

Discuss the role of
celebrity culture in
politics



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Citizens in a modern form of democracy are able to access more political information than ever; this information has fused with their established political knowledge and attitudes, which reflects the overall political view on the political world. Thus media has built an interactive communication approach between the government and society. This interactive communication approach can be seen in two ways, these two ways are the motions in which information flows. Firstly, there is an upwards flowing motion, so information goes up from citizens to the government.

This means that politicians are aware of issues which related to citizens, the other information flow is, from the government to citizens about how decisions are made and what the results will be. As political issues are being reported in news with greater frequency, politicians have realized this trend and are trying to affect public opinions via traditional media and social media. This essay will start with reviewing the changes that have occurred in media in general, which can be briefly introduced as 'tabloidization'.

Then, it will discuss the impact of celebrity culture on political communication; firstly by pointing out how celebrity culture shaped the present forms of political communication and politician's public images. After, by analyzing the role of celebrity culture in politics, the essay will focus on two main areas: voting and democracy in the critique and defense of celebrity culture. Generally speaking, the media environment has experienced a 'dumbing down', as Barnett (1998) pointed out that we are facing a more accessible and less elitist approach to communication.

First of all, emphasis of media has changed from serious issues to entertainment, scandals and show business. This dumbing down can be seen through the front pages of newspapers that are in circulation which will often discuss the latest celebrity divorces and break-ups, or a major crime or tragedy story instead of more challenging material such as current affairs, political debates, foreign affairs or international issues. The same goes for television, prime time broadcasting is being devoted to entertainment shows and soap operas. Or using Barnett's (1998) words: the 'bad' is progressively chasing out the 'good'.

Take Blumler's (1992) research on children's television as an example, some programs that used to focus heavily on educational aspects such as storytelling aired on the preschool children's television owned by the BBC has been replaced by less educational cartoon and entertainment formats. Secondly, the massive expansion of available airtime in broadcasting needs to be filled, but not necessarily by 'serious' material. To make difficult concepts and stories more enticing to potential viewers, length and language are also being shifted to tabloidization.

Political advertising, for example, will usually be shorten and simplified to a 30 second news clip filled with uses of emotive language and sensationalist images which are lacking in any real political content of discussion of policy. Meanwhile, the growing obsession with the private lives of celebrities requires media to expose larger numbers of scandals in order to satisfy the audience's growing appetite. It is due to this growing appetite that companies, governments and organizations have become the targets of tabloidization.

Thirdly, as competition rapidly grows throughout the media industry, how newspapers or articles can draw in larger audience numbers has become the guiding rule in content selection. (Barnett 1998). Also the increasing power of advertisers and sponsors requires the press to be more flexible and co-operative to the whims of these financial backers. However, the full blame can't be placed on the media and they cannot be judged as entirely irresponsible as this is in a sense a trend that comes from the 'consumer's demand' (Snoddy, 1992).

It is with this background of tabloidization in mind that we can see how politics has been catching up and gradually becoming a 'culture industry' (Corner and Pels, 2003), and obscuring the boundaries between 'high' political representation and 'low' popular entertainment. Another boundary that is being blurred is the public and private lives of celebrities, with this blurring and invasion of privacy becoming a crucial selling point in the market of media platforms (Rojek, 2011). There are two kinds of celebrity politicians, the first type refers to the traditional politician who have also had engagements with popular culture and used this in order to enhance or advance their political goals. Examples of this would include Clint Eastwood, Jesse Ventura and Schwarzenegger. There are also two main goals for this type of politician, they either trade their background in entertainment, show-business or sport in an attempt to get elected (Street, 2004), or use their celebrity status to enhance their image and communicate their message with the mass. As Postman (1987) said they are engaged in television culture as celebrities; in such that they will show up anywhere to do anything at any time.

The other type is the 'famed non politicians' who claims the right to represent people's opinions without seeking or requiring to become elected but still states these claims in attempt to influence political outcomes, such as Simon Cowell, a judge on the television show Britain's got talent. Both forms of celebrity politicians are engaged with politics and claim to speak for others, the different lies in their official capacity to represent others and how their ideas are understood.

How exactly does the media go about establishing an individual or politician as a celebrity politician? Such questions are often raised by public relations managers as they are faced with the difficult task of making politics interesting to their audiences, particular to the young. What the audience want most and which is one of the key draw factors of celebrity culture is that it offers glimpses into celebrity's real lives and their actions (Dyer, 1986).

This claim is given further weight by Goffman (1969) who claimed that information about celebrities' private lives that is made public by media is an important factor of celebrity's politics due to a sense of involvement. Research by Schlesinger (1990) shows that no matter who the candidate or what they represent, they have to be 'media frameworked' in order to become a celebrity politician. The media prefers politicians who are reliable, responsible and powerful and in return a news source may make celebrities become trustworthy politicians or politicians become celebrities.

According to Yiyi and Heng (2012)'s paper, there are four elements in a celebrity politician media framework: 1. Personal quality, which refers to

specific personalities of the politician, it can be traits such as being independent, firm, confident and ambitious. It can be shown in appearance, healthy image, personal style and hobbies. 2. Back story, it is more important than personal abilities or academic achievement are disseminated to the public and media as these are stories without political connotations, which in turn can create sympathetic reactions from an audience.

For example, when Arnold Schwarzenegger was giving a speech during his election of governor of California, he used the slogan ' Save California', which was built on the image of hero such as those he would play in his movies. Such back stories can related to childhood stories, family, or work experience for example. 3. Para-social interaction, it is playing a certain role in order to establish a closeness with the public in an attempt to achieve a better relationship, the key factor of para-social interaction is to make politicians seem the same as the ordinary people to the public. Giles, 1974). 4. Political styles, also refers to style-conscious politics, it concerns details such as expressions, dress, postures, those subtle style-signals that display political emotions. Even though it is not the most reliable source for people to judge a politician on it is still a form of presenting and politicians can use this to draw more attention to themselves and be more persuasive. However, celebrity culture not only creates fame, it can also create notoriety, it can build a good image of a politician or destroy him/her completely.

Bill Clinton with his saxophone, Tony Blair with his guitar and Obama with his dancing on the Ellen Show (Street, 2012), in such a celebrity centric world, these images and action display clearly the celebrity culture's influences on political communication in terms of the media environment, political news

coverage and politician's images. This popular culture can communicate with people in forms that traditional political communication cannot (Coleman, 2003). Political communication has become a cultural act in order to foster a greater form of political attractiveness through the use of a celebrity culture platform.

As for the role of celebrity culture in politics, it has played a big role in two main areas: voting and democracy. While Couldry and Markham (2007) suggested that people who have strong interests in celebrity culture are the least likely to vote in the UK, however, if we view the USA and Canada, there is evidence that shows that celebrities may actually encourage young people to support specific cases (Jackson, 2007; Jackson and Darrow, 2005). Young people are most strongly connected to the latest cultural news and happening and are also the most powerful driving forces in the creation of celebrity.

For young citizens, celebrities are an alternative method by which they may engage in the politics, and to understand political workings such as voting and party membership (Fahmy, 2003). Even though celebrity culture has attracted more people into the political public sphere, it may also affect voters abilities to make meaningful choices. Fame enables celebrities to get their opinions heard by creating a recognizable public figure and private identity (Inthron and Street, 2011).

While the public performance by the former identity may be acceptable, it may be better to think that the latter is a reflection of that person's true identity, thus the clues and hints they leave must be judged in order to see if

this person is trustworthy enough to support and follow through on their political interests. However, the problem that is shown here is that is the celebrity politician system may confuse citizens' understanding and profiling of a politician, is he a basket-ball player or governor, is she a comedian or a queen, is he a movie star or a minister (West and Orman, 2002).

This kind of confusion will also affect citizen's abilities to make rational and informed decisions while voting. In addition, different formats of television styles and shows such as close-ups and one-to-one conversations, will allow audiences to be exposed to different political characters and styles of these politicians. This could help to build emotional attachment between audiences and politicians with greater ease than was possible before and the result is that voters will pay more attention on politicians as a human rather than elite leader.

In such a world, politicians who have greater skills of communication in a given medium will win more votes than those who may have real leadership ability but be lacking in communication skills. Hence we ask should look at the question ' Will political and media system are likely to produce a ' good' democracy (Divas, 2010)? ' Some commentators consider the process of combining celebrity and politics as evidence of the democratization of the public sphere, while others see it as an undermining of democratic culture (Hyde, 2009).

If democracy is ultimately only about who can provide the most successful form of communication, then the selected leader will naturally just be the best communication artist who puts on the best public performances. My

personal opinion tends to side with the latter of these two situations and echoes the worries of Postman (1987) that ' Our politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business' has become facts.

Also my personal opinion agrees with his statement that ' You cannot do political philosophy on television'. When every action of a politician has been shown in media and there's no way to tell where performance ends and reality starts. As Corner and Pels (2003) mentioned, in the field of political communication, consumerism, celebrity and cynicism are three main elements when establishing a political industry rather than a democracy society.

This growing trend of an emphasis on the consumer in many countries has shaped the forms of public service, including education and health, as well as politics. In this market, politicians and celebrity culture have become ' service providers' (Corner and Pels, 2003). Modern mediated politics has provided the mass visibility of the issues of ' style, appearance, and personality'; politics from entertainment has become closer to political leadership from a media celebrity. Thus citizens have become political consumers who have more choices of buying political goods.

Citizens are no longer the passive receptors but have more distinctive information. To sum up, celebrity culture has come to shape political culture. According to Mancini and Swanson (1996), the rise of modernization and breakdown of traditional social structures requires a new form of political communication. In summary, , celebrity culture blurs the boundary between

serious news and entertainment (Delli Carpini and Williams, 2001) . Political communication here is not just a science but an art, which also refers to aesthetic politics.

Politicians who use this form of politics are also being crafted into celebrities in order to draw more attention to themselves and get their opinions to be heard.. Although it must also be noted that this increasing of scope of the political sphere and those included has led to, political learning appearing in all the forms of media, such as entertainment television (Jones, 2005; Van Zoonen, 2005), detective novels (Hermes and Stello, 2000), popular music and video games (Scott et al. forthcoming). Overall, as for politics, celebrity plays a role in changing communication forms, providing voting reasons and affecting democratic processes. To some extent, celebrity politics is a form of market in which politicians become stars, parties become companies in order to sell themselves or sell a product. This new style of political communication is a rational expansion the reality of politics, and political advertisement is just another definition for political campaigns.