DEMOCRATIC VALUE OF ENTERTAINMENT: A REAPPRAISAL

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Abstract

This essay attempts to go beyond the standard responses to media entertainment in the democratic theory literature. It argues that TV drama and factual entertainment provide a way of debating values often at the heart of politics; a means of exploring and discussing social identities (important for understandings of individual and group interest); ways of debating alternative understandings of society; and of engaging in a debate about norms that regulate our common social processes. But while entertainment should not be dismissed as being something unrelated to the politics, it provides no substitute for good journalism that holds power to account.

Keywords

Democracy; Political Communication; Entertainment; Journalism.

Much of our thinking about the democratic role of the media dates from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when the press consisted primarily of highly politicised newspapers and journals. Since that time, the media have been transformed. The great bulk of content produced by contemporary media systems – including television drama, computer games, social networking websites, films, music videos and popular novels – has nothing to do with public affairs. Indeed, even *news* media devote increasing proportions of their output to soft news and entertainment (in the extreme case of the British tabloid press over three quarters of its editorial content)[1]. In other words, most media output consumed most of the time is unrelated to conventional understandings of politics. Any reconception of the democratic role of the media needs to think through the implication of this transformation.

There are three standard responses to the rise of media entertainment. The first is to deplore it as a diversion from the serious democratic role of the media, the principal response of late nineteenth century liberals[2]. The second is to view entertainment as a separate category from public affairs coverage – basically, the reaction of the American political communications academic community. The third approach is to point to a cross-

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1   J. Curran and J. Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility*, 7th edition, London: Routledge, 2010.

2   M. Hampton, *Visions of the Press in Britain*, 1850-1950, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004.

over between public affairs coverage and entertainment[3]. This draws attention to entertainment with explicitly political content, such as the TV series, *West Wing* (1990-2006) about the lives of staffers in the White House or the satirical Jon Stewart's *Daily Show*. It also notes the growing tendency to report politics as a branch of entertainment, in terms of unfolding scandals and electoral 'horses races' devoid of policy difference[4].

Each of these responses is inadequate as a basis for assessing the democratic role of the media. The first approach, dismissing entertainment as only a distraction from politics, ignores the political meaning of entertainment. The second approach, viewing entertainment as a separate category unrelated to politics, is a convenient way of pretending that nothing has changed. It is methodological ruse for viewing contemporary media systems as if they were early nineteenth century newspapers – a procedure that only makes sense if it is assumed that media entertainment has no political meaning or importance. The third response suffers from only looking at the segment of media content that very explicitly fuses politics and entertainment.

All three approaches step gingerly around an uncharted minefield: the democratic meaning of entertainment[5]. Perhaps, the best way to start mapping this terrain is to suggest that entertainment relates to politics in four principal ways: in terms of values, identities, cognitions and norms. There is of course some overlap between these different categories, and they are presented here only as a convenient way of demarcating broad dominions of political meaning.

Debate about values

the totality of TV drama, film and factual entertainment affords a debate about the values that underpin politics. This matters because values have assumed an increasing significance in contemporary politics, and motivate some people to vote idealistically against their ostensible economic self-interest in the US and elsewhere[6]. Nations also differ in terms of the values that shape their political cultures[7], which contribute in turn to differences in

3   M. Delli Carpini, and B. Williams, 'Let Us Infotain You: Politics in the New Media Environment', in W.L. Bennett and R. Entman (eds.), *Mediated Politics*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001. This argument is extended in an important essay, B. Williams and M. Delli Carpini, 'Media Regimes and Democracy' in J. Curran, *Media and Society*, 5th edition, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010.

4   J. Wittelbols, *The Soap Opera Paradigm*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004.

5   This chapter is only concerned with the role of media entertainment in terms of the functioning of democracy, not with its wider role in terms of human fulfilment.

6   T. Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004.

7   World Values Survey (1999-2001). http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org [accessed 10 July, 2010].

public policy and the allocation of resources and rewards[8]. And shifts in values give rise to political change, exemplified by the way in which increased individualism sustained the rise of neo-liberal regimes in the later twentieth century[9]. So when 'entertainments' uphold different values, and implicitly invite audiences to choose between them, their function is not simply to entertain. They are potentially contributing to the political process.

To illustrate the ways in which drama can express different values, and sustain different politics, we will consider three contrasting examples. The first is the internationally successful, magical realist film, *Chocolat* (2000), directed by the Swedish film director Lasse Hallstrom. The film begins with a mysterious woman, and her daughter, arriving in a sleepy, French village, and opening a chocolate shop during Lent. The mayor and the priest urge local people to boycott the shop because it is encouraging people to transgress Lenten vows of abstinence. A battle ensues between the shopkeeper and the leadership of the local community which the shopkeeper gradually wins. Her shop, serving chocolates and hot cocoa with magical properties, radiates a widening gyre of social healing and happiness. Regular customers are transformed: a sour grandmother establishes a rapport with her grandson; a battered wife is rescued from her husband; an elderly man gains the courage to make welcomed overtures to a widow; a shunned Roma traveller acquires local friends; and so on.

A new spirit of fun enters the life of the village, as when the shopkeeper (Vianne) gives away a freebie:

Shopkeeper (Vianne): 'And these are for your husband to awaken his passion.'

Customer (Yvette): 'You've obviously never met my husband.'

Shopkeeper: 'You've obviously not tried these.'

And then after the cocoa beans have had their desired effect, the customer reappears:

Customer (Yvette): 'Do you have any more of those thingies please?'

Shopkeeper (Vianne): 'How many do you want?'

Customer (Yvette): 'How many have you got?'

The village gradually sloughs off its inherited culture of tradition, hierarchy, and repression, and embraces a new spirit of generosity and hedonism. The forces of reaction are triumphantly defeated. The mayor gorges himself on pagan chocolate, in a symbolic act of surrender, and is transformed into a warm, giving person. He comes to terms with the fact that his wife has left him, never to return, and makes advances to his secretary, who loves him. The priest relents and, warming to the new mood in the village, delivers a sermon

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8   H. Milner, *Civic Literacy*, Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2002.

9   T. Judt, *Reappraisals*, London: Vintage, 2009.

that repudiates the old values of censoriousness and abstinence in favour of tolerance and good will. 'I think,' he declared, 'that we can't go round measuring our goodness by what we don't do – by what we deny ourselves, what we resist and who we exclude'.

Although the film does not concern itself with the political realm, it is nonetheless a profoundly political film. Its characterisation of the conservative mayor as a stiff, authoritarian aristocrat and of the priest as his weak, callow mouthpiece, its identification of 'tradition' with a gendered, class-based hierarchy, and its association of Catholicism with cruelty and hypocrisy, make it a sustained onslaught on the culture that supports faith-based parties of the right in Catholic Europe. Indeed, the film's unwillingness to acknowledge any positive aspect of the tradition that it attacks – the priest and the mayor, for example, are only portrayed in a partly sympathetic light when they recognise the error of their ways, and embrace their opponents' values – make it a dramaturgic manifesto for an anti-clerical, left politics that is immediately recognisable in the context of mainland Europe.

However, it also expresses a political meaning within an Anglo-American orbit that is not dependent on local contextual references. The film embraces progressive liberal values in being overtly anti-racist (with 'decent' people recoiling in horror at an arson attack on a Roma boat). It is also overtly opposed to patriarchy: the old order in which 'if you don't go to confession… or if you don't pretend… that you want nothing more in your life than to serve your husband three meals a day, and give him children, and vacuum under his ass' is openly derided. Its core value is the expression of liberal individualism as a moral code. Characters in the film discover both happiness and tolerance by rebelling against the conformity, sexual repression and bigotry of an authoritarian *collectivist* culture. In this way, they learn to be true to their selves, to respect difference in others, and to find happiness. Thus, a grandmother is applauded for electing not to go into a nursing home to be 'caged', monitored and controlled. Instead, she chooses to lead a full, if shortened, life, and in the process gains friends and reciprocated love that she did not have before. This is revealed to be right for her, unlike the 'sensible' course of being cared for in an institutional setting urged by her daughter (who really wants to be rid of her). Doing your own thing, the film tells us, makes for happiness; and respecting other peoples' right to do their own thing makes for all-round serendipity.

If the values of this film have a strong political resonance in a European continental context, they also have a political history in Britain. The growth of progressive individualism, reacting against an authoritarian culture, gave rise to liberalising legislation in 1960's Britain, leading to easier divorce, and the legalisation of abortion and adult gay sex[10]. It was an important current also in the adoption of anti-racist, anti-homophobic and feminist policies in radical town halls in the 1980s, and culminated in social liberalising reforms during the Blair era[11].

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10 K.O. Morgan, *Britain since 1945*, 2nd edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

11 J. Curran, I. Gaber and J. Petley, *Culture Wars*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005.

But if the individualism extolled in *Chocolat* is progressive, it can also take a more conservative form. This is illustrated by the American television reality show, *Random1*, insightfully dissected by Anna McCarthy[12]. Transmitted on the Arts and Entertainment network in 2005, it is an extreme makeover programme where a TV 'tracker' and 'case worker' befriend at random someone in need, and enhance his or her life. Thus, one programme features Bruce, a 'drifter', with a stunned, palsied face, who is missing a leg as a result of a childhood accident. He is currently sober, and in need of considerable help, not least because his artificial leg is falling apart. The TV case worker gets to work, and raises cash from well-wishers for a new artificial leg. The implication is that Bruce can now confront his inner demons, and make something of his life. He has been given a new start, and it is up to him to avail himself of the opportunity created by warm-hearted charity. The TV case worker concludes the show: 'with the leg no longer an obstacle, Bruce can decide if and when to rebuild his life'. Bruce seems to agree, saying 'I got my freedom'.

The programme proclaims more generally the value of self-help, apostrophising in the trailer 'Random 1… asks the question, "What can we do to help you to help yourself"'. But as Anna McCarthy[13] points out, 'the program is not, ultimately, a makeover but rather an extended meditation on the nature of making over…' Thus, Bruce remains seemingly homeless and jobless, and his life is visibly not remade. But the programme's point is that he has been given the cue to assume responsibility, and the rest is up to him. The same neo-liberal gospel of individual self-help is transmitted by other American entertainments such as the successful CBS courtroom show, *Judge Judy*, in which the troubled, disadvantaged 'other' are regularly cajoled and humiliated. In essence, argues Oullette[14], this top rating show functions as a civics lesson in which TV viewers are encouraged 'to function without state assistance or supervision as self-disciplining, self-sufficient, responsible, and risk-averting individuals'.

Standing in opposition to the values expressed in these shows are the progressive collectivist values of a successful TV hospital drama series, *Casualty*, which started in 1986 and is still among the BBC's most popular programmes in 2010. Patients are more prominent in *Casualty* than in most hospital soap operas. They come from enormously varied backgrounds: for example, a restaurant manager with a missing finger (left in the strawberry sundae), a doctor who is seriously ill (and asks to die), an alcoholic tramp infested with fleas, teenagers with dodgy DIY piercings, a women with a stomach full of condoms filled with heroin, a suicidal Catholic woman made pregnant by her brother-in-law, a Jehovah's witness who refuses treatment, a bald man with a wig glued to his head, a badly beaten

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12 A. McCarthy, 'Reality Television: A Neo-Liberal Theatre of Suffering', *Social Text*, 25 (4), 2007, 17-41.

13 Ibid, p. 330.

14 L. Ouellette, 'Take Responsibility for Yourself: Judge Judy and the Neo-liberal Citizen' in S. Murray and L. Ouellette (eds.), *Reality TV*, New York: New York University Press, 2003, p. 232.

prostitute, and so on. In the accident and emergency department where the show is set, these patients are well cared for, with priority going to the most desperately ill. The way in which Britain's health is organised as a state funded comprehensive care system available to all, with priority determined by need, is implicitly presented as the way it should be. Indeed, the political meaning of the show is conveyed partly through its effacement of politics. Britain's collectivist state organisation of health care is *naturalised*: it is made to seem outside of politics, the expression of a shared way of doing things and looking after one another.

Casualty is also a soap opera, with a weekly dose of trouble. Some hospital staff become jealous, clash, fall in and out of love, and have troubled home lives. Awful things can happen, as when a MP's son dies in the corridor, and a desperate asylum seeker commits suicide by hanging himself from the hospital roof. But the impression is still conveyed that Britain's public health system is fundamentally effective, and that front line hospital staff – whatever their human flaws - are motivated by a strong sense of public service.

This is the central theme, for example, of a 2001 episode, featuring a hospital paramedic, Josh Griffiths, who has resigned and returns to the hospital to hand in his kit[15]. He is unable to cope with the human suffering he encounters regularly in his work. 'I can't go on seeing the things we see', he tells a colleague, 'and then seeing them again when I shut my eyes'. However, Josh has no firm plans to do anything else, apart from the vague aspiration 'to get a life'. He is persuaded very reluctantly to go out one last time to a car crash because there is a staff shortage. He finds a young woman, whom he has met briefly before, trapped in her car. The medical team realise that she is dying and beyond help. She complains that 'it hurts everywhere', and is terrified. Josh dulls the pain, and with a perfect choice of words – expressing warmth and human understanding, but also offering distraction and hope – comforts the woman before she dies. Afterwards, Josh laments that he was unable to help her. 'You were there', replies his colleague, 'you made her feel safe. You cared. And she knew'. Another colleague commented, 'if that were me, I would want someone to talk to… He was the last person for her'. Inevitably, the episode ends with Josh withdrawing his resignation. He is good at his job, and it gives meaning to his life. 'I'm a paramedic me. Nothing else makes sense', he declares. 'Course I am coming back!' The implication is clear. Josh can no more walk away from his job than a priest can leave his vocation.

Thus, each of these dramas has a different political resonance. *Casualty* affirms a progressive collectivism supporting a tax-and-spend welfare state; *Random 1* endorses a conservative individualism, in which private charity nurtures self-reliance; and *Chocolat* champions a progressive social individualism that has been politically seminal. Of course,

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15 *Casualty*, Season 16, Episode 9, 'Distant Elephants' (transmitted BBC 1, 10/11/2001.)

extensive audience research demonstrates that people respond differently to the same communication, reflecting their different beliefs and dispositions. However divergent responses to drama, and the discussion that this promotes (something that can be observed on fans' websites), merely extends the democratic function of entertainment in facilitating a debate over contending values.

Indeed, entertainment can sometimes provide a less constrained way of engaging with the values informing politics than the official discourse of politics itself. Through entertainment, it is possible to glimpse that conservative collectivism (stressing patriotism and moral order) has something in common with progressive collectivism (stressing solidarity and collective provision); and that conservative individualism (emphasising slimline welfarism and self-help) has something in common with liberal individualism (emphasising freedom from government and individual tolerance).

But politics in much of the west has been organised along different lines, based on an alliance between fiscal and social conservatism (low taxes and traditional morality) pitted against an opposing alliance of state collectivism and progressive individualism (welfare spending and liberal reform). Political parties have to aggregate both economically-based and value-based groups in order to optimise votes, and then contain their differences in order to appear fit to govern. But entertainment is not subject to the dragooned disciplines of public life, and can offer a flexible exploration of the emotional deep structures that underpin politics, but are not necessarily represented in the covenants that determine political life.

Entertainment and identity politics

The second way in which entertainment supports the democratic process is by contributing to the formation, maintenance and (sometimes) reformation of social identity. Politics is partly about the pursuit of self-interest. However, what people think is in their best interest can depend not merely on their 'objective' situation, but also on which group they identify with, and also whom they feel threatened by. Most people have multiple social identities, so what is politically important is which identity from a pack of available identities (linked to nationality, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion, age or region) that they judge to be salient. Social identity is a strong influence on how large numbers of people vote[16]. More generally, shifts of social identity can have a profound impact on politics. For example, one major change in Europe has been the decline of class identity, forged in the crucible of mass industrialisation, in favour of other identities shaped by the

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16 C. Hay, *Why We Hate Politics*, Cambridge: Polity, 2007; A. Heath, R. Jowell, and J. Curtice, *The Rise of New Labour*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

culture of leisure and consumption in service-based economies. This has contributed to a shift in the structure of politics, reflected in the decline of traditional political parties appealing to class identity, and the rise of new social movements appealing to identities based on gender, sexuality and ethnicity. It has led also to attempts by political parties – especially declining European Social Democratic parties - to connect to changed social identities as a way of renewing their electoral appeal, something that has led also to a shift in their politics.

So, media consumption that influences people's understanding of who they are, where they fit in, and whom they are against are all central to the dynamics of contemporary politics. This confers particular significance on the media, and related fields of style and fashion, that are consumed by young people. Subcultural style can be like an experimental laboratory for the production of self: a means of exploring and realising a satisfying social identity, and of joining a desired group and excluding others, though within the constraints of specific contexts[17]. This can subsume an implied or explicit politics. Dick Hebdige gives as an example the way in which 'skinheads' in early 1980s Britain responded to their low social status as young working class men, and the dislocation of their neighbourhood communities, by developing a sub-cultural style that invoked an exaggerated, nostalgic evocation of traditional 'lumpen' working class life. To this were added two further elements – a stress on masculinity and white Britishness – that offered compensation for their low status and sense of loss. Style, in this case, was associated with angry working class conservatism[18]. But this association between media consumption, cultural identity and implied politics need not be confined to exotic groups or young people – the hunting ground of the Birmingham school of cultural studies. Thus a number of researchers have pointed to the way in which certain lifestyle magazines and popular TV series have fostered the conviction that women can through self-monitoring, self-discipline, and self-determination take control of their lives, and shape their destinies[19]. The 'fiction of autonomous selfhood', they argue, is incubating a new strain of conservatism, centred on a strong sense of feminine identity.

Popular music is especially important, both as a component of subcultural identity, and as a vehicle of political protest. This can be registered explicitly in lyrics and tone, as in the radical African American Rap music of the early 1990s that protested against urban and industrial decline[20]. More often, it is the conjunction of one or more elements – lyrics,

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17 K. Gelder, *Subcultures Reader*, 2nd edition, London: Routledge, 2005; J. Fornas, U. Lindberg, and O. Sernhede, In *Garageland*, London: Routledge, 1995.

18 D. Hebdige, 'Skinheads and the Search for White Working Class Identity', *New Socialist*, 1 (1), 1981.

19 L. Blackman, '"Inventing the Psychological": Lifestyle Magazines and the Fiction of Selfhood', in J. Curran and D. Morley (eds.), *Media and Cultural Theory*, London: Routledge, 2005; A. McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, London: Sage, 2008.

20 D. Kellner, *Media Culture*, London: Routledge, 1995.

rhythm, genre, artists (and their known views), audience appropriation, context and time – that turn particular forms of music, or particular songs, into a 'statement' that can acquire political significance[21].

Cognitive maps

the third way in which popular entertainment impinges on politics is by offering ways of making sense of reality. Entertainment offers images of society and its component parts, helping us to visualise its totality in a way that goes beyond anything that we can possibly experience at first hand. It also helps us to interpret society in terms of the mainsprings of human action, and the dynamics of power shaping our lives.

This inference is supported by a longstanding tradition of research mainly concerned with the effects of news reporting. For example one notable study, based on experimental research, found that when crime and terrorism was reported as a series of discrete events, it encouraged responsibility to be attributed to the individuals involved[22]. But when crime and terrorism was reported in a contextualised way, it encouraged attribution to societal causation. The strength of this framing effect varied across issues, and was affected by intervening variables like partisan orientation. Given this demonstration of the cognitive influence of news reporting, it would seem likely that the cumulative consumption of fiction over a long period also influences our understanding of the world.

The way that entertainment depicts reality can have significant political implications. Take, for example, popular American drama concerned with the role of the American military and security services. There is a very large number of American war films, extending from *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949) to *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), which focus on the self-sacrifice, heroism and nobility of the American armed forces[23]. There is also a genre of Cold War science fiction film, once very popular, that feature a terrifying menace – such as monsters from the sea, invaders from another planet or an invisible enemy within in (as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956)). These threats - thinly disguised metaphors for the Communist Menace - were usually thwarted at the end of the film with the help of the American armed forces. In the post Cold War period, this science genre was reworked in an imperialist form by depicting the American armed forces as saviours of the world. For example, *Armageddon* (1998) climaxes with two American military shuttles called Freedom and Independence (the latter including a Russian cosmonaut) racing to prevent an

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21 E. van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen*, Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004; J. Steet, *Politics and Popular Culture*, Cambridge: Polity, 1997.

22 S. Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible?*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

23 J.D. Slocum, (ed.), *Hollywood and War*, New York: Routledge, 2006.

asteroid from destroying the planet. The earth is saved, and the surviving crew of Freedom return as heroes. Similarly, in *Independence Day* (1996), the Unites States' armed forces lead the world's remnants of resistance to an alien invasion of earth. People in different continents pray for the success of the American military, and then greet its heroic triumph with grateful joy.

After the 9/11 attacks in 2001, extraterrestrial threats were supplemented by ruthless terrorists. The most popular of the terrorist dramas is the long running Fox TV series, *24*, featuring Jack Bauer, the indestructible hero of the Counter Terrorism Unit. He prevents a succession of terrorist plots: to assassinate a senior politician (2001), blow up Los Angeles with a nuclear bomb (2002), spread a deadly virus (2003), generate carnage at the behest of terrorist mastermind, Habib Marwan (2005), release deadly nerve gas in a shopping mall (2006), explode nuclear devices in suitcases (2007), and takeover America's energy, water and air traffic control systems (2008).

Taken together, this vast fictional output underwrites the need for America to be ever vigilant in warding off manifold threats, to spend heavily on its military and intelligence forces, and to be grateful for the bravery of its armed forces. This provides implicit support for America's vast military budget, something that has not been lost on the Pentagon. It has long given logistical and technical support to Hollywood, providing in effect a hidden subsidy for American war films[24].

But Hollywood has also produced films that cut across or even challenge the 'national security' theme of patriotic war films. There is a long tradition of critical war dramas from *Red Badge of Courage* (1951) through to *Platoon* (1986) and *Jarhead* (2005). Their most often recurring themes are that war brutalises everyone, exacts a terrible human cost and should be avoided whenever possible. There is a second cluster of critical films, from *Three Days of the Condor* (1975) through to the Bourne franchise (*Bourne Identity* (2002), *Bourne Supremacy* (2004) and *Bourne Ultimatum* (2007)), which feature murderous, corrupt groups of operatives in the CIA. Their implication is that a democracy needs to exercise control over its security forces. Thus, *Three Days of the Condor* ends with the hero (a CIA employee) walking towards the New York Times building as a whistleblower, while *Bourne Ultimatum* features in its conclusion a news report of a US Senate hearing into CIA abuses. There is also a third, small group of popular anti-imperialist films. This includes the remake of *The Quiet American* (2002), which draws attention to an American CIA agent's moral ambiguity, implying that he had been implicated in a massacre in French Indochina; *Rendition* (2007) which depicts the CIA as being involved in the abduction and torture of an innocent engineer, who is induced to 'confess' to terrorism that he never committed; and *Syriana* (2005) which portrays the American state as being hand-in-glove with the oil industry, and deploying arms to prevent a

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24   J-M. Valentin, *Hollywood, Pentagon and Washington*, London: Anthem Press, 2005. According to Valentin, the Pentagon usually demanded to see advance information about the film's story line before providing assistance.

moderate Arab from introducing democracy, establishing the rule of law and advancing the position of women in a Gulf emirate. Here, the American state is portrayed as using violence to prevent the promotion of American values of freedom and democracy overseas – the obverse of countless American films.

Thus if many American military films implicitly support a Pentagon perspective, there are also anti-war, CIA conspiracy and anti-imperialist movies. In effect, Hollywood stages an implicit political debate about America's national security state. The spectrum of positions expressed in this debate goes beyond that of conventional politics. The anti-imperialist perspective of *Syriana* falls outside the bi-partisan consensus of Capitol Hill, while the TV series *24* pushed the boundaries by championing state torture.

Drama can also provide a focus for collective debate, a point illustrated by the impact of Jack Bauer on America. Bauer dramatised torture, making it real: something enacted in people's living rooms. Although Bauer often takes the law into his hands, and acts in an unauthorised way, he invariably saves people's lives. Torture is thus presented as something that has to be done in order to defeat terrorism, and to prevent (sometimes literally) a 'ticking bomb' from exploding. However, what made this justification of state torture a catalyst for national debate were three things. First, the TV series featuring Jack Bauer was so widely viewed that it provided a common basis of experience and shared point of reference. Second, Bauer's use of torture became more frequent and prominent from 2005 onwards (with Bauer reflecting upon and justifying his actions in the series itself). Third, and most importantly, Jack Bauer came to be seen by large numbers of people as representing something more than just fiction. The 'abuses' of Abu Ghraib, revealed in 2004 and the subject of publicised courts martial up to 2006, were widely presented as the actions of pathological individuals. But by 2007, increasing prominence was being given to the claim that the American state was outsourcing torture to other countries through secret renditions, and also sanctioning 'high pressure' interrogation methods by its own agents when dealing with suspected terrorists. Public discussion of Jack Bauer greatly increased in 2007, and focused on his use of torture, partly because it became widely suspected that torture was being deployed in the battle against terrorism by the 'good side'.

In 2007, Jack Bauer came up in a televised presidential debate between Republican presidential candidates, prompting one columnist to call the debate 'a Jack Bauer impersonation contest'[25]. Conservative Supreme Court Justice, Antonin Scalia, made headlines with a remark, much quoted (and also misquoted): 'Is any jury going to convict Jack Bauer?... I don't think so'[26]. Former President Bill Clinton condemned torture, but commented on Bauer in an

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25 R. Brooks, 'Don't tell these guys torture is wrong: the GOP debate was a Jack Bauer impersonation contest', *Los Angeles Times*, 2007. <http://www.commondreams.org/archive/2007/05/18/1284> (accessed 12 October 2009].

26 A. Sullivan, 'Scala and Torture', *The Daily Dish*, 2007. http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com/the_daily_dish/2007/06/scalia_and_tort.html[accessed 14 October 2009].

elliptical way that was interpreted in different ways[27]. Brigadier General Patrick Finnegan, Dean of the elite West Point Military Academy, urged the producers of the show to eliminate torture scenes in order to prevent a negative influence on young soldiers[28]. Some Protestant evangelical religious leaders took a public stand against torture, in opposition to the Bauer enthusiasts within their community[29]. A satirical cartoon strip in which little Jack Bauer takes after his father and tortures Arab children at a cub scout camp provoked uncomfortable laughter in the blogosphere[30]. A national debate about Bauer and torture was conducted in the media, extending from the *Washington Post* and CBS through to Yahoo chatrooms[31]. Some of this was insubstantial, typified by the claim that the success of *24* was a popular referendum in favour of torture, and the counterclaim that a drop in the show's ratings reflected a changing public mood. But at its heart was a serious discussion centred on three contending positions: the Jack Bauer view that the 'means justifies the ends'; its antithesis that torture is always wrong; and a centre ground of worried pragmatism (disapproving of torture but believing that, in certain circumstances, it is necessary, while also registering that overdone torture can produce unreliable information).

Jack Bauer thus provided a catalyst for a national community to engage in a moral-democratic debate about torture, at a time when it was divided and, to some degree, in two minds. A Pew survey in April 2009 found that just 25% said that 'torture to gain important information from suspected terrorists' is never justified. Compared with this, 22% said that torture is rarely justified, 34% that it is sometimes, and 15% that it was often justified[32]. Although most Americans support torture in certain circumstances[33], President Obama changed American state policy on interrogations to comply with international law, in January 2009.

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27 Anon, '24: Bill Clinton OK with Jack Bauer's Torture Tactics', *Buddy TV*, 2007. <http://www.buddytv.com/articles/24/24-bill-clinton-ok-with-jack-b-117533.aspx> (accessed 14 October 2009); M. McAuliff, 'Torture like Jack Bauer's Would be OK, Bill Clinton Says', *NY Daily News.Com*, 2007. http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/2007/10/01/2007-10-01_torture_like_jack_bauers_would_be_ok_bil.html (accessed 14 October 2009).

28 A. Buncombe, 'US Military Tells Jack Bauer… Cut Out the Torture Scenes… or Else!', *The Independent*, 2007. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-military-tells-jack-bauer-cut-out-the-torture-scenes--or-else-436143.html (accessed 13 October 2009).

29 B. Meyer, 'Jesus vs. Jack Bauer', *Cleveland.com*, 2009. <http://www.cleveland.com/.../torture_debate_prompts_evangel.html> (accessed 12 October 2009).

30 For example, Anon, 'Andrew Sullivan Criticizes Jack Bauer Cartoon', *Neveryetmelted.com*, 2007. http://neveryetmelted.com/2007/05/03/andrew-sullivan-criticizes-jack-bauer-cartoon-torture/< (accessed 14 October 2009).

31 This debate is played out in the 39,100 items recorded by Google on the subject of Jack Bauer and torture [Jack Bauer=torture], as of October 16, 2009. The most prominent of these are voluminous American media news and feature articles.

32 Pew Research Center, 'Public Remains Divided over Use of Torture', 2009. http://people-press.org/report/510/public-remains-divided-over-use-of-torture (accessed 14 October 2009).

33 There was little sustained movement of attitudes towards torture between November 2007 and April 2009, save for a small increase (4 percentage points) in those who thought that torture was 'sometimes' necessary (Ibid).

Entertainment and public norms

the fourth way in which the media impinge on public life is through contributing to a dialogue about public norms. These are the rules, conventions and expectations that guide individual behaviour, and the social interaction of society. Public norms generate shared understandings about what actions are appropriate and inappropriate, and also help to define acceptable and unacceptable attitudes.

However, public norms evolve and change over time. They also vary in terms of their force. They can be coercive because they are consensual and enforced by law; and they can also be weak because they are contested, and widely breached. Norms can also demarcate very sharply the boundaries of what is acceptable, or leave a wide spectrum of behaviour as a matter of individual and subcultural choice. Despite this variability, public norms are an essential part of the way in which we govern our common social processes.

The media are involved in norm enforcement through pillorying or demonising trans-gressors (for example mothers who go abroad on holiday, leaving their children behind unattended – a favourite British tabloid target). But the media can also participate in the weakening, strengthening or revision of norms. This can take the form of opening up public norms to explicit debate, leading to their reaffirmation or modification. Alternatively, revision can be enacted symbolically through changing representations of the 'other' in a way that redraws the boundary between the acceptable and unacceptable. This will be illustrated through a brief account of changing portrayals of sexuality and gender.

In Britain, gay sex used to be a crime, and discouraged through strong social disapproval. This was reinforced through negative representations of gays and lesbians in films during the first half of the twentieth century. Gay men tended to be depicted as silly and comic or as sinister, predatory and menacing[34]. When attitudes in Britain liberalised during the 1960s, this was accompanied by less hostile film representations (including a notable film *Victim* (1961) in which the sympathetic hero is a blackmailed gay man), and by the decriminalisation of gay sex in 1967. Screen hostility towards gays and lesbians continued to decrease in the next thirty years, though they long continued to be depicted as 'other' (i.e. not normal), with the most sympathetic portrayals usually being reserved for the 'asexual'. There was a corresponding change in British public attitudes, with those saying that homosexuality is always or mostly wrong decreasing from 70% to 47% between 1985 and 2001[35]. In the early twenty first century, there was a further liberalising shift. While there continued to be negative screen depictions (fuelling displays of public disapproval, and violent 'queer-bashing' by normative vigilantes), almost for the first time,

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34 L. Gross, 'Minorities, Majorities and the Media', in T. Liebes and J. Curran (eds.), *Media, Ritual and Identity*, London: Routledge, 1998.

35 G. Evans, 'In Search of Tolerance', in A. Park et al. (eds.), *British Social Attitudes: The 19th Report*, London: Sage, 2002.

there were also screen portrayals of gays and lesbians as 'ordinary'. A notable landmark was the British TV series, *Queer as Folk* (1999-2000), whose narrative, camera gaze and sex scenes normalised being gay[36]. A combination of decreasing hostility and more positive media representation gave a further impetus to legislative change. In 2001-4, same sex partnerships were legally recognised (with important financial consequences), and the age of sexual consent was made the same for all.

Similarly, the weight of tradition – underpinned by religious interpretation and biological theory, supported by early socialisation, peer group pressure and popular culture, and underwritten by patriarchal authority – projected a clear normative understanding of gender difference in late Victorian Britain. This ordained that the women's place was *rightfully* in the home (though this was often breached in practice), and that men should be the principal breadwinner and play the principal role in public life. Gender convention also assumed that women were inherently different from men. Thus, it was widely believed that men were naturally ardent, initiating, rational and independent, while women were naturally disposed to be demure, dependent, emotional, and nurturing[37].

This normative inheritance was contested, renegotiated and modified in the subsequent period. The organised women's movement, supported by a significant feminist press[38], secured major legal reforms, not least, in 1918, the right of women over 30 to vote. Subsequent legislative reform was accompanied by gradual normative revision that was played out in the contemporary media. Thus, most popular newspapers in the 1920s and 1930s depicted woman's increased freedom from confining social codes and dress, and a greater stress on female athleticism, as part of a generational change that was to be welcomed as a way of being 'modern'. Yet, while these papers mostly put their weight behind gender change, their women's pages remained focussed on looking good, being a housewife and mother[39]. Similarly, the male ideal in young women's magazines fiction shifted in the 1950s towards a new stress on boyishness and gentleness, though the ideal man was still expected – as in the 1920s – to be 'strong'[40]. This combination of continuity and change is typical of the way in which media support normative adjustment.

From the 1970s onwards, the advance of women in Britain accelerated (though significant gender inequalities remain). This shift was accompanied by changes in the way in which women were depicted in the media. In the period 1945-65, autonomous, independent wo-

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36 G. Gleeber, *Serial Television*, London: British Film Institute, 2004.

37 S. K. Kent, *Gender and Power in Britain*, 1640-1990, London: Routledge, 1999; D. Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*, London: Croom Helm, 1982.

38 M. Tusan, *Women Making News*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005.

39 A. Bingham, *Gender, Modernity and the Popular Press in Interwar Britain*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004.

40 G. Murphy, 'Media Influence on the Socialisation of Teenage Girls', in J. Curran, A. Smith and P. Wingate (eds.), *Impacts and influences*, London: Methuen, 1987.

men tended to be symbolically punished in popular films: they usually came to an unhappy end, or were portrayed as unfeminine or unfulfilled[41]. By contrast, popular TV drama from the 1980s onwards featured an increasing number of autonomous heroines who were also successful, fulfilled and feminine[42]. Changing representations of gender were linked to a growing repudiation of the Victorian gender order. Thus, in 1989, only 28% in Britain agreed with the statement that 'a man's job is to earn money; a woman's job is to look after the home and family'. By 2002, this traditionalist minority had shrunk to just 17%[43]. But this repudiation of the past is riddled with ambiguity not least over who does what in the home. The same study also found that in 2002, 48% said that that women should stay at home when there is a child under a school age, a figure that is significantly less than the 64% who adopted this position thirteen years before, but still substantial[44].

This background of changing gender relations partly accounts for the impact of the American TV series *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) in Britain and elsewhere. The series is an improbable fable about four professional women (three in their mid thirties, and the other in her early forties) living the life of the super rich in Manhattan, without the kind of jobs or private incomes that would sustain this. The series has been championed as expressing a new generation's updated feminism[45] and denounced as a return to a reactionary pre-feminist past[46]. Both positions are wrong because the series stages a *debate* between alternative gender norms.

This debate is sustained in four ways. Firstly, it is expressed in the monologues of the journalist, Carrie, as she writes or thinks about her weekly sex column. One of its recurring themes is the tension between expectations shaped by the popular culture of the past, and the reality of her life and that of her friends. A world of celluloid romance and fairy tale princesses is contrasted with the routines and disappointments of quotidian life. 'No one has "Breakfast at Tiffany's" and no one has "Affairs to Remember"', she comments wryly. 'Instead we have breakfast at 7am, and affairs we try to forget as quickly as possible.'

The second way in which this normative dialogue is sustained is through the contrast represented between the four friends at the heart of the series, each of whom embody different orientations and expectations. At one end of the spectrum is Charlotte, an art gallery director who yearns for a Tiffany engagement ring, marriage to WASP perfection,

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41 J. Thumim, *Celluloid Sisters*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992.

42 A. Lotz, *Redesigning Women*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006.

43 R. Crompton, M. Brockman, and R. Wiggins, 'A Woman's Place… Employment and Family Life for Men and Women', in A. Park et al, *British Social Attitudes: The 20th Report*, London: Sage, 2003, p. 164.

44 Ibid., pp. 164-5.

45 A. Henry, 'Orgasms and Empowerment: *Sex and the City* and the Third Wave Feminism', in K. Akass and J. McCabe (eds.), *Reading Sex and the City*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2004.

46 A. McRobbie, *The Uses of Cultural Studies*, London: Sage, 2005

a fulfilled life as mother and wife. Her search is unrelenting: 'I've been dating since I was fifteen', she declares. 'I'm exhausted. Where is he?' Samantha, the head of a small public relations company, represents the other end of the spectrum: the female equivalent of a 'laddish' male, who regards the idea of eternal love as an illusion, abhors the idea of marriage, and is a confident, initiating libertine. 'I am try-sexual', she explains, meaning that she will try anything. Situated between these two is journalist Carrie, who oscillates between romantic yearning for a perfect man and the sceptical detachment of a journalist-ethnographer; and Miranda, a Harvard-trained lawyer who is focused on her career, does not want a child, and makes occasional feminist outbursts. Exasperated by the men-talk of her friends, she exclaims on one occasion: 'How does it happen that four such smart women have nothing to talk about but boyfriends? It's like seventh grade with bank accounts. What about us – what we think, we feel, we know? Christ…'

The third way a dialogue is staged is through the ritual meetings that take place between the four friends, in almost all 94 episodes, in a restaurant, bar, coffee shop or apartment. These meetings become occasions for sharing recent experiences or future plans, and generate contrasting reactions. Thus, when Charlotte announces that she intends to give up her job as the head of a fashionable art gallery in order to prepare for her first child, redecorate her flat and help her husband through volunteer fund-raising for his hospital, she gets a strongly disapproving response from her friends. In a subsequent heated phone conversation with one of them, Charlotte defends her gender traditionalism by declaring: 'the women's movement is supposed to be about choice', and she is entitled to make a choice that is right for her.

The fourth device for critically reflecting on contemporary gender norms is that the four women respond in different ways to what happens to them. While Charlotte secures a 'dream husband – a blue-blooded surgeon', the dream turns out to be an illusion, like 'a fake Fendi – just shiny and bright on the outside', because closer knowledge of her husband reveals him to be deficient in most ways that matter. The dream's emptiness is underscored when Charlotte poses with her estranged husband in their soon-to-be-sold Park Avenue apartment for a fashionable magazine – generating the sort of image that had nourished her romantic yearning for years. Although Charlotte's home-making ambitions do not change, she becomes more pragmatic and less tied to social convention. Similarly, the fiercely independent Samantha acquires a sense of vulnerability, as a consequence of ageing and getting cancer, and settles for the emotional stability of living with a young, loving actor (whose career she transforms). Carrie secures the romantic, exciting man of her dreams, but not before discovering – from a lonely vigil as a pampered but neglected doll in Paris – that the combination of romance *and* a career is what makes her happy. Miranda has a child that she had not bargained for, and settles for a nurturing man who becomes the principal home maker in a traditional gender role reversal. Each woman thus

opts in effect for different strategies in being a contemporary woman.

Of course, at one level, the series is steeped in convention in that it is based on a man-hunting narrative that ends in all four women getting their men – three of whom could have stepped out of the pages of a Mills and Boon or Harlequin novel. However, the four friends in *Sex and the City* have in a sense everything: they are clever, successful, witty, good looking, warm, imaginative, and in touch with their feelings. This is in marked contrast to most men they meet who, however promising they first appear to be, turn out to be sadly inadequate: they are self-obsessed, emotionally immature, unable to commit, have unacceptable character defects or, in the case of the best drawn male character (Aidan), are just too ordinary. This depiction of underlying inequality between the heroines and the men they encounter is the dynamic that subverts the conventional formula on which the series is based. The women in *Sex and the City* have demand rather than supply side problems in finding a man. Although they are sometimes rejected, they more often turn down men as not being good enough. And although they all seem anxious to find a man, each (apart from Charlotte) have actually rather ambivalent feelings. One is centred on her career, another on recreational sex, and the third enjoys her freedom and independence, and has a panic attack when she tries on a wedding dress. These are women who have come into their own, and are seeking out new relationships and solutions. So, to see the series as simply a reversion to a patriarchal era in which women yearn to be married, and are only fulfilled through their relationship to a man, is to misunderstand its complexity. It is also to miss the significance of the series as an extended dialogue between the past, present and future.

In brief, entertainment connects to the democratic life of society in four ways. It provides a space for exploring and debating social values, which occupy a central place in contemporary politics. It offers a means of defining and refashioning social identity, something that is inextricably linked to a sense of self-interest. It affords alternative frameworks of understanding which inform public debate or, as in the case of Jack Bauer, a catalyst. And it provides a way of assessing, strengthening, weakening, and revising public norms that are an integral part of the way we govern ourselves. To continue to view entertainment as something removed from politics, and unrelated to the democratic role of the media, is no longer sustainable.