

Celebrity IS democracy

blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2008/02/25/celebrity-is-democracy/

2008-2-25

Celebrity is a fact of political life, in fact, it is a vital part of modern politics, and politicians should do much more to be effective as celebrities. That seemed to be the conclusion of our panel debate where journalists, politicians and a psychotherapist embraced a world where the Cheeky Girls are more recognised than Gordon Brown. They also seemed positively enthusiastic about the way the Internet is making celebrities of us all.

Former New Labour apparatchik-turned-psychotherapist [Derek Draper](#) was the most completely enamoured with the idea of celebrity as politics. He dismissed Tony Blair as a 'fantasist' but said that someone like Gordon Brown has to sell himself as a personality. The key is to make sure that your celebrity image is based on reality rather than the psychological equivalent of a dodgy dossier. So Gordon has to show us that he is dull and intelligent – and that might be just what we want from a Prime Minister. But why is the modern voter hooked by celebrity rather than policy? Derek thinks it's down to our repressed cave man heritage.

derek_draper_140x140.gif

Draper says that we all want to live in the kind of communities we enjoyed in our tribal past but our 21st century lifestyle can only be lived in a virtual village made up of celebrity friends. We can never get to know all the policies but we can get to know politicians as characters: "If you believe in people power than you have to believe in the celebritisation of politics".

Interestingly, the rest of the panel agreed with this, albeit from different perspectives. Guardian writer and Goldsmith's media academic [Angela Phillips](#) pointed out that politicians' main problem is that they are 'crap celebrities'. Generally, they aren't very good at competing for public attention with all those other celebs out there. But she also had a warning for those politicians who have achieved celebrity status:

angela_phillips_140x140.jpg

"The private is now political. Men in power can't hide their private lives. But they should be warned that those who live as celebrities can die as celebrities. Look at what has happened to Nicholas Sarkozy."

Perhaps that is why Lib Dem MP [Lembit Opik](#) was somewhat ambivalent about his celebrity status. He agreed that his personal relationships with women who have celebrity status gave him access to public interest. But he was frustrated that his work on issues such as fox hunting and Ireland were so less exciting to the media than his liaison with a Cheeky Girl. He even suggested that newspapers should be forced by regulation to carry a proportion of editorial 'roughage' along with all the celebrity fodder. He also objected that in the celebrity soap opera that is modern political journalism, politicians are portrayed as pantomime villains:

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"the zeitgeist of the media is to be negative, and superficial reporting shows us as more ignoble than the rest of the public when in fact MPs are more noble overall than the general population".

That left [Kevin McGuire](#), associate editor at the Mirror newspaper to insist that celebrity is a fact of life for all news media. Even the Economist and Financial Times carry endless profiles of business leaders. He said that in there amongst the celebrity coverage was still plenty of hard news. He pointed out that some celebrities such as George Clooney on Darfur or Jamie Oliver on

kevinmaguire.jpg

school dinners have had more impact on politics than individual politicians. In the end character matters because that is what determines a good politician, not their detailed policy statements.

So what should the politician do to compete with the other celebs? Draper called on them to try harder to force their ideas in to the world of Big Brother and Hello!:

“The politicians must come up with the images and narratives to feed the celebrity-driven media. Or else, the media will fill the space with negative human interest stories about politicians. You have to fill the vacuum”.

Our debate chairman [Stephan Shakespeare](#) of YouGov was surprised at how relaxed our speakers were about the idea of a celebrity-swamped political and media culture. There are a few voices such as John Lloyd who still talk about the dangers of dumbing down. But I think this may be partly because politicians and media folk are sophisticated consumers of debate and data. They can enjoy serious journals as well as cheeky personality clashes on popular TV. Perhaps they are right to think that the voter can do so as well.

I certainly agree that our political discourse is moving towards a more personal and emotionally intelligent set of values. I also think that new media will accelerate that process. It offers us almost infinite opportunities to mash-up our individual and private lives with the public sphere. But as ‘celebrity’ becomes the medium in which ideas swim, we need to define much more accurately what exactly it means.

[Thanks to Polis intern Danielle Priestley for producing this event]

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