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POPULAR CULTURE AND POLITICS: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

Abstract

Within society there are many agents of political socialization. These agents compete and vie for the attention of young people. Parents, churches, peers, the news media and the entertainment media present young people with severely conflicting ideas about government and politics. But we must be careful not to assume young people are passive recipients of political socialization. We must also consider them as active participants in the process. Sorting out the relative influences of these various agents is a task which has been pursued by social scientists for more than a generation.

A world of socio-politically relevant entertainment media content and celebrity political activists with some clout is most certainly part of the context in which teaching is enacted. Students must be shown how to think critically about the often subtle content in the media. And so, rather than attempting to make another contribution to this sorting out of influences, this paper examines some recent evidence for the power of pop culture in general and celebrities in particular to influence the political beliefs of young people. Then it examines these findings in light of their potential impact on teachers, administrators, scholars, and activists engaged in school reform.

Abstrakt

Wiele źródeł politycznej socjalizacji rywalizuje o uwagę młodych ludzi poza szkołą. Rodzice, Kościoły, rówieśnicy, media związane z informacją i rozrywką prezentują młodym ludziom różnorakie, pozostające w ostrym konflikcie, idee dotyczące władzy i polityki. Kategoryzowanie relatywnego wpływu tych różnorodnych instytucji jest zadaniem, któremu badacze społeczni oddają się już ponad generację z wciąż bardzo ograniczonym sukcesem.

Zamiast kolejnej próby kategoryzowania wpływu w tym artykule sprawdzam ostatnie dowody możliwości wpływu kultury pop oraz sław (*celebrities*) na polityczne przekonania młodych ludzi. Następnie rezultaty badane są w perspektywie potencjalnego wpływu na nauczycieli, administratorów, uczonych i aktywistów zaangażowanych w reformy szkolnictwa. Konkluduję z nadzieją, że media rozrywkowe może nie są wrogami krytycznego myślenia i demokratycznego uczestnictwa.

Introduction

Many agents of political socialization besides schools vie for the attention of young people. Parents, churches, peers, the news media and the entertainment media present young people with conflicting ideas about government and politics. Sorting out the relative influences of these various agents is a task which has been pursued by social scientists for more than a generation, with limited success.

Rather than attempt to make another contribution to this sorting out of the relative power of different agents of socialization, this paper examines instead some recent evidence of the power of pop culture in general and celebrities in particular to influence the political beliefs of young people. Then it examines these findings in light of their potential impact on teachers, administrators, scholars, and activists engaged in school reform. It concludes with a discussion of a writing assignment based on critical thinking about politics and popular culture which I have used, and what results of the assignment might tell us about different ways young people think about entertainment and politics.

Some Recent Pop Culture and Politics Research

Political socialization scholars have traditionally paid relatively scant attention to the entertainment media as potential agents, but recently this has changed somewhat. Jackson surveyed 709 Midwestern U.S. university students and drew a number of conclusions about the relationship between entertainment media use and political beliefs.¹ First, in many instances the entertainment media attract large audiences of youths by depicting behaviors that are contrary to traditional conservative values. However, successfully socialized conservative youths find much to disagree with in the popular culture. They approach it with a critical eye and are not necessarily empty vessels into which messages are poured. Learning theory suggests, however, that these conservative youths may modify their own values after repeated exposure to the contrary messages, especially if the youths lose connections to other traditional agents of socialization, as often happens in college, and/or find other agents (such as peers) to reinforce the new beliefs.

Youths pre-socialized as more liberal, when they pay attention to the liberal messages in the entertainment media, appear to have their liberalism positively reinforced. The few conservative messages (negative reinforcement) seem to have no influence on them.

A final interesting result from Jackson's 2002 work relates to young people who are more liberal than their parents. This is an especially interesting group to examine because these youths have in some ways rejected the pre-socialization

¹ D.J. Jackson, *Entertainment and Politics: The Influence of Pop Culture on Young Adult Political Socialization*, Peter Lang Publishing, New York 2002.

offered by parents and parentally-selected agents of socialization. In a model to predict this occurrence, three popular culture factors stood out: large amounts of time listening to both alternative and classic rock, and whether the respondent had attended concerts where interest groups had set up informational displays. This new means of communicating with young people may pay off for the groups who try it.

This result parallels the findings of Baumgartner and Morris, who demonstrated another alternative means of political communication, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, influenced young people's beliefs.² They found through use of an experimental design that university students exposed to jokes from the show about George W. Bush and John Kerry rated both candidates more negatively. They also found that viewers were more cynical toward the electoral system and the news media. However, viewers of *The Daily Show* also reported increased confidence in their own ability to understand politics. It is difficult to imagine displays at a rock concert or the content of a fake news program having similar effects on substantially older citizens.

But we must be careful not to assume young people are passive recipients of political socialization. We must also consider them as active participants in the process. Jackson and Darrow demonstrated through analysis of responses to survey questions about messages agreed with and disagreed with in the popular culture that young Anglophone Canadians consume a lot of US media, but the influence of this consumption is not obvious or simple.³ For example, many young respondents indicated strong agreement with what some perceive as the anti-American messages of the films of Michael Moore. Young English-speaking Canadians' responses to questions about themes they have agreed and disagreed with in songs, TV shows and movies indicate they are not passive recipients of propaganda when they experience the popular culture, even if most of what they experience derives from the U.S. culture industries. This is not surprising, given that the average respondent is over 20 years old. However, the complexity of some respondents' thoughts about the messages in the entertainment media indicate that some young people are doing much with pop culture, and not just having things done unto them.

More specific effects of entertainment on politics have been shown as well. In particular, celebrity endorsements of beliefs have been demonstrated to positively influence the beliefs of young Canadians,⁴ Americans,⁵ and British and

² J. Baumgartner and J.S. Morris, *The Daily Show Effect: Candidate Evaluations, Efficacy, and American Youth*, *American Politics Research* 34, pp. 341–367.

³ D.J. Jackson and T.I.A. Darrow, *Politics and Popular Culture: How Some Young Anglophone Canadians Perceive the Political Content of the Entertainment Media*, *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, forthcoming.

⁴ D.J. Jackson and T.I.A. Darrow, *The Influence of Celebrity Endorsements on Young Adults' Political Opinions*, *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 2005 (July), pp. 80–98.

⁵ D.J. Jackson, *Selling Politics: The Impact of Celebrities' Political Beliefs on Young Americans*, *Journal of Political Marketing*, forthcoming.

Irish young people.⁶ This research is based on a quasi-experimental design where young respondents (those enrolled in first and second year university courses) were randomly distributed two different versions of a questionnaire. On one version a political belief was presented as belonging to a random “someone,” while on the other it was attached to the celebrity who had actually said it. In a majority of instances, the celebrity endorsement statistically significantly correlated with a higher level of agreement (or lower level of disagreement with regard to some particularly controversial statements).

For example, among Canadian respondents, When Wayne Gretzky instead of an anonymous someone was quoted as saying, “The president of the United States is a great leader, I happen to think he’s a wonderful man and if he believes what he’s doing in Iraq is right I back him 100 per cent,” the average level of disagreement with the statement dropped. It is important to note Gretzky’s endorsement did not lead to total persuasion. In other words, it did not lead young Canadians actually to AGREE with the statement, but just to DISAGREE with it less fervently.

This is the pattern that obtained with most celebrity endorsements studied. Popular positions seemed to be made more popular by celebrity endorsements, while unpopular beliefs were made less unpopular – complete persuasion was not in evidence. Importantly, Jackson and Jesse added variables to the equations to account for familiarity of the celebrity to respondents as well as respondents’ level of affection for the stars. Not surprisingly, familiarity appeared important in many cases as a necessary precursor for endorsement effect. For example, aging rock star Peter Frampton’s endorsement of Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry mattered only among those who had heard of Peter Frampton, and especially among those who felt warmly toward him. Not all celebrities are created equal, and not all celebrities among one group of people are even vaguely recognized among others.

One political celebrity who appears to be very different from all the rest is U2 frontman Bono. The band has enjoyed a more than 25 year run as one of the world’s most significant rock bands, and Bono has parlayed the band’s commercial success into political influence of a global scale never before achieved by any celebrity.

U2’s political focus started with US involvement in Irish politics, but over time it has expanded to include a variety of social justice issues. After U2 performed in “Live-Aid,” which raised \$200 million for African assistance, Bono spent a month working in Ethiopia in a relief camp, and his experiences there helped him later on to realize that \$200 million amounted only to the debt payments of African nations for a few days. Bono has come to be most strongly associated with the issue of third world debt relief. Bono has formed a policy advocacy group called DATA, which stands for “Debt AIDS Trade Africa,” and he has lobbied for debt relief among G-8 leaders both in their capitals and at

⁶ D.J. Jackson and N. Jesse, *Agreeing with the Stars: The Influence of Celebrity Endorsements on Young Adults’ Political Beliefs in the UK and Ireland*, unpublished manuscript.

G-8 summits and has helped Bob Geldof organize the “Live 8” benefit concerts in 2005. According to economist Robert J. Barro, who is critical of the value of debt relief, “Bono was as successful with conservatives, such as Senator Jesse A. Helms ... as he was with liberals.”⁷ The keys to Bono’s success appear to include his massive celebrity appeal combined with self-deprecating irony, knowledge of the issue, and commitment to a very un-glamorous cause. According to Traub, he is “the most politically effective figure in the recent history of popular culture.”⁸

Jackson demonstrated through survey results that young Canadians who name Bono as an entertainer whose beliefs about politics they respect are politically different from other youths.⁹ While this most certainly does not prove that Bono’s beliefs caused the beliefs of the young people, the relationship is at least as expected. Moreover, popular music scholar Simon Frith argues that scholars who focus on the potential influence on listeners of the lyrical content of pop songs miss the point, because he argues songs are best understood as the expressions of these ideas.¹⁰ In other words, U2 is not necessarily getting young people to agree with their message by influencing them through specific lyrical appeals, but instead is offering young idealists an avenue of expression of their beliefs, be it in the form of singing along with U2 on recordings, or in concerts with tens of thousands of others.

The findings described above may be summarized as follows. First, research relying on surveys to draw correlations between popular culture preferences and political beliefs produces a mixed bag of results, not all of which can easily be made sense of and integrated. But young people consume massive quantities of entertainment media, think about it sometimes in rather rigorous ways, and may experience reinforcement of their pre-existing beliefs through it. Change requires other elements of the social world for reinforcement, and this process is complicated and not easily mapped. We must also be aware that young people are not passive recipients of political socialization, but may use media in unexpected ways. Also, it is nearly indisputable that celebrity endorsements of political beliefs have an impact on the beliefs of some young people. Persuasion from agreement to disagreement or vice versa might not be the result, but certainly reinforcement takes place, especially when the celebrity is especially well-known and liked. Credibility might aid in influence as well, and no recent celebrity has had the political impact on both elites and masses as Irish rock star Bono.

⁷ R.J. Barro, *Why Would a Rock Star Want to Talk to Me?*, BusinessWeek (16 July 2001), p. 24.

⁸ J. Traub, *The Statesman*, “The New York Times” (18 September 2005), retrieved 20 September 2005 from <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/18/magazine/18bono.html>

⁹ D.J. Jackson, *Star Power? Celebrity and Politics among Anglophone Canadian Youth*, British Journal of Canadian Studies, forthcoming.

¹⁰ S. Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1996.

Consequences for Educators, Reformers

Teachers have long known they have their work cut out for them in terms of getting students' attention away from entertainment. However, it is not entirely clear that the entertainment media are the enemy of education or democracy.

For example, there has been some concern recently regarding alternative sources young people use to get their political news. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* has received much attention because its combination of fake news with a liberal/cynical/anti-Bush Administration bent combined with real interviews of authors and newsmakers has become a hit with millions of young people. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press showed in 2004 that only 23 percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 got their election information from nightly network news coverage, which was down from 39 percent in 2000.¹¹ A stunning 21 percent said they rely on comedy programs such as *The Daily Show* for their information. One might justifiably wonder if relying on Jon Stewart, Jay Leno and David Letterman for political news would lead to the creation of a generation of imbeciles. This does not appear to be the case. The University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Election Survey administered a survey which included a 6-item political knowledge test on which *Daily Show* viewers did the best.¹² If respondents watched no late-night comedy shows, they averaged 2.62 correct; viewers of Letterman and Leno averaged 2.91, while *Daily Show* viewers averaged 3.59.

Clearly this evidence does not demonstrate that young viewers of comedy shows learned their information from the programs. Young viewers of late-night comedy shows might already have known more about politics before they watched the programs. But the programs are not making them less knowledgeable, and the counter-intuitive nature of the finding is an important warning to those who would thoughtlessly condemn entertainment media's impact on politics.

The evidence presented above suggests a pretty significant power of celebrities to influence the beliefs of young people in English-speaking western democracies. There is also evidence political behavior might be influenced by celebrities as well. The 2004 report of the Vanishing Voter Project at Harvard University found that first time voters were, "more likely to say (seven percent vs. two percent) that they became interested 'because so many celebrities were encouraging people to vote.'"¹³

¹¹ *Cable and Internet Loom Large in Fragmented Political News Universe*, retrieved 29 October 2007 from <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=200>

¹² *'Daily Show' viewers ace political quiz*, retrieved 29 October 2007 from <http://www.cnn.com/2004/SHOWBIZ/TV/09/28/comedy.politics/>

¹³ *First Time Voters Propelled to Polls by Personal Contact: Non-Voters Discouraged by Election Procedures*, retrieved January 14, 2004 from <http://www.vanishingvoter.org/Releases/release111104.shtml>

In the Conference Conceptualization, the following is cited approvingly,

With one eye on our students and another on ourselves, we attend to both the learning environment and the concentric circles of context in which our teaching is enacted. We commit to striving for true awareness of the larger world, to feeling the weight of it as we attempt to lift it up¹⁴.

A world of socio-politically relevant entertainment media content and celebrity political activists with some clout is most certainly part of the context in which teaching is enacted. Students must be shown how to think critically about the often subtle content in the media. Evidence shows they perceive and think about the content, when asked. In a survey of young Canadians six questions were asked of the respondents concerning whether they had ever agreed or disagreed with the political message of a TV show, movie or song. The smallest majority answering in the affirmative to those six questions was the 78.8 percent who reported ever disagreeing with the political content of a movie.¹⁵

Along these lines, there is a paper assignment dealing with critical thinking about politics and popular culture with which I have had some success at the university level. I have used this assignment dozens of times very early in the first semester in an introduction to American Government class, so while it has been used only among college students, it has been used among very young ones.

Here is the text of the assignment:

In this paper you will think about the entertainment media. Often, popular music, entertainment television and movies contain political messages/themes that promote one side or another in a conflict of values. In the first half of the paper you will choose a political message from television, movies or music with which you have DISAGREED and explain why. You must specify the song, movie or episode of the program with which you disagreed and explain why in detail. Then, choose a political message from television, movies or music with which you have AGREED and explain why in detail. The only sources you need to use are the elements of the media about which you are writing, but if you use other sources you must cite those.

Please be advised that I expect you to think clearly about the creators' intentions with regard to the media presented. For example, if a movie contains a character who expresses overtly racist beliefs, do not take the intellectually lazy way out and say you disagree with racism. Try to figure out what the writer/creator/actor is trying to say with the cultural production in its entirety, and do not analyze a de-contextualized portion of a song, program or movie. In other words, the racist character might demonstrate the writer's opposition to racism, not support. Also, you need to speculate about the potential of the pop culture you are examining to influence people's socio-political beliefs. Would it change people's minds, reinforce existing views or something else?

¹⁴ W. Ayers, *Teaching toward freedom*, Beacon Press 2004.

¹⁵ D.J. Jackson and T.I.A. Darrow, *Politics and Popular Culture: How Some Young Anglophone Canadians Perceive the Political Content of the Entertainment Media*, *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, forthcoming.

I have read hundreds of very good papers based on this assignment, and very few terrible ones. But I did have to add the second paragraph because of a few of the students doing just what it warns against. I suspect most of these failures were due to intellectual laziness or deadline pressure and not a total misunderstanding of the popular culture's content. The admonition derives from a specific paper that "analyzed" the movie *American History X*. There is little doubt that the writers, producers, director and actors in the film intended to make an anti-racist film. But, naturally, many of the characters say and do terribly racist things. So, a few students reacted against that, rather than take on the film as a whole.

Now, in the context of an assignment where the students are explicitly instructed to analyze the product of the popular culture in its entirety, criticism of not doing so is justified. However, in the real world young people probably do not pay total attention to every element of a complicated cultural production. People do not necessarily carefully and in a linear fashion develop their political beliefs. Timothy Cook approvingly cites Vygotsky's theory of "pseudo-conceptual" thinking, which suggests that people think about politics, "based on horizontal sets of associations rather than a hierarchy of abstractions vertically running from general to specific,"¹⁶ and while we are encouraging students to think about the politics of entertainment in a serious way in the classroom, we should not lose sight of the fact that they probably do not always do so in their daily lives.

Discussion and Conclusion

Democracy can be fragile, and its existence in one realm appears to rely on its existence in others. So democracy in the classroom and in the overall relationship among students, teachers, parents and reformers relies on democracy in other realms of life. Certainly the evidence cited in this paper does not indicate that the entertainment culture of the U.S., Canada, Great Britain, or Ireland is hostile to democracy, although U.S. conservatives continue to worry that the sexuality, drug use and the overall structure of the entertainment media are a threat to youths' moral values and to deliberative democracy.¹⁷ But we must take students where we find them, and right now we find them saturated with entertainment to a degree both greater than ever before, and likely to grow. To transform them, we must convince them to challenge what they have learned as well as the credibility of the sources from which they learned it.

¹⁶ T.E. Cook, *The Bear Market in Political Socialization and the Costs of Misunderstood Psychological theories*, *The American Political Science Review*, 79 (4), 1079–1093, p. 1085.

¹⁷ See R. Bork, *The Collapse of Popular Culture and the Case for Censorship*, and M. Medved, *TV Vice? Sex and Violence Aren't the Problem*, in: D.M. Shea, *Mass Politics: The Politics of Popular Culture*, Wadsworth Publishing, New York 1998.

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