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The Politics of MTV: Beneficial or Inimical?

By Linsey Rae Sommers

Our freedom in America is best understood as a paradox. We pride ourselves as being the freest nation in the world, yet by not exercising our freedom we indirectly let others decide our fate. This immense nationwide apathy, expressed primarily by voter indifference, is undermining democracy today. Many groups realize the seriousness of voter apathy and are calling for increased citizen awareness and participation. Formally only known for producing music videos, MTV (Music Television) has expanded into the political realm by striving to overcome voter apathy and “convince young people if they’re not happy with the political process, they have the ability to influence it” (Express News Net n.d.).

C. Wright Mills, a controversial writer and sociologist in the 1960s, theorized that the apathetic attitude of society was leading to an “end of ideology” (Jacobs and Landau 1966, 102). He thus galvanized younger members of society to become the agents of social change. Tom Hayden, an influential leader of SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) and a contemporary of Mills, wrote “The Port Huron Statement” as a way to urge students particularly to become aware of the issues affecting them and to fight for radical politics. This essay will use Mill’s theory of “the end of ideology” to analyze the apathy expressed in society and then focus on Hayden’s theory of organizations to explain MTV’s commitment to draw young voters into the political process and to show them why their voice is necessary for maintaining democracy.

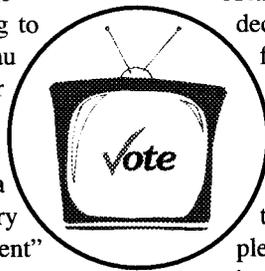
Apathy is increasing among all levels of society. Americans in general are not knowledgeable about current political issues and simply do not seem to care enough to educate themselves. Since the founding voting has been the primary means granted by government for ordinary citizens to shape those policies that affect them directly. With the expansion of suffrage, rise of “soft money,” and

the passage of the motor-voter law, it is easier today to register and vote than any other time in our nation’s history, yet the percentage of total eligible voters keeps shrinking (Janda, Berry, and Goldman 1997, 236).

The founders of this nation established America as a democracy. A true democracy is “a system of government in which power is vested in the people, who rule either directly or through freely elected representatives” (Hirsch, Kett, and Trefil 1988, 291). A democracy in its fullest form can only function by the voice and consent of the people. If members of society, as a whole, do not express their views, the elected officials themselves are at liberty to determine what is best for the people and democracy is undermined.

A lack of political concern is not new to this decade. In the late 1960s, C. Wright Mills found that society lacked a clear vision for America. To him, the majority of people tended to think there were no substantive issues or problems of vital importance. Additionally, Mills claimed that the power elite, rather than the people, governed the nation. The lack of substantive issues and domination by the elite engendered feelings of external inefficacy. Complacency subsequently prevailed among society as many citizens felt they were incapable of instigating societal change (Jacobs and Landau, 104). Feelings of both external inefficacy and complacency, in turn, fostered political apathy. Mills theorized that this prevailing mood of political apathy would lead to “the end of ideology” because society, according to him, was losing that unified ideological vision that once guided the nation and held it together (Jacobs and Landau 1966, 102).

For Mills, “the end of ideology” rested “upon a disbelief in the shaping by men of their own futures” and it stood for the refusal to work out an explicit political philosophy (Jacobs and Landau 1966, 104). Without a well-defined political philos-



ophy how does one instigate societal change? Mills theorized that if societal change was going to occur, it must occur within the younger segment of society. He discovered that while the ingrained beliefs of the older generations made them less receptive to new ideas, the younger members of society had not lived long enough to form concrete ideologies and were easier to mobilize. Mills therefore called for young intellectuals to challenge the existing norms and values among the elite and become new agents of social change. He urged the rest of the population to "learn from these young intellectuals and with them work out new forms of action" (Jacobs and Landau 1966, 114).

As Mills theorized in the 1960s, the elite continue to govern society, and political ignorance still abounds among the general population. With such low voter turnout policy makers find it difficult to aggregate the varied beliefs of the citizens into a cohesive political philosophy to guide the nation. Traditionally, politicians and other organizations have given up trying to capture the youth vote because the turnout is so low and because they find their efforts fruitless. In recent years though, many organizations have adopted Mills's philosophy of expressing greater confidence in the younger segment of the population and have tried to increase the political awareness and influence of young adults.

MTV, with its unconventional format, anarchist music videos, and unorthodox hosts, was once considered by many as detrimental to democratic order. By educating young people about the current issues and engaging them in the political process, MTV is changing that image. Like Mills, MTV believes that, with some initiative, the younger segment of society can influence legislation and get policymakers to address their concerns. Barbara Jordan captured MTV's philosophy by emphasizing "it's not just that youth voters are cynical; they're just lost like the rest of the electorate" (Coleman, 1992, 26). MTV's goal is to break this sense of disillusionment among young adults and instill them with some form of guiding political ideology.

Mills theorized that without a coherent ideology, society remains stagnant only left to be governed by the elite. Developing an explicit political philosophy is dependent upon knowing which ideals are most important to society. Without citizen participation, particularly voting, those ideals never get expressed. MTV, which previously had no connection with politics, has since realized the importance of citizen participation and is striving to educate young people about the issues and increase voting.

Like Mills, MTV believes that with greater citizen participation, the nation can become closer to developing a coherent political philosophy. Mills wanted young people to be the "historic agents of change" (Jacobs and Landau 1966, 110-11). Adopting a similar philosophy, the tour manager for the MTV bus remarked "We're just out here to reinforce the idea that they [young adults] have power, if they'll only use it" (Express News Net n.d.).

Thus far the emphasis has been on Mills's articulation of the problems facing society, namely a lack of a coherent ideology. While Mills's analysis of American society accurately captures the sentiment of the nation, Hayden's theory more fully articulates the mechanisms needed for change. Although the time between Hayden's involvement with the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) and MTV's current campaign covers thirty years, Hayden's conception of society in the 1960's parallels society's political apathy today, thus his theory of mobilizing the youth is still applicable.

Hayden described his generation as "bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit" (Jacobs and Landau 1966, 150). Although stated in the 1960s, his view epitomizes the world we live in today. With the Cold War over there is no major threat to our security. The economy is growing at an unprecedented rate and the crime rate is drastically decreasing. The improvements in society have weakened the sense of urgency for change. Hayden explains: "America rests in national stalemate, its goals ambiguous and tradition-bound instead of uniform and clear, its democratic system apathetic and manipulated rather than 'of, by, and for the people'" (Jacobs and Landau 1966, 151).

Hayden wanted to break through this stalemate and make political institutions more accessible and responsible to the people. He felt that the lack of organizations binding people together inhibited societal change. Hence, Hayden thought if he could unite people under organizations purporting change, he could then overhaul the current political system and institute better democratic practices. He claimed that "A first task of any social movement is to convince people that the search for orienting theories and the creation of human values is complex, but worthwhile" (Jacobs and Landau 1966, 154).

Hayden focused on the younger segment of the population because he knew that this young generation today would eventually become the leaders of tomorrow. MTV is targeting the youth for the same reason. During the 1992 presidential campaigns, Sara Levinson, executive vice president of

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MTV, urged the youth: "You can make a difference, your point of view makes a difference and you can change the world" (Multichannel News 1992).

MTV's commitment to enhancing democratic participation among the youth was first actualized through its "Rock the Vote" campaign. Actually "Rock the Vote" was not created by MTV, but by a young man that wanted to raise awareness of the government's attempt to limit the freedom of speech and artistic expression. After only one year of the organization's inception, MTV recognized the group's immense following and MTV joined forces with Patrick Lippert in 1991. MTV has since greatly expanded the mission of "Rock the Vote" into the realm of political activism. As defined by MTV, "Rock the Vote" is "a non-partisan, non-profit organization dedicated to protecting freedom of speech, educating young people about the issues that affect them, and motivating young people to participate by registering, voting, and speaking out" (Express News Net n.d.).

"Rock the Vote" became a political force just before the 1992 presidential elections. During the campaign season MTV interpolated thirty-second to four-minute political news segments into its traditional display of music videos. The network also conducted weekly issue-oriented news specials, covered both the Republican and the Democratic conventions, and aired political commercials. Additionally, the network interviewed high profile candidates such as Al Gore, Bob Dole, and Bill Clinton. At the conclusion of an interview, President Clinton remarked, "We've got to get young people to believe again that the political system can make a difference in their lives" (Chen 1992, 27 [A]).

Although Hayden stressed more radical politics, the stated objectives of the SDS are similar to those of MTV. Hayden wrote The Port Huron Statement to express his views of democracy and to state the goals of the SDS, which include seeking "the establishment of a democracy of individual participation, governed by two central aims: that the individual share in those social decisions determining the quality and direction of his life; that society be organized to encourage independence in men and provide the media for their common participation" (Jacobs and Landau 1955).

To fulfill his objectives, Hayden traveled to various college campuses across the nation trying to instill some sort of unifying institutions among the young people. By rallying students to fight for radical politics, he tried to create enough political upheaval among the younger segment of the population to instigate societal change. MTV adopted

relatively the same technique for increasing political awareness and voter participation. In a desperate attempt to convince America's youth to vote, its 45-foot custom designed "Choose or Lose" bus toured the nation making stops at universities, concerts, malls, and youth gatherings across America. At each stop MTV registered voters, set up interactive information kiosks, and distributed forty-five-page voting guides. During a stop at the University of Iowa Dave Anderson, the tour manager for MTV remarked, "It's no secret young people are disillusioned with politics." He then urged the youth: "You need to get involved! Sitting on the sidelines only makes it worse. It's your life. . . . How the government is run affects you" (The Daily Iowan 1996).

On paper, goals of the SDS seemingly correspond with those of MTV; in practice though, they are vastly different. MTV's vast size and strength gives the appearance that MTV's fight against political apathy far surpassed the intentions of Hayden's democratic movement. Actually, Hayden would consider MTV's movement weak and ineffectual. Hayden envisioned a strong democracy in which participants are actively engaged in the political process. Unlike MTV, he did not consider merely voting once every two years, democratic participation. To reap the rewards of a democracy, Hayden wanted society to rally for meaningful causes, to engage in political debates or protests, and truly to educate themselves about the issues. MTV's main concern was to increase voter turnout.

On a deeper level, the SDS was fighting against everything that MTV represents, i.e., the elite establishment, the status quo, and especially corporate conglomerations. Without his own personal gain, Hayden instigated a grass roots movement from the lowest ranking members of the political spectrum—the youth. Hayden would be appalled that such an organization that produces music videos would use such a potentially potent force in politics to further its own corporate interests. Granted, MTV is helping to promote democratic practices and perhaps should be applauded for its efforts, but there may also be some underlying motives driving its efforts. According to *Variety* magazine, the executives at "MTV are poised to capitalize on the public interest in politics. . . . Its 'Choose or Lose' coverage not only drew in voters, but was an advertising and marketing success story" (Robins 1992, 21). From its "Rock the Vote" campaign and "Choose or Lose" tour MTV gets free advertisement and publicity on major networks such as ABC, NBC, and

CBS, and is in countless newspapers and magazines across America. Hayden sought to overthrow the elite establishment and bring power to common citizen, not further the aims of corporate enterprise.

The question we must now ask ourselves is which form, if either, is truly democratic. Although Hayden wants a government literary "of, for, and by the people," is demanding social and political upheaval the best way of approaching democracy in the first place? Is Hayden's method even democratic at all? He felt that if one really cared about a particular value, he or she would work through the institutions and fight for their beliefs. Thus, for Hayden, deference should be given to those who are the most outspoken. The problem with this pluralist model is that it essentially favors those with more resources, such as time, money, and prestige. Hence, in some ways his method might actually undermine democracy because those with more resources are better able to get their concerns heard and addressed.

MTV also maintains that it is promoting democracy; it makes citizens aware of the current societal dilemmas, educates them about political issues, and then encourages them to cast their ballot. One should be aware, though, that the issues spotlighted by "Rock the Vote" are decided by MTV the corporate enterprise, not MTV the philanthropist. Thus, MTV will try to advance those issues most beneficial to their corporation, which may or may not be in society's best interests. Throughout the presidential campaigns, MTV focused almost exclusively on the two major parties with only an occasional remark about a third party. According to David Saulnier from Dischord magazine, "MTV has to insure its own safety with regards to broadcasting and profit making. This causes them to distribute very safely manufactured political fluff which pose no real threat to the status quo" (Saulnier n.d.). Additionally, MTV has the inimical capacity to shape the beliefs of an otherwise uneducated voter.

MTV is a network designed for producing music videos. It does not have the resources, nor the capacity to provide complete, in depth coverage of the candidates or the political issues and cannot be expected to. The problem arises when the youth rely solely on MTV for their political information, thinking that MTV's coverage is well balanced and comprehensive, when in fact they should also be relying on newspapers and networks such as CNN and C-SPAN. Hayden would argue that merely brushing over important issues and opinions keeps the youth from becoming truly active in the American political system. This, in turn, inhibits democracy because a large segment of society would be under-represented.

Even after the rallies by Hayden and the voting drives of MTV, the same dilemma of political apathy articulated by C. Wright Mills thirty years ago still faces society today. Their methods did, though, profoundly influence society, especially among young adults. Hayden unified the youth and gave them hope for the future. MTV educated young adults and increased their political participation substantially. Yet the question still remains of why America is still on the path towards an "end of ideology." If America's ideology rests primarily on democratic principles, how can we expect to bring that ideology into fruition if we can't abide by its precepts?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Linsey Rae Sommers is a junior in political science. She grew up in California, but her parents recently moved to Arizona. In her spare time she enjoys skiing, drawing, collecting animation art, and traveling. Her dream job is to become a political science professor and then work as an advisor on the president's staff.

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