

Young people, politics and popular culture



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This is a report on the results of a project entitled 'From Entertainment to Citizenship: A comparative study of the political uses of popular culture by first time voters'. The project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and was conducted at the University of East Anglia by Professor John Street, Dr Sanna Inthorn and Martin Scott.

Executive summary

As we approach the UK general election in 2010, youth political disengagement will once again be on the agenda. Political parties will no doubt use popular culture in an attempt to engage young people in the political process and to encourage them to vote. This has certainly been characteristic of recent elections, as party leaders seek the endorsement of celebrities and appear on popular entertainment television shows. In the first ever detailed research into young people, politics and popular culture in the UK, we find that such attempts to exploit popular culture to engage young people are almost always doomed to fail. The young people in our study reveal themselves to be sceptical of blatant attempts to attract their attention and to gain their vote. At the same time, these young people do use popular culture in order to explore and express their political attitudes and ideas. In short, it is evident that popular culture is of direct political relevance and importance in our democracy, but it cannot be used – by media executives or politicians – as a crude instrument of public policy.

Introduction

Popular culture is often blamed for the ills of society. For example, politicians from the Labour and the Conservative parties, such as David Cameron and Kim Howells, have blamed rap for the spread of knife crime. The breakdown of the nuclear family has been attributed to television soap operas. In the same way popular entertainment generally has been identified as a cause of the decline in political participation. The leading American academic Robert Putnam argues (2001: 245) that 'Watching TV, videos, and computer windows onto cyberspace is ever more common. Sharing communal activities is ever less so.' Our study draws more positive conclusions about the political role of popular culture.

Nonetheless, the situation is serious. Voter turnout among 18-25 year olds continues to be lower than for other age groups, a state of affairs compounded by their disillusionment with mainstream politics. A recent survey of over 1,500 UK teenagers showed that 63% of 13 to 18-year-olds would not vote if the legal age was lowered (Piczo 2008). The main reason for young people's reluctance was the feeling that voting had no effect on public policy (31%). Added to this, 46% said that they had no respect for politicians and 67% said that government policy was biased against their age group. Our results from a smaller survey reveal that young people do not see national and local politicians as having any direct relevance to their lives.

Among the many explanations for the decline in youth engagement in mainstream politics is the suggestion that popular culture either breeds this cynicism or indifference towards politics, or that simply by occupying more of everybody's time squeezes political participation to the margins. It is certainly true that the UK represents a nation of television watchers – adults watch an average of 16 hours a week, while their children spend hours online, playing video games and listening to music, as well as in front of a TV set (Ofcom 2009).

Our research, however, challenges the conventional wisdom about the relationship between popular culture and politics. We found that rather than distancing people from politics, popular culture forms part of our engagement with politics, and while young people may avow a lack of interest in or cynicism about mainstream politics, they often use popular culture to engage with a broader politics.

The research reported here is based on a qualitative study of young people aged 16 to 18. It involved a small survey questionnaire, focus groups and individual interviews. Our aim was to look in detail at how young people talked about and used popular culture to relate to politics.

What follows is a summary of the key findings of the project. Further details of our research project and a more complete account of our findings can be found on the project website

www.uea.ac.uk/psi/e2c or by contacting
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Key finding 1:

Young people are aware of the importance of politics, but feel that the way it is covered in the news fuels their sense of political disengagement

Presenting politics

Young people combine a disdain for politics with a feeling of ignorance about it.

'To be honest, I don't think any of us really know anything about politics'. (Chloe¹, year 12)

'I don't know anything about politics, so I won't vote properly'. (Sean, year 13)

Politics can be felt to be something that is not immediately relevant to young peoples' lives and young people don't know how they can make a difference.

'I don't need to hear everything that's going on in the world, it doesn't make a difference, I don't think it really directly affects me'. (Arjan, year 12)

Young people do watch the news, if only out of habit because their family watches it.

'My parents will always have it on. As children we were kind of taught that this is what you watch at 6 o'clock'. (Craig, year 12)

The lack of political efficacy felt by young people is linked to the way politics is covered in news and current affairs programmes. The young people we spoke to found the presentation of news to be off-putting and said that news lacked relevance to their lives.

'The only access we have to politics is the grown up programmes like the news and stuff; you don't understand everything on there like what every party believes and all that kind of stuff'. (Paul, year 12)

'When I turn on the news it's really boring and they are always behind desks and they are looking into the camera'. (Akim, year 13)

'You listen to the news on the radio and it's always the same voice talking in headlines'. (Paula, year 12)

Young people perceive the news as being 'biased', and focussing too much on 'bad news'.

'The news is just rubbish; they just show us what they want to show us'. (Katie, year 12)

'When you watch the news you tend to see a lot of bad things, and I'm thinking, where are all the good things in life?' (Toby, year 12)

'The news just scares you into thinking things you don't really need to think about'. (Jack, year 12)

'News is so biased, you can't really believe it'. (Clive, year 13)

They felt that the issues that are relevant to their lives were being squeezed out of the news agenda, and as a result they became disconnected from the wider society.

'If you can't engage with it, what's the point in watching it?' (Alexandra, year 12)

But despite their self-proclaimed ignorance about politics, young people do recognise the importance of politics.

'I suppose politics is all around you; it's governing you and everything'. (Graham, year 12)



Bubbles Photolibrary / Alamy

¹ The names have been changed to preserve anonymity. Year 12 and 13 are the last two years of school study in England.

Key finding 2:

Politics, in its various guises, is present in all forms of popular culture and, as such, is part of the political world of young people

Just entertainment?

If the news does not engage young people in politics, where else might they encounter politics in the media? Is there anything to be learnt about politics outside of news and current affairs? Many popular entertainment television programmes, video games and popular music contain references to politics. The opening sequence of the video for Metallica's 'One', for example, contains the following exchange from the film *Johnny Got His Gun* (1971) between Henry Fonda and a young boy.

- Boy:** What is democracy?
Fonda: Got something to do with young men killing each other, I believe.
Boy: When it comes to my turn, will you want me to go?
Fonda: For democracy, any man would give his only begotten son.

Other references to politics in popular culture include a mention of the election of Barack Obama in *Eastenders*, numerous anti-Bush sentiments in the lyrics of the rapper Eminem and others, and various video games which allow players to re-enact events, such as the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre (*9/11 Survivor*), the First Gulf War (*Kuma\War*) and the assassination of John F. Kennedy (*JFK Reloaded*).

While these references to traditional politics in popular culture are important, politics is about more than governments and the actions of nation-states. Politics is about identity; what it means to be British, to be a woman or a man, to be a Christian or a Muslim. Politics is also about relationships with the police, teachers, parents, the media, and it is about morality – such things as equality, fairness and justice. Numerous references to these wider forms of politics can be found in many different forms of popular culture.

Popular music, for example, offers young people the chance to identify themselves with others and with a wider community.

'Because I'm a Christian I listen to gospel music sometimes because it just tends to lift me up, lift my spirit up and make me think about God'. (Catherine, year 12)

Soap operas frequently present young people with attitudes to authority figures such as the police.

'A lot of people don't trust the police. I don't think Hollyoaks helps because [that policeman] is meant to be an upstanding member of the community but he is hitting people and killing people behind the scenes'. (Edward, year 12)

Computer games often pose moral dilemmas and offer young people the chance to experience the consequences of the choices they make.

'On the game Fable I chose to save these thousands of people who died and everyone else chose to save their dog'. (Natalia, year 13)

'Fable 2 is quite good with morals because, if you make a bad decision, you kill someone, you turn more evil and it gives you evil points, whereas if you spare their life you get good points, and it reflects on the character you are'. (Henry, year 12)

Key finding 3:

Young people use popular culture to find out and to explore what it means to be a citizen

Popular culture and being a citizen

How do young people learn to be citizens? The answer lies in part with what they claim to learn from popular culture.

Popular culture helps young people to gather knowledge about the political world. While the news may provide young people with the information and 'facts' about government and party politics, entertainment television can help educate them about social issues, such as health and crime:

'I think it's really good for people of our age to see things like the anorexia, drug use and teenage pregnancies [on Hollyoaks]'. (James, year 12)

'I learn a lot more from One Tree Hill than sometimes what I learn from the news'. (Katrina, year 13)

Popular culture helps young people understand and express their relationship with their fellow citizens. Even video games – which are often criticised for turning young people into aggressive loners – are important. Playing games allows young people to test the boundaries of social rules and helps them learn something about being a good citizen.

Young people are not fooled into believing that video games are anything like the real world. They make a distinction between the virtual world of computer games where these rules do not apply and the real world where they do.

'If you run over an old lady in Grand Theft Auto you don't care and if you did, you just turn it off. There are no consequences to it'. (Liam, year 12)

Popular culture helps young people appreciate the values that bind them together. The behaviour of the judges on programmes like *X Factor*, for example, encourages young people to think about values such as justice and fairness.

'I think you need people like Simon Cowell. I know it sounds harsh but you have to face reality. If you are not good, you're not good. You need someone down to earth that says it like it is, and that's what Simon Cowell does'. (Valeska, year 13)



Key finding 4:

Young people use popular culture to talk about the politics of everyday life

Fans and citizens?

The academic Liesbet van Zoonen (2005) argues that there is a continuity between being a fan and being a citizen, and in our research we found direct evidence of this link. One of our respondents talked about whether Jeremy Clarkson would make a good prime minister:

'Jeremy Clarkson seems like [he would be] a good politician because he has a boisterous personality and his views are one-sided and most of the politicians that I've met in person are like that'. (Naomi, year 13)

But such connections between the world of entertainment and formal politics were relatively rare. More often, the young people in our study use popular culture to think and talk about the kinds of politics they encounter in their everyday lives. In particular, they often talk about the differences between genders in their discussions of popular culture.

'I think girls learn more from a soap opera, not being sexist or anything but I think girls do learn more because all the story lines are related to girls'. (Oliver, year 13)

'Girls don't really like shooting stuff, they go for the cuddly animals, fluffy bunny rabbit games'. (Zack, year 12)

And they talk about being British when they judge television programmes.

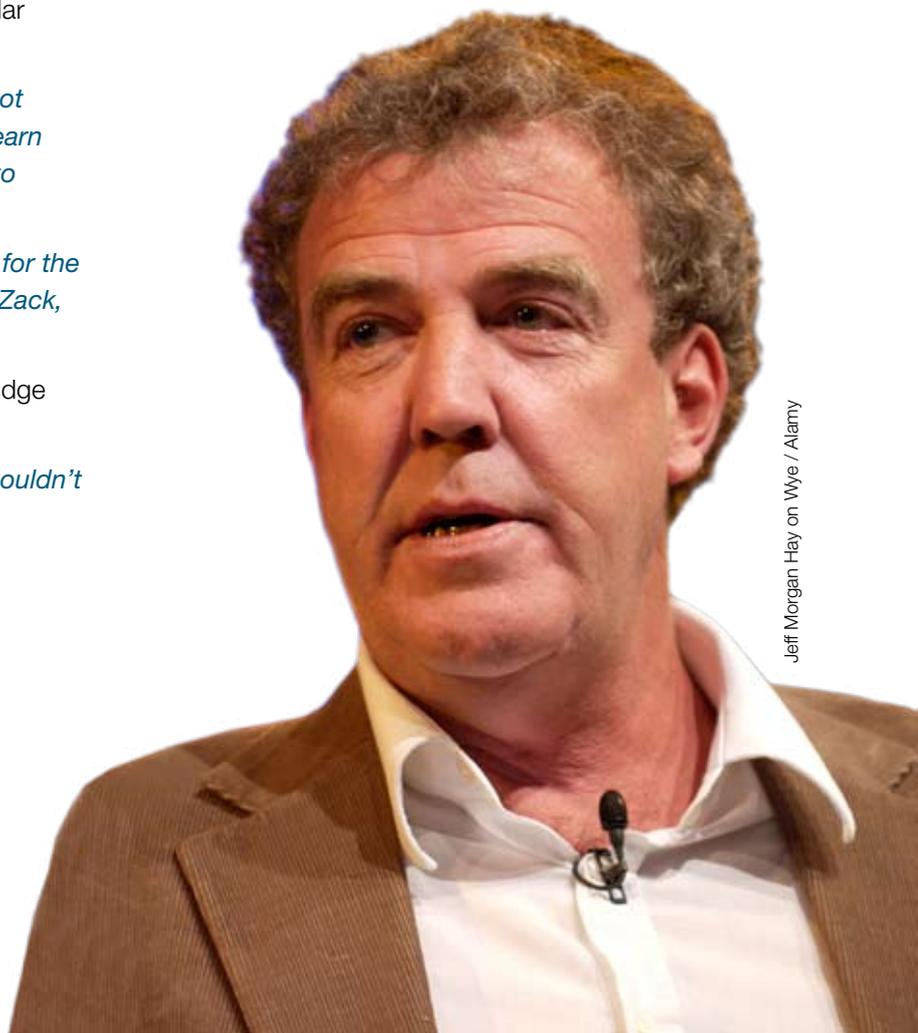
'I think the programmes that Britain makes wouldn't really treat people cruelly'. (Fraser, year 12)

Popular culture can be an effective way of engaging young people in politics because issues can be presented in a way that young people relate to more easily.

'I don't think I'm that interested in politics. But if music said something about it, then maybe I would stop and think about it'. (Simon, year 12)

'I would listen to more politics in a song than if a politician was talking. If they made up a rap about what the issues were, I would listen to it, instead of them just talking. I think in some ways it's just easier to understand'. (Thomas, year 13)

'Me and my friends don't really know that much about politics at all, so if it was kind of thrown into the stuff we do know a lot about, like games, it would be a lot better. Politics is one of those things I'm interested in, but finding out about it isn't very interesting to do'. (Leanne, year 13)



Jeff Morgan Hay on Wye / Alamy

Key finding 5:

Popular culture has the potential to motivate young people to care about contemporary issues and other people

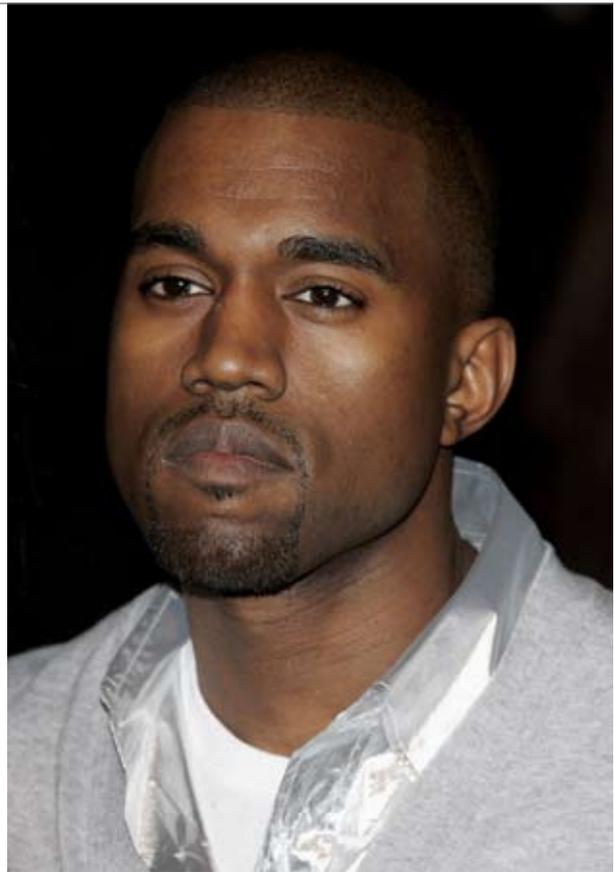
Caring about politics

Politics is not just about knowledge, morality and identity. It is about caring. One of the questions rarely asked is why people come to care about one issue rather than another. We suggest that one part of the explanation is how popular culture energises our feelings and sentiments and focuses our concerns. The young people we spoke to provided evidence of this.

'In Diamonds are Forever, Kanye West is talking about poverty and how people are starving and we're living in a good society and we should make the most of it... listening to a song like that, it hits you so deep, and then it makes you want to do more in life, become a better person and you obviously act upon that. When you're older you want to look after your own family and maybe give money out to the poor'. (Daniel, year 12)

Other research (Austin *et al*, 2008; Jackson & Darrow, 2005) has shown that celebrity endorsements do have some effect on the willingness of young people to support particular causes or politicians. Or put another way, conventional ways of engaging with politics leave young people unmoved.

'I think people probably find it quite difficult to listen to politicians, mostly because of the way they word things. It's more around the point and trying to make everything sound more appealing'. (Anna, year 13)



Alistar picture library / Alamy

Young people become politically involved through popular culture. This is particularly true of popular music which young people often value as being more authentic and 'real' in comparison with television and video games.

'You are more drawn to musicians who appear passionate about something. It is kind of someone to look up to because they are giving you their view on things when sometimes it is really hard to form your own view on things because you've got so much information coming in from everywhere'. (Sam, year 12)

'If Lily Allen talked about politics then more people would listen to it'. (Akim, year 12)

Key finding 6:

Young people's sense of being in control of their world is often expressed through their criticism of the fake or inauthentic in popular culture. They look for evidence of authenticity and genuine authority before trusting leaders or those who claim to represent them

Reality check

For many people, mass media are one of the main sources of power in modern society. But equally, it is assumed that the media literate or the “media savvy” are those who are able to resist and challenge this power. Young people are often thought of as the most media literate section of society. They seem to be able to adapt easily to using a range of new technologies, but also to adopt a critical, irreverent attitude towards what they watch, listen to and play.

Young people themselves are keen to promote this idea. When talking about television and computer games, they are critical of the conventions of the media, whether it's the acting style, the editing or the ‘realism’ of the content.

‘Most things on TV are set up. They are not real’.
(Scott, year 12)

‘Hollyoaks is so wooden and there is so much going on at once, and they just can't act, and it is just the most ridiculous drivel I've ever seen in my entire life’. (Clive, year 13)

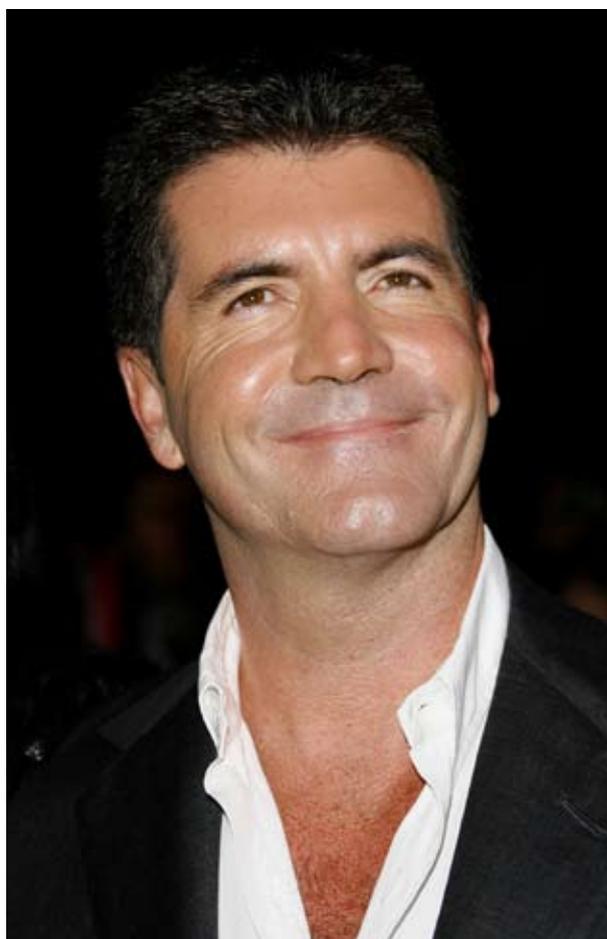
‘In X factor, you can see from the editing how they have completely made people out to be what they want the viewers to know them as.’ (Linda, year 12)

‘I think the things Simon Cowell says are because he knows what people expect him to say and that is what he gets paid ridiculously for. It's fake’.
(Amy, year 12)

While we found plenty of evidence of young people expressing a critical distance from what they see in the media, we also found evidence of young people uncritically believing in media representations of the social and political world. Celebrities and experts are trusted if they seem to have experience and evidence of (often business) success.

‘The Apprentice gets you ready for life, for when you go and get a job. You know what to expect from a boss like Allan Sugar. Business is harsh so he needs to be. You learn lessons [from The Apprentice] because that is how business really is.’
(Annabel, year 13)

Young people are generally not as critical of popular music as they are of television and video games. One young person's comment that popular music is ‘made by the people, for the people’ was typical and contrasts starkly with the criticisms of television and video games.



Key finding 7:

Many young people are dismissive of celebrities who talk about traditional political issues. However, they do take notice of those celebrities who talk about the politics in their own lives

Young people and celebrity politicians

Following the success of ventures such as Live8, the celebrity politician is often represented as the way to engage young people in politics. Celebrities are also used to raise young people's awareness for social issues, such as health. Our research shows that young people do not reject these attempts out of hand. But it also shows that the choice of celebrity maybe crucial in determining the success of such campaigns. Young people are sceptical and dismissive of celebrities – like Bono – who use their fame to talk about politics.

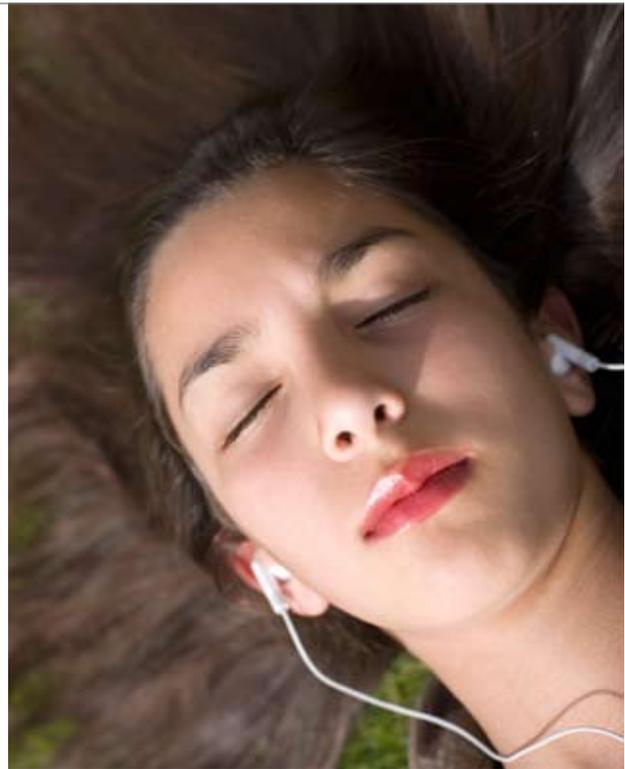
'I tend to find them quite hypocritical, like Bono, I just can't stand him... they just talk about things because they can. They could do more to help'. (David, year 12)

'It's all very well for them to talk about global warming, but they're not going to start giving up things'. (Geri, year 12)

Many of the young people we spoke to reject the suggestion that these celebrities spoke for them or represented their views. For them the stars had no special insights or were doing it for purely selfish reasons.

'They don't know what they are talking about. They just do it for the money [or] to promote their fame'. (Ariel, year 13)

Given the rise in celebrity involvement in politics, it will be increasingly difficult to find celebrities that can pass as genuinely interested in a particular cause. Young people are highly sceptical of celebrities' motives and scrutinise their actions. Yet despite this strong level of cynicism, there were some performers, such as Eminem, whom young people do relate to and take notice of when they spoke about politics in their own lives.



Geoff du Feu / Alamy

'Certain artists like Eminem write about his life and talks about his life, so you can take things that he says and say, oh, that's what happened in my life'. (Lucy, year 12)

'When people talk about their lives they kind of personalise it a bit more and you can kind of, not necessarily attach, but you can kind of feel how they are feeling, but when they are talking about other stuff, it's just like you are just like the rest of them'. (Taya, year 12)

These were artists whom young people perceived as being passionate and 'real' and whom they can relate to.

Young people trusted and respected these particular celebrities far more than politicians because they felt politicians always spoke with an agenda and with their audience in mind rather than 'speaking about the truth about their own lives'.

When asked whether they would trust Jade Goody rather than Gordon Brown, one of our respondents said,

'Yeah, I probably would, probably because she's been in the media attention and obviously she's been in Big Brother, so you can see what she's really like as opposed to a politician who says things just to please everyone and make himself look good' (Una, year 13).

Conclusion

The way traditional politics is covered in the news can fuel young people's apparent disengagement from traditional politics. By contrast, popular culture can be an effective way of engaging young people in politics because issues are presented in a way that young people relate to more easily. Popular culture can also motivate young people to care about contemporary issues and other people.

But while news organisations and others may learn from our research about what role popular culture can play in engaging youth audiences, young people can see through superficial attempts to capture their attention. Celebrities talking about politics, for example, do not automatically provide a short cut to engaging young people. Equally, young people are suspicious of political messages in soap operas and other forms of popular culture. If popular culture is to be used to engage young people in politics, it is crucial that young people are taken seriously as experienced consumers of media culture. Young citizens want politics to be relevant to their lives. This means taking their concerns and experiences seriously, but without packaging them in simplistic and patronising ways.

Contact us

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Credits

Image page 3: Girl watching tv in her bedroom. Bubbles Photolibrary / Alamy
 Image page 5: Grand Theft Auto IV videogame. Richard Levine / Alamy
 Image page 6: Jeremy Clarkson. Jeff Morgan Hay on Wye / Alamy
 Image page 7: Kanye West. Allstar picture library / Alamy
 Image page 8: Simon Cowell. Allstar picture library / Alamy
 Image page 9: Girl Listening to Music. Geoff du Feu / Alamy
 Image page 10: Lily Allen. Trinity Mirror / Mirrorpix / Alamy

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Sanna Inthorn is lecturer of society, culture and media at the University of East Anglia. In her research she explores the relationship between popular culture and social identities. She is author of *German Media and National Identity* and co-author of *Citizens or Consumers: What the Media Tell us about Political Participation*.

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