

Popular culture can help to engage young people with political ideas, but isn't enough on its own

By Democratic Audit

*Young people are generally of the firm opinion that politics is dull and politicians are not worth listening to. Research by **Sanna Inthorn, Martin Scott and John Street** shows that despite their disinterest, 16 and 17 year olds – through their engagement with popular culture – do partake in debates which can be termed 'proto-political'. However, a meaningful interaction with democratic structures won't occur until politicians can show themselves to be honest, credible, and passionate.*

How many teenagers do you know who can rattle off all cabinet members' names? How many would be keen to discuss the privatisation of Royal Mail with you? It is likely that you'd be politely, but firmly, told that politics is boring and not something they feel like talking about.

This is what we encountered in our research project [From Entertainment To Citizenship: Politics And Popular Culture](#). In focus groups and interviews we asked 16 to 17 year olds what they thought about politics and politicians. Almost unanimously, they declared politics to be irrelevant and dull. Many were quite cynical about politicians whom they described as bossy, loud and far removed from the everyday lives of people like them. They were suspicious of the motives of those politicians who make a point of publicly announcing what bands they like. To the young people we spoke to, such antics seem nothing but an act, a patronising attempt to get their votes.

They doubted whether politicians really want to listen to what young people have to say. Even those who were not openly dismissive of politicians' motives described government politics as a world that is closed to people like them. Many said they simply did not know enough about politics, or suggested that it is mainly older and arrogant men who command the respect needed for political leadership. If you are under age and have a secret passion for songs by Britney Spears, a world of loud and elderly men does not seem all that welcoming.

The young people we spoke to told us that government politics is simply 'not for them'. In contrast, what they declared to be absolutely for them was the world of popular culture. In conversations about television, video games and music, our participants spoke with great confidence about the quality of something they had seen or heard or played. They did not for one second think they had no right to discuss at great length the pleasures of a particular game, or the lyrics of a song. Unanimously, they told us that popular culture is fun. They also told us that it is something they use to 'switch off' and chill out, something they seek out when they don't want to think too much.

This, we realise, is likely to confirm the fears of those who might consider popular culture a threat to democracy, opium for the masses, something that stifles true creativity and critical thought. We are more optimistic. Yes, young people like popular culture because it can offer distraction. However, the pleasures they derive from it are more diverse than this. Our respondents told us how they enjoyed sharing the experience of watching television, playing games or listening to music.

Popular culture is a social and communal experience. Moreover, it gets them talking. And it is in talk about popular culture that young people seem to explore the moral and cultural values of their communities. This might not be a discussion about the privatisation of public services, but it is politics nevertheless. One example of this is the following exchange in one of our focus groups. Two participants got into a heated debate over whether on reality television children should be treated differently to adults:

A: If you've got an eight year old on there who thinks he can sing and his parents are too stupid to tell him that he can't. Then standing out on stage and Simon is like yelling at him. Probably find it quite entertaining.

B: It may be entertaining but it's quite mean.

A: I'm not sympathetic.

B: But telling them they are horrible on television.

A: But he tells adults as well and I don't see why it should be any different if they're a child.

B: But adults can take it.

A: Kids are more fragile. They haven't got any experience.

To us, such conversations are evidence of two things: young people engage in debates about the political and it is popular culture that stimulates such debates. We don't wish to overstate the significance of such 'political talk'. We accept that in order to engage in formal political processes it is not enough to have an opinion of judges' comments on reality television shows. The range of cultural capital that is required is richer than that. Talk about popular culture is often proto-political, a tentative exploration of issues of public concern without explicit connections to formal political structures.

Yet just because it is proto-political, does not mean that we should discount its importance altogether. We think it is a way to connect young people with formal government processes. Moreover, the politics of popular culture does not exist solely in this formative state. One of our respondents, for example, told us how hip hop stars such as Kanye West and Akon are 'just talking about how ... poverty is, and how people are starving.' He explained how when he listens to one of their songs 'it just hits your heart really and it just makes you feel you've got to become something really, and make worth what you've got in your life.'

Popular culture engages young people in political talk. However, just because they like entertainment does not mean that young people want formal politics to become like popular culture. They may want politicians to be more humorous, but, the main thing they seemed to be looking for in a politician is honesty and a personal, credible passion for a cause. This is why they would trust some celebrities more than a politician. One young woman told us, she would have trusted the late Jade Goody more than Gordon Brown, because of Goody's appearance on Big Brother where 'you see what she's really like'. A politician, this young woman told us, 'says things just to please everyone and make himself look good'.

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John Street is professor of politics at the University of East Anglia. He is the author of several books, including *Music and Politics*, *Politics and Technology*, *Rebel Rock: the politics of popular music*, *Politics and Popular Culture*, and *Mass Media, Politics and Democracy*, and is co-editor of the *Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*.

Sanna Inthorn is senior lecturer at the University of East Anglia. Her publications include *German Media and National Identity* and *Citizens or Consumers? What the media tell us about political participation* and various articles on political engagement and popular culture in journals such as *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *Cultural Sociology* and *Media, Culture & Society*.

Martin Scott is lecturer in Media and International Development at the University of East Anglia. He is author of a forthcoming book on media and development and has published widely on international television coverage.

