

‘Simon Cowell for prime minister’? Young citizens’ attitudes towards celebrity politics

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From Oprah Winfrey endorsing Obama, to Bono and Bob Geldof’s Live 8 campaign to end Third World debt, the merging of celebrity and politics is becoming an established element of democratic political culture (Mukherjee, 2004; Nash, 2008; Street et al., 2008; West and Orman, 2002). While some commentators celebrate this process as evidence of a democratization of the public sphere, or ‘democratainment’ (Hartley, 1999), others see it as undermining democratic culture (Turner, 2004: 4; see also Hyde, 2009). Certainly it seems that celebrity culture blurs the boundary between news and entertainment (Delli Carpini and Williams, 2001) and more generally redefines what constitutes an issue of public debate and resolution. Drawing on our own empirical research with first-time voters in the UK, we want to contribute to this debate. Specifically we ask whether, for young citizens, celebrities are an alternative to current political processes and a democratizing force capable of engaging them in the politics of the public sphere. Young people are a particularly interesting example. While disconnected from mainstream forms of political participation, such as voting and party membership (Fahmy, 2003), young people’s lives are strongly connected with the cultural industries that drive the production of celebrity (Turner, 2004: 41–45). For example, in the UK, 93 percent of young people (aged 16 to 24) say they regularly watch television; 71 percent regularly listen to music (Ofcom, 2009).

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Our argument engages with those authors who suggest that popular culture has the potential to energize the public sphere. Entertainment television (Jones, 2005; Van Zoonen, 2005), detective novels (Hermes and Stello, 2000), popular music and video games (Scott et al., forthcoming) all have been identified as sources of political learning. We recognize that even within this field the political consequences of consuming celebrity culture remain much debated. On the one hand, in the UK, Couldry and Markham suggest that people who have a strong interest in celebrity culture 'are the least likely to vote, and their political interest is low, as is their social efficacy' (Couldry and Markham, 2007: 418). By contrast, in the USA and Canada, there is evidence of celebrities having a positive impact on the willingness of young people to support specific causes (Jackson, 2007; Jackson and Darrow, 2005) or to vote in elections (Austin et al., 2008). There is also research that suggests that celebrity endorsements can, albeit to a limited extent, increase political support for presidential candidates (Pease and Brewer, 2008). But in noting this latter research and the support it offers for the positive impact of celebrity politics, we offer the following qualifications. The first is that conclusions about celebrity politics may be dependent upon the political system in which they occur. The weaker, more decentralized US party system may be more hospitable to celebrity politics than the UK's more centralized party and electoral systems. Second, the US and Canadian studies draw conclusions either based on experimental work (Jackson and Darrow, 2005; Pease and Brewer, 2008), or from survey-based quantitative analyses (Austin et al., 2008). Neither approach allows researchers to comment on the reasons why certain respondents react to particular celebrities in distinct ways – only that they do. For us, this is a key issue. While it may be that there are contextual differences to be considered, it is also crucial to investigate the political meanings that celebrities hold for citizens. For this reason, our research follows the approach taken by Couldry and Markham, both in its UK location and in its concern with citizens' perceptions of celebrity politics.

We do not challenge Couldry and Markham's argument that people with high levels of interest in celebrity culture show little interest in politics. Our research was not designed to explore this particular relationship. Instead, we are primarily concerned with the factors that may mediate citizens' responses to celebrity politics. Our argument is informed by studies on celebrity culture in the field of political marketing, in which researchers have argued for some time that, rather than treating celebrity culture as homogeneous, we need to be sensitive to the ways in which audiences engage with different aspects of an individual celebrity's identity, such as attractiveness, credibility and perceptions of expertise and trustworthiness (Basil, 1996; Hague et al., 2008; Henneberg and Chen, 2008; Jackson, 2007). From these studies we take the argument that citizens may not respond to all celebrities in the same way and that we cannot treat celebrities as a homogeneous group (Jackson and Darrow, 2005). We also take the suggestion that celebrities' persuasiveness may be mediated by citizens' attitude towards politics (Wood and Herbst, 2007: 154).

Our analysis is based on 13 30-minute, semi-structured focus groups, followed up by 26 in-depth interviews with first time voters between 17 and 18 years of age in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex in the UK. This age-group is of particular interest because, despite a lack of reliable evidence, there is a perception among journalists, politicians and researchers that first-time voters' participation at general elections is at an all time low (Kimberlee,

2002: 86). Our sample largely consists of white middle-class respondents which is why we do not claim to offer conclusive results about young citizens in the UK as a whole. What we do offer is new empirical research to suggest that citizens' attitudes towards celebrity politics are connected to their understanding of the power structures which govern the politics of the public sphere.

Celebrities: energizing the public sphere

In common with the findings of other celebrity endorsement research (see for example Jackson and Darrow, 2005) our study suggests that certain celebrities have the potential to connect citizens with a political cause. To our respondents, celebrities represent a welcome alternative to elected politicians whom they distrust. The following exchange from our research illustrates how in the eyes of many the fact that someone defends a particular political cause 'because it is their job' calls into question the genuine nature of their political motives:

- A: If you like, say Coldplay and you really like Coldplay, and they would kind of say something I would be more inclined to listen to them than let's say ...
B: Gordon Brown.
A: Yeah.
C: It's not their job to do politics, so you believe them ... Because they are your idols.
(Focus group 11)¹

A few weeks into the period during which we gathered our primary data, a public scandal erupted over the expenses claimed by members of the British parliament. Undoubtedly insights into the morally questionable way in which some members of parliament chose to handle their expenses informed many of the particularly cynical views we heard. However, our findings indicate that in order to gain young citizens' attention as well as their trust, politicians may have to overcome a more fundamental and long-standing image problem: young citizens feel they have only limited or no access to politicians' private lives, making it hard for them to judge their true beliefs, which, for our respondents, was the key.

Not surprisingly many of our respondents suggested that fame makes it easy for a celebrity to get an (at least initial) audience for their political message:

- Interviewer:** Why would you listen to Kanye West?
D: I don't know, I think it's just status.
C: He's just a legend.

(Focus group 12)

In the eyes of these respondents fame enables celebrities to get their opinions heard. From this it might be logical to conclude that famous politicians, such as the Prime Minister, can rely on an already existing audience, rather than having to prove that he or she is worth listening to. However, becoming a 'legend' requires more than becoming a familiar and recognizable public figure. Many of our respondents worked with the assumption that anyone famous has a public and a private identity. They accepted that the

former requires a certain element of performance, but assumed that the latter is a reflection of that person's true identity. Our respondents were suspicious of political efforts that were routinely 'part of someone's job', and were looking for political causes that were 'genuinely' close to someone's heart. Many indicated that a public person's private life provided them with the clues they required to judge whether this person is trustworthy and their political interest genuine:

Interviewer: Would you trust her [reality television star the late Jade Goody] more than someone like Gordon Brown?

A: Yeah I probably would, probably because she's been in the media attention and obviously she's been in *Big Brother*, so you see what she's really like as opposed to a politician who says things just to please everyone and make himself look good.

(Interview 2)

The blurring of public and private and the suggestion of almost unlimited access to celebrities' private lives is central to the perception of their image as it is sold and marketed across a range of media platforms (Rojek, 2001: 11). Moreover, one of the key pleasures celebrity culture offers consumers is glimpses of a celebrity's 'true' or 'authentic' identity (Dyer, 1986; Holmes, 2005; Turner et al., 2000) and what, drawing on Goffman (1969), we may call moments when the 'mask' of identity performance slips. When it came to their attitudes towards celebrities' political efforts, respondents indicated that information about celebrities' private lives, made available by cultural intertexts about a celebrity, were central to their engagement with the celebrity's politics.

Our respondents' positive attitude to celebrity politics represents a challenge to the traditional ways in which politics is done. Yet while celebrities seemed the more genuine and trustworthy politicians, our respondents did not advocate a radical restructuring of public politics. As they discussed the suitability of different celebrities for political leadership, it became apparent that for the majority of our respondents it seemed inconceivable that alternative forms of politics could ever become established. Many described formal politics as a sphere which is accessible only to those who comply with its established conventions.

Old, serious, rich and male: young citizens' perceptions of political leaders

Across our focus groups and interviews it emerged that our respondents worked with a concept of political identity as 'performance' (Goffman, 1969). In order not to come across as fake, but successfully 'pass' (Robinson, 1994) as a politician of credibility, many suggested celebrities have to signal their expertise and authority in very conventional terms. Age, a serious demeanour, financial success and masculinity were mentioned by many as the markers of authority required for the successful performance of a respected politician.

All the young people we spoke to were between the ages of 17 and 18 and many equated youth with a lack of power. One of our interviewees, for example, suggested that Jade Goody had less of a chance than the older pop star Kylie Minogue to be perceived as a credible advocate for a cancer awareness campaign:

A: I think Kylie is more of a role model because she's done more good stuff in her life and she is old as well. I don't know how old but she's definitely over middle aged and Jade was, like, young, loud sort of like a teenager still, but in a 20-year-old body and it doesn't show. It's not really an idol you want kids to look up to, someone like Jade Goody, but I would say Kylie was more of a role model to have for cancer sort of thing.

(Interview 21)

When our respondents were sceptical about the chances of a young reality television star like Jade Goody being able to intervene in public politics, they revealed more than their attitude towards a particular celebrity. The limited chances they saw available to someone like Jade Goody were very similar to the chances they saw available for themselves. When we asked them to comment on their general interest in politics, we often heard responses like the following:

C: So when I get to that [voting] age then I'll start thinking about [politics] but for now there is nothing I can do to change anything so leave that to them who can.

(Focus Group 4)

Many respondents identified youth, but also identity performances associated with youth, as obstacles to successful political engagement. The interviewee who rated the chances of the 'definitely over middle aged' Kylie Minogue to succeed in politics as better than those of Jade Goody, not only described the reality television star as young, but also as 'loud, sort of like a teenager' (Interview 21). Descriptions like this reveal that, in the eyes of our respondents, anyone seeking to make a difference in politics must refrain from what we may call 'carnavalesque' (Bakhtin, 1973, 1984) forms of behaviour that undermine the etiquette of the dominant culture. Being 'loud', but also being funny, are forms of behaviour many identified as unacceptable within the framework of formal politics. Several of our respondents indicated that they would like there to be humour in politics. However, when considering the political chances of comedians or otherwise boisterous celebrities, they suggested that, in order to be accepted by members of the public, unconventional forms of demeanour must still meet culturally established notions of what politicians are like.

Jeremy Clarkson, the famously politically incorrect host of 'BBC's leading lads' television show' *Top Gear* (Chalus, 2008), was mentioned by many as a celebrity with a chance of succeeding in politics. Clarkson's aggressive style of arguing fitted what many described as the image of a politician:

A: Um, well, I agree he [Jeremy Clarkson] seems like a good politician because he has a boisterous personality and his views are one sided and most of the politicians that I've met in person are like that.

(Interview 6)

The picture of a successful politician that emerged across focus groups and interviews was one of a serious, argumentative and mature person. This conventional portrait was completed by two further features: wealth and masculinity.

A celebrity who was described by many as a person of authority was music and media entrepreneur Simon Cowell, creator of *X Factor*, *Pop Idol* and *Britain's Got Talent*, television talent shows on which he also appears as one of the celebrity expert judges (BBC, 2007). Many equated his achievements not only with the right to speak his mind, but also with superiority of his opinion. Being a successful capitalist, for many of the young citizens that we spoke to, means knowing what is best:

Interviewer: Does he know what he is talking about, Cowell...

F: Yeah.

B: That is why he is so rich.

E: Successful.

B: Obviously got something right.

...

A: That's just like Gordon Ramsay in [reality television show] *Hell's Kitchen*, he knows what he is talking about so he is someone who can say if you are crap and he can give you advice and if you don't take it you don't take it and so that's the same as Simon Cowell because they've made it.

F: Yeah that's true, they are one of the richest or biggest of their time so it's alright for them to say, kind of.

(Focus group 4)

By validating the worth of business and normalizing competition, our respondents drew on the language of the so-called 'new capitalism' (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002), which is central to the narratives of talent shows like Simon Cowell's *X Factor* (Holmes, 2004). Moreover, many suggested that the authority of the successful business person was transferable to the world of politics:

Interviewer: Would anyone put the case for Simon Cowell for Prime Minister? He 'knows what he's talking about' ...?

C: If he's willing to tell the truth and do what's necessary to get the best person then surely he'd be the same for the country, willing to do what the country needs.

(Focus group 10)

Respondents indicated that success in business may qualify celebrity entrepreneurs for a role in government politics. Yet what became apparent also was that, in the eyes of many, financial success alone is not enough to qualify a celebrity for political leadership.

Not only did our respondents validate the rule of capitalism, but they also sustained the hierarchies of power that are at its core. In particular, respondents naturalized the gender inequalities that are seen as central to capitalist systems (Engels, 1972; Mies, 1986), as the following extract illustrates:

D: He [Simon Cowell] is not like Louis Walsh and like 'oooh'... like for the whole panel he is the dominant masculine figure, like the girls are both very girly.

A: Crying.

D: Nice and crying like for good performances and Louis Walsh is just Louis Walsh, and he [Cowell] is the only one who seems to talk any proper sense because he is like the dominant powerful, kind of masculine figure.

(Focus group 8)

Whenever they questioned the expertise of Simon Cowell's fellow judges, respondents did not support their argument by referring to specific evidence relating to the judges' actual achievements as music entrepreneurs and artists. Instead, they described both Danni Minogue and Cheryl Cole as 'girls' and criticized their display of emotions on the show. Both the hierarchy of naming (Duncan and Messner, 1998: 191) and a focus on emotions are common linguistic tools to deny power to women in the public sphere (Duncan and Messner, 1998: 177). When judging the expertise and authority of female celebrities for political leadership many of our respondents sustained a gendered concept of the public sphere which privileges hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987: 185–186), centered around the theme of rationality, controlled emotions, competitiveness and heterosexuality (Connell, 1990: 83, 94; Morgan, 1993: 71–73). The performance of this particular masculinity in theory is open to both women and men (MacInnes, 1998: 45). Equally, failure to perform is a possibility for both. Men too may become feminized. The description of Louis Walsh by one of our respondents as being 'so oohh' (Focus group 8) suggests that our respondents consider the authority of male celebrities as challenged if they do not adhere to the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Respondents interpreted campness as a 'strategy of subversion' (Gross, 2001), but, rather than empowering its performer, they judged it as undermining a public persona of authority and expertise.

Both male and female respondents saw only limited opportunities for the performance of femininity in formal politics. Central to a flawless performance as politician they described to us is the avoidance of cultural conventions of femininity:

A: No it [pop star Kylie Minogue's style] doesn't fit politics at all. She's like make-up girly girl; you don't really see that, apart from that American politician.

Interviewer: Sarah Palin?

A: I think that's stupid for her to be a politician, she was like, that guy's deputy president or whatever, I thought that was the most stupid thing I've ever seen, she was in a beauty contest, and now she's a politician, it doesn't fit, she looks a bit, she just looks out of place, there are all these men in suits and then there's her all glammed up and trying to pull it off and it looks fake to me.

(Interview 21)

When judging the chances of female celebrities in politics our respondents assessed the extent to which they saw women fitting into the existing structures of power that govern public politics. Many seemed particularly doubtful about the public acceptance of post-feminist identities which combine a focus on consumer culture and beauty with access to the public sphere (Machin and Thornborrow, 2006). 'Glammed up' women like Sarah Palin

were criticized not so much for their policies, but for looking ‘fake’ and ‘out of place’ (Interview 21). Our respondents’ doubts about the leadership potential of female celebrities seemed to be rooted, not so much in their attitude towards women, but in their perception of government politics which they see dominated by masculine identity performances.

When they assessed politics in this way, these young citizens were not too far off the mark. While the growth of women in public office has changed somewhat the symbolic face of the British political elite, feminist values seem to have made a significant impact only on labour policy (Norris, 2002: 56). Moreover, the acceptability of female politicians as leadership candidates remains a topic of public debate – as is perhaps illustrated by the case of former Cabinet minister Caroline Flint, whose decision to allow ‘model-style shots’ of herself to be taken for the *Observer Woman* magazine was said to have ‘reinforced’ Downing Street’s view of her as a weak politician (Watt, 2009). Similarly, our respondents’ suggestion that successful entrepreneurs may have privileged access to public politics suggests that their views are grounded in knowledge of British politics which has seen the appointment of businessmen like Alan Sugar to the position of government advisor. Our respondents clearly do not see themselves as having privileged access to the world of politics. When describing themselves as people who yet cannot make a difference and in their cynicism towards elected politicians, they echoed criticisms that have been raised by young people in the UK for years. The perceived failure of politicians to listen to and act upon young peoples’ concerns’ is one of the key reasons young people feel alienated from existing political structures (Electoral Commission, 2003). Celebrities who pursue political causes that are close to their heart are – in theory – an alternative to a system which our respondents distrust. Yet rather than challenging its hierarchies of power, they remain subjects of a discourse (Foucault, 1982) which normalizes the privilege of masculinity, maturity and capitalist success. The potential of celebrity culture as a democratizing force is not fully realized.

Conclusion

Our findings reveal a tension within young citizens’ attitudes towards celebrity politics. On the one hand, the young citizens we spoke to responded positively to the general idea of celebrity politics because they saw it as an alternative to formal government. An example which perfectly illustrates the connection many of our respondents felt with celebrities’ political causes is the following extract from one of our interviews:

Have you heard the new Eminem album, it’s very good, isn’t it, I think it’s brilliant ... I love listening to his lyrics because they could be made up but I’m sure they’re not, and so there’s kind of a bit of trust in that as well because of what he says you think that’s pretty cool. I like to do that, and again, it’s learning, it’s quite factual.

(Interview 23)

What to us seems striking is not so much that this particular respondent expressed a seemingly unwavering trust in the statements of a hip hop artist, but rather that across all our focus groups and interviews politicians did not even get close to being described in this way. What gives celebrities like Eminem the advantage over an elected politician is public access to his private life. The young citizens we spoke to look for authentic

politics, and they use the private personas of political actors as markers of authenticity and genuine commitment to a cause.

Yet while they may be perceived as the more authentic political actors, not all celebrities in the eyes of our respondents are cut out for political leadership. Our findings suggest that young citizens in the UK are caught in an established discourse of authority and power and rather than offering counter discourses, they normalize the political structures from which they find themselves excluded. By making this argument we do not want to suggest that young citizens lack all agency. We certainly think that in their criticism of politicians and their celebration of (some) celebrities' politics, our respondents articulated a sense of how in their eyes politics *should be*. Yet at the same time their assessment of how politics *is* showed their awareness of the strength and persistence of cultural norms that continue to put some social groups, including young members of society, at a disadvantage.

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Note

- 1 The focus groups and interviews, which were conducted in five different schools, are numbered consecutively. The participants are anonymized, and letters used to indicate the different speakers.

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