What Film and Cultural Histories Can Teach Us About YouTubers

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In this brief essay, I limit my commentary to the example of political authority situated in the history of the mediated entertainment persona engaged in political communication. The "part played by people" in communication processes[1] is a well-examined topic reflected in the established but ongoing history of media effects, and more recently, in audience reception and media industry studies. Whether we locate any of these research areas in either "communication" or "media studies" seems to be a banal question, given the growing and generally welcomed interdisciplinarity of the field. One thing about our enterprise seems certain: engaging media, John Nerone tells us, can hardly be avoided for scholars in the humanities and social sciences; thus, many turn to "historical work as a mode of explanation."[2]

What is less straightforward, though, at least in the North American context, is the place of film studies' contributions to cultural history that bears on communication and media studies, owing in part to cinema studies' partitioning of itself from traditional academic boundaries at its inception and its early emphasis on auteur theory and textual analysis. With his recent survey of four prominent journals over several decades, Phil Novak has shown that although film scholarship is assumed to be dominated by textual interpretation, in fact, the "most important category of work in the field is, and has always been, history (although what has been meant by history has changed at points over the years)."[3] When the Society for Cinema Studies added *Media* to its name in 2002, it did so to better reflect the diversity of its members' interdisciplinary research on the moving image affected by convergences across related industries and in

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[2] John Nerone, "Introduction: Mapping the Field of Media History," in *The International Encyclopedia of Media Studies*: *Media History and the Foundations of Media Studies*, eds. Angharad N. Valdivia and John Nerone (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 19.

[3] Phillip Novak, *Interpretation and Film Studies: Movie Made Meanings* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillian, 2020), 114.

reception practices, accelerated by digitization.[4] Students of film history vis-à-vis cinema studies, however, are less likely to attend the National or International Communication Associations, notwithstanding film historian Janet Staiger's call for cinema scholars to practice historiography more in terms of *media* history than film history.[5] One reason for this may be a historical positioning of film primarily within the division of "mass communication" and thus within a circumscribed social scientific association to a "milestone," or research event, such as in the propaganda and effects research of the 1930s Payne Fund studies, or the *Why We Fight* films of World War II.[6]

Just as film scholarship benefits from new approaches to studying different media enabled by new technologies, so too are communication and media studies enriched by cinema studies' historical work related to semiotics and structuralism, critical theory and psychoanalytic theories of spectatorship, feminism, political economic analysis, and audience reception. Good film history is also good media (and cultural) history when film scholars trading in cultural theory, for example, situate institutional examinations of Hollywood or nontheatrical film practices in broader historical contexts to account for technological, economic, regulatory, and social change in ways that reveal the connections or gaps between co-existing media. But more to the point in the media-saturated twenty-first century, if "media use and media effects may now materialize everywhere, anytime, and with respect to any sort of context," but without clear determinations of any single source of information in "our always-on environment,"[7] media histories informed by broad cultural histories refusing medium or discipline-specific isolation or the reification of research events can better account for structural and phenomenological conditions of media ubiquity, power, and the role that people play.[8]

To this end, I suggest that the history of communication and media studies better integrate film and cultural histories into its corpus in order to facilitate productive connections among cognate areas even if they may vary in their methodological approaches. To take one example, if we wish to understand the historical conditions of existence that help explain, at least theoretically, the arrival, prevalence, and disruption of the entertaining "YouTuber" celebrity pundit in today's highly polarized, post-truth digital environment, then we must grapple with, among other things, what Susan Herbst calls "media-derived authority"; that is, the mechanisms of legitimation enabled by mediation onto the communicator. Charismatic authority aside, media-derived authority is "a culturally and historically situated formation" because authority itself "evolves over time. . . within particular sets of institutions and configurations of social forces."[9] Certainly,

[4] *Cinema Journal*, accordingly, changed its name to the *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* in 2018.

[5] Janet Staiger, "The Future of the Past," *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 1 (2004).

[6] Lana F. Rakow notes that Shearon Lowery and Melvin DeFleurs's twenty-five year canonization of certain research projects in their textbook, *Milestones in Mass Communication Research*, has produced a tenacious telos of communication history. Rakow, "Feminist Historiography and the Field: Writing New Histories," in *The History of Media and Communication Research: Contested Memories*, eds. David W. Park and Jefferson Pooley (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 116–17.

[7] Peter Vorderer, David W. Park, and Sarah Lutz, "A History of Media Effects Research Traditions," in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, eds. Mary Beth Oliver, Arthur A. Raney, and Jennings Bryant (New York: Routledge, 2020), 11–12.

[8] Film historian Richard Maltby makes this argument with respect to cinema studies' preoccupation with textual analysis and genre in "How Can Cinema History Matter More?" *Screening the Past* 22 (2007).

[9] Susan Herbst, "Political Authority in a Mediated Age," *Theory and Society* 32, no. 4 (2003): 491.

the YouTuber celebrity profits (and suffers) from media-specific affordances of the 2.0 platform, but if we want to trace historical paths from the present construction of popular authority, arguably we must get at not merely the perception of expertise or credibility in political knowledge (politics and punditry), but at affective relations involving authenticity and intimacy in performance. Unsurprisingly, in some ways the YouTuber celebrity pundit is not unlike their talk radio or cable counterpart, and the success of these popular figures in political entertainment has roots, of course, in broadcasting, but I would argue also in cinema and the celebrity culture that precedes the moving image.

Mass communication research directs us to some "canonical" historical texts, and for good reason. Among these is Robert Merton's study of popular singer Kate Smith's eighteen-hour radio bond drive in 1943, during which Smith sold thirty-nine million dollars in war bonds.[10] Similar to the 1938 broadcast "War of the Worlds," the radio marathon provided communications researchers with the opportunity to conduct in-depth interviews on radio listeners,[11] and in the case of Smith, to document the ways in which audiences reported their perceptions of her enormous stardom refigured into an ordinary American patriot. Not only was *Mass Persuasion* remarkable for the rarity of its subject and methodology at the time—a reception study on a proto-media event to measure the socio-political influence of an entertainer in the public sphere—but as Simonson points out, the concept of "public image" as an amalgam of Smith's character (or construction of her professional persona) "indexed an emerging politics of celebrity, made possible in part by media technologies which brought the distant famous seemingly close up to the masses."[12]

To be sure, Merton's observation on the congruity between Smith's stardom and her "mother image" and sincere "plain folk" on-air persona anticipated Richard Dyer's work on the film "star image" and its authenticating processes by over thirty years, as well as Richard deCordova's genealogy of the film star system by more than another ten.[13] But as contributions to film history, Dyer and deCordova show how what becomes Hollywood stardom develops out of complex industrial and discursive relations that constituted cinema and produced fan culture, while other histories trace film stardom to precedence in stage performance or chart its overlapping history with theatre, vaudeville, and film, and still other cultural histories offer a broader context of celebrity culture emerging in the nineteenth century.[14] These histories trace early celebrity or stardom's authentication to a measure of whether the image of the extraordinary person is consonant with who the public or fan thinks the "real" (or ordinary) person really is, and it is from this process that audiences experience

[10] Robert K. Merton, with Marjorie Fiske and Alberta Curtis, *Mass Persuasion: The Social Psychology of a War Bond Drive* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1946).

[11] See Hadley Cantril, Hazel Gaudet, and Herta Herzog, *The Invasion From Mars: A Study in the Psychology of Panic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940).

[12] Peter Simonson, "Celebrity, Public Image, and American Political Life: Rereading Robert K. Merton's *Mass Persuasion*," *Political Communication* 23, no. 3 (2006): 278. It should be noted that historian Alan Brinkley observed radio's function in creating perceptions of "immediate intimacy and friendship between the speaker and his audience" in his study of Father Charles Coughlin and Louisiana politician Huey Long in the 1930s, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 192–3.

[13] Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1979); Richard deCordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

[14] See, for example, Benjamin McArthur, *Actors and American culture, 1880–1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University

pleasure in celebrity consumption, knowing that the person deserves their celebrity status. Celebrity authentication is also a mechanism of media-derived authority within the field of entertainment because it grants a perception of legitimacy, although the process functions differently depending on the industry sector such that celebrities can produce varying sensations of affect and identification in the subjectivities of audiences who apprehend them, whether in film, television, popular music, or infotainment.[15]

With respect to the construction of *political* authority—by which I mean, borrowing from Bourdieu, the symbolic power to act as a spokesperson through the conversion of celebrity capital from the field of entertainment into the field of politics—Merton argued that the war bond drive furthered Smith's public image as "*primarily* a patriot rather than an entertainer," and that her persona "monopolize[d] public imagination," and at no time was it "subject to a counterpropaganda."[16] Perhaps the latter point is less remarkable if we take into account the larger context of "total" war mobilization, during which nearly every sector of business accommodated the federal government to an unprecedented extent, particularly communication-related industries whose trades were needed to manage and channel public support. For their part, Hollywood stars sprung forth to personally sell war bonds, not for the first time, but for the second, though on a much larger scale than during World War I.[17] Notably, by World War II, film studios were promoting the idea of "Hollywood" as synecdoche for the entertainment industry more broadly, as they also began to poach and consolidate talent from other sectors of cultural production (Broadway, radio, and emerging television). During the war, thousands of live and broadcast appearances of "Hollywood personalities" were coordinated and controlled by film-industry producers, starting in 1942, a year before Smith's radio marathon.[18] Although Merton et al.'s study does consider the fact of other celebrities selling bonds, the observation that such an "anomaly" indicated that an entertainer "can take on the attributes ordinarily reserved for the moral leader"—what the research identified as sincerity, philanthropy, and patriotism—are indeed some of the moral attributes constituting Mary Pickford's wartime star image, among other silent film stars who sold war bonds during the Great War.[19]

Of course, there are important distinctions between these sociopolitical and cultural contexts, and the specificity of Merton's details, articulating both the authentication of celebrity and the phenomenology of fandom, informed subsequent research on mass communication, such as Horton and Wohl's theory of para-social interaction, which highlighted the television talk show host's construction of

Press, 1984); Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic* (New York: Columbia University, 1992); Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man: On the Social Psychology of Capitalism* (New York: Knopf, 1977); Warren I. Susman, " 'Personality' and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture," *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1984); Charles L. Ponce de Leon, *Self-exposure: Human Interest Journalism and the Emergence of Celebrity in America, 1890–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Antoine Lilti locates the birth of celebrity in the eighteenth century in *The Invention of Celebrity, 1750–1850* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2017).

[15] With respect to the first three sectors of entertainment, see P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

[16] Merton, *Mass Persuasion*, 102, 172 (emphasis in original).

[17] See, for example, Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Roy Hoopes, *When the Stars Went to War: Hollywood and World War II* (New York: Random House, 1994); Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: The American Cinema in the 1940s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Kathryn Cramer Brownell, *Showbiz Politics: Hollywood in American Political Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2014); Giorgio Bertellini, *The Divo and the Duce* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).

[18] Sue Collins, "Star Testimonies: World War and the Cultural Politics of Authority," in *Cinema's Military Industrial Complex*, eds. Haidee Wasson and Lee Grieveson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018).

[19] Merton, *Mass Persuasion*, 82.

pseudo-intimacy between himself and his audience.[20] In this case, the televisual apparatus produces the conditions of a "simulacrum of conversation" that occurs when audiences engage the mass medium as if it were an interpersonal mode of communication in a continuous relationship. The spectator comes to identify herself as a fan, taking pleasure in the idea that she "knows" the persona more intimately than other people; "that she 'understands' his character and appreciates his values and motives."[21] Here too, it is important to note the precedent in film star and celebrity history on the discursive construction of intimacy orchestrated by the rise of fan magazines and celebrity journalism in the 1910s. The focus on stars' private lives by fan magazines and trade press, in particular, was an industrial strategy to authenticate stars through a sense of intimacy, even as other presses may have exposed stars to scandal.[22] If, as Thomas Elsaesser suggests, "No medium replaces another, or simply supersedes the previous one," it would appear that stardom as a cultural construct or commodity can claim relevance as remediation from live theater to YouTube and its prominent social influencers.[23]

Finally, by way of revealing my motivation to pursue this line of argument for a more inclusive history of media and communication studies, I would like to end by suggesting another entailment that occurs to me: To flesh out the historical roots and cultural significance of our YouTuber celebrity pundit, it would be useful to (re)consider the theoretical import of opinion leadership as a form of authority or testimonial in *mediated contexts that are treated like or confused as interpersonal ones*. Leaving aside the much discussed "dominant paradigm" debate and critique of the limited effects model, Katz and Lazarsfeld identified opinion leaders as ordinary but key people who, when exposed to media in turn, may confirm or shape the ideas, attitudes, and behavior of others through interpersonal networks.[24] Forwarded at a particular moment in communication research, opinion leadership provided cover, in a sense, from media manipulation by situating interpersonal "gregariousness" into a model of horizontal two-step flow grounded in community networks and social conformity.[25] But if we take the notion of the ordinary as a measure or perception of authenticity and legitimacy, and if we consider the remediation of para-social intimacy, perhaps the history and phenomenology of fandom has more in common with two-step flow's interpersonal networks of social conformity than researchers have considered. If so, this might tell us something we need to know about how confirmation bias and the construction of outrage feed the algorithm, and thus grow the persona.

[20] Donald Horton and Richard R. Wohl, "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction," *Psychiatry* 19, no. 3 (1956): 216. The same year, Kurt and Gladys Lang theorized television's impact on social distance between public figures and audiences in their article, "The Television Personality in Politics: Some Considerations," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (1956). At the dawn of "media studies," Joshua Meyrowitz employed Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model to extend the construction of intimacy to his "media friends" construct, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). Also, the same year, Richard Schickel in his critique of celebrity traced the same notion to communication technology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and in particular to the camera close-up shot, sound production, gossip columns, tabloids, paparazzi, and the institution of Hollywood in *Intimate Strangers*: *The Culture of Celebrity* (New York: Doubleday, 1986).

[21] Horton and Wohl, "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction," 216.

[22] Lee Grieveson, "Stars and Audiences in Early American Cinema," *Screening the Past* 14 (2002); Samantha Barbas, *Movie Crazy: Fans, Stars, and the Cult of Celebrity* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); Richard Schickel, *Intimate Strangers*.

[23] Thomas Elsaesser, "The New Film History as Media Archaeology," *Cinémas* 14, no. 2-3 (2004): 93.

[24] Notably, for my purpose, according to Everett M. Rogers, the general conception of opinion leadership can be attributed to Walter Lippmann, who while alluding to the idea without naming it in *Public Opinion* (1922), influenced Edward Bernays, who in turn inspired Lazarsfeld's coining of the concept in 1944, *A History of Communication Study: A Biographical Approach* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 287. Bernays, it turns out, did not limit the idea to interpersonal contexts; rather, there are various forms and degrees of authority held by people who mold public opinion, such as persons listed in *Who's Who*, including "leading theatrical or cinema

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producers" and "recognized leaders of fashion." In fact, Bernays understood in the late 1920s that politicians could capitalize off of their associations with famous actors, since audiences "like people who amuse them," *Propaganda* (New York: H. Liveright, 1928), 32–33.

[25] David W. Park, "The Two-Step Flow vs *The Lonely Crowd*," in *The History of Media and Communication Research*, eds. David W. Park and Jefferson Pooley (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

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