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Get a Real Job: Authenticity on the Performance, Reception and Study of Celebrity

Abstract

This paper considers the place of attraction within debates on normative citizenship. Reconsidering my research on public reactions to UK Tory MP Boris Johnson, I ask if apparently superficial comments indicate how alienated audiences can read themselves into the world of representative, and represented politics. John Street warns that it is too early to condemn the celebrity politician, since there remains a great deal to be understood about how such a figure can be within specific modes of media organisation. The Johnson case study shows the idea that politics should be entertaining does not necessarily contradict what Corner & Robinson understand as critical/structuralist positions, that tend to concentrate on information as the touchstone of democratic communication. As a result, the gulf between structure and agency in audiences' negotiations of the political landscape may not be as wide as it seems.

Keywords: authenticity, politics, celebrity, fans, public opinion.

Introduction.

This article will consider the role that qualitative, pleasure focussed audience research, much of it influenced by theoretical and empirical fan scholarship, can play in addressing tensions between structure, agency, apathy and engagement in the field of political communication.

It is inspired by three things; critical reception of my work on public reactions to a media scandal involving the British Tory MP Boris Johnson's in October 2004 (Ruddock, 2006a; 2006b), John Street's thoughts on the value of political celebrity as an object of academic inquiry and means of sparking exchanges between pluralist, constructivist and structuralist camps within political communication (2004; 2005), and

the desire to reconsider some of my earlier research on the occasion of the reprinting of *Issues, Images, Impacts: The Media and Campaign '92* (Lewis, Morgan & Ruddock, 1992/2006). The latter piece, which used both a survey and focus groups to assess how US voters understood the Presidential contest between Bill Clinton, George Bush I and Ross Perot, is best known for its structuralist conclusion; that voters had rationally reached the wrong conclusion about Clinton's policy intentions, due to the myopic informational and ideological spectrum presented to them by television in particular. The study also, however, made tentative, and less recognised comments about the importance of affective political communication; a theme that can be developed in the context of recent work on fans that opens positive readings of intense yet ephemeral bonds with media events. In combination with Street's thesis that celebrity politics is a rational, explicable and even desirable outcome of shifting forms of political representation, in this piece I revisit my Johnson study to ask how ostensibly flippant audience indicate how audiences are attracted to displays of difference that make the political world relevant. This directly addresses our 1992 complaint that 'managerial' politics discourage participation by propagating the illusion that politics is about efficiency, not belief. However foolish or calculated his actions appeared, and however uniformed or superficial public responses were, somewhere in all of this social class emerged as a clear rallying point for both his supporters and detractors.

Street's work informs a distinction between playful remarks and the ill informed, unstable opinions, that dilute the quality of democratic speech (Converse 1975). I conclude with the humble point that "apathetic" or "superficial" political pronouncements can still have a logic that is worth exploring, and that the gap between "top down" and "bottom up" studies of political audiences might not be as wide as it seems. Again following Street, this is not to celebrate any sort of public reaction to the political realm, but simply to recognize that even casual observations have a genealogy. My argument takes on the following structure; first, I describe how and why Boris Johnson emerged as an analytical topic. Second, I discuss the media and academic responses to the research. Third, I consider how Street's work and new developments in fan studies help to address some of these critiques. Finally, I revisit some of the more "superficial" public remarks, arguing they have a cultural history that explains Johnson's infamy. However one may feel about celebrity politicians, they exist in numbers large enough to suggest something is afoot beyond any simple collapse of an idealized public sphere. As respected figures such as Al Gore in the US and Tony Benn in the UK decide to pursue their interests outside traditional channels of politics and political communication, it is worth thinking about how celebrity politicians look to draw audiences before worrying about votes.

Why Boris Johnson?

Journalist, broadcaster, popular historian and novelist, Boris Johnson enjoys a far

higher public profile than would normally be expected for an opposition MP whose Commons pedigree traces back no further than 2001. There is no doubting the public relations acumen of a man who cultivates public affection by cloaking arch Conservatism and a Herculean capacity for multi-tasking in a chaotic media image. His persona is cleverly aesthetic in its aesthetic absences; somehow, the question of how it is possible to edit the political magazine *The Spectator*, write for *The Daily Telegraph*, research and produce well received novels and historical studies AND do the work of a constituency MP and shadow minister gets lost in the aura of crumpled suits and disheveled, youthfully blond hair, owing more to pudding bowls, mothers and blunt scissors than Vidal Sassoon. That, and the familiar figure of the 'upper class twit'.

Johnson's affable mask slipped, however, in October 2004. *The Spectator* published an anonymous leader criticizing emotional public reactions to the execution of Liverpool born civilian contractor Ken Bigley at the hands of Iraqi militia. The magazine represented Merseysiders' commemoration of Bigley's passing as indicative of Britain's new un-British blame culture. Once a nation of heroes stoically accepted responsibility for their own actions. Bigley did not deserve his horrific fate; but he had decided to ply his trade in a war zone. Did his demise therefore warrant a two-minute silence before a Premiership football match between Liverpool and Manchester United? A minute more than is granted to mark the death of the Commonwealth's war dead? And was this evasive public sentimentality a particular problem in Liverpool? Apparently spontaneous grief was modeled on formulas developed after the 1989 Hillsborough tragedy, where 96 Liverpool FC fans had died in an overcrowded football stadium. The earlier public wake, so the editorial ran, allowed Liverpoolians to avoid questions about how the fans themselves contributed to the disaster.

This was an offensive and factually incorrect charge (Liverpool fans were entirely blameless for Hillsborough). As the author failed to step forward in the scandal that followed, Boris Johnson accepted full responsibility for the piece in his capacity as Editor. The Liverpool press was incensed. Merseyside MP Peter Kilfoyle called for a public apology. He was duly obliged. Tory leader Michael Howard ordered Johnson North to express his regret in person. The tarnished star complied – after a fashion. By his own admission, "Bigley's demise" made factual errors in underestimating the numbers killed at Hillsborough. It also repeated allegations that fans had abused and robbed the dead and dying, long since discredited as tabloid fantasies. Johnson was sorry for these hurtful mistakes. He was not, however, sorry that his magazine had published a commentary on the need to accept responsibility for one's actions. Ken Bigley had not deserved to die. Neither had Captain Robert Falcon Scott in his 1912 attempt to cross the South Pole. Both men had, however, consciously entered hostile territory. Bigley, like Scott, should have been prepared to accept his fate.

In October of that same year, I decided that this story said something about audiences and their dis/engagement from political issues and figures. Here, apparently, was an incident that people passionately cared about, breaking images of civic apathy. Or did

they? What would we find by going beyond media vox pops? Searching for data, I wrote to Boris Johnson's Parliamentary office asking if anyone had written to him about the issue, and if so, could I see the letters?^[1] To my surprise Melissa Crawshay-Williams, who manages Johnson's office, immediately agreed the request. May 13th 2004 found me on a Liverpool bound train staring at over 300 of them. Over the next months, I made some sense of the letters by using both quantitative and qualitative methods, presenting my work at the Celebrity Culture Conference at the University of Paisley in September 2005, MeCCSA 2006, and subsequently publishing in *Social Semiotics* in 2006.

The research, in published form, aimed to assess structure/agency tensions in looking at how general shapes of response addressed audiences' abilities to critique the form as well as the content of political communication. Categorizing correspondents' themes via SPSS produced the following patterns:

1. 40.8% (n=128) of letters agreed with Spectator/Johnson comments on "Culture of sentimentality"
2. 40.8% (n=128) of praised Johnson's honesty, courage, integrity,, authenticity
3. 36.3% (n=114) opposed Michael Howard's treatment of Johnson
4. 30.6% (n=96) of letters agreed with negative depiction of Liverpool and its citizens
5. 30.3% (n=95) of letters praised Johnson's performance as public political/media figure
6. 17.5% (n=55) of letters agreed with Spectator comments on Ken Bigley
7. 16.2 % (n=51) of letters criticized "political correctness"
8. 15% (n=47) of letter writers claimed to speak for a "silent majority"
9. 13.4% (n=42) of letters criticized "media hype"
- 10.12.7% (n=40) of letters criticized the reception Johnson was given by Paul Bigley/the people of Liverpool on his visit.
11. 9.2% (n=29) of letters blamed Liverpool fans for Hillsborough.

On one hand, the letters showed a surprising trend. Despite the near universal public venom directed at the errant MP in the media, most of the people who had written to him had done so to express support. The reason for this seemed to be that in taking his public gaffe on the chin, Johnson shone as a rough diamond in the flotsam of rhetorically evasive political figures.

However, if this enthusiasm contained a latent critique of spin, ergo the colonization of politics by media management, at the same time there was evidence that many of the

writers had only a vague sense of how the scandal, which of course was entirely a media matter, had actually played itself out. Sizeable minorities missed Johnson's apology to Liverpool. When writers addressed the nature of mediated politics, it was to express the forlorn hope that one day politics could happen face to face (Ruddock, 2006a).

In October 2005, I was asked to discuss the project on Radio 4's *Thinking Allowed*, a program that reviews developments in the social sciences for a general audience hosted by sociology professor Laurie Taylor. October 12's edition featured a discussion on public authenticity, and the show's producers thought the Johnson research relevant. I subsequently spent around twelve minutes debating relations between authenticity and performance in politics (the main point being that real is not something you "have", it's something you "do") with sceptical *Times* journalist Andrew Pearce and Professor Taylor.

Tuning in the following week, I was aurally assaulted by a listener's dismissive review:

I've just listened to someone discussing if Boris Johnson is a real person. Are you sure *he* is authentic?

This attack sided with Pearce in construing my work as an entirely misguided effort to rescue something of worth from the superficiality of celebrity politics. My on-air speculation that fan communities might provide models for the way that we would like citizens to think, act and engage sealed my own public fate; I was a fake scholar making something out of nothing about a fake politician via the fakest part of a fake discipline.

Although public ridicule goes with media studies territory, it is still useful to consider how generic hostility to the discipline played out here. First, subsequent events strengthened the claim that I had chosen to study someone who was merely playing at politics. In 2004, Johnson was a novice MP holding a minor position (Shadow Minister for Culture) in a party that could barely define its relevance to contemporary Britain. Yet marginality suited a figure who dabbled in politics. Local academic Peter Stoney urged Liverpoolians to ignore the comments of a political lightweight (Stoney, 2004). Developments in October 2005 revealed that Johnson himself shared these sentiments. As David Cameron campaigned to become Tory party leader, so it was whispered that Johnson would be asked to rejoin the shadow cabinet (having been dismissed by Michael Howard in late 2004). Johnson appeared determined to do the job properly this time around:

...Mr. Johnson appears to have accepted that he can no longer moonlight as journalist and politician, revealing that his lust for power has eclipsed his desire to be a high profile editor...Mr. Johnson will tell (Radio 4 presenter) Sue Lawley that he "would choose politics" over journalism when the time was right. (Elliot, 2005).

Retrospectively, we would have to conclude, then, that at the time of the *Spectator* article, Johnson was toying with politics. Worse still, his apologies were indeed spin-in-action. Much of the support offered in the letters was charged by the impression that Johnson's remorse was genuine. As one writer put it:

I was incensed to read yet more negative comments about the city I love. We're always copping it in the media, and we're sick of it. But it takes a big man to say sorry, and an even bigger man to say sorry face-to-face.

At the time, Johnson echoed the importance of facing up to things in the flesh:

...having been to Liverpool, and having stood eyeball to glistening eyeball with those who felt they deserved an apology, I am glad I went, and I think at least some of them are a bit glad that I went too. (Johnson, 2004).

On *Thinking Allowed*, Andrew Pearce mocked this faux humility. Johnson was not sorry for a word of the article, and he had gagged on every syllable of the Howard-induced apology. This was no moment of sincerity in an otherwise glib political world. When in the Lawley radio interview Johnson claimed that in hindsight he wished he had not visited Merseyside, it seemed that Pearce was right.

At this juncture, it seemed that 'structuralist' accounts of political communication were appropriate. How could one find anything of value in 'readings' of a charade that fell for the very spin that the letter writers despised?

Academic Critiques

None of the general scepticism directed at my Johnson study came as a surprise. It made perfect sense within a public forum accepting that political ignorance and apathy are facts, and that media studies offers no useful reflections on this state of affairs. But peer reaction was often more hostile. The title of the *Social Semiotics* piece won a place in the satirical magazine *Private Eye*'s "Pseud's Corner", a regular feature lampooning academe's tendency to "over-egg" with arcane jargon. What made this surprising was that the title had been reported to the editors by a certain John MacInnes, who had published an essay in the very same edition of *Social Semiotics* (2006).

More substantially, exploring the Johnson letters as expressions of 'fandom' proved controversial, as it seemed the writers lacked the commitment and knowledge needed to warrant the label. This again gestured toward the structuralist conclusion that what the letters evidenced, if anything, was how poorly equipped audiences were to participate in politics. At first blush, the fan shift made sense as many of the letters

primarily occupied affective spaces. As the numbers revealed, the joint most popular motivation for writing to Johnson was to express feelings of admiration. It was this emotional content that, apparently, shoved many into the increasingly rare act of physically writing to an MP. Apparently, then, Johnson's Liverpool adventure enabled

Forms of political participation in which fans position(ed) themselves in cultural and political debates in relation to their own values and beliefs...(also) providing spaces of...participation for those...disenfranchised by concepts of traditional liberal (politics) (Sandvoss, 2003. 170-171).

Certainly in this regard, Johnson allowed his "fans" to redraw the political map using their own co-ordinates:

How come you're a Tory? You always seem to make sense...I've grown up thinking that all Tories I happen upon haven't got an original thought in their body. But you continue to be witty and strangely alluring...if anyone can explain the whole Tory ideals thing to me, it's got to be you. (female, North of England).

Though implacably opposed to your politics...I fully concur with the views that you and your journal recently expressed...I don't think you're a real Tory....I think you're a sort of anarcho-liberal and great entertainment (male, London).

However, presenting these ideas at the 2006 MECCSA conference (Ruddock, 2006b), I was confronted with the critique that fandom implies a sense of commitment that appeared absent from these letters. A comparison with Will Brooker's research on *Star Wars* fans (2002) illustrates the point. For many filmgoers, the original trilogy was the most profound cultural experience of the 20th century. A major symbolic resource for making sense of the self and the world, *Star Wars* came to embody a series of everyday moral and political positions. These ideologies were not, however, "in" the films. Starved of fresh content for over 20 years, fans generated vast quantities of their own material to keep treasured characters and stories alive. This creative activity took on a life of its own. So, when George Lucas finally ended his symbolic drought with *The Phantom Menace*, many rejected the prequel as a betrayal of his own legacy. The audience's commitment was theological. Having spent two decades pouring over the original texts, absorbing every detail, exhausting every possibility for what they could mean, *Star Wars* fans attained a feeling of deity-like ownership. They cared more about *Star Wars* than its creator. But they also knew more about it.

"Borisphiles", in my first reading of their work, lacked this omnipotent aura. Many were unaware that Johnson had not actually written the offending editorial. Those embracing criticisms of Liverpool were similarly oblivious to Johnson's denunciation of his own

"scouse-bashing".^[2] In this respect, they resembled the ersatz fans that Giulianotti blames for diluting the relevance of British football as a source of authentic experience and expression (2002). Giulianotti paints the majority of soccer "fans" as Johnny/Jenny come-latelies drawn as moths to the flame of a media spectacle. They are fascinated by the carnivalesque displays of commitment performed by "authentic"

fans, those who remember the days of standing on concrete terraces whatever the weather or quality of play. Yet this is a transient sort of captivation. The flaneurs neither understand nor care about the game. As a result, they will soon move along. Turning to Borisphiles, lack of attention to the narrative of the scandal paints a picture of the car-crash rubber necker, not the citizen.

Indeed the letter writers could be described as being closer to Dayan's "almost" public (2001) than Brooker's fans. The categories are similar. "Almost publics" affect commitment. Writing to an MP does display an unusual level of engagement. Within the almost public, however, this "caring" is undermined by an ephemerality and flippancy. In this regard, it is interesting that a number of writers were keen to point to the superficiality of the scandal. One did so in verse.

Oh Boris Johnson

What can you do?

Opened your gob again

What will they do to you?

Mind you no-one's perfect

It's just a little impasse

But think twice before you open it

Or you'll sound like a silly Arse!

I still love you Boris.

But as I reflected on the project, I began to wonder how my own methods and sensibilities may have contributed to the conclusion that the "Borisphiles" were neither 'proper' citizens nor 'proper' fans. Their letters, after all, represented tiny clues about the lives they led. Who was to say that if they knew little about the Bigley scandal, or representative politics, that they were not also involved in other less recognized forms of citizenship? Alternatively, if the writers did pay so little attention to mediated politics, what was it about Johnson that piqued their interest? In other words, the *fact* of the writing indicated that processes were at play that may illuminate how celebrity politics works; processes that were certainly worth exploring regardless of the banalities and inaccuracies of anything that was actually written.

I realized that whatever my efforts to give a broad structural shape to divergent audience comments, in turn inspired by my ongoing argument that quantitative methods offer much to the analysis of culture (Ruddock, 2001), my thoughts and conclusions were haunted by a particular quote: “As a boy I loved Jennings books. What I really want to know about is this: do they really have pillow fights at prep schools?” Of all of the topics that could have been raised vis-à-vis the Johnson/Liverpool rumble, the writer chose to center on how closely the MP’s experiences mirrored fictional accounts of British public (i.e. residential fee-paying) school life. The a priori assumptions of the study were that the *Spectator’s* attack on “excessive mourning” was also an assault on politics from below. Public commemorations of Hillsborough represented organic reactions to political issues giving ordinary people a real visibility (Walter, 1991). Depicting the *Spectator* scandal as nothing more than a jolly jape gone wrong entirely missed the point, or so I thought. ^[3]

I don’t want to necessarily abandon this conclusion; but I do want to reflect on how, in its original conception, my decision to identify this as an “inappropriate” expression ignored important issues on how to handle data and contemporary debates on fan cultures. Taking the latter point, my distaste for the comment echoed the tendency to divide “good” and “bad” audiences that had afflicted much of the groundbreaking fan work. Despite its canonic status, Matt Hills (2002) criticized Henry Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers* (1993) for allowing its empirical content to be driven by the desire to prove the value of fan communities. In privileging his political/academic project over the voices of the people he studied, Jenkins produced a calculative vision of fandom bearing little resemblance to the affective rough and tumble of actual fan experience. Conversely, Jonathan Gray (2003) is more interested in exploring ‘bad’ audiences. Given that most of our media experiences fall outside the fan spectrum, where we watch, listen or read simply to pass the time, or because we have no choice, the time has come for audience researchers to explore the cultural logic of the relatively uncommitted. In this shifting context, my instant dismissal of an apparently superficial comment appeared premature.

Exploring the issue of how to treat data further, it is important to reflect on the wisdom of objectifying comments that were not written with the contemplation of citizenship in mind. Having access to the letters alone, it is not clear where the data falls on the public/private continuum. If some acknowledged the fact that they were writing to a public figure, others used familiarity tones more characteristic of personal correspondence. Expecting the letters to present considered reflections on citizenship was a bit like commanding David Cameron to explain, in technical detail, his understanding of what replacing the pound with the Euro would do to the UK economy on *The Jonathan Ross Show*. ^[4] Although the idea that audiences can and should be allowed to speak for themselves can still be used to good effect (see, for example, Alan McKee’s work on pornography, 2005), most of the time empirical researchers accept that they do not simply “find” what people think, but build encounters that impact how audiences process their media relations. Recent studies by Philo & Berry (2004) and Kitzinger (2004) were designed to challenge and work on, rather than measure, what people know and think about real life issues (the Israeli occupation of Palestine. and child sex abuse, respectively). In one memorable section of their book, Philo & Berry found a focus group participant who at first argues that television news

is biased against Israel. Having performed an extensive content analysis, the authors are morally certain that this is not true. They firmly believe that the respondent has not understood what they are asking of him. As a result, they refuse to accept his first as his final answer, having him revisit the question and the footage. Kitzinger similarly uses the technique of producing interview transcripts, then having interviewees re-read and reflect upon their own comments. As a result, her project is as much about helping people to re-organize their mental maps of what sexual abuse is, who does it and where it happens. Hills follows suit in his research on cyclical fandom (2005). Using a series of regularly scheduled individual interviews, he encourages participants not simply to report on, but work up their narratives of media taste.

These methods do not reflect the desire to check analysis against the audience to ensure that the researcher has “got things right”; nor do they allow editing that proves the culturalist case. Instead, they aspire to echo the fluidity of cultural processes. The point here is that the “pillow fight” comment does not necessarily speak for itself, in terms of where it comes from and what it means, and even if it did, we would still have to ask, by what logic did it appear sensible? This interrogative demeanour is hard to simulate in archival work. However, the changing shape of writing on political communication, fandom and relations between the concepts do allow a deeper reflection on the quote, something I think I owe to both the writer and an MP who generously granted access to valuable data. Succinctly, I would hypothesize that the “Jennings” comparison might show how someone perceived a fellow traveller in an otherwise alien world of electoral politics. In what follows, I explore the possibility that this off the cuff question has a cultural history. Johnson’s “calamitous” performance (however calculated the imbroglio truly was) worked by couching the image of the maverick MP within an honorific tradition of English amateurism, for which the ‘naughty public schoolboy’ is a common avatar. This image reintroduced class as a meaningful idea that not only ‘attracted’ his supporters, but also rallied opponents who felt their voices were rarely heard in public.

Or perhaps the writer just really liked Jennings books.

John Corner: Structure, agency & celebrity politics.

Suspending the second possibility, John Street’s work on the mapping of political communication, and the normative role that celebrity can play in democratic speech, provides a first means of investing the “Jennings” comment with a relevance that is worth exploring. Street’s typology, which marshals scholarship on the media/politics nexus into the camps of pluralism, constructivism and structuralism, has been criticized as a crude simplification, particularly in its division between the latter two areas (Corner & Robinson, 2005). However, in conjunction with his writing on celebrity, Street’s usefully calls for greater attention to issues of affect in what counts as political dialogue proper.

Street's distinction between pluralism (with its assumption that political communication is a clearly demarcated area whose task is to show how effective communication makes rational links between aspiration and choice within electoral politics), constructivism (where the media are seen to constitute rather than represent the political, even if the latter retains structures having an independent existence) and structuralism (which insists on the economic determination of symbolic forms) is less important than his call for dialogue between "competing accounts of...communication ... the political ... and the balance ... between structure and agency" (18). This is clearer in his earlier work on politicians who court celebrity, celebrities who woo office, and showbiz stars who, like fame, either seek or have the activist mantle thrust upon them (2004).

As with the later work, Street's efforts to define the range of celebrity politics is not flawless. He identifies two sorts of celebrity politicians. First, we have elected officials who seek credibility by blagging popular culture. UK MP George Galloway's participation in the 2006 *Celebrity Big Brother* springs to mind. Second, we have celebrities who use their fame to run for electoral office; Arnold Schwarzenegger is the most obvious example, although in Britain Glenda Jackson also fits the bill. Quite how "Gopher" from *The Love Boat* parlayed his clumsy asexual charm into a career as a hawkish Republican Senator is anyone's guess. Finally, we have celebrities who use their public profile as a platform for political activism, as in the cases of Bob Geldof and Bono (Street, 2002).

To illustrate the difficulty of giving order to a fluid field, it is not to dismiss Street's work to argue that his typology is not exhaustive. Al Gore currently embodies all three shades of celebrity politics in his activities around *An Inconvenient Truth*. The former US Vice President has translated his political capital into cinematic success. Claiming no ideological axe to grind, Gore remains equivocal as to whether his currency may be reconverted into a second tilt at the Whitehouse. The bigger point, however, is that Street believes it is important to examine how celebrity politics is structurally possible (and here, Babcock and Whitehouse (2005) have described how "The Governator"'s success had as much to do with his evasion of FCC equal time regulations via talk-shows as it did personal charisma) and why exactly it raises such ire, given that it has historical precedence.

However, Street also recognizes that explaining celebrity politics as predictable outcome of media organization means little to those whose "main objection ... is based on two elements. The first has to do with the excess attention given to image and appearance, and the second has to do with the irrelevance of the expertise which the celebrities possess" (2004: 441). Street's solution occupies the space between variant definitions of what "representation" means in "political representation". The term either means standing for, or acting for. Critics of celebrity politics *tout court* tend to prefer the latter. Here, political representation refers to a person's ability to act in the interests of those he or she represents. There is no necessary connection between

serving the people and appearing to be one of them. Celebrity politicians, so the critique runs, create the erroneous impression that standing for, or resembling silent yet widely held public sentiment, is tantamount to acting in its interest. We can return to George Galloway to explain the difference. The pugilistic Scot claimed his reality television foray was designed to give the anti-Iraq war lobby a higher profile. One can demur for two reasons. The first was that it was hard to see what impersonating Elvis and a cat, and engaging in running battles with glamour model Jody Marsh and disgraced light entertainer Michael Barrymore, did to promote peace. Second, Parliamentary colleagues asked who was acting in the interests of Galloway's constituents during the MP's televised sojourn.

Against representational critiques, Street simply offers that stylistic political performances aimed at winning audience empathy have ever been a part of the democratic process, and indeed represent an invaluable shorthand in a complicated world of policy and ideology: "Just as art creates a version of reality, making present what is otherwise absent ... political power is a product of style and creativity" (2004: 445). There is no space here to reflect on the rights and wrongs of Galloway's argument. However, what we can say is that if we accept that communication is material, then to symbolically 'stand' for something is a form of action.

The idea that a politics of attraction is not an anathema to democracy-in fact, quite the reverse-directs attention to one of the less considered parts of *Images/Issues/Impacts: the Media and Campaign '92*. The study is habitually located within the corpus of what Corner & Robinson (2005) identify as "critically structuralist" research. Two of the authors, Lewis and Morgan, have based their careers on arguing that the capitalist bias of US media systematically narrows the range of views and experiences offered to audiences. Indeed, the quantitative part of the report was the second of three surveys that charted correlations between political opinion and factual error on the behalf of those polled (Morgan, Lewis & Jhally, 1991; 1999). In this fashion, *Images/Issues/Impacts* aimed to intervene in a poll dominated campaign by looking not only what people thought, but what they knew about candidates Clinton, Bush I and Perot .

Our survey complemented the general thrust of the work that emerged from the University of Massachusetts's Centre for Mass Communications Research: the majority of respondents erroneously believed that candidate Clinton intended to pursue an agenda based on high welfare expenditure, funded in part by higher taxation, and the erosion of tough crime legislation . But given the limited range of political viewpoints on offer, it was easy to see why, when asked about his policies, most of the sample were wont to paint Clinton as far more left of centre than was truly the case. The narrow spectrum also led to the strongly held, but ultimately misplaced belief that in Campaign '92 voters should and would act on issues, not ideology.

Yet the report was *not necessarily* a call for more fact based news discourse. Some

years later, Ekstrom (2002) argued that television news never has and never will be a particularly efficient vehicle for this sort of knowledge, making it unfair to judge its output exclusively on informational criteria. The focus group section of the *Images/Issues/Impacts* hinted at a move in this direction in asserting the importance of style in politics. The idea of voting on issues made little sense when the sample demonstrably knew so little of what the candidates planned to do about the economy, welfare and law and order. But even if they had, politics is rarely a matter of right and wrong; we argued that the reality of policy is that some groups are favoured over others.

This was reflected by working class respondents who saw politics as a system wherein their opinions, knowledge or whatever counted for nothing:

This is the first year I'm saying, should I vote? Whoever they want gets in there. I've always believed that if they don't want you in there, then you don't get in. If they want a person in there, if I vote or nobody votes, they'll get in there.

I feel like politicians are out of touch. I believe that if you cannot live like me, then you cannot serve me. If you have not lived my life, then you don't know how to serve me.

In the context of the criticisms we made about the inadequacy of media coverage, these comments indicated a perfectly sensible response to a situation in which voters were aware that they had been robbed of the tools to make issue based decisions. The idea that the successful candidate would be chosen by the system, not voters, was an entirely reasonable reaction to a campaign between candidates who varied little in what they planned to do. American voters witnessed the same dynamic in the Bush II/Kerry race; run along the Mekong Delta since military service provided the only chink of light between the candidates in action and attitude.

It was therefore unsurprising that in 1992 people turned to emotional, interpersonal criteria drawing on standing for understandings of representation in making their decisions:

One of the things I respect most about Clinton the man is his beginnings, where he came from. You've got to understand where he came from. I mean, we all know that his early childhood was not a good one, and I think that a guy like Clinton serves as a good role model, and I think if we're looking for anything today, we're looking for people to be role models.

The idea of choosing a candidate based on where he or she comes from, on the understanding that this will shape their general world view that will in turn guide policy decisions, did not contradict our final conclusion:

What it is reasonable to do is to expect voters to make informed decisions

based on their understanding of a candidate's basic political philosophy; for example, whether he or she believes in redistributive social policy or laissez-faire economics. In other words, the democratic system runs through, not in spite of, ideology. We vote for the people who we feel best represent the way we think social life should be conducted, or, to put it another way, who are closest to us ideologically. While many within the news media tend to portray political ideologies as negative and unnecessarily dogmatic, we would argue that ideology actually functions as an invaluable form of political shorthand which allows candidates to succinctly communicate the essential elements of their platforms to the electorate.

What we failed to do is to consider how this "political shorthand" might run best through the integration of politics and entertainment; surprising given Lewis' writing on the damage caused by the lack of narrative in news (1991). And it is with this failure in mind that Johnson became relevant, as a public figure whose infamy rested on a performance of difference. Calculated or not, Johnson's words, actions and style reintroduced class as an issue at a time when both his own party and the ruling Labour government wished it away. Many audience researchers have argued that our field should spend more time considering casual media engagements. In this sense, the fact that the letters were mostly written by people who did not fit the fan or citizen profile makes them a valuable resource. In outlining what Johnson had stood for, the writers gave clues about how people would like political communication to work. In this symbolically standing for *something* acts, recasting the political as a realm of choice and action, not fate.

Proper Citizens: Commitment, Community, Network.

The problem with dismissing "Borisphiles" as inauthentic citizens is that it is difficult to say what the real deal would look like. The citizen/fan metaphor changes what counts as proper political activity. Van Zoonen's call for a "fan democracy" (2003) is premised on the importance of integrating emotional content and political discourse. Coleman (2005) concurs. Within current arrangements, the only time when we are interpolated as citizens is when we stand alone in the voting booth. This is an antiseptic, anomic experience that simply does not feel right. As Barry Richards (2004) continues, we can only expect to take an interest in politics when we are emotionally invested in its form and content. These ideas have been echoed in public discussions of proposed "citizenship tests" on migrants to the UK. There are two problems with administering exams on politics, history and culture to would be Brits. First, many people who are already "in" would probably fail them. Second, citizenship is an emotional obligation that cannot be measured by what people know (Harkin, 2005).

Unfortunately, likening authentic citizenship to fandom does not necessarily clarify the picture. There is some question over what it means to be a proper fan turning on

clashes between “depth” and “surface” models. This is a useful obstacle, as it allows us to overturn Dayan’s critique of the “almost” public by arguing for the efficacy of ephemeral networks rather than structured communities of engagement.

Take “intensity”. As Jancovich points out, the heat fan cultures generate often has profoundly undemocratic outcomes. Battling to prove they belong, fans have little truck with those who do not share their mode of investment. Honohan’s “collegial” citizenship model (2003) portrays this sort of intensity as an anathema to democracies that have to deal with extreme difference. The object of commitment should be the process of communication between constituencies, not the values within each. Intense fandom is therefore an inappropriate model for citizenship. This is made explicit in Tamar Sorek’s analysis of relations between “community” and “enclave” among Arab football fans in Israel (2003). Here, the preservation of fan identity depends on its excommunication from the political realities of Arab life. Unlike Brooker’s *Star Wars* fans, intensity is preserved and strengthened by a determined effort to divorce football from everything else. In my own work, I have used the enclave idea to argue that fan commitments mean that racial politics can be acknowledged, but not discussed or processed in football fanspeak (Ruddock, 2005).

Intensity and depth might therefore make for worse politics. Shemtov’s research into local, single-issue political organizations (2003) identifies the importance of “goal expansion” in achieving a sustainable public presence. Such groups, often formed around very specific environmental concerns, are vital places where people develop bonds of loyalty and empowerment that are vital to civic engagement. However, this engagement can only be maintained insofar as these local concerns can be translated into the interests of other groups. In other words, NIMBY activism can only continue if it is willing to abandon the initial object of its concern.

Hence, ephemerality can be a positive civic attribute. The idea that citizenship, like fandom, should be related to depth models of community, where co-dependence is grounded in shared values, is at odds with the ontology of globalized politics (Stevenson, 2003). This pushes us toward “network” thinking, where cultural experiences and ties come to resemble speed dating; our connections are short, but intense (Wittels, 2001).

However, “network” thinking is consistent with Matt Hills’ notion of cyclical fandom (2005). Hills argues that fandom is more about process than object. Many of the fans that have been studied are obligated to an external “thing” over which in many ways they exert no control. For example, Giulianotti (2005) points to the frequent claims from football supporters that they have no choice other than to continue following their team. Cyclical fandom is a more individual commitment to a journey of self-development, facilitated by a movement between objects. In reality, media audiences are fans of several things. Fandom thus features a cast of changing objects that are stitched together into a life narrative. But this is not a functionalist claim. For Hills’

interviewees, the fundamental pleasure of being a fan lies in the moment of surprise, of discovering a new object that becomes the focus of affective and cognitive investment. The cyclical fan, then, is open to the idea that an external environment can rewrite what he/she cares about and why.

This tunes with Kai Erikson's presentation of "network" as an anti-functionalist means of understanding totality. Erickson's essay makes three points that are relevant to a positive reading of ephemeral fandom. First, it acknowledges that cultural critique needs the idea of the whole, while at the same time recognizing that culture is not reducible to neatly defined influence or logic. Second, it offers a non-hierarchical model where power circulates between actors within a network, rather than being a quality of an overarching system. Third, as networks are conceived as relations between actors, rather than relations between actors and an external meta-narrative, and wherein the consequences of these networks are more than the sum of the intentions and needs of each actor, networks have the potential for infinite expansion. This expansive definition of cultural connection and experience is in keeping with Hills' work, which questions the possibility of deciding where fandom begins and ends, and the idea that "authentic" citizenship has yet to be defined. Taking these points in combination, is it possible that Johnson provided a moment of surprise for people generally uninterested in electoral politics? And does this indicate how the latter sphere might expand to connect with citizens who are not naturally 'hot' for politics? These are truly questions for further research, but what we can do is discuss what it was about this incident that lit the flame.

In defence of Borisphiles

If the lack of knowledge about what Boris Johnson really said and did in the Liverpool scandal signifies a general lack of interest in media coverage of politics, then why go to the trouble of writing to an MP? Perhaps the writers recognized a fellow amateur. Johnson made two professional gaffes. As an editor, he had allowed the publication of an article containing serious factual errors. As a politician, he had been stupid enough to say "mea culpa". The act of publicly admitting a public screw-up drew admiration. As evidenced by the first writer quoted, this was even true for the minority of correspondents who wrote to chastise Johnson over the *Spectator* piece. For others, Johnson's professional failure as journalist and politician cohered into a much more successful performance of celebrity containing a distinctively English twist.

You yourself would be the first to admit that certain aspects of the first article were ill-advised...but to your immense credit you had the good grace to sincerely apologise. We all drop clangers...there must be many people in Liverpool and elsewhere who feel about you as I do, but unlike myself may not write and tell you so. I wish there were more like you in political life. I feel that your approach to life and politics is refreshing. I love your self deprecating sense

of humour. No Boris, don't ever change mate. (Male, Liverpool).

You are the witty, humourous human face of politics...a counterbalance to excessive solemnity (the curse of contemporary Britain). (Male, West Midlands).

While you acquitted yourself well eating humble pie and I admire you, I fear for you in "Have I Got News For You" as those two, Merton and Hislop, will pull you to bits. But I know that our fears are unjustified as you will come out of it in the inimitable manner that you are able to command. (Male, SW England).

These comments depict Johnson as escaping his Mersey maelstrom via the charming knack of not taking life too seriously. In doing so, they access an affection for "bumbling through" which Nick Cull (2002) sees as a central to the particularly English taste for WW II POW films.

This is a useful comparison as it combines amateurism with an interest in authenticity. British POW films aspired to empirical realism in using real life stories, and employing the people who lived them as technical advisors. This empirical clout naturalized the ideological project of building an upper class image of English ingenuity. Often, POW camps were portrayed as extensions of the public school experience, where Nazi overlords were nothing more than especially harsh matrons (Cull, 2002).

Johnson's bumbling public schoolboy persona was explicitly referenced by one of his Liverpool critics:

The Boris Johnson episode was simply a case of a public schoolboy getting it wrong yet again. He is not a serious commentator and we should treat him with the contempt he deserves, and ignore him. (Stoney, 2004)

But Borisphiles were more prone to read the public school template in positive terms:

Dear Boris (Mr. Johnson seems too formal): What is all this fuss? (The media) probably attack you because of your background, schooling, wit and personality. A bright spark indeed in a sea of smiley, insincere, namby-pamby greyness. Don't change a thing-least of all you glorious hair! (Female, home counties)

Others connected this to a tradition of English heroism:

We seem to have moved, collectively, from the cult of hero (Nelson, Douglas Bader and Bobby Moore) to the cult of victim. (Unknown, south coast).

Here we see the POW theme explicitly invoked. Douglas Bader is an archetype for English "make do" ingenuity. Despite losing both legs in a flying accident, Bader was

allowed to re-enlist in the RAF during WWII. Shot down over France, so frequent were Bader's escape attempts that he was eventually held in to the infamous Colditz, placing him at the centre of POW mythology.

The WWII/public school theme emerges again among those who cast Johnson's trials in Churchillian terms:

You will rise again. Winston Churchill suffered wilderness years. He was more effective and impressive afterwards-and how! (female, south coast)

Think of Churchill. At your age, as I remember, he was sacked over the Dardanelles. It must have seemed as if everything was over. (Male, south coast)

It has been said...that Churchill had a sense of destiny throughout his Parliamentary career. However, on several occasions he had to regroup and reposition, and fight off the black dog-depression as well as his enemies. I hope you and your loved ones are able to overcome the current crisis (male, Oxfordshire)

Churchill's schooling at Harrow has been portrayed as central to the formulation of a maverick political career born of instinct rather than intellect (see for example Richard Attenborough's 1972 *Young Winston*). For some Borisphiles, these public school/WWII themes enabled them to narrate the Liverpool incident as a marker of a conventionally English unconventional politician.

So why not ask about pillow fights and prep schools? At the very least, the question locates why a lot of people cared about this story. But what does this say about power? Cull's analysis begins from the 1996 European Football Championships, where England fans adopted the theme from *The Great Escape* as their anthem. This, to Cull, represented; a. the importance of the POW myth to English nationalism and b. historical amnesia. For *The Great Escape* represents the exact moment when POW films stopped being about Englishness. Steve McQueen steals the show. Representation working class and Eastern European characters, and mass murder, the movie also ended the image of the WWII POW experience as a gentlemanly game of catch. Similarly with regard to Liverpool, regarding Johnson's actions as a charming shambles evades the persuasive charge that it represented a calculated strategy to play to the Tory heartland.

The problem with Cull's argument is that what *The Great Escape* was as a piece of film history and what it is as a cultural resource might be two different things. We could only know this by looking at the life world of Euro '96 fans. In similar fashion, while it is easy to see Borisphiles as unwitting victims of a media savvy political showman, Johnson's intellectual and stylistic acumen only partly explains why he struck a chord. At the very least, that it did raise all sorts of questions about why

other politicians and political issues are less engaging. Just as asking if they have pillow fights at prep schools makes sense, so too does studying why the question gets asked in the first place.

Images/Issues/Impacts concluded that politics is rarely a matter of good or bad, but good or bad for whom? Media politics needs clearly symbolized ideological differences between candidates. If this is so, then the Johnson scandal an exemplar. If we look at the people and events that draw audiences by taking politics into the popular; Arnold Schwarzenegger, George Galloway, Al Gore or Tony Benn, the common denominator is a willingness to represent difference; the immigrant, the maverick, the insider who decides the system has lost its relevance. It is far from clear if Galloway's Big Brother strategy achieved the goals he intended, but what it did do is raise the question of where politics should happen, how politicians should behave, and even who they should be.

In the Clinton/Bush/Perot study, we complained that aspirations toward managerial politics made little sense to voters for whom ideological difference still mattered. This being the case, we felt that the presence of a clearly labeled class discourse could only have helped make mediated politics more relevant. The "pillow fight" quote does show how class was at least visible in the Johnson scandal. But a wider view shows that this was not a discourse the showman controlled. Relatives of the Hillsborough victims claimed that the MP's visit and apology to Liverpool were acts calculated to play to the southern upper middle class Tory heartland. In doing so, they projected themselves beyond local issue politics onto a national stage. Between these reactions, we can see how Johnson productively polarized audiences; a matter of great significance given David Cameron's latest efforts to rebrand Conservatism as classless, not class-based. Hence in drawing an audience, no matter how ephemeral, Johnson manifested class as a political issue that is far from exhausted. Perhaps soon after writing his/her letter, the Jennings fan returned to a dream world of public school nostalgia; but not before he/she indicated how beneath the factual confusion of the Johnson scandal, the matter of what representation means in politics did become visible. The Member for Henley-On-Thames indeed "stood for" many things, but in doing so he also "acted for" those who did not share his politics in giving them a public platform. That is as real as it gets.

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[1] My first inclination was to contact the *Daily Post* and *Liverpool Echo* to arrange access to all of the letters submitted by readers during the affair. The only ones available were those published. Boris Johnson's office, in contrast, had kept, filed and responded to every letter sent. I have often been asked if it is possible that the MP had selected a sample of letters that he wanted me to see. I do not think he did. Many of the letters painted an unflattering picture of Johnson supporters. For example, the clash with Jewish Tory leader Michael Howard prompted a number of openly anti-Semitic missives. Also, the research was conducted in the midst of a general election

campaign. Johnson and his staff had better things to do than worry about what I might say about Liverpool. Of course his openness was also entirely in keeping with his central line on the whole affair; the need to be face up to one's mistakes.

[2] "Scouse" is a colloquial term for "of Liverpool origin".

[3] "Jennings" here refers to an 11-year-old public schoolboy who was the eponymous hero of a series of children's books written by Anthony Buckeridge, most of which were produced in the 50s and 60s.

[4] Jonathan Ross, who has styled himself as the UK's David Letterman, has a late night talkshow on BBC1. Its stock guests are drawn from show business. In 2006, David Cameron, the 39-year-old newly elected leader of the opposition Tory party, was asked to appear. The ensuing interview focussed on the question of whether Cameron harboured masturbatory fantasies about his political ancestor, Margaret Thatcher.

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