Tuesday, 27 January 2015, 12.00 - 12.30

Ana Stojiljkovic

The School of Media and Communication

University of Leeds

Extended Abstract  
**Celebrities and Election Campaigns: Populism and Forms of Attachment**

The use of celebrities in election campaigns has mostly been examined form the perspective of its effects on citizens’ electoral decisions, on media agenda, their ability to reach wider audiences, or from a normative perspective - value for democracy and public sphere. It has been dubbed ‘a cynical expression of desperate populism’ or an extension of modern democracy (Street, 2004). Politicians are accused of drawing on popularity of celebrities used in election campaigns and a sense of intimacy they share with their audiences and voters in general. The use of celebrities in election campaigns has been a product of the changing nature of politics and political communication and especially the rise in populist appeals. A rise in cynicism, distrust and apathy among voters has brought about the rise of the expressive, even theatrical dimension of political communication and campaigning. Politicians seeking broader public appeal and attempting to refer to popular sentiments have been turning to celebrities to serve as ‘cultural intermediaries’ (Bourdieu, 1984), deriving from their ‘media’ and ‘symbolic capital’ (Davies, 2010), performing at both the political and public and popular spheres (Corner, 2003). The modern trends of political communication and campaigning have also given rise to the ‘celebrity politician’ (Street, 2004), a term that later became associated with (but not limited to) the US President Barack Obama.

This paper, however, does not focus on celebrity politicians, or celebrity activists for that matter, but focuses on popular culture celebrities and their role in constructing political affiliations and constituting audience into an identity while publicly declaring support for a party or a candidate during an election campaign. Commonly, at first, the role of celebrities is considered to be engaging people with a discourse ‘they do not understand, find intimidating and regard as tedious’ (Coleman, 2001) and digesting complicated issues into accessible chunks of information (Evans, 2009). Further, by the force of public admiration and fame and familiarity, they gain authority and serve as role models in society (Corner, 2003, Street, 2004); they link the represented with the representatives in democracies (Wheeler, 2013) by appearing to be in touch with popular sentiment (Street, 2004). Through their engagement with politics, celebrities often succeed in bringing attention, personalising an issue or offering compassion, all the while supplying audiences with a point of identification (Evans, 2009). And not just any, but the most powerful form of identification in modern societies (Marshall, 1997). By acting as ‘representative embodiments for the rest of us of what it is like to be an individual’ but also ‘what it means to be a part of a wider collective identity’ in times when wider collectivities are becoming non-rational and emotional, celebrities serve to control the masses and channel their emotions (Hesmondhalgh, 2009). Additionally, celebrities have the ability to trigger the constitution of distinctions between their fans and the others as well as the constitution of in-group solidarity among fans (Fiske, 1991). Supposedly, celebrities can extend this ability to the political realm in the same manner, and influence the divisions among larger collective identities. In this way, celebrities relate to electorate, stir emotions and passions that help construct divisions and identities, ultimately directing the (voting) behaviour of citizens.

This paper draws on evidence from the recent election campaigns in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The two selected cases are prominent examples of communities in the process of redefinition of collective loyalties offered to their citizens. The two countries have had an identical starting point after the breakup of Yugoslavia; they were post-socialist, post-conflict, went through periods of collectivizing propaganda (first, communist and socialist and then nationalized) and then started transitioning towards democracy in very different arrangements. The major difference between Serbia and Bosnia is the ethnic composition of their populations that further influenced the political and electoral systems (especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina). For these reasons, they provide a good comparison for examining the nature of collective identities invoked by electoral appeals in different institutional and cultural contexts. Four campaigns (2006 and 2010 in Bosnia and Herzegovina and 2008 and 2012 in Serbia) were selected for their strategic focus on questions of ethnic identities. The strategy appears to be extended to the choice of celebrities involved in campaigns (for example, successful tennis players like Novak Djokovic in Serbia and controversial nationalist folk singer Svetlana Raznatovic in Bosnia and Herzegovina).

This paper is based on the textual analysis of party slogans, speeches at campaign closing rallies, PSB televised debates and specialized election talk shows and election manifestos and policy proposals of the parties competing in these elections. These campaign materials are supplemented by interviews with campaign professionals and candidates from the two countries but also focus groups with voters. I will perform an in depth qualitative analysis of these key materials that will allow me to make inferences about the nature of celebrities’ engagement in campaign appeals.

Initial analysis suggests that candidates and campaign managers in the two countries do not consider all aspects of celebrity involvement when making these choices but concentrate on the attention grabbing aspect. They are uncertain about the effects of the celebrity involvement and to what extent celebrity performance motivates voters. On the other hand, they appear to be firm that the choice of celebrity to be associated with a campaign is very important. Voters on the other hand react with passion and tend to identify themselves and others in relation to these celebrities.

The two countries differ in selection of celebrities involved with election campaigns, but still, celebrities in both countries invoke national/ethnic identities. In Serbia, major parties chose celebrities that serve as reference points of national heroes, examples of success and recognition in the world. The winner of Eurosong contest, renowned scientists, world famous athletes, are all examples of celebrities chosen by the biggest campaigns to tackle the dominant emotions among voters - cynicism and distrust towards the political and politicians. The strategy is to ignite feelings of national pride and coherence. In Bosnia and Herzegovina on the other hand, fear and hatred, remains of the ethnic war, seem to be the most powerful emotions among the electorate. In addition, the electoral system of the country is organised according to ethnic lines. Consequently, celebrities selected are of national importance or they are representative of neighbouring ethnic ‘motherlands’, or prominent performers of ethnic cultural forms. In such way, they are able to revive ethnic tensions and congregate groups around ethnic leaders.

The methodology selected for the study, content analysis of campaign materials complemented with focus groups and interviews with voters on one side, and interviews with campaign professionals on the other side, is a good tool to examine all sides of the production process of message design. However, given that celebrity involvement in election campaigns was a secondary finding in this study, further research into voters’ motivational and identification processes is needed. Also, data suggest that there are strategic differences among parties. Their ideologies and positions in relation to government structures influence campaigns' selection of celebrities. This implication also merits further investigation.