking at how news, entertainment, and politics intermingle. Rather than condemn or praise a film like *John Q.* for how it used melodrama, emotion, and spectacle to comment on a political issue, we might just notice how effective it was in bringing the public's attention, however slight, to the issue of access to health care. Discussion about the movie and the issues it raised spilled out of the review pages onto commentary pages, industry trades, *Oprah*, and the news, thereby reaching many more people than would ever see the film itself.

Other scholars go beyond DeLuca and Peeples (2002) criteria of grabbing people's attention to look at the quality of the impact that entertaining treatments of political issues have on audiences. They have tried to develop criteria we might use, whether the genre is actually entertainment or informational, other than the limiting criteria of objective journalism or idealized political talk. Myra Macdonald (2000), for example, questions the assumption that personalization in informational programming is always depoliticizing, but also argues that personalization is not therefore always politically useful. Her examination of current affairs documentaries in England leads her to advocate discriminating "between personal case studies that are knowledge-enabling and those that merely confirm prejudice or advance an ill-supported and closed thesis" (pp.255-256). Her focus on programming that is "knowledge-enabling" is echoed by Williams & Delli Carpini (2004), who want to evaluate infotainment with regard to its messages about democratic practice, and Peter Dahlgren (1995) who thinks popular journalism should be evaluated in part on its pragmatics, or how it invites or guides viewers to participate as citizens. All three see the potential for "infotainment" to be "knowledge-enabling" and encourage greater and better civic participation because personalized stories that invite identification from viewers may motivate them to seek and then implement new knowledge. As Christopher Lasch (1990)

has argued, citizens are unlikely to become involved in politics on the basis of information alone – they need to perceive a debate or stake in political discussion. The right kind of personalization in entertaining programs can give viewers the motivation to seek more information and to become more active in politics, rather than be depoliticizing as Campbell (1991) observed in his study of *60 Minutes*. These scholars might praise *John Q.* on the basis that it ultimately rejects relying on the individual reluctant hero to solve a pressing crisis (although it arguably milks that scenario for all the spectacle and voyeurism it is worth), and points to the necessity for more collective solutions and policy responses to a broader underlying problem by the end of the film.

On other evaluative criteria that these authors offer the film may hold up less well. Macdonald's (2000) criterion of "typicality" is similar to Williams & Delli Carpini's (2004) criterion of "verisimilitude." Both these criteria challenge creators of infotainment, whether in informational or entertainment genres, to take responsibility for both the explicit and implicit truth claims they make through their narrative and directorial choices. By highlighting a case that seems to fall out of the sphere of typicality as an example of what HMOs can do to their patients, *John Q.* possibly misleads the audience as to what is a common or even likely occurrence. Arguably on the point of typicality or verisimilitude the film fails, even if its "deeper" truth claim about inequities in access to healthcare is more supportable.

By demonizing the health system in two unsympathetic characters in the film, Anne Heche's HMO hospital administrator and James Woods' surgeon, the film also treads on dangerous ground in possibly oversimplifying the problem as one of the health industry's greed and heartlessness, rather than as a larger political and systemic problem. Although the

film does caricature these characters throughout most of the story, it shows their “softer” side toward the end, and connects *John Q.*’s plight beyond his conflict with these two personalities to the larger health care, welfare, and legal systems he’s constrained by.

In evaluating whether personalization in infotainment is politicizing or depoliticizing, Macdonald looks for “testimony”, which is “where engagement between personal account and social or political process is perceptible...Although testimony invites identification, it prompts the viewer into interrogative mode by marking the limits of mere emotional vicariousness” (2000, p.251). Here the audience is invited to identify with a “witness” whose concrete personal circumstances “cut through” and complicate the official narratives that are meant to define the situation, rather than merely serve as an emotional, sensational performance that audiences are invited to watch “from a safe distance” and that leave previous conceptions of the *status quo* untransformed. While the latter performances may be critical, they rely on personal conflicts between good and evil, and between victims and villains, rather than making connections to political or social structures that could actually be changed (Macdonald, 2000). *John Q.* arguably walks down the road of depoliticizing personalization and an individualized solution to a crisis for large parts of the film, but then tries to undo the depoliticizing tendencies of its own melodrama by humanizing villains, punishing its hero, and explicitly inviting audience members to see a “bigger picture” and to get involved in the issue of health care reform.

The issues raised in the talk surrounding the release of *John Q.* are increasingly relevant as politicians, film critics, journalists, and audience members are faced with more and more entertaining political fare, such as Michael Moore’s documentaries. As Macdonald (2000) and Williams & Delli Carpini (2004) argue, we need to move beyond a knee-jerk

judgment that personalization and emotional presentations are necessarily manipulative and apolitical, and as a viewing community develop a set of vocabulary and criteria to talk about these hybrid forms more clearly.

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Endnotes:

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<sup>i</sup> The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation is a non-profit, private foundation that focuses on health care issues in the United States, and is not affiliated in any way with Kaiser Permanente or Kaiser Industries. See <http://www.kff.org/> for more information.

<sup>ii</sup> The impact that *John Q.* may have had beyond those who actually saw the movie is suggested by the results of the Kaiser Foundation's survey conducted in June of 2002, which found that while only 6% of the random sample had seen the film, 44% of respondents had heard of it (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002b).

<sup>iii</sup> The study found that 78% of policy-related interactions involved ethical issues, 13% involved resource-related topics, and 9% involved both (Turow & Gans, 2002, p.15).