

[Transcript] Vinohradská 12 / Age of Political Anger

I am Matej Skalicki, and this is Czech Radio News Podcast, Winoherazka Advanáct. The Age of Anger, the Politics of Anger, rage, wrath and annoyance, everything revolves around politicians.

They're hated, they're loved, they have huge fanbases.

Many topics to discuss with Karinval Jorgensen, a journalism professor from Cardiff University and the author of a book called Emotions, Media and Politics.

It's Sunday, August 13th.

So hi, thank you very much for joining us on this podcast.

Thanks very much for having me.

So do you think we'll live in the Age of Anger right now?

Well, it's a really interesting question.

I think that when you ask a lot of observers, they'll say, well, we do have a lot to be angry about at the moment.

But I tend to think that that has probably always been the case.

What I think is true is that we live in an age where it's become more acceptable to express your feelings of anger in public.

I think that there are several different reasons for that.

One of the reasons is that there's a sort of broader acceptability of speaking about your emotions in public,

which is something that we've really seen happening over a very long period of time.

But then secondly, I think in the most recent decades, what we've seen is that the rise of social media in particular

have made anger much more prominent and much more widely expressed emotion.

And that in turn is something that spills over into the content of mainstream media.

So I think we live in an age where the expression of anger has become much more acceptable than it was before.

And do you think that it's way more acceptable for politicians as well to get angry?

Yeah, I think that absolutely it's the case that politicians are much more likely to express their anger in public than they were before.

I think that historically there's been a kind of prohibition on negative emotions in terms of their expression by public figures.

It's been seen to be almost kind of illegal or not allowed for politicians to express negative emotions.

But we've seen a shift whereby some politicians, I think particularly populist politicians, have discovered that anger is a very, very powerful political emotion.

And I think this is something that political activists and social movements have known about and benefited from for a very long time.

I think that anger in particular has always been really useful for marginalized people, but rarely something that's been seen as acceptable for mainstream politicians.

So I think what's changed now is that populist politicians have discovered that when they express anger in public,

it really is something that resonates with voters because they're kind of channeling the views, they're expressing the views of big, disaffected, unhappy populations in society.

In your book you work with the mediated anger, so can you describe what is it?

In the book I'm interested in exploring the notion of mediated anger as something that's quite

distinctive from the kind of anger that we may feel as individuals.

So there's something very particular about what happens when we see anger represented in media coverage.

And I think it's distinctive in several different ways.

So first of all, it's not something that just kind of comes to us unprocessed.

Instead, it's what are called constructed through the reporting and the storytelling of journalists.

So the journalists themselves kind of tell stories about anger, which makes them meaningful and makes them potentially ideological.

And then secondly, I also think that when we see anger expressed in the media, that anger is performative.

And what I mean by saying performative is that when actors are angry in the media, if we think of anyone from protesters to presidents, that anger is performed on the basis of the knowledge that you're appearing in public.

And that knowledge very likely shapes the way in which that anger is expressed.

And finally, in the vast majority of cases, as my own research on this shows, when you see anger represented in the media,

that doesn't tend to be so much the anger of individuals, because an individual being angry about something isn't particularly newsworthy,

unless those individuals themselves, here I'm thinking about people like Donald Trump, for example, are newsworthy.

So in other words, mediated anger is actually often about collective anger.

It's about the anger of, let's say, doctors who are not getting paid enough.

It's about the anger of, let's say, refugees for their treatment by governments.

It's about the anger of groups that have particular perceived injustices.

And what that means is that in the vast majority of cases, mediated anger, because it's collective, is potentially political.

Yeah. But when we switch this back to the politicians, so if I get it right, politicians are far more willing to act angrily or to run amok,

just because it's performative and they are mobilizing their waters.

Also, I think that in part what's happening here is that the public expression of emotion has become much more acceptable,

and in particular, the public expression of anger has become more acceptable.

But really what I think is happening is that populist politicians in particular have recognized that if they express anger in public,

they're in a way kind of channeling the emotions of the public.

So they're channeling the views of the disaffected of people who are voters and who are thinking about the things that are making them angry.

So it's turned out for populist politicians to be a really effective way of mobilizing the interest of voters.

Speaking of Donald Trump, because you've mentioned his name and he's a representative of an age of anger or politics of anger,

but there is one more term that we can connect with his name and that is political fandom, isn't it?

So do you think that this has an important role or it might have an important role in his comeback in US politics?

I think Donald Trump is obviously quite a distinctive and unique figure in lots of different ways, but also I think in other ways he's quite symptomatic of broader developments.

So one thing that we've seen over a longer period of time is that we've seen more and more celebrities going into politics.

And a second thing we've seen is that politicians are increasingly drawing on kind of metaphors and languages and images from popular culture.

So popular culture and politics have drawn closer together over the past several decades.

What I'm arguing in the book really inspired by the work of scholars of fandom is that we can think of devotion to a politician as sort of like fandom.

The reason why I'm making this argument is that for scholars of fandom it's very important that when we think about what makes someone a fan,

fandom is about emotional attachment to a particular text or to a particular popular culture figure.

In the same way when we think about politics and when we think about why people like particular politicians,

there is an element of emotional allegiance to a particular political figure.

So there isn't an element whereby we vote for someone because we feel kind of emotionally attached to them.

That doesn't sit in complete isolation from rational decision making.

So in a way rational decision making about our political beliefs operates hand in hand with these kinds of emotional attachments.

When we look at Donald Trump in particular, what I think is going on is that in part he is a figure who comes from a kind of popular culture celebrity background.

So he's someone who is instantly recognizable and who has that particular brand associated with him.

But then at the same time he's also a politician that his voters clearly have very strong emotional connections to,

something which is illustrated by the fact that some people describe the followers of Trump as being almost like kind of a cult in terms of their allegiance to him.

So yes, I think that we can explain some of the kind of political resonance of Trump through these kinds of tropes around fandom.

By the way, why we are emotionally attached to politicians? What's the sorcery in this? Is it all about the social media?

I think that we have always been looking for some reason to be emotionally connected to politicians.

So as I just mentioned, when we think about why we want to vote for particular politicians, it's in part because we agree with their beliefs and their policies.

But it's also in part because there's something about the way they present themselves, the way they perform as politicians, which resonates with us as individuals.

And I think that's something that's probably always been around and has been sort of really accentuated by the rise of mass media, like starting with radio and television.

But it's probably something that has been particularly amplified with the rise of social media.

There is some kind of a parasocial relationship between the voters and politicians on social media, isn't it?

Yes, no, absolutely. I think there is that parasocial relationship insofar as we kind of project certain qualities into political leaders.

We invest ourselves in their lives. We invest ourselves in their personalities as well. So we can think about the idea that voters have parasocial relationships with politicians in the same way that fans of particular texts will have parasocial relationships with the characters in that particular text,

whether it's a television series or film or some other kind of media text.

I will add one particular Czech story to this discussion.

Our former prime minister likes to cook, dance, sing, scrap a pick in the zoo on social media.

They all do those ridiculous challenges and things, all of the politicians, not only in our country. Why do you think they're doing that? Does it work?

Well, it's a really interesting question, right? I was just before we were speaking, I was looking up some of the literature about the Czech political context.

I was looking at a study which does show growing celebrity engagement in politics and media coverage of political activities over the last couple of decades since 1996.

So there is clearly something going on within your political context, which also reflects what's happening elsewhere.

And I think that a big part of this puzzle is that politicians now operate in an environment where they have to try to engage with voters by appearing to be ordinary people.

So they have to appear to not be elevated above us, but be just like the rest of us. They have to be cooking, they have to do the laundry, they have to know how to dance, they have to know how to relate to ordinary people as well.

So it's a very different kind of landscape where politicians are measured, not just how they perform in relation to policies, but also in terms of having the most relatable personality.

We were speaking about performative anger, so isn't this only performance? Is it believable? Is it authentic?

Well, I think that what you see is a pattern whereby there's almost a requirement that politicians are able to perform their emotions in an authentic manner.

So some of the most successful contemporary politicians are exactly those politicians who do express their emotions, whether they're positive emotions or negative emotions, and who do so in a way that appears to be authentic.

And so one of the figures I'm thinking about, for example, is Vladimir Zelensky, who obviously comes from a background as an actor, so understands a lot of the intricacies of performance extremely well.

But then paradoxically, because he comes from a background as an actor, he also really knows how to appear authentic.

And so he is quite consistently performing his emotions, whether they're positive or negative emotions, in a way that very much coincides with concrete policy goals, which in his case, obviously, tend to be about saving Ukraine at whatever means is possible.

And in broader speaking, do you think that it is necessary to bring emotions into politics or to try to be emotional and authentic, and that there will be some sort of selection in the future that only the people who are expressing the emotion, they will survive in politics, and all of the others will disappear?

I think that increasingly now, politicians have to be able to orient themselves towards what we might describe as a media logic towards what is going to play well in relation to media coverage, and that includes the ability to perform your emotions in an authentic manner.

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So yes, I think that it is still important for politicians to embody policies that resonate with the electorate, but probably having that kind of emotional intelligence, having the ability to perform your emotions authentically and also to connect with voters in an emotional manner, that is probably increasingly essential, and I think it will be difficult to be successful in politics without that.

Okay, so thank you very much for all your answers.

Thank you very much for having me.

And that's all for today. I spoke with Karinavall Jorgensen, a forum at Cardiff University in Wales.

Thank you for listening.