

WELCOME TO POLIWOOD

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It isn't so much a question of whether or not celebrities *should* be influencing the political sphere. It's what citizens should know about the amplified effects that celebrities have over their votes.

Is it ethical for celebrities to be so involved in the democratic process? Is there any difference between their ability to write cheques for politicians and for them to hold functions to promote political campaigns? It's been established that young people make for more adoring fans than adults, and as such, are more vulnerable to celebrity influence (Chou, 2015). For the betterment of their future, we find ourselves as librarians trying to ask the right questions. Librarians are tasked with enhancing civic knowledge and inspiring political engagement, in the hopes of combating the decline of political activities such as voting (Cohen, 2017). We must foster political

discussion and critical thinking about current events and marketing.

We should ask: How should celebrities be held accountable for their ever expanding scope of civic responsibilities? In the documentary *Poliwood* that aired almost a decade ago, one interviewee perceptively stated, "after 9/11 they asked Ja Rule what he thought about 9/11. Last time I checked, Ja Rule was not a specialist in emergency management response or politics..." (Levinson, 2009, 14:37). American rapper, singer, and songwriter Ja Rule was more recently involved in a lawsuit for alleged fraud, breach of contract, breach of covenant of good faith and negligent misrepresentation of the infamous Fyre Festival in the Bahamas which was economically, socially and environmentally devastating to the island and its locals

("Celebrity lawyer files \$100m lawsuit against Fyre festival organizers", 2017).

Jah is one of many celebs with an egomaniacal impulse to impose his global influence, what Hyde called 'mission creep' (cited in Choi & Berger, 2010), in which celebrities of the 21st century have expanded from entertainment to advertising to global political and international diplomacy. The impact of this is greater for younger generations more connected with social media and the internet (Choi & Berger, 2010).

Global internet and mobile technologies allow the dissemination of countless images and stories in nanoseconds, blurring the distinction between internet-driven ideas [and] actual scientific and historical records (Choi & Berger, 314, 2010).

To be fair, good ideas and bad ideas are both spread through the internet. A Revolution took place in Egypt almost a decade ago thanks to Facebook (Vargas, 2012). We have witnessed the result of Russian hacking and influence in the US election, no longer a disputed hunch but an established fact. Our reality sounds like a fairy tale, including trolls, court jesters, sinister tricksters, stolen children and threats of a New World

Order. This is in part due to the blurred status Washington and Hollywood celebrities hold.

Candidate as brand

Media has always been manipulated to influence people, but it wasn't until President Reagan's campaign in 1980 that brands started to associate with individual politicians instead of parties. Thus spurred advertising efforts focused on creating a 'presidential image' (Van Steenburg, 2015). Now, it's normal to have movie directors and writers in Hollywood also working in Washington as speech writers, advisers and activists (Thanouli, 2013). Dissenters question their suitability for such a dual status,



and tout elitism both on behalf of the politicians and the celebrities (Levinson, 2009). Oprah Winfrey was one of the major celebrity supporters of Barack

Obama in 2008, which counted as major news at the time (Zeleny, 2007). Later, it wasn't strange to see Beyoncé and Jay-Z visiting Michelle and Barack like old friends in the White House, and throwing fundraisers at elite clubs in Manhattan ("Obama's celebrity fundraising friends", 2015). The Center for Responsive Politics estimated that a total of US \$6 billion was spent on advertising in the November 2012 elections (Van Steenburg, 2015).



Celebrity endorsements

It's been proven that parasocial interactions (mediated through a screen or text) with anyone including celebrities, politicians, religious icons or elves from the *Lord of the Rings* results in the same psychological effects that people get from interacting with flesh-and-blood people (Perse & Rubin, 1989). Celebrity endorsement works on the general population in part due to the

real emotional investment people feel as a result of parasocial bonding (Hung, 2014). On top of that, the value of celebrity is now measurable and tangible thanks to the global internet and social media (Choi & Berger, 2010). People have become more obsessed with the idea of being famous because it seems more attainable than ever. The population most vulnerable to this are young people (Choi & Berger, 2010).

Future voters

Young people in the US and Canada are being heavily targeted by celebrities telling them to vote because it is effective. Political ads endorsed by celebrities not only improve young voters' attitudes toward the ad, endorser, and party, it positively influences their intention to vote (Chou, 2015). Social media provides a free platform for anyone to have direct access to even the most rich and reclusive of celebrities. All of a sudden, the world was talking about a wolf population in British Columbia in 2015 because Miley Cyrus posted a picture to Instagram (Todd, 2015). College students tend to think favorably of movie stars' and athletes' endorsed political statements and positions even

when it functions through implicit endorsements (i.e., financial support) (Chou, 2015). In the UK, where celebrity status is celebrated very differently than in the US, researchers are considering the use of celebrity endorsements in targeting citizens that do not actively engage with politics to make a significant change in voter attitudes (Veer, Becirovic & Martin, 2010).

Celebrities are some of the best advocates that there are for promoting the arts in education and public funding. Celebrity-endorsed campaigns help to persuade young voters to participate in elections, combat complacency in youth and increases their feelings of autonomy (Chou, 2015).

Platform power

Just because Oprah Winfrey is a celebrity does not mean she is unqualified to comment on politics or express her opinions about the state of her country. It is easy to forget that Oprah Winfrey was a scholarship winning student at Tennessee State University and one of the first black female news anchors on television ("Oprah talks to graduates about feelings, failure and finding happiness",

2008). So why might we have reservations about her capacity to influence politics?

Mayim Bialik, an American actress, author and neuroscientist, recently took to social media to complain about the people who tell her to "stay in her lane" and stop talking about politics. She argues that she is a citizen like anyone else, and wants to engage with social media like a normal person, posting a diversity of things that reflect her myriad interests (Bialik, 2018). She ends by reinforcing that *everyone* is unsure how to operate on social media, so she feels compelled to figure it out alongside everyone else. Bialik founded a platform for cultural discourse with people of all ages at <https://groknation.com/>.

Librarians are acutely aware that our place in history proceeds the nations founders anxieties about the influence that wealth could have on the democratic process (Cohen, 2017). It is our duty to engage with this new era of political activism online and offline, and to promote democratic participation for young people and especially critical thinking when it comes to political advertisements.

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