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# Politicians, Celebrities and Social Media: A case of informalization?

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## Abstract

With electoral politics no longer organised by social class, politicians increasingly seek to relate to a broad spectrum of citizens and part of their relatability is conjured through more casual, informal performances aimed at cultivating authenticity. The various platforms of social media promote forms of authentic communication by blurring the public/private divide, creating 'spontaneous' and instant access to 'real life'. This article seeks to investigate the informalization thesis (Wouters, 2007) by applying it to data from young people aged 16-21 years in Australia, the UK and the USA asked about the way politicians and celebrities use social media. Findings reveal respondents' desire for more authentic and accessible politicians, but this was in direct tension with traditional views and expectations of politicians needing to be professional, informed and worthy of respect. Informalization amongst politicians is evident and welcomed by young citizens but persistent traditional views means it also threatens their credibility.

## Key Words:

Authenticity; celebrity; informalization; politicians; politics; social media; young citizens

## Introduction

Politicians in many established democracies frequently try to present themselves as accessible, relatable and authentic individuals. Such informality and casualness is revealed in the title of a recent biography of British Prime Minister David Cameron: *Call Me Dave* (Ashdown and Oakeshott, 2015). The media also helps cultivate this less formal and relatable image of some politicians by representing them in 'private' or backstage settings such as on holiday, at home and with family. We may understand this as part of politicians' strategies to relate to citizens who in many established democracies increasingly show a lack trust in politicians, weak connections to political parties and low levels of electoral participation. Indeed, this electoral disengagement is particularly pronounced for young citizens (e.g. Blais and Rubenson 2013). Alternatively, the increased casualness and informality affected by many politicians may be *facilitated* by these changes within politics but they may be part of a much wider historical process of informalization (Wouters, 2007), reflecting the relaxation of social hierarchies and incremental egalitarianism.

Despite persistent, and in some areas increasing, inequalities (e.g. Dorling, 2015; Piketty, 2014), in some societies parts of social life have become more 'relaxed' and social hierarchies have become less rigid. Wouters (2007) describes this as a process of 'informalization', whereby expressing feelings of social superiority have become a much less common feature of social life. Informalization does not mean anything goes, but that people are increasingly subject to 'the constraint to be unconstrained, at ease, authentic and natural' (p. 90). Within this broader social process of informalization, this paper explores how social media technology facilitates the demand for and access to 'authentic' communication from politicians and celebrities and how such communication is interpreted by young citizens.

Previous studies have focused on the relationship between celebrity, politics and politicians (Street, 2003; Marsh, Hart and Tindall, 2010; Wheeler, 2013) with emphasis on politicians becoming like celebrities in their style and marketing. There is also a growing body of work on celebrity activists who are becoming increasingly political. Within another research agenda much has been published on young people and social media including studies of undergraduate use of social media platforms (Quan-Haase and Young, 2010) or the impact of celebrity on notions of hard work and career aspirations (Allen and Mendick, 2015). However, amidst a context of young people's disengagement from electoral politics (e.g. Cammaerts et al 2016), it is notable that limited consideration has been paid to the contribution of politicians' use of social media as a means of engaging young citizens. Even fewer connections have been made between social media usage by politicians and celebrities to engage young people and how young citizens' perceive such media activity. This paper seeks to address these research gaps through data gathered from young people aged between 16-21 in Australia, the UK and USA.

The paper proceeds in three parts. In the following section we outline Wouters' (2007) informalization thesis and set out the changes in politics and popular culture which place an emphasis on authenticity and connection to everyday life. Here we also discuss the way social media technologies facilitate access to the 'authentic' through its documentary and instantaneous capabilities. The following section outlines the methodological approach of the present study. The final section sets out our findings about young people's interpretations of celebrities and politicians' use of social media before concluding.

### **Informalization: politics, celebrity and social media**

Wouters developed his notion of informalization through a comparative analysis of changes in American, Dutch, English and German manners books from the late nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century. In the footsteps of Elias (2000), Wouters' analysis of manners is used to explore changes in social hierarchy and emotion regulation or self-regulation. During the twentieth century, Wouters identified a general trend across the four countries of increasing informalization; previously forbidden behaviours became permissible and the regulation of conduct and behaviour in many parts of social life became less formal. These shifts reflect greater levels of social integration and mixing as well as declining social and psychic distance between individuals and groups. One clear exception to this trend was the way displays of superiority and inferiority became increasingly tabooed. As such, we are not witnessing a liberation of emotional and behavioural alternatives instead, formal rules and expectations have gradually been replaced by increased demands for self-

regulation. As manners become less formally regulated we are increasingly asked to look 'natural' in our adoption of alternative behavioural and emotional conduct. Hence the easing of social formality does not mean 'anything goes', but entails a new imposition for increased self-regulation. For Wouters we are increasingly under 'a constraint to be unconstrained, at ease, and authentic.' (2007: 4)

As with interpersonal relations, manners and etiquette, social change has rendered young people's relationship with electoral politics less structured and formal. The shift away from an electoral politics where social class and vote were closely aligned (Best, 2011) has meant a more complex and changeable relationship between vote preference and social position has emerged. The kind of social change described by Wouters has also produced less deferential societies, as seen in the rise of *Critical Citizens* (Norris, 2011) who are less trusting of governments and question and challenge their political leaders. Part of this shift means that even the electoral participation of citizens is not guaranteed, with the decline in electoral participation amongst young people being particularly pronounced (Blais and Rubenson, 2013). A number of authors argue that young citizens are leading a shift away from duty-based notions of citizenship which prioritise electoral politics, towards self-actualising and non-institutionalised forms of civic participation (e.g. Dalton, 2009; Hooghe and Oser, 2015; Author D, 2015). This complex political sphere, with its multiple meanings of politics and new, changing political repertoires that implicate the self and one's identity, is characteristic of late modern societies and processes of detraditionalization (Giddens, 1994). For many young citizens, their relationship with politics – be it electoral or extra-electoral – may be less related to their social position within social structures, and more bound up with processes of reflexivity, self-expression and self-actualisation.

Other forces also facilitate a less structured and more individualized engagement with electoral politics. Some argue that we are witnessing a 'presidentialization' of politics, whereby political leaders across different countries and political systems have increasingly become a focal point for politics and exercise greater power in executive and party contexts (Poguntke and Webb, 2005). The increasing mediatization of politics has also worked to emphasise political leaders over and above political parties and the private lives of politicians are also politicised (Strömbäck, 2008; Staneyr 2013). The decline in partisanship and membership of political parties across many countries (Whiteley, 2011) further undermines the collectivist basis of citizens' relationship with electoral politics.

The demise of electoral politics organised around social class, with widespread party membership and activism has left political parties and many politicians more disconnected from citizens than in the past. In an effort to bridge this divide, some politicians attempt to evidence their representative suitability by demonstrating connections with everyday life and popular culture. They attempt to cultivate feelings of affinity amongst citizens by experientially and/or somatically reflecting the electorate back to themselves (Manning and Holmes, 2014). This occurs through a range of means and may include evoking their experience as a parent or spouse, through a regional accent or using the vernacular, bodily comportment and other efforts at humility. These performances are about exhibiting one's credibility, experience and skill for the job with a convincing informality and authenticity; the subtext is 'I understand you because I am like you. I know your troubles, I know the problems in *our* area and I can make things better.'

An analogous process of informalization, increasing familiarity and even intimacy can also be seen in the realm of celebrity and celebrity culture; described by Turner (2004) as a 'demotic turn'. This is evident in the increasing visibility of the 'ordinary' and 'ordinary' people in popular media, the spread of celebrity culture and its colonization of everyday life in much of the West, particularly for young people (Turner 2006). The importance of celebrity in these formats is aimed at a particular recognition of the self; the demotic turn constitutes an expansion of the public sphere (Turner, 2010) with media increasingly involved in the construction of cultural identity. The informalization associated with the demotic turn is expanded beyond television and radio to include social media as a key driver of growing participation of 'ordinary' people in the media and public sphere and the blurring of public and private.

Social media can facilitate the informalization trends described above for politics and celebrity. While social media platforms are far from egalitarian or solely a force for positive social change (Freedman, 2014), its various platforms promote forms of 'authentic' communication by blurring the public/private divide. Social media provides for the publicization of 'private' everyday activities (e.g. through 'selfies'), the sharing of 'private' thoughts and opinions as well as being used to publicise 'public' parts of one's life (e.g. work achievements). Moreover, social media is instantaneous, enabling 'real life' to be captured spontaneously making posts less formal, quickly composed, with many containing slang and abbreviations or resembling a stream of consciousness. These characteristics lend themselves to 'authentic' and 'genuine' representations, composed quickly to document a moment or share a current preoccupation. This provides potential intimacy with fellow social media users to the extent that details of private daily lives and routines are revealed in the public sphere (Beer and Penfold-Mounce, 2009). This accessibility to the private by 'ordinary' people in a public space suggests a distinct lack of script, working to making the private in public appear authentic. A great deal of care and consideration *may* go into the composition of some posts, but this is not in keeping with the instantaneous nature of the media or its capacities for transcending public/private divides. Furthermore, unlike the static media of magazines and television, social media is often used by celebrities to provide fans with constant, interactive and instantaneous access to the 'private' lives of celebrities; access which can cultivate enduring relationships and intimacies (Ferris and Harris 2011).

Social media enhances the paradoxical ability of politicians and celebrities to present themselves as both ordinary and extraordinary (Harvey, Allen and Mendick, 2015; Ekman and Widholm, 2014). Politicians and celebrities can use social media to emphasise ordinary, everyday dimensions of their persona, or the other extreme where they are extraordinary due to associations with other high profile individuals, luxury goods and glamorous lifestyles. For Coleman (2006: 468), our mediated politics means 'the role of being a representative entails appearing to be someone who is extraordinary enough to represent others, but ordinary enough to be representative of others.' This is interwoven with the stylistic convention increasingly deployed by politicians where they try to present themselves as 'cool'. This is not just about being popular but being popular in a particular way. They want to be stylish as celebrities are stylishly cool. These associations are derived from the cultural value placed on cool and also the notion of authenticity associated with it; for "Cool' represents being in charge *and* in touch' and meets the criteria of someone being authentically representative (Street, 2003: 96). However this is a risky presentational strategy for politicians – the popular culture origins of cool often involve challenging or opposing the very authority politicians seeks to assert, whilst contemporary notions of 'cool' are typically indifferent to politics (Street,

2003). Pountain and Robins take this further asserting that to be cool is to display personality traits of narcissism, ironic detachment and hedonism which are very difficult styles for politicians to achieve. In their words, 'Cool is never directly political, and politics, almost by definition, can never be Cool' (2000: 26, 171). Striving for authenticity and cool is a fraught endeavour for contemporary politicians, but a strategy adopted by some as a means of engaging citizens who are increasingly disengaging from electoral politics (Manning and Holmes 2013).

The question of how young citizens interpret politician and celebrity attempts to be authentic and 'cool' on social media is significant as popular culture and politics are often conceived as mutually exclusive fields with young people having little interest in electoral politics. At the same time, social media and the Internet are considered to be effective tools in revitalising democracy (e.g. Bond et al., 2012; Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Xenos et al., 2014). Indeed, Margaretten and Gaber's (2014) analysis of Scottish MPs use of Twitter highlights the platforms' potential to promote 'authentic talk'. Nonetheless, we know little from young people themselves about how they interpret politicians' use of social media or how they perceive and interpret politicians on social media relative to celebrities who use social media for political purposes (Street, 2012). This dearth of understanding about young people, politics and social media reflects a similar lack of understanding about young people's engagement with celebrity. Within celebrity studies there are calls for an expansion of data beyond textual analysis of celebrity to include data such as interviews, political economies and focus group work to improve our comprehension (Ferris, 2007; Allen, Harvey and Mendick, 2015). Here we take up this dual call within two different arenas of research for more empirical and comparative work with data from three late modern democratic societies: Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States of America (USA).

## Method

Our findings are derived from a larger project undertaken to investigate the use of social media by young citizens for political engagement (Loader, Vromen and Xenos 2016). The project involved a large survey (N= 3,691) of young people aged 16-21 in Australia, the UK and the USA<sup>i</sup> this quantitative data was complemented by twelve online discussion groups (four per country) that were subsets of the main survey sample. For our analysis in this article we use the responses of the young people who participated in the online discussion group using IPSOS-Mori's online discussion boards. These took place over three days in September 2013 comprising online asynchronous group responses producing data similar to responses to open-ended questions. The moderator and researchers were all able to follow and interact with the groups using follow-up questions but this was fairly minimal – indeed, interaction amongst respondents was limited. In total 107 young people participated (approximately 9 per group) with 56% female members. By using the survey results, participants were purposefully recruited according to their reported levels of political participation (low 0-3 acts, high 7-13 acts) and their socio-economic status (SES), using their parents' educational attainment as a proxy (both vs neither parents had higher education).<sup>ii</sup>

From the dataset three particular questions related to celebrity politics, two of which form the basis for the present analysis. One question asked respondents

*What do you think of politicians posting this sort of thing?*

The images shown were country specific and included a 'selfie' of then Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, President Barack Obama and then Mayor of London Boris Johnson; all have been active Twitter users and are generally popular with young people. Two of the three images (Boris Johnson and Barack Obama) featured the politician with politically engaged celebrities. A second question asked respondents:

*What do you think about celebrities who use social media to talk about social issues? Is this different from politicians using social media? In what ways? Is this more or less genuine than when politicians use social media? Why?*

Transcripts of the responses to the questions from each of the 107 participants were later thematically coded by the authors. These online discussion groups provide, we believe, a valuable source of data with which to gain a deeper insight into the attitudes of young people towards politicians and political celebrities performing in their social networking domains. The methods used mirror those of political marketing and enabled the groups to be drawn from the commercial panel to produce a representative social sample in all three countries. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that online discussion groups do not allow the kinds of intensive, in-depth enquiry that can be enabled by one-to-one interviews over an extended period in their own environment. Further, the use of online rather than face-to-face group interviews limited the scope for participants to co-produce and discuss interpretations and experiences of politicians and celebrities on social media. Indeed, we would suggest that methods/methodologies which yield more in-depth data would be an ideal way to further test the findings and conclusions set out in what follows.

### **Politician's use of Social media: achieving authenticity?**

Many respondents were positive about the images provided to discussion groups of politician's use of social media. They thought they were generally a good thing, working to humanise them, showing them as fallible, capable of "fun" and revealed them as more than just politicians:

It is good. Many people want to see their leaders as normal people, instead of puppets controlled by speechwriters and policy makers. To see that somebody has a sense of humour, and is a flawed person, like the rest of us can have a very strong impact. (Male Australia)

Importantly these views were generally shared across countries and genders:

I think it is totally fine for politicians to post something like this on Twitter. It makes them seem more real, not trying to hide anything. If you open up to the people, the people will want a better connection because it seems more real than superficial. (Male USA)

I think that it is fine because it shows that politicians are able to engage with other people and different cultures. It shows that politicians are not always serious that they have fun as well; they are just like us. (Female USA)

I think its quite positive to see politicians and celebrities posting impromptu like images and messages – makes me connect better with them (Male UK)

Definitely, this is great to see! It will get more young people interested I think. (Female UK)

This kind of visual use of social media was seen by some participants as a way of engaging young people in politics because of the connection it made between the young citizen and the politician. Moreover, as suggested in the excerpts above, such communication strategies were often seen as enhancing the authenticity of politicians. Many respondents felt such social media presence revealed politicians to be “just like us”, more “real” and “down to earth” (Female Australia). These ordinary communications of politicians are notable because it makes them extraordinary. We can understand these communication strategies as politicians appealing to citizens' feelings of affinity. Holmes (2010) argues that processes of detraditionalisation mean people are increasingly reliant on emotional reflexivity in a world where established ways of being and doing can no longer be taken for granted. Processes of social change have meant electoral politics is no longer organised around divisions of social class. Politicians increasingly present themselves not as policy experts or representatives of a class, but as people with connections to everyday life, people “just like us”. Their claims to leadership are often grounded in a performance of connections to everyday life which, they imply, provides them with an understanding of the concerns and issues important to ‘ordinary’ citizens (Manning and Holmes 2014). Young people in the present study often thought politicians were “normalised” (Male UK) by social media uses which showed them with celebrities, “hanging out” (Female USA), able to “have fun” (Female USA) or making mistakes.

In line with Wouters account of informalization and the taboo surrounding displays of superiority and inferiority, here we see political elites attempting to project themselves as being of the people, and many respondents were attracted by the presentation of accessible, relatable politicians who seem “just like us”. Social media can facilitate access, exchange and accountability across profound social divisions and as such, may promote political engagement amongst groups (e.g. young people) who often feel excluded from politics and the political classes (Keane, 2002). While such uses of social media were generally viewed positively and thought to promote engagement, there was some concern that such forms of communication could be a distraction from the important real work of politics:

They should be out doing their job and being seen to be working. [...] should spend their time working on the issues inste[a]d of using social media. would be better off being seen out in the community working (Female Australia)

Despite these more critical comments, this sample from three late-modern societies were overwhelmingly positive about politicians using social media, indicating they were open to making connections with politicians. While many may have been dissatisfied or even disengaged from electoral politics, they were willing to acknowledge common ground between themselves and politicians when it arose. Nonetheless, as discussed below, the participants in this study were much more likely to feel a sense of connection with celebrities who discuss social issues than with politicians.

### **Celebrities care but politicians have an agenda**

A key trend shared amongst participants was the perception that politicians were using social media in ways which made them more authentic and accessible for young people. However this view was not sustained when politicians' use of social media was compared with celebrities who use social



media to discuss social and political issues. Through such a comparison politicians were typically interpreted as pursuing an agenda for their own benefit while celebrities were thought to be expressing genuine personal beliefs. This contrast highlighted that the informality of celebrities aided perceptions of them as authentic because they were able to “speak out” (Female Australia) about issues and, unlike politicians, celebrities did not have to “hold back” (Female USA). Again, this was a strong theme across the three countries and genders but only a small selection can be shown below:

I think that in some cases [celebrities are] more genuine because celebrities are just expressing their opinion with little motivation behind it to win favour with people. In politics it is all about winning people over. (Female Australia)

Yes, politicians goals are to further themselves, and while celebrities do gain in some way or other (sponsored commercials) they don't stand to gain or lose a job based on what they post [...] When politicians use social media, it is almost always an ad. (Male USA)

I think a celebrity writing a post is usually more genuine because they don't necessarily care if people oppose their view, whereas a politician has a job to get people backing them so they would care more if someone was to oppose. (Female UK)

The notion that politicians have agendas while celebrities express their beliefs and are “passionate” (Male Australia) about issues and causes, was not the only reason they were seen as more genuine. Numerous respondents thought celebrities had greater scope to freely express their opinions through social media. They were not “duty bound” (Female UK) to follow a party line and their posts were thought to be subject to less scrutiny: “[...] there is more leeway with celebrities than politicians. Celebrities can talk about purely social issues and a wide range of issues without being as closely examined as a politician would.” (Male USA). Similarly, others thought celebrities were more genuine because they were perceived to reveal more about their private and non-work lives and identities; by posting “‘normal’ things” like a picture of their pet (Female UK) or by posting “some inane nonsense” (Female Australia).

Processes of informalization allow celebrities using social media to demonstrate an ‘ordinariness’ which is a mainstay of celebrity discourses (Harvey, Allen and Mendick, 2015) – an ‘ordinary’ person extracted from obscurity and rocketed to stardom. Despite the contradiction of these discourses celebrities continue to be valorised for being exceptional and also celebrated for their ‘intrinsic ordinariness’ (Turner, Bonner and Marshall 2000: 13). Politicians experience a parallel contradiction in expectations that they be ordinary and relatable whilst also professional and formal. This is further complicated because it is the job of celebrities to be well-known and this is achieved largely by granting access to their private life. In contrast, politics and politicians have historically sustained much firmer boundaries between public and private spheres. As a young man from the UK said, “politicians mostly use it [social media] for work related topics (you're unlikely to see David Cameron retweeting a picture of a cute cat!) while celebrities use it for more than their work.” (Male UK)

The issue of authorship was also important for respondents. Many felt that celebrities were much more likely to be writing their own posts and sharing their own content (e.g. photographs), while the

posts of politicians were perceived to be produced by someone other than the politician and too formal:

[celebrities post] directly from their own phones. They take fuzzy photos and say things in slang. In comparison, politicians talk through their IT teams [...] (Male Australia)

Several respondents perceived politicians as “fake” (Female Australia) which was not aided by perceptions that posts were being composed by someone other than the politician. Meanwhile celebrities were often positioned as “normal people [...] who have just got the label of being a celebrity because of the job that they have” (Female USA), suggesting they are authentic in a way that politicians on social media are not. This is only confirmed by claims that celebrities were “role models” (Female Australia) and likely to be much more influential than politicians:

When celebrities use social media to talk about politics or social issues I think they are much more influential than politicians, especially with young people. (Female USA)

Ironically for politicians, there was a sense in which many respondents seemed to position some celebrities as though they were natural representatives of the people:

If it [social media posting] is for work purposes, then there is a difference because politicians will take caution as to what they say, whereas celebrities, representing the people, will be more open about their views and open to receiving criticism, etc. (Male Australia)

The perceived authenticity and openness of celebrities is a direct contrast with staid, image conscious politicians who are seen to be focusing on their job and not revealing parts of their private everyday lives. In contrast to this cynical and jaundiced view of remote and manipulative politicians, celebrities were often understood as similar to Gramsci’s (1971) organic intellectual. Celebrities were frequently viewed as connected to ‘normal’ people and everyday life and able to freely express important social and political issues; issues politicians “might not be able to comment on” (Female UK) or those deemed as too “risky” (Female USA) by politicians. This alleged greater expressive freedom of celebrities led to an impression that they were genuine and unlike politicians did not “always have to worry about their image.” (Male Australia) Instead, “celebrities are not promoting themselves but they’re just talking about government and how they’d like to see things run.” (Male USA) This belief in the genuineness of celebrities is ironic considering that so much of what celebrities do is fundamentally bound up with constructing and portraying an image (Penfold-Mounce, 2009).

For some respondents feeling that celebrities were genuine and authentic in their social media communications reflected a long-standing relationship with particular celebrities. The following comments about Madonna illustrate this identification well:

It is more genuine because celebrities, we have known them for a while. let's take Madonna for an example, she has been singing for a long time and with time, her public has learnt to know her a bit more or personal things about her so somehow we feel as if we knew them. (Male UK)

It is not surprising that many young people have more enduring and intensive relationships with celebrities than politicians. Nonetheless, this is significant because it means young people are not

simply cultural dopes unable to recognise that celebrities associate themselves with social and political issues as part of their image. For many, judgements about authenticity are based on following the public and private lives of celebrities over time, such that they feel they “know them”, how they feel and what’s important to them. Ferris and Harris (2011) explore this increasingly common ability to share social interaction with celebrities and build a perceived intimacy with them without ever forming a close physical proximity or non-fan style relationship. This intimate social media relationship with celebrity is invariably one-way with the young person feeling a bond with the celebrity although the celebrity does not form a similar personal bond in return. Social media in the hands of the celebrity enables more than Mathiesen’s (1997) viewer society where the many watch the few but instead the many now watch *and* socially bond and interact with the few despite the lack of a directly reciprocated bond.

### **“It depends”: authenticity isn’t everything**

As we have seen, in general celebrities using social media to discuss social and political issues were understood as genuine in their interests and concerns. Nonetheless, this was not always a straightforward acceptance of the integrity and authenticity of *all* celebrities. Our findings are in line with other research which finds young people to be critical interpreters of the media rather than simply vulnerable to its influences<sup>iii</sup>. Respondents noted that some celebrities use social media to pursue “self-promotion”, while others were prepared to share their views “regardless of how it will make them look” (Male UK). In particular, numerous participants argued that some celebrities had more credibility in terms of socio-political issues than others:

For example, when Ashton Kutcher discusses social issues I feel like he truly cares because he’s been around forever and is involved in a lot of different campaigns for different issues and raises awareness. However, when Kim Kardashian tries to talk about social issues or politics, I just kinda roll my eyes because she does nothing really in my opinion to show that she’s involved in raising awareness for different things. (Female USA)

Some participants even articulated a complex picture wherein they recognized that some celebrities use social media to “build their brand” (Male UK) and will accept paid endorsements. For these participants making judgements about the genuineness of celebrities’ social media missives was a murky activity; conclusions were difficult to reach and genuine concern for socio-political issues could be coupled with making money and self-promotion:

[...] some [celebrities] may get paid (or incentives) for supporting a particular politician or issue. So, its a pick-n-choose game since you don't really know who is more or less genuine. (Female USA)

I think its a good way of promoting some good causes, it depends on what they are promoting or saying. It can be used by them [celebrities] to make more money or make them look like better people. I can remember the Jamie Oliver campaigns on school meals to try to change them, I think he meant well by it and also made a lot of money out of it. (Male UK)

A small number of respondents showed disregard for celebrities using social media to discuss socio-political issues:

[...] but frankly, who cares what they [celebrities] think? I prefer to get my opinions and ideas from more credible and primary sources and am not really interested in the viewpoints of celebrities. (Male Australia)

Even though celebrities on social media were typically viewed as more genuine and authentic in their social media communication because they were regular users, provided followers access to their private lives and were more informal making them readily perceived as the author of their posts, respondents did not straightforwardly want politicians to replicate this behaviour. In contrast, politicians were often expected to adhere to a different set of standards. They were expected to be informed, serious and responsible and to maintain a slightly more rigid boundary between their public and private lives. The call for politicians to keep some things 'private' was particularly evident in the case of former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd who cut himself shaving and posted a 'selfie' of this on Twitter (see Fig. 1). This image was used to promote discussion with the Australian sample. Most of the Australian respondents tended to think such a post humanised and normalised Rudd, making him more accessible to young people. However a few respondents were concerned that it was a "publicity stunt" (Male Australia) "carefully prepared to generate attention" (Male Australia). Notwithstanding these views, numerous other participants thought it was inappropriate or "unprofessional" (Female Australia).



I think Rudd was trying to appeal to the younger generation by using Twitter to post a "selfie". However i think being the PM, it is quite important to uphold a certain amount of poise and elegance that is not demonstrated here. (Female Australia)

I think this is borderline of being good or bad. Good because it makes him seem human and more approachable but it is also bad because I think it is sharing too much. [...] I think any politician posting this sort of thing is over sharing. Instead of seeing something like that photo, I would rather see photos of a politicians campaign and photos of him with his family. (Female Australia)

One respondent even thought politicians should have separate social media accounts for public and private purposes: "These kinds of photos have no place on politicians public accounts, as they should be using these to focus on issues that are affecting their respective communities." (Male Australia) Like others, the following participant wanted politicians to focus on political debate, issues and

ideas: "I don't want a silly, look-at-me-aren't-I-a-silly-duffer selfie from a sub-rate communicator."  
(Male Australia)

The notion that politicians need to uphold a firmer division between public and private and maintain a professional disposition was pronounced amongst the Australian sample particularly because of the image used in the discussion groups, but some respondents from the USA and UK made similar remarks. The following comments relate first to the image of Boris Johnson (Fig. 2) and then Barack Obama (Fig. 3).



ewh things like this make me cringe bet he doesnt even know who will smith is just another photo op so he can be seen as begin cool no no no. (Female UK)



It can be a downside because some people might think he isn't as, "serious" as he says he is. (Female USA)

I think that this is nice every once and awhile, but I don't want to see this all the time. There are better things to do than spend time posting pictures about your life when you are in charge of running the country. (Female USA)

The call for politicians to maintain a greater separation between public and private was in part linked to a sense of politicians as important people with important work to undertake: “celebrities are entertainers but politicians are more important because they can change your life and that of others.” (Male UK) This view was also reflected in comments such as, “people view politicians as more of a serious group of people” (Female USA). As suggested above, there was also an acknowledgement by several participants that the communications of politicians were subject to greater scrutiny than those of celebrities. The gravity of political office and the work of a politician in “keeping voters informed” (Female UK) meant politicians were often thought to be better informed than celebrities. Moreover, some respondents thought politicians needed to be accurate and controlled when using social media:

The politician should be maintaining the utmost accuracy in the data they relay, through whatever medium they use, so as not to mislead the people. (Female USA)

[...] a politician doing something rash on social media, or elsewhere, definitely would, affect how able I see them to be in running our country or community. (Female USA)

Each of these factors operate to demarcate politicians as subject to “stricter restrictions” (Female Australia) than celebrities, requiring them to be more “careful” (Male Australia), “mature” (Female USA) and “serious” (Female USA). Certain forms of communication frequently deployed by celebrities were deemed inappropriate for politicians: “I don't think it would be a great idea for

politicians to comment on the issues or politics in a humorous way (depending on who you are), since it can be a sensitive topic for some people.” (Female USA) As one female Australian respondent put it, “politicians need to set an example when it come[s] to behaviour. They represent the people of Australia and they need to keep the respect of the people.” (Female Australia) These “stricter restrictions” run counter to Wouters’ trend of informalization and feeds perceptions of politicians as lacking authenticity and genuineness. Acceptable conduct for politicians on social media is clearly a new and changing field and we may see a loosening of existing standards and restrictions, but at the moment, for some young people “social media is too informal for politicians” (Female Australia).

### **Concluding remarks**

Processes of informalization have undermined the formality and hierarchy which characterised relations between political authorities and their subordinates from an earlier era. Contemporary politicians are under increasing pressure to avoid displays of superiority and present themselves as accountable, responsive and connected to ‘ordinary’ citizens. At the same time, the erosion of a politics organised by social class has placed greater emphasis on individual politicians, an informal style and the sharing of ‘private’ life has become a means of gaining legitimacy for many politicians. This legitimacy is increasingly sought by cultivating authenticity and relying on informalization by presenting the ‘authentic’ private in public. Political elites have often tried to appear authentic and establish affinity with the public and social media facilitates this to a new degree. Social media is well suited to displaying performances of authenticity by acting out the private in the public sphere and is used to great effect by a multitude of celebrities. Based upon the data gathered from the UK, USA and Australia it is clear that social media use by politicians can succeed in normalising-humanising them. Many of our respondents liked representations of politicians in social media that showed them to be ordinary, “real” and “down to earth” people behind their public persona and the official business of electoral politics. While these normalising representations of politicians were welcomed any gains in authenticity by politicians were not sustained when compared directly with celebrities. Celebrities are achieving what politicians seek and the young citizens in this study generally perceive celebrities as authentic, open and trustworthy actors when discussing social and political issues. However, our respondents made it clear that they held politicians to a different set of standards from celebrities in that many wanted them to be informed, serious, professional and formal (see Street and Inthorn, 2010). Consequently, young citizens seem to be demanding a contradiction: they want politicians to be “just like us”, fallible and capable of having “fun” but at the same time they also need to be responsible, judicious and worthy of respect. This contradiction highlights the challenge facing politicians wishing to establish authenticity in the liminal space of social media where the boundaries between public and private are permeable and shift rapidly.

Rulers and political elites have historically had to balance competing demands to represent the eminence of an office or position whilst also displaying appropriate affinity and proximity to the public (Daloz, 2009). The advent of social media has made the cultivation of an authentic image easier for politicians but it can also undermine their claims of eminence, professionalism and authority. Social media renders politicians vulnerable to criticisms on at least two different fronts: firstly, if they don’t use it or if they don’t embrace its interactive and informal potential or don’t

disclose aspects of their private lives, they risk being seen as out of touch and aloof; alternatively, if they do use it they risk undermining their integrity and authority by being too intimate and “over sharing”. Here we see informalization for politicians hitting its present limits – the thesis holds in so far as respondents wanted direct, informal communication with politicians who seem “real” and “down to earth”, but they also regarded politics somewhat traditionally which led them to think politicians needed to retain some of the formality associated with professionalism, integrity and the exercise of authority. In contrast, the ease with which celebrities traverse the public and private, interact with fans and the apparent informality of their social media presence often enhances their image as genuine, authentic individuals. The potential for such interactions between celebrities and the public to endure over time also works to further an authentic image. Hence, informalization and its presentational styles are central to how celebrities are perceived as authentic and “passionate” when addressing socio-political issues.

The acceptability of informalization for politicians is likely to be unevenly distributed across political roles, and the evaluation of such presentational styles is also likely to vary between citizen groups. Indeed, politicians’ use of social media to cultivate an authentic and accessible persona may not be a communication strategy which is available or safe for all (van Zoonen, 2006). High profile women on twitter including female politicians have endured widely reported trolling incidents including threats of rape and other abuse<sup>iv</sup> and the low number of women talking politics on twitter compared to men<sup>v</sup> is a stark reminder of not only continuing gender inequality but the limitations of social media as a communication strategy for some groups. Relatedly, Cardo’s (2014) work demonstrates that attempts by politicians to cultivate mediated authenticity and ordinariness can fail quite spectacularly. Nonetheless the democratising potential of informalization, celebrity culture and social media should continue to be a resource in creating a more accessible and dialogical politics which engages young citizens.

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<sup>i</sup> It is worth noting that the electoral systems and political cultures of the chosen countries tend to place more emphasis on individual politicians than some proportional systems and political cultures where parties are more prominent.

<sup>ii</sup> This resulted in four groups labelled regarding high or low participation and high or low SES. These labels have not been retained in the analysis as we found no discernible pattern. Gender and country labels have been applied but our data reveals strong coherence across these variables.

<sup>iii</sup> Celeb Youth.Org. (2015) Mythbusting on Celebrity and Youth Aspirations. Available at: <http://celebyouth.org/mythbusting/category/myths/>

<sup>iv</sup> Dominiczak P, Marsden S (2013) Female Cabinet ministers targeted by 'trolls' on YouTube. *The Telegraph*. 30 July. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/law-and-order/10212441/Female-Cabinet-ministers-targeted-by-trolls-on-YouTube.html>

<sup>v</sup> Henderson H (2015) Is politics on Twitter a man's world?. *BBC News*, 1 April. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-32137886>.