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Representations of Silvio Berlusconi on YouTube:

Identification Within a Supra-Logic of Entertainment

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Abstract

This thesis addresses the prevalence of the logics of entertainment and celebrification in a sample of political discourse on internet file-sharing website YouTube. Drawing inspiration from Postman's (1986) account of entertainment's dominance of broadcast television, it attempts to transfer the essence of his critique to the medium of YouTube. Through employing a content analysis methodology that attempts to transcend traditional quantitative and qualitative distinctions (Krippendorff, (2004), the study examines the extent to which entertainment logics structure representations of former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi on YouTube. It also draws on the concept of 'celebrity politician typologies' (West & Orman, 2002; Street, 2004), in an attempt to evaluate Berlusconi's representation on YouTube through an established set of celebrity 'traits'. This idea of 'celebrity politician typologies' is supplemented through the use of 'Burkean identification' (1958), in order to better understand how audiences articulate identification or disidentification with the controversial figure of Berlusconi. This thesis finds the YouTube representation of Silvio Berlusconi to be a discourse dominated by the logics of entertainment and celebrification. It also finds that Berlusconi's celebrity appears to transcend the boundaries of the existing 'celebrity politician typologies'. The application of Burkean identification reveals that, in some instances, Berlusconi appears to inspire a paradoxical form of identification; one in which YouTube users cognitively disidentify with him as a politician, yet display a degree of identification with him as an entertainer. The study concludes that Berlusconi's representation on YouTube demonstrates an audience internalisation, and even amplification, of the entertainment logics that Postman (1986) claimed structured political discourses in the broadcast television era.

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Preface

Neil Postman begins the forward for his seminal 1986 critique of television, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* by discussing two of the great dystopian literary warnings to emerge from the 20th Century: George Orwell's *1984* (1949) and Aldous Huxley's *A Brave New World* (1932). Postman contends that, at the time of his writing, while the liberal democratic world was congratulating itself on having recently avoided the due date for the Orwellian nightmare, it was in fact succumbing to the 'slightly older and slightly lesser known' Huxleyan nightmare (Postman, 1986, p. vii). In distinguishing between these two dark visions, Postman cites Orwell's and Huxley's fears as diametrically opposed means of reaching similarly oppressive ends: namely diminishing people's capacity to think. Unlike Orwell's, Huxley's vision for democracy's demise requires no Big Brother to achieve its ends. Huxley's vision is one embedded in what he characterised in *A Brave New World Revisited* as 'man's almost infinite appetite for distractions' (Huxley, 1958, p.29). Postman argues that Orwell's vision feared 'those who would ban books', 'those who would deprive us of information', 'that the truth would be concealed from us', and 'that we would become a captive culture' (1986, p. vii). Conversely, he argues that Huxley's vision feared that 'there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one'. Rather than concern about those who would deny information, Huxley feared 'those who would give us so much information that we would be reduced to passivity and egotism', drowning the truth in 'a sea of irrelevance', and ultimately becoming 'a trivial culture' (Postman, 1986, p. vii). In Huxley's own assessment (1958, p. 21), in 1984 people are controlled through pain, while in *Brave New World* people are controlled by pleasure. Postman summarises the differences in Orwell and Huxley's visions: 'In short Orwell feared that what we hate would ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love would ruin us' (1986 p. vii). Postman ends *Amusing Ourselves to Death's* foreword by declaring that 'this book is about the possibility that Huxley, not Orwell was right' (Postman, 1986, p. viii). This thesis also entertains this possibility. Essentially, the concern is that an excess of trivial information can threaten the quality of democracy just as effectively as information being excessively controlled. This thesis explores the possibility of an 'excess of triviality' in the YouTube representation of Silvio Berlusconi.

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