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Popular culture and political communication

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Abstract

The electoral success of Donald Trump has fuelled once again the suggestion that political communication is intimately linked to popular culture. In this article, I trace the different routes taken by this connection – from the representation of politics in popular culture to the rise of celebrity politics and the idea of citizens as ‘fans’. My suggestion is that our understanding of contemporary political communication needs to take account of its affinities with popular culture, but that we are still some way from substantiating how the relationship operates in practice.

Introduction

The idea that popular culture is a form of political communication is not new. Its heredity can be traced back to Plato, and from there to Rousseau, Nietzsche and Adorno. But while there is a long history to the idea, in the modern era it has almost assumed the status of a conventional wisdom, albeit one that is resisted by some academics and public commentators (eg Postman, 1987). The election of Donald Trump as US President has, however, given the topic of popular culture’s connection to political communication a further impetus and relevance.

For some writers, Trump's success is demonstration of how a political persona can be created and disseminated via popular culture. His appearances in Hollywood movies and on TV shows, his wrestling and Miss Universe franchises, and, of course, his role in *The Apprentice/Celebrity Apprentice*, have all been cited as evidence of how he has become a politically prominent figure, of how, in the words of the TV commentator Emily Nussbaum (2017a), he has been made 'electable'.

His political style has been attributed to, or understood in terms of, popular culture. He has been compared to a variety of popular entertainers. At his rallies, he has been described as inspiring the crowd in the manner of a rock star (Lefsetz, 2016) or as working his audience like a stand-up comic (Nussbaum, 2017b).

Trump is not the first politician to draw upon popular culture in this way. It is an increasingly familiar feature of US politics, and of other polities – see, for example, Prime Minister Boris Johnson in the UK, Beppe Grillo and the rise of the Five Star Movement in Italy, the election of Volodymyr Levensky in the Ukraine, or that of Imran Khan in Pakistan. Trump is, it might be argued, the most developed form of the phenomenon. Equally, popular culture's involvement in politics should not be associated only with the case of elected politicians and their parties. It is evident, too, in the political prominence assumed by those who have no formal links to representative democracy: the film and pop stars who pronounce on causes and issues (Wheeler, 2013; Brockington, 2014). We need to think only of the image of the reality star Kim Kardashian posing with Trump,

after she had persuaded the President to arrange for the release from prison of an elderly grandmother.¹

Popular culture is present also in the wider culture of politics, in the images and ideas that fuel political action. Writing of the UK's decision to withdraw from the European Union, Fintan O'Toole (2018) explains the leave vote by reference to a popular culture evoked in novels, movies and music. He points to how the English leavers (in particular) have been shaped by fictional accounts of a Britain that has never escaped its war past and that lives in a state of perpetual anxiety, fearful of being dominated by an outside Other. He detects this state of mind in works such as *Fatherland*, in which the author Robert Harris (2009) imagines a Britain that has lost the Second World War and is now ruled by Germany. He also detects this fear of dominance and submission in other works of popular culture:

It does not seem entirely beside the point that, in the years immediately leading up to Brexit, by far the biggest-selling book by an English author in any genre was E.L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey*. It is a fantasy of submission and dominance. It is not hard to fantasize, in turn, a political adaptation in which Christian Grey is the European Union and Anastasia Steele an innocent England seduced into entering his Red Room of Pain (O'Toole, 2018: 21).

In similar vein, O'Toole understands the anger that mobilised the leave vote as a product of the spirit unleashed by punk in the 1970s. 'Had it not had the genius of Take Back Control,' writes O'Toole (2018: 128), 'a perfect slogan for the Leave

¹ <https://www.thedailybeast.com/kim-kardashian-trump-really-understood-my-clemency-plea>

campaign would have been Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's Brexit! For it is in punk that we find ... the nihilistic energy that helped to drive the Brexit impulse.'

O'Toole's book *Heroic Failure* was much acclaimed on its publication, at least by 'remainers'.² It has a natural appeal to those who see the leave vote as an act of political self-harm. And it also has an appeal to those who see Brexit, and the rise of Trump and of populism more generally, as symptomatic of the contemporary political influence of popular culture. The question remains, though, as we survey the field of political communication in the first half of the 21st century, as to whether there is any greater substance to this close affinity between politics and popular culture. In what follows, I will try to give an overview of where we are – theoretically and empirically – in establishing a link between popular culture and political communication. In doing this, I do not intend to dwell on the (not unimportant) question of what is meant by 'popular culture'.³ My focus will instead be on the different forms of political communication with which popular culture – in whatever guise - has been associated.

Representations of politics

With the de-regulation and displacement of traditional forms of communication, it seems that audiences are spending more and more time being entertained, and less and less time being informed. In the UK, there is an increase in the use of social media and 'word of mouth' as a source of news, and signs that news itself

² <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/dec/29/fintan-otoole-the-books-interview-brexiteer-english-nationalism>

³ For those interested in this debate, see Storey (2012: Chapter 1).

is a declining media product (Ofcom, 2019). Platforms like Netflix allow consumers to confine their viewing habits to a diet of fiction (or quasi-fiction in the form of 'reality' shows).

There is a danger, though, in assuming that this means that they know nothing of conventional forms of politics. This would be a mistake, if only because conventional forms of politics feature prominently in entertainment (Davies and Wells, 2002; Fielding, 2014; van Zoonen and Wring, 2012). Shows like *House of Cards* or *Veep* make politics the focus of their attention. The immensely popular (not to say lavish) *The Crown*, while putting the history of the UK's royal family at the centre of its plots, deals extensively with the politics of the period.

In this context, it is apparent that conventional politics features in the entertainment of many viewers. The question then becomes, not *whether* politics is being communicated, but *how* it is being communicated. This is an issue to which Liesbet van Zoonen and others have devoted their attention (van Zoonen, 2005; van Zoonen and Wring, 2012; Clapton and Shepherd, 2017; Brassett and Sutton, 2017; Fielding, 2017). For van Zoonen (2005), the key has been the narratives that are used to imagine politics, which she characterises as 'the quest' (for electoral victory), 'bureaucracy' (politics as institutionally frustrated action), 'conspiracy' (the dark forces operating behind the appearance of political action) and 'soap opera' (politics as the product of individual competition and collaboration). With Dominic Wring, she has surveyed how British fictional television has portrayed the reality of politics. Here a set of tropes and stereotypes emerge. Politics, according to its portrayal by the UK's TV

producers, is populated by ‘mostly plain men of uncertain age – around 40 or over – somewhat grumpy, somewhat clumsy and hardly ever in full control of the situation.’ (van Zoonen and Wring, 2012: 274). Steve Fielding (2008 and 2017) has completed similar surveys of British film and television portrayals of politics, as others have done with US television and film (Davies and Wells, 2002).

The HBO series, *The Wire*, also attracted the attention of political communication scholars (Havercroft and Deylami, 2015; Wheeler, 2014). Throughout its five series, the politics of Baltimore has been a constant feature, but in Series 3 it comes to the fore. And arguably, it is a representation that is both sympathetic and subtle in its attempt to capture politics and politicians. Jacob Weisberg of *The Slate* wrote of *The Wire*: ‘No other program has ever done anything remotely like what this one does, namely to portray the social, political, and economic life of an American city with the scope, observational precision, and moral vision of great literature’ (as quoted in Talbot, 2007). Similarly sympathetic accounts of politics can be found, albeit rarely in mainstream television. James Graham’s (2012) play, *This House*, dramatizes life in the House of Commons, portraying politicians as well-intentioned and almost heroic, as does Richard T. Kelly’s (2016) novel, *The Knives*, about a government minister’s struggles with conscience and principle, with private desires and public duties.

The politics of the fictional

The examples we have considered so far are of works of popular culture that seek in some way or another to render the reality of politics in fictional form. There is, though, an alternative means by which cultural representation and

politics are linked. This occurs when authors/creators introduce politics through the mode of fantasy and speculation. Works such as *1984* or *The Handmaid's Tale* might be seen like this. Here audiences are invited to interpret the text as a commentary on contemporary politics.

An example of this interpretative political engagement with popular culture is furnished by William Clapton and Laura Shepherd's (2017) discussion of *Game of Thrones*. Clapton and Shepherd are international relations scholars, frustrated by their discipline's failure to recognise or appreciate the gendered nature of power. They argue that the realities of gendered power are better captured and understood in *Games of Thrones* than they are in standard, mainstream IR texts.

There are two issues that emerge from these kinds of claims about the relationship between popular culture and the communication of political ideas and images. The first of these has to do with interpretation; that is, how scholars read the works of popular culture upon which they focus. Shepherd and Clapton base their argument on accounts of the plots of episodes of *Game of Thrones*, and specifically on the representation and experience of Queen Daenerys. It is their reading of Daenerys that allows them to make their claims about gendered power. An alternative interpretation, therefore, might yield a very different account of what is happening.

The possibility of other readings underpins an argument made by two other political scientists, James Brassett and Alex Sutton, about how satire communicates politics. Brassett and Sutton note that the conventional reading of

satire (see, for example, Wagg, 1992), at least as it exists within UK popular culture, is that it serves to mock politicians and political action. It is seen to portray politics in entirely cynical terms, with politicians acting simply to further their own interests at the expense of the public interest, and thereby to contribute to the general trend towards political disengagement. To this extent, it represents a form of anti-politics. Brassett and Sutton challenge this view, arguing that the satire of Charlie Brooker (*Black Mirror*), Chris Morris (*The Day Today*, *Brasseye*) and Armando Iannucci (*The Thick of It*) actually engages the viewer with politics, allowing them to view politics critically, but not cynically. As Brassett and Sutton (2017: 258) write:

The work of Morris, Iannucci and Brooker reveals an acute critique of mediatised politics that targets the weakness of deliberation about social issues in the United Kingdom, the tragic potentials of this backdrop for political practice and a provocative move to consider the viewer as a site of political agency.

The issue of interpretation and counter-interpretation leads to the second question prompted by the attempt to read political communication out of popular culture. How can these rival interpretations be assessed and evaluated. One response to this – familiar to literary and cultural critics – is that competing interpretations may be judged according to their subtlety and depth, according to how persuasively they read the text. But there is another answer, which is to seek evidence from the response of readers and audiences to the text.

In the field of International Relations, J Furman Daniel and Paul Musgrave (2017) have, for instance, shown how the novels of Tom Clancy inform perceptions of global politics. More systematically, a recent article by Ruben Durante (2019) and colleagues has claimed to show how the consumption of entertainment television results in increased support for populist politics. Research of this kind builds on the suggestion made by Robert Putnam (2000) that entertainment television has a negative impact on social capital, a suggestion that has received further (albeit qualified) support from subsequent research (Besley, 2006; Hooghe, 2002). What this literature represents is the burgeoning attention to, and evidence of, popular culture as a source of political ideas, images and attitudes. Future work will no doubt add to (and complicate further) this relationship.

Celebrity politics

One path in the development of popular culture's place in political communication is marked by the ever sharper focus on the phenomenon of celebrity politics and celebrity politicians. A recent issue of the journal *Perspectives on Politics* was devoted to the topic. What was striking about the articles was their empirical richness. They provided much needed substantiation of some of the assumptions and speculations that have characterised the field.

Much of the previous writing on celebrity politics has been taken up with matters of concepts and theorisation. These are themselves a legacy of other cognate literatures within political communication, including that on the marketing and packaging of politics (Lees Marshment, 2004; Franklin, 2004),

and on the popularisation and personalisation of politics (Mazzoleni and Sfardini, 2009; Stanyer, 2007). These currents in thinking drew attention to the use by parties and politicians of advertising and of the techniques of mass consumption, which in turn were closely associated with popular culture. The literature – insofar as it was a critique of these new forms of political communication – also drew on the animosity that was expressed towards mass popular culture from the 1930s onwards by writers on the left and the right (such as FR Leavis, Theodor Adorno, Richard Hoggart, Harold Bloom, and Neil Postman).

The celebrity politician is seen as both a development of trends such as marketing and popularisation, and as an object of criticism in similar terms. In some incarnations, the celebrity politician is seen more as celebrity than politician. This is evident in the role of, and response to, figures like Bob Geldof, Bono, George Clooney and Beyonce. They are politicians insofar as they take up and promote causes, but celebrities in terms of the attention their views receive. They are criticised for lacking the detailed knowledge and for being unconstrained by mechanisms of accountability.

The other general category of celebrity politician, the one who seeks validation through the ballot box, is subject to a different kind of criticism, albeit one that shares suspicions about their expertise and accountability. These individuals draw upon popular culture, either by virtue of their own past careers (Ronald Reagan, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Vlodymyr Levensky as film and TV actors; Imran Khan as an international cricketer; Donald Trump as a television

performer; Beppe Grillo as a comedian) or by the way they campaign and communicate. But popular culture does not just shape or define their style, it also provides a platform upon which they can perform their politics. This applies whether we are witnessing a politician with a background in showbusiness or one who has followed a conventional political career (Barack Obama on the *Ellen de Generes* show; Hillary Clinton on stage with Beyonce and JayZ).

The apparent proliferation of celebrity politics and politicians has led, as I've indicated, to a theorisation that owes much to familiar themes in political communication. It has also led to considerable efforts in conceptual clarification and classification (Wood et al., 2016; Marsh et al., 2010). But as with debates about the political interpretations of popular culture, so these exercises in theoretical speculation and conceptual refinement do not in themselves establish the empirical validity of the claims being made. Hence, the relatively recent development of detailed case studies and comparative analysis of the celebrity politician (Ribke, 2015; Brockington, 2014). There is evidence that, under specific conditions, celebrity involvement in an issue can affect the political attention that it receives and can help to shape political agendas (Atkinson and DeWitt, 2019; Nownes, 2019).

Another avenue of research has been how the new celebrity politician makes use of the affordances that their status grants them. This includes Trump's use of Twitter (Schneiker, 2019). It also entails the political consequences of his persona, itself drawn from the palette provided by popular culture. Trump's political success may be attributable to his use of particular archetypes of

popular culture. The journalistic habit of comparing politicians to performers from popular culture – comedian, shock jock, rock musicians, superhero – may reveal a deeper truth: that this is exactly how political communication in the modern era operates. Politics is a form of popular culture, and success is determined by the quality of the performances given. Such a thought owes much to the arguments of the historian of political thought FR Ankersmit.

The business of grounding or authenticating a representative claim depends, according to Ankersmit (1996; 2002), on an act of aesthetic creativity; it is a matter of style. As he writes: ‘in a representative democracy all legitimate political power is essentially aesthetic’ (Ankersmit, 2002: 118). It depends on the *representation* of reality: ‘Political reality does not exist *before* political representation but only exists *through* it’ (Ankersmit, 1996: 46; his emphasis). In understanding political life, therefore, we need to focus ‘not on *content*, but on the *style(s)* of interaction’ (Ankersmit, 2002: 135; his emphasis). He rejects the criticism often made of politicians (or artists) that ‘they are all style and no content.’ The style *is* the content. ‘[S]tyle,’ he contends, ‘does not tell us *why*, but *how* individuals think or act.’ And he goes on: ‘What we see as the person’s style will be *what he is like to us*’ (ibid.: 150-1; his emphasis). The implication of Ankersmit’s argument is that, if representative politics is a matter of style, then the sources of the style matter too. Popular culture is the embodiment of the attempt to connect performance to people, to generate bonds of affection, and to ground claims to represent.

Research that my colleagues and I conducted on how popular culture informs or shapes young people's engagement with politics, found that the celebrities that they associated with political leadership were not the (perhaps obvious) humanitarian campaigners like Bono and Bob Geldof, but rather the judges on shows like X Factor (Simon Cowell) or the UK's version of The Apprentice (Alan Sugar)(Street et al., 2013). What this suggests is that the image generated by these performers more closely fits with how our young subjects understood the character and needs of political leadership.

This leads onto a final area of interest, one that also connects with the general trend being identified here: how in theory and practice popular culture is seen to act as a form of political communication.

Fans and citizens

Writing of his time as Deputy National Security Advisor to President Obama, Ben Rhodes (2019: 299-300) observes at one point:

In the last week before the election, I went on a couple of campaign trips with Obama. He was loose, powerful on the stump, deconstructing Trump, puffing up Clinton. But it felt like a classic rock concert. The crowds roared, the music played. They were there to see Obama, to hear the hits.

Many of the descriptions of Donald Trump's campaigning rallies echo this analogy. What is being witnessed is not a conventional political event, but one that more closely resembles a pop concert or a stand-up comedy show. This points to the already familiar thought that politics is about performance (Alexander, 2011); it also chimes with Ankersmit's argument. And it has

implications for how we understand what is being communicated in the performance of politics. It is not sufficient to examine the political performer; we need to pay equal attention to their audience.

That audience, it can be argued, is not to be understood as a gathering of deliberative-minded citizen. Rather, they more closely resemble fans. This idea was advanced some time ago by Liesbet van Zoonen (2005), and it has been revived in the wake of Trump's elevation, but it has received relatively little empirical attention. There is, of course, now a vast literature associated with Fan Studies, but this has yet to be applied systematically to politics. There are important exceptions to this rule (Sandvoss, 2013; Dean, 2017) but there is still considerable scope for further investigation into how political performances are received and interpreted.

This analysis does not substitute for the other dimensions of political communication and their links to popular culture. It is, though, an essential complement to these other aspects of political communication. It also invites the thought that political judgement cannot be reduced to material self-interest or to political identity. It may be as much a matter of cultural taste and aesthetic judgement.

Conclusion

The relationship between political communication and popular culture exists in several different dimensions. These begin with the relatively straightforward matter of how popular culture represents the political world, whether explicitly

by dramatizing or addressing politics directly or whether by analogy. Although such uses of popular culture are very obvious, they remain relatively understudied as compared to the more traditional forms of political communication. And they open onto the potentially more significant uses of popular culture as a means of claiming and articulating the representation of citizens and causes. It is this dimension of popular culture's communicative role that underpins much of the literature on, and interest in, the phenomenon of the celebrity politician. Here, it seems, there is a need, on the one hand, to pay closer attention to how it is that popular cultural roles and tropes operate within the creation of political persona, but also how the political performances to which it gives rise resonate with, or act upon, audiences who may more often resemble fans than the citizens of classical democratic theory.

These emerging research agendas are themselves clearly also informed by the relationship between popular culture and populism. There is a tendency to blur the two, and to treat popular culture as just another tool of the populist politician or political movement. To do this, though, is to see popular culture as a crude communicative tool that serves only to satisfy large numbers of people in the simplest way possible. It would be to regard popular music, for example, as no more than the global hit song (and ear worm) 'Baby Shark'. Taking popular culture's relationship to political communication seriously does not just mean taking communication seriously; it means doing the same for popular culture.

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