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The mediatization of celebrity politics through the social media

ABSTRACT

This article provides an analysis of celebrity politics within the public sphere. As there has been a commodification of digital media services, the lines between politics and entertainment have been blurred. With the rise of talent shows, rolling news channels, Web 2.0 networks and user-generated online content, celebrity has become instantaneous and may be orchestrated in viral terms. Therefore, this analysis will consider how politicized celebrities (CP2s) have received a greater amount of coverage with reference to social networks such as Twitter and Facebook to associate themselves with endorsements, causes and activities. The article will provide a case study of the online dispute that occurred amongst film, television and music stars concerning Israel's 2014 military action within Gaza. Finally, it will reflect upon whether celebrity activists' use of the social media can reinvigorate politics or will such activity erode the political culture.

KEYWORDS

celebrity politics
social media
citizenship
network society
cyber politics
democratization
elections
Internet

INTRODUCTION

This article provides an analysis of celebrity politics within the public sphere. As there has been a commodification of digital media services, the lines between politics and entertainment have been blurred. Moreover, there has been an exponential rise within competitive international news channels

1. Street's taxonomy
has also included
those politicians who
have employed the
characteristics of fame
to garner votes. They
are known as CP1s.

and a paradigmatic shift in the audience's usage of political communications systems. This dynamic has escalated those historical trends that have been identified as being characteristics of celebrity politics. These include the changes from the publicization of heroic virtues to the introduction of mass media techniques designed to manufacture a celebrity's persona; the rise of a leadership class that has been defined by political imagery; and the transformation of celebrity endorsers into political activists.

Presently, celebrity culture has become even more pronounced than before with reference to the political economy of digital media. With the rise of talent shows, rolling news channels, Web 2.0 networks and user-generated online content, celebrity has become instantaneous and may be orchestrated in viral terms. This analysis will discuss how these concerns have placed a greater emphasis on the personalization of political engagement. In particular, it will consider how celebrity politicians (CPs) have received a greater amount of coverage with reference to social networks such as Twitter and Facebook, which have acted as 'infotainment' platforms, to associate themselves with endorsements, causes and activities.

Therefore, this article considers how politicized celebrities (CP2s) (Street 2004), have become important figures in modern political communications.[1] In recent years, CP2s have been positioned at the interface of causal-based activity, social engagement and cultural practice. Celebrities have affected direct links with their fan bases through Twitter subscriptions and their online endorsement of commercial products has been a growth industry. Moreover, as the social media has grown exponentially, film, music and television stars have used their fame to mediate 'a more expansive conception of political capital' (Coleman 2007: 15). CP2s have raised public awareness concerning campaigns that have existed both within and outside of the purview of partisan-based politics. Consequently, this analysis will consider how the social media has further enabled stars to create points of public identification with specific campaigns.

First, it will provide the context for online celebrity engagement in political endorsement or causes. There will be a short outline of the exponential growth of the social media and a consideration of what Manual Castells has defined as the 'Network Society'. Castells (2007) has envisaged horizontal rather than hierarchical power relations that facilitate opportunities for grassroots activism and social movements. These communications reforms have segued into the ever-changing trajectories in modern political communications that have seen the expansion of celebrity endorsements in partisan- and causal-based humanitarian campaigns within the first few decades of the twenty-first century.

Second, the article will look at how alternative forms of celebrity endorsement of mainstream political campaigns have emerged through the employment of Facebook and, most especially, Twitter platforms. Moreover, within the United States, as CP2s have become patrons, advocates and fundraisers for a multitude of causes including injustice, the environmental movement, public health and reforms to education systems, they have employed social networks to bring attention to a range of grassroots movements. In turn, as the United Kingdom (UK) celebrity culture has grown, there has been an accompanying rise in online star activism.

Third, it will provide a case study with reference to the human rights debate concerning Israel's 2014 military action within Gaza. This was accompanied by a vitriolic online dispute amongst film, music and sports stars. The

1. death toll of over 1600 Palestinian men, women and children led to celebrities
2. arguing about whether Israel has affected a legitimate or disproportion-
3. ate response to Hamas' rocket attacks on Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. The Gaza
4. debate transcended many of the characteristics of celebrity humanitarian-
5. ism, not least because of its origins within the ideological divisions between
6. Zionism and Palestinian rights of national self-determination and as the social
7. media had reconfigured the nature of CP2 interventions into matters of inter-
8. national controversy.
9. The article will conclude by considering how the social media has facili-
10. tated a greater blurring of the entertainment and news media. As online info-
11. tainment has predominated, it has defined how celebrities may influence
12. political agendas so that CP2 activities are praised and condemn equal meas-
13. ures. In particular, celebrity activism has either been seen to be worthwhile
14. or a shallow expression of a consumer-led culture. Therefore, this analysis
15. will reflect upon whether celebrity activists' usage of the social media can
16. reinvigorate politics as against the fears expressed that they will erode the
17. political culture.
18.
19.
20. **THE SOCIAL MEDIA IN MODERN POLITICAL COMMUNICATIONS**
21. According to a 2012 Nielson report, US Internet users spend more time on
22. social networks than any other category of websites. The report concluded
23. that 20% of people's time on Personal Computers (PC) was devoted to the
24. social channels and 30% of their mobile phone time was spent on social
25. networks (Nielson 2012). It demonstrated that 17% of American consumers'
26. PC time is spent on Facebook, which remains the most popular web brand
27. and mobile application in the US (Nielson 2012). Thus, it is maintained that
28. the social media allows for the rapid growth of *many-to-many or point-to-*
29. *point forms of communication*. Most especially, the unprecedented expan-
30. sion of online social networks such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter has meant
31. that there are major opportunities for grassroots communication, deliberation
32. and discussion.
33. Consequently, there has been a widespread discussion about the civic and
34. economic potential of online media and social networks. In particular, their
35. contribution to changes in working and living practices, and growth rates, had
36. been seen to potentially enhance democratic practices, public sphere and civic
37. cultures, citizen responsibility and participation. Social media is said to radi-
38. cally change the way in which public communication takes place and provides
39. an electronic agora to allow for alternative issues to be raised, framed and
40. effectively debated. As the Internet provides an instant global communication
41. resource, it is contended that citizens may enjoy a real-time interactive access
42. with one another to transmit ideas, bypass authorities, challenge autocracies
43. and affect greater forms of expression against state power.
44. These new forms of the public sphere have been associated with the
45. rise of network democracy. This concept suggests a dispersal of concen-
46. trated communications power and that a horizontal network of links allows
47. for the viral spread of information, thereby affecting greater levels of public
48. engagement, participation and ideological representation. Manuel Castells
49. in *Communications Power* (2009) argues that the information networks
50. construct new forms of meaning by encouraging causal linkages between
51. members' private expressions and public discourses. Therefore, this enables
52. an ever-expanding set of digital citizens to engage in a 'communicate

abundance' to resist the dominant forces within society (Keane 2013: 1; Fenton 2012: 163):

> In our … network society, power is multi-dimensional and is organized around networks programmed in each domain of human activity according to the interests and values of empowered actors. Networks of power exercise their power by influencing the human mind predominantly (but not solely) through the multimedia networks of mass communication. Thus, communications networks are decisive sources of power-making.
>
> (Castells 2012: 7)

Further, as Web 2.0 social networks distribute information in a viral manner, they allow for new forms of information exchange. In this respect, people-to-people forms of communication have enabled 'memes' – units of ideas, styles or cultural practices that are designed to permeate the public's international consciousness – to operate through hyperlinks, websites or retweeted messages complete with their own hash tags. Through such a fragmentation of information sources, alternative voices have emerged to affect a 'poly-lateral' or non-hierarchical form of communications.

CP2S AS 'PERFORMERS'

These changes in information and communications practices may enhance what John Street has identified as a 'differentiated yet inclusive definition of politics' (2011: 7). According to Street, smaller-scale power relations, which had been previously conceived as being marginal to representations of public life, should be recognized as legitimate forms of political agency (2011: 7).Consequently, it has been noted that CP2s have provided creditable endorsements for partisan and increasingly issue-driven campaigns as they may 'represent' a viewer or constituency in a broad political sense (Street 2004).

In modern American politics, Hollywood film stars, musicians, sportsmen and women have continued to endorse political candidates. Indeed, such a form of celebrity engagement reached a crescendo during the Democratic presidencies of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. In 2008, Obama utilized the US entertainment–politics nexus to enhance his status in the Presidential elections, which he won in 2008 and 2012. Consequently, he received CP2 endorsements from Leonardo Di Caprio, George Clooney, Bruce Springsteen, Robert De Niro, Chris Rock, Kerry Washington, Tim Robbins, Susan Sarandon, Ben Affleck, Jennifer Aniston, Halle Berry, Will Smith, Matt Damon and Stevie Wonder.

Celebrity endorsements have also become increasingly commonplace in UK politics. In 2010 the Conservative campaign machinery unveiled the international film star Sir Michael Caine at a press conference to promote their plans for 16 year olds to volunteer as National Citizens as part of the then fashionable concept of the 'Big Society', which envisaged a communal programme of activities designed to enhance citizenship and societal virtues. Caine was joined by other CP2s such as Carol Vorderman, Kirstie Allsop, Gary Barlow and Chris Rea. Within this campaign, the Labour Party was more vociferous in its employment of celebrity endorsements when the comedian Eddie Izzard appeared in a Labour Party Election Broadcast (PEB), stating that a Conservative victory would be a disaster and that 'Britain is Brilliant'. Elsewhere, David Tennant and Richard Wilson provided voice-overs for Labour PEBs and its audio manifesto.

1. In terms of the visibility of their endorsements, CP2s have moved
2. beyond appearing on platforms or in television commercials to support
3. candidates. Increasingly, they have understood that it is their responsibil-
4. ity to propagate the values of the campaign itself. Moreover, public opinion
5. has been more favourably galvanized towards celebrities when they have
6. engaged in non-partisan activities. Stephen Huddart has explained how
7. CP2s have 'performed' as patrons, advocates and fundraisers for social move-
8. ments (2005: 40). For example, a patron refers to those celebrities who allow
9. an organization to cite their name, thereby affording credibility to external
10. publics and validation to internal audiences. In tandem, a spokesperson or
11. endorser is a celebrity who is identified with a charity and makes statements
12. on its behalf. This has occurred within the field of celebrity humanitarianism
13. to be personified by Bob Geldof, Bono, Angelina Jolie and George Clooney.
14. Further, the audience's capacity to consume such CP2 endorsement
15. has exponentially increased due to the collapse in trust towards the political
16. classes and their ability to be 'in touch' with popular values. Most especially,
17. John Thompson has contended that being a 'fan' has become a defining factor
18. in modernity so that the public form an 'intimacy with distant others' such as
19. celebrities (1995: 220). In turn, Ellis Cashmore has noted that there has been
20. a major cultural shift in which celebrities have assumed a moral authority
21. among target audiences that was 'once associated with sages or charismatic
22. leaders' (2006: 218). While celebrities were politically active in the past, their
23. fans demonstrated little or no desire to see their favourite actors, musicians
24. and performers in a political guise. With the growing demand from audiences
25. for authentic forms of celebrity engagement, transformative CP2s have real-
26. ized their value as advocates for a wide range of causes. Therefore:
27.
28.   Celebrities must create a political persona that invokes their own
29.   credibility and authority, which then gets conferred onto the cause to
30.   which they are associated. … They must use these resources to demon-
31.   strate authenticity in order to get the attention and sympathy of the
32.   audiences they seek, and to protect themselves from retribution should
33.   they alienate audiences.
34.   (Collins 2007: 186)
35.
36.
37. **CELEBRITIES' ENGAGEMENT WITH THE SOCIAL MEDIA: BRANDING**
38. **AND PARTISAN ENDORSEMENT**
39. As user participation within the social media platforms has grown, it has segued
40. into the dynamics that have shaped the audience's identification with celebrity
41. interactions. Previously, celebrities had been constructed through the princi-
42. ples of fame, talent and achievement, and these concerns were augmented in
43. the era of mass communications by publicity machines such as the Hollywood
44. star system (Boorstin 1971). However, the social media has removed the stars'
45. untouchable and mysterious status, and enabled them to directly communi-
46. cate with their fan bases. Further, the user-generated social networks such as
47. You Tube have transformed 'normal people' into online celebrities and have
48. launched the careers of reality TV stars whose unique selling points (USP) are
49. defined as 'being famous for being famous' (Istanboulian 2012).
50. Therefore, across the digital platforms, marketers have vied for the consum-
51. ers' ever-decreasing attention spans by employing well-known spokes-
52. people to get a brand noticed. Moreover, within the realm of the social media,

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2. For an interesting discussion of the unidimensionality or multi-dimensionality of online credibility and celebrity engagement, see Marshall (2011: 11–14).

celebrities have a greater cachet amongst those younger voters who predominate on social networks. For instance, on Twitter, Canadian 'teeny-bopper' sensation Justin Bieber (whose career was launched online) has 34.5 million followers, while talk show hostess (and occasional actress) Oprah Winfrey has 16.6 million, and reality TV star Kim Kardashian has 17.3 million. In contrast, the branding capacity of traditional commercial players and the political classes remains limited in appeal.

Further, a key difference has emerged from the traditional media fan-celebrity interaction in which social media transactions allow for constant updates/posts shared between stars and their followers. In this manner, it has been argued that a greater sense of personal connectivity exists between the celebrity and the fan. Moreover, in their use of their social networks, celebrities can choose how and when they want to reveal themselves to their fans (O'Brien 2014: 13). This has meant that celebrities have become opinion leaders who have fashioned their public relations (PR) strategies to appeal to their online fan bases.

Therefore, as politicians or political causes have previously employed celebrities to bring visibility or monies to their campaigns, the social media has not only widened the scale and reach of the conversation but has enhanced the credibility of CP2 endorsements.[2] Additionally, the social media through the continuous measurement of tweets, retweets, Facebook likes and the accumulation of followers creates a straightforward system for tracking the strength of such celebrity engagement (O'Brien 2014: 13). These developments have resulted in the social media becoming a significant platform for a political dialogue between CP2s and their fan bases:

> Celebrities… have a greater potential to impact thoughts and decisions, even if that impact is only to reinforce an already held belief. It is not uncommon for a fan to buy a product simply because their favourite celebrity endorses or recommends it. In one study by Ani Istanboulian, 43% of the respondents indicated they had learned more about a cause because of a celebrity they follow online.
>
> (O'Brien 2014: 13)

Accordingly, within American and UK elections, CP2s have taken to the social networks to utilize their fame and status as a form of political capital to endorse candidates and propagate partisan ideologies. In 2008, Web 2.0 tools such as You Tube and Facebook, along with the Obama's team interactive website MyBarackObama.com (MyBo), allowed the Democratic Presidential candidate to affect numerous political advertisements online incorporating well-known supporters. A popular favourite referred to the Jewish comedienne Sarah Silverman's 'Great Schlep', imploring Jewish grandchildren to fly to Florida to force their grandparents to leave their condominiums and their prejudices behind to support Obama's candidacy. This was accompanied by CP2 endorsements from Chris Rock, Matthew Broderick and Orlando Bloom on You Tube videos designed to mobilize regular voters to become 'involved' in the Obama campaign by manning phones or canvassing supporters on the polling day (O'Brien 2014: 11). Other film and music stars including Scarlett Johansson, Kelly Hu, John Legend, Herbie Hancock, Kareem Abdul Jabbar, Adam Rodriquez, Amber Valetta and Nick Cannon produced a pro-Obama video with The Black Eyed Peas entitled *Yes We Can*, which became one of the most downloaded items on You Tube (Kellner 2009: 719).

1.   In the 2012 American Presidential campaign, CP2s lined up again, via
2. the social media, to encourage their fans to support either Obama or his
3. challenger, the Republican nominee – Mitt Romney. In the main US music,
4. film and television stars supported the incumbent President, with Beyonce
5. Knowles, Neil Patrick Harris, Eva Longeria, Katy Perry and Will Smith post-
6. ing messages backing Obama. The massive growth of Twitter (which had
7. been in its infancy in 2008) meant that it became the CP2s' platform of choice,
8. as it not only made it easier for celebrities to reach out to their vast number of
9. followers, but through trending devices Obama's spin doctors could calculate
10. the effect of the 140 character endorsements. For instance, the Afro-American
11. film director Spike Lee posted on his account:
12.
13.   VOTE, VOTE, VOTE, VOTE, VOTE, VOTE, VOTE, VOTE, VOTE, VOTE,
14.   VOTE, VOTE, VOTE, VOTE, VOTE, VOTE, VOTE, VOTE, VOTE, VOTE,
15.   VOTE, VOTE, VOTE, VOTE, VOTE, OBAMA.
16.   (Lee quoted from Hernandez 2012)
17.
18. Lee's message was subsequently retweeted on 2003 occasions and received
19. a favourites setting of 215. Moreover, the success of a celebrity's online pres-
20. ence has been measured by their 'Klout' score. This indicator refers to a
21. combined accumulation of the public's retweets or 'likes' of CP2s' messages
22. across eight social media platforms. Under these terms, Obama supporters
23. such as Winfrey and Stephen Colbert ('The Colbert Report') achieved impres-
24. sive levels of online attention (O'Brien 2014: 13). In such a manner, the 'noise'
25. made across the social networks by those CP2s supporting Obama became a
26. key mechanism through which his team galvanized the American electorate.
27.   In the 2010 British General Election, there was a limited degree of online
28. celebrity political activity. The Monty Python comedian John Cleese, who
29. had produced PEBs for the Liberal Democratic Party (LibDems) in the 1980s
30. and the 1990s, supported the party and its demand for electoral reform on
31. his Twitter and Facebook accounts. Similarly, the ambient musician Brian Eno
32. appeared on a YouTube video claiming that 'We need a new voice, to think
33. differently', in which he berated the Conservative Party to failing to be a proper
34. opposition in 'a prevailing Labour one-party state' (Eno quoted from Arthur
35. 2010). In tandem, stand-up comedians Eddie Izzard and Alan Davies utilized
36. their extensive Twitter account followers (1,529,986 and 128,867, respectively)
37. to exhort their fan base to vote for the Labour Party. However, Stephen Fry,
38. the UK celebrity most associated with Twitter with three million followers,
39. remained undecided during the campaign. He vacillated within his tweets stat-
40. ing that he was a disenchanted Labour supporter who was considering voting
41. LibDem, 'Frankly I'm tempted to vote Lib Dem now. If we let the Telegraph
42. and Mail win, well, freedom and Britain die' (Fry quoted Arthur 2010).
43.   However, British public interest in online celebrity activism remained
44. limited. Invariably, this reflected the truism that UK politics and popular cultures
45. continue to be more comfortable with each other when they maintained an
46. arms-length relationship. Moreover, not all US celebrity endorsements were
47. sought by the political classes and several stars (Jane Fonda, Rosie O'Donnell,
48. Madonna and Tom Cruise) proved to be counter-productive. Romney's social
49. media campaign was detrimentally affected by property magnate Donald
50. Trump and rock star Ted Nugent's vitriolic tweets aimed at Obama that were
51. motivated more by bitter self-interest and anti-statist psychosis than any form
52. of political enlightenment. Yet, in America the long-standing relationship

between politicians and celebrities has invariably been enhanced by the use of the social networks to mediate political messages. Further, American and British CP2s have transmitted messages through the social media to engage in causal-based types of activism and humanitarianism.

ONLINE CELEBRITY ACTIVISM: CAMPAIGNS AND CAUSES

> Celebrities are supposed to use their celebrity to pull focus to issues …
> that's our function.
>
> (Dreyfus 2000)

As the film star Richard Dreyfus has commented, CP2s have realized that they may draw public attention to a range of causes. Through their participation in a public service announcement, the writing of an opinion piece or an appearance at a public rally, celebrities can attract visibility to a cause. Such star appeal in the political realm has been determined by the replacement of older mechanisms of party campaign machinery with more individualist forms of campaigning (Rabidoux 2009: 79).

For PR agents, celebrity philanthropy has proved to be less dangerous to celebrity brands than political endorsements, which can be ineffably tarnished by support for the wrong candidate or party (O'Brien 2014: 14). There have been several spectacular own goals such as Romney supporter Clint Eastwood's berating of an empty chair representing Obama at the 2012 Republication National Convention. The overwhelmingly negative reaction upon the social media to this gaffe raised awareness that any perceived slip-up would be poorly received by a multitude of user groups:

> It became a defining moment in the campaign as the meme 'Eastwooding'
> went viral along with posting of pictures of empty chairs. In just a few
> days an 'Invisible Obama' Twitter account had over 32,000 followers.
> Even Obama tweeted an image of himself sitting in a chair in the White
> House accompanied by the line 'This seat's taken'.
>
> (O'Brien 2014: 15)

Further, the realization that the social media instantly circumvents the traditional media gatekeepers has led to celebrities behaving in an apparently more altruistic manner. Increasingly, CP2s have taken to the social media to support and publicize worthy causes. As Ani Istanboulian (2012: 10) and Pamela C. O'Brien (2014: 14) have noted, this process has been a two-way street as causal groups, non-profits, charities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have benefitted in gaining validation and legitimacy. When celebrities post their support for an organization, their followers are only a click away from the lobby's website or a relevant article related to the issue. Therefore, Edward Norton co-founded a grassroots donation platform, Crowdise, which enabled users to access the social network to raise monies for charitable groups. These fundraising opportunities have led to pressure groups employing celebrity managers to coordinate online CP2 activity to direct user group attention to their campaigns (Dyson et.al. 2013: 4).

Such concerns became evident at the 2014 Music Television (MTV) Video Music Awards when pop 'wild child' Miley Cyrus traded in her raunchy 'twerking' antics with a dedication of her award for the promotional video accompanying her song 'Wrecking Ball' to America's homeless population.

1. To this end, she asked a young homeless man 'Jesse' to accept the award on
2. her behalf and for the 1.6 million runaway youths living within the United
3. States. Within the acceptance speech he directed the large television audience
4. to send donations to a homeless shelter, which appeared on Cyrus's Facebook
5. page, while 'the star perched on the side of the stage and sobbed at her own
6. beneficence' (Wills 2014). It was later reported that:
7.
8.   PR expert Mark Borkowski thinks the po-faced antics at this year's MTV
9.   awards are part of a wider trend for stunt-based good deeds such as the
10.   Ice-bucket Challenge. 'Agents, managers and artists are more switched
11.   on to world events than ever because of social media, so there's pres-
12.   sure on celebrities to feed into the news agenda. It's no longer enough
13.   to give a tissue-soaked speech or wear a stunning dress to leverage
14.   global headlines'.
15.   (Wills 2014)
16.
17. Other US CP2s have taken to the social media to campaign for a diverse
18. range of causes. For instance, there was online support for Obama's reforms
19. to Healthcare Insurance ('Obamacare'), and actors Michael Cera and Kal
20. Penn mobilized CP2s to campaign for the Affordable Care Act. In 2012, Jeff
21. Bridges announced on his website that he would be attending the Democratic
22. and Republican National Conventions to publicize No Kid Hungry, a group
23. dedicated to the eradication of child hunger. Moreover, Lady Gaga, Britney
24. Spears, Ashton Kutcher and Matt Damon have utilized their Facebook and
25. Twitter accounts to demonstrate their compassion and to bring visibility to
26. social causes. Similarly, in Britain several CP2s (Stephen Fry, Annie Lennox
27. and Daniel Craig) have used their social media networks to lend their support
28. to humanitarian NGOs such as Oxfam, Save the Children and Amnesty
29. International. According to David Piner, PR Manager at the British Red Cross:
30.
31.   People consume media in so many different ways now … Lady Gaga
32.   has 15.2 million followers on Twitter; Stephen Fry has three million and
33.   a tweet from him can crash your website … A tweet from someone like
34.   Annie Lennox has a huge impact on traffic.
35.   (Piner quoted from Plummer 2011)[3]
36.
37. While there have been advantages related to online celebrity involvement
38. concerning social causes, there are obvious difficulties. Many questions remain
39. about the motivations of celebrities such as Cyrus who have been criticized for
40. using their social networks for self-promotion rather than any form of altruism
41. (Plummer 2011). Moreover, an untenable conflict of interests between celebrity
42. commercial endorsements and humanitarianism became conspicuous when the
43. US film star Scarlett Johansson, who had been an advocate for Oxfam, became
44. the face of Soda Stream in January 2014. Controversially, the company had a
45. factory within the occupied Israeli West Bank territories in violation to the human
46. rights abuses exposed by Oxfam. Johansson decided to follow her commercial
47. interests rather than her principles and withdrew from representing Oxfam. Her
48. contradictory position was taken up by Pink Floyd musician and Palestinian
49. rights activist Roger Waters, who commented on his Facebook page:
50.
51.   Scarlett's choice of Soda Stream over Oxfam is such an act of intellectual,
52.   political, and civil about face, that we, all those of us who care about the

3. There has been
    a significant
    debate about the
    worth of celebrity
    humanitarianism
    ranging from Andrew
    Cooper's (2008) general
    support for celebrity
    diplomacy to recent
    survey material by
    Dan Brockington and
    Spenser Henson (2014)
    that argues that such
    CP2 activity is largely
    negligible.

downtrodden, the oppressed, the occupied, the second class, will find it
hard to rationalize. … Scarlett, you are undeniably cute, but if you think
Soda Stream is building bridges towards peace you are also undeniably
not paying attention.

(2014)

Similarly, the over-exposure of CP2s can result in public appetite for celebrities engaging in public pronouncements reaching saturation.

Yet, the removal of media filters such as editorial controls and changes in public reception to online messages has led to CP2s becoming more confident in engaging international political controversies. This became evident during the online debate that was conducted by American and European celebrities during the Israeli military intervention into the Gaza Strip, which occurred in the summer of 2014.

GAZA AND ONLINE CELEBRITY HUMANITARIANISM

The human rights debate concerning Israel's military action within Gaza was accompanied by a vitriolic dispute amongst those film, music and sports stars who pitched into the controversy. Spanish film celebrities including Academy Award winners Penelope Cruz and her husband Javier Bardem, along with Spain's leading film director Pedro Almodovar signed an open letter, which was reproduced across the social media, condemning Israel's 'genocidal' devastation of Gaza. In the wake of this letter, Zayn Malik – a member of boy band One Direction – tweeted #Free Palestine to his thirteen million followers. This message was retweeted on 150,000 occasions. However, Malik was bombarded with death threats as well as plaudits. In turn, the British musician and record producer Brian Eno upped the ante. He wrote a widespread condemnation (which was distributed on Talking Head's star David Byrne's website) of the US government's support of Israel, which he claimed was akin to its backing of the Klu Klux Klan:

> Like it or not, in the eyes of most of the world, America represents 'The
> West'. So it is *The West* that is seen as supporting this war, despite all
> our high-handed talk about morality and democracy. I fear that all the
> civilizational achievements of The Enlightenment and Western Culture
> are being discredited – to the great glee of the mad Mullahs – by this
> flagrant hypocrisy. The war has no moral justification that I can see –
> but it doesn't even have any pragmatic value either. It doesn't make
> Kissingerian 'Realpolitik' sense; it just makes us look *bad*.
>
> (Eno 2014, original emphasis)

Within the American news media, the UK comedian Russell Brand employed YouTube films to level criticisms of the 'humanity' of the right-wing Fox News anchor Sean Hannity, a self-proclaimed Zionist and anti-Hamas commentator. Hannity responded that Brand was a 'D-list' celebrity best known for being the former husband of pop star Katy Perry.

On the other side of the debate, Jewish celebrities such as the late Joan Rivers, Howard Stern, Jackie Mason and Israeli model/actress Gal Gadot claimed that the critiques were naive, as Israel had to protect its citizens from Hamas' attacks. In particular, Rivers had told the America Online (AOL) entertainment website TMZ, 'They (Hamas) started it. We now don't count who's dead.

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1. You're dead, you deserve to be dead' (Alexander 2014). Rivers apologized and
2. stated that her comments were taken out of context. The Israeli media magnet
3. Haim Saban and Relativity Media Chief Executive Officer Ryan Kavanaugh also
4. condemned Hamas and made clear their contempt towards Cruz and Bardem.
5. Consequently, the Spanish couple, who have Hollywood as well as European
6. careers, retracted their initial criticisms by stating that it was their intention to
7. facilitate a peaceful negotiation between both sides (Daunt 2014).
8. For Jon Voight (who has converted from a being a liberal anti-Vietnam
9. War protester into a neo-conservative Republican and has become as famous
10. for being celebrity humanitarian Angelina Jolie's father), Cruz and Bardem's
11. explanations were not good enough and he accused them of being Anti-
12. Semites. 'You have defamed the only democratic country of goodwill in the
13. Middle East: Israel', he said. 'You should hang your heads in shame' (Voight
14. 2014). Yet, Voight in his online letter to the *Hollywood Reporter* seemed to
15. suggest that the Spanish signatories were 'in America' when he commented,
16. 'You have been able to become famous and have your monetary gains because
17. you live in a democratic country' (2014).
18. However, previously vocal Israeli supporters felt that the moral dilemmas
19. evidenced within the Gaza dispute could not be so easily rectified. For instance, an
20. online photo and video project supporting Palestinian rights labelled '#Gazanames'
21. received the backing of Jewish American actor Mandy Patinkin, Tony Kushner,
22. Jonathan Demme, Gloria Steinem, Wallace Shawn and Eno. The project was
23. co-produced by the Jewish Voice for Peace organization. In turn, Madonna
24. posted an Instagram picture of herself flanked by two topless male dancers: one
25. bearing the Star of David, and another with a Muslim Star and Crescent accom-
26. panied by 'No Separation! We all bleed the same colour'.
27. Moreover, a younger generation of film, television and music stars such as Jon
28. Stewart, Tori Amos, Rob Schneider, Mark Ruffalo, Selena Gomez and, indeed,
29. Rihanna (whose tweet #Free Palestine was hastily removed after eight minutes
30. but had been retweeted many times over) were critical of Israel. Although Stewart
31. and others like United Nations Goodwill Ambassador Mia Farrow demonstrated
32. a greater degree of nuance when they suggested that by questioning the effec-
33. tiveness of Israel's foreign policies they had not become Hamas supporters.
34. The online celebrity engagement into the long-running controversy of
35. the Israel–Palestine dispute demonstrated how the employment social media
36. has changed the nature of CP2 interventions into modern political commu-
37. nications. Although celebrity activism had become increasingly politicized,
38. it usually operated within a framework where agreed normative principles
39. concerning human rights and liberal internationalist causes have been appar-
40. ent (Cooper 2008). With the divisive exception of Vanessa Redgrave's support
41. of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) when accepting her Academy
42. Award in 1978, Israel–Palestine had remained a no-go area. However, as there
43. has been a rise in the social networks in which the previous editorial controls
44. have been lifted, celebrities have become more confident that they can engage
45. in the Israel–Palestine dispute.
46. Stephen Walt, the Harvard Professor and co-author of *The Israel Lobby and*
47. *US Foreign Policy* (J. Mearsheimer and S. Walt, 2006), argues that the social
48. media has enhanced celebrities to influence as the new platforms mean that
49. they can directly communicate their ideas to their fan base:
50.
51. The public discourse on Israel has changed. A lot of it is due to social
52. media. It gives people, especially celebrities who have a lot of influence,

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a platform to say how they feel without being pressured by editors and
publishers, who are themselves being pressured by outside organizations.
(Walt quoted from Kennedy 2014)

As the critiques of celebrity advocates have indicated, there are dangers in
over-simplifying complex forms of international geo-politics. However, the
celebrity engagement in using the social media to comment on the Gaza
debate cannot be easily dismissed. Crucially, it demonstrates how stars influ-
ence public opinion to direct their online audience's attention to matters of
conflict and peaceful resolution.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated how the social media has facilitated greater
opportunities for CP2s to endorse political candidates, engage in causal-based
politics and to contribute to matters of international controversy. Through
their dedicated Facebook pages and Twitter feeds CP2s have had a profound
impact, for both good and ill, upon the practices of international political
communication. New forms of political participation have emerged as celeb-
rity activists have reconfigured politics for a more fragmented and image-
conscious public arena. However, until the controversy concerning Israel's
military action within Gaza, celebrities had largely steered clear of the Israel–
Palestine dispute, reserving political opinion for less fractious issues (Carroll
2014). But the human rights debate concerning Israel's military action within
Gaza was accompanied by a litany of CP2 tweets, retracted tweets, multiple
open letters and further online statements clarifying positions or stating that
they had been taken out of context (e.g. Penelope Cruz, Javier Bardem and
Joan Rivers) after a barrage of complaints.

Such an employment of the social media demonstrates how modern political
communications are changing swiftly. The Gaza debate has transcended many
of the characteristics of celebrity humanitarianism and it has shown how celeb-
rities may increasingly clash in such a high-profile manner, prompted by the
ideological divisions at stake. These CP2 statements were extraordinarily varied
in tone and intelligence, but they did raise important questions about whether
celebrities should comment on geopolitical controversies. And have their inter-
ventions helped to raise the appropriate level of public awareness of the issues
involved? Further, these concerns have taken on a greater importance as west-
ern publics are consuming entertainment rather than ostensible 'hard' news
through social media feeds. Thus, if people are receiving their news via CP2s'
personal websites, Twitter accounts and Facebook pages, there is a greater need
to understand the processes and worth of these forms of celebrity activism.

Therefore, as 'infotainment' occupies a range of Web 2.0 outlets, it should
be noted that celebrities have become more politically conscious. This celebri-
tization of politics has brought about new forms of political engagement that
indicate a dialectic transformation of high politics with a populist approach to
cultural citizenship. This has had both positive and negative connotations. CP2
activity may publicize a cause or make visible ongoing debates about humani-
tarian concerns. Conversely, emotionally driven engagements may obfus-
cate the true nature of geopolitical divisions and offer simplistic responses to
intractable conflicts. Yet, with the rise of social media, the previous editorial
controls have been lifted so that CP2s may raise political issues within new
arenas to affect greater forms of public engagement.

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Finally, these concerns segue into a wider debate about the dynamics, which are shaping post-democratic societies. Here it is contended that traditional civic duties are being replaced by alternative forms of virtuous participation (Bang 2005). Within this new political environment, different types of agency such as celebrity politics have become centrifugal forces for public engagement. Yet, celebrity politics must not only be seen to have social value, but needs to provide the conditions through which a transformation in democratic behaviour may occur. Therefore, CP2s need to demonstrate ideological substance and provide clarity in establishing a fixed range of meanings upon which people may achieve a real sense of connection with political causes. Consequently, such forms of activity should provide the basis upon which citizens may participate in terms of their own political efficacy to define the common good.

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