

Popular Geopolitics

INTRODUCTION

For a long time, popular geopolitics was not taken too seriously; it was certainly seen as a relative of other forms of geopolitics, but perhaps a sort of distant cousin who just gathered the low-hanging fruit. To an extent, this idea remains: there is research in the sphere of popular geopolitics which is a little less serious than we might expect of other academic research, and many respectable geographers avoid popular geopolitics because to study it would require studying popular culture. But on 7 January 2015, when the brothers Saïd and Chérif Kouachi stormed the offices of the French satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo*, murdering 12 people, it became clear that the study of popular geopolitics would have to be taken more seriously. How did we arrive at a situation where two men decided to commit mass murder for a cartoon?

There is so much that we do not know about the relationship between elites, media and the general public when it comes to factors like the formation of foreign policy, multiculturalism, identity, interstate relations, soft power and the relationship between religion and the state. Popular geopolitics can give us a forum at which to start drawing together theories and research from many different areas to try to better understand these areas.

At the time of writing, the *Charlie Hebdo* case has not made it into the popular geopolitics academic press, as journal review cycles are long.

But an earlier case has: the drawings of the Prophet Mohammed in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005, which led to attacks on Danish (and indeed Norwegian and Austrian) embassies and Christian churches around the world. Ridanpää (2009) sees this stemming directly from popular geopolitics: ‘In the case of the Danish cartoon crisis it is crucial to stress that this time the impetus for the political conflict came from the world of popular geopolitics, which has conventionally been perceived as a more or less passive reflector of geopolitical processes’ (Ridanpää 2009, 732). We can no longer afford to simply view popular geopolitics as a ‘passive reflector of geopolitical processes.’ As our daily interactions with media increase, that relationship between popular geopolitics and other forms of geopolitics will become every more complex. But this presents an opportunity: as more data become available, we have more opportunities to research and better understand the phenomenon of popular geopolitics. As Dittmer (2005, 626) argues, if we want to understand national identity and global order, we need to understand popular geopolitics.

DEFINING POPULAR GEOPOLITICS

The study of popular geopolitics emerges from critical geopolitics and indeed it is still an integral part of it. But this study recognises that geopolitics is an everyday occurrence that happens outside of academia and the policy world; it happens in the realm of popular geopolitics: the ‘geopolitical discourse that citizens are immersed in every day’ (Dittmer and Gray (2010, 1664); see also Dittmer (2010, 14)). Of necessity, the term ‘popular geopolitics’ refers to two things: the daily type of geopolitics, which are presented through various media, and the academic analysis of that daily geopolitics (Dittmer 2010, xviii). For the former category, Purcell et al. (2010, 377) propose a further subdivision: popular geopolitics produced by elites, and popular geopolitics produced by non-elites (Purcell et al. 2010, 377). Indeed, for Saunders (2012, 82), the aim of popular geopolitics research is to look at the complex relationship between elite geopolitics and popular understandings of how the world works. Furthermore, Narangoa (2004, 48) argues that we should look not just at the ways of thinking which led to political decisions, but also the ways in which people are socialised to think about their world in certain ways.

Accordingly, popular geopolitics researchers need to study media in practically all its forms (Dittmer 2010, 15). Purcell et al. (2010) see

cinema, magazines, comics and newspaper cartoons as producing elite geopolitics. For them, the non-elite-produced popular geopolitics comes from new social media and other such Internet-based technologies, which have an interactive element (Purcell et al. 2010, 377–378). This is an interesting distinction, and it is one which the case study on Twitter later in the chapter will make a preliminary analysis of.

History and Importance

Discussions of popular geopolitics generally start with the work of Ó Tuathail, but we can wind the clock back a little further. Takeuchi (1980, 15) discusses how geopolitics has always been of popular appeal because it gives novel explanations of political reality which conventional means have not been able to explain. However, this comes at a price: geography's scientific basis is lost for the sake of demagogy. Takeuchi (1980) is very seldom referred to in the literature, which is unfortunate, as this analysis remains nuanced and useful.

But we are indebted to Ó Tuathail for his work in advancing the field of popular geopolitics. Drawing on Michael Herr's (Herr 1977) account of the Vietnam war, referred to as 'America's first rock-n-roll war,' Ó Tuathail argues that the influence of Vietnam remains with us (Ó Tuathail 1996, 171): 'Chuck Norris/Oliver Stone/Rambo wannabes are shooting up wild zones across the globe while a remasculinisation imperative—overcoming the lack and impotence that is the "Vietnam Syndrome"—underwrote the picture-perfect slaughter of the Gulf War.'

At the time of Ó Tuathail's article, it was Bosnia. Again, referring back to (Herr 1977), Ó Tuathail states: 'Bosnia, Bosnia, Bosnia is now everywhere. It is an ongoing series in our newspapers, a sound-bite on our television sets that occasionally splashes us with spectacular violence captured on videotape for our viewing pleasure. We can be there now by going to a U2 concert, clicking on a computer screen... ' (Ó Tuathail 1996, 171). Here, then, we can see the start of the formal analysis of popular geopolitics. While some of the events are now dated, it set the stage from moving away from just analysis elite texts.

Prior to this, analysing elite texts had been the norm, and while there was a recognition that popular culture had been feeding on geopolitical events, popular culture itself was seen as a bit of a waste of time (Dittmer 2010, 1). There was recognition that popular culture could provide "easy

access” to the events of the geopolitical world in a simplified form,’ but for many geographers, this was a little too easy (Ridanpää 2009, 730). Accordingly, there was a reluctance among geographers to look at popular materials in a formal way. But after Ó Tuathail (1996), geographers realised that they would have to start looking at popular culture in their analysis: ‘geographers and other academics in the “classical” fields of study have, to their chagrin, been forced to accept popular culture’s increasing importance in shaping reality, particularly via motion pictures, television programmes, comics, serialised fiction, blogs, and user-generated content on the web’ (Saunders 2012, 83).

ELITE/PLURALIST MODELS

However, it continues to be the case that the study of popular geopolitics has, at the moment, mostly focused on elites. These are not the traditional foreign policy elites, but media elites. Dittmer and Gray (2010, 1664) expresses a degree of annoyance that researchers of popular geopolitics have ‘somewhat inexplicably still focused on the elite versions of media moguls, movie directors, and lower-level yet still relatively empowered media functionaries like writers and reporters’ (Dittmer and Gray 2010, 1664). Yet perhaps this is not too surprising. When analysing elite texts has been the norm for years, it can be difficult to adjust to new methods. To really understand the new non-elites and their effect on foreign policy, we need to either run survey experiments or start harvesting data from social media. Thankfully, some of this research is starting to be done. For the survey experiments, Atsushi Tago has led a team of researchers performing experiments on public opinion and foreign policy, regarding uni/multilateralism, fighter-jet near-miss incidents and foreign denouncements of government foreign policy: all clear examples of new, non-elite-based popular geopolitics (see Tago (2010); Ikeda and Tago (2014); Tago and Ikeda (2015); Pilster et al. (2015); Kohama et al. (2016)). For an early example of capturing data from social media on geopolitical issues, see later in the chapter. By taking these approaches, we can start to reframe popular geopolitics, a version in which ‘power is more diffuse and relational, rather than caught up by elite agents – and thus is much more of an “everyday” affair’ (Dittmer and Gray 2010, 1665).¹

¹ Falah et al. (2006) write about the difficulties the US government has had because geopolitics was ‘being played out in cyberspace, at multiple levels, in a wired age; an

Moreover, the move to social media forces us to reconsider the elite/non-elite binary: '[w]hen politicians (or celebrities) use Twitter or Facebook to engage with their fan-base/voters, the distinction between elite and popular political communication breaks down. The world of celebrity geopolitics would appear to connect the national parliament/congress with the popular/everyday and the "celebrity" with the "politician" (and the citizen) in interesting ways' (Benwell et al. 2012, 2). Accordingly, we must start looking at social media in an organised way if we want to understand geopolitics.

Reader's Digest

One of the earliest attempts to move away from the elite focus was the analysis of the *Reader's Digest* in Sharp (1993). In a sense, so much has changed in the world since the publication of this piece. Yet Sharp (1993) remains a model of how to do a structured, empirical analysis of popular geopolitics and serves as a reminder to us that we need to apply such methods now that social media have arrived.

Sharp (1993) was very conscious of the fact that critical geopolitics had been depending on elite texts; the belief had been that these were the fonts of wisdom, and that popular media would naturally follow their lead; accordingly, we only needed to read the texts at the source, rather than the second-hand stuff. Sharp (1993) disagreed: 'an over-concentration on the understandings of elites tends to collapse the sociology of knowledge production into the internal dynamics of the geopolitical text. Geopolitics does not simply "trickle down" from elite texts to popular ones. It is thus not sufficient only to interpret elite texts' (Sharp 1993, 493). This allowed her to develop the notion of 'Geopolitics and *you*: popular participation in the creation of a geopolitical enemy' (Sharp 1993, 495).

For the actual analysis, Sharp (1993) looked at all articles in the period 1980–1990 (the 'second Cold War') referring to the Soviet Union. Of the 89 articles in that period, only one was sympathetic to the Soviet Union, and that was a piece on the December 1988 Armenian earthquake. In the other 88 articles, she found 'there is a constant set of themes running through all Soviet stories—whether ethnographic, sociological, religious and so on—which provide a consistent characterisation allowing

extraordinary challenge to hegemonic power and its manipulations' (Falah et al. 2006, 160). This also applies to researchers of popular geopolitics: we need to adjust too.

the credible creation of a Soviet geopolitics by the *Digest*. Thus every representation of the USSR is a political action. It fits into the discursive structuring of the USA and USSR as polar opposites: a structure centered upon irresolvable difference' (Sharp 1993, 501).

NEW MEDIA AND TABLOID GEOPOLITICS

Sharp (1993) goes some way, then, to debunking journalism of its notions of lofty objectivity.² Media are part of geopolitics; they are not external. Falah et al. (2006) go on to argue that media should not be regarded as separate from geopolitical conflicts; they are a part of it. To demonstrate this, they look at the case of Iraq in the run-up to the US invasion in 2003. They argue that something new was happening here: thanks to what they refer to as a 'hypermedia environment' where news and information were instantly available via the Internet, popular and governmental opposition were fuelled in a way they never had been before. As such, Falah et al. (2006) argue that media helped build morale within Iraq and bolstered the rhetoric of the Iraqi leadership, domestically and abroad. 'As the Iraqi vice-president said on CNN on the evening of 17 March 2003, the "whole world" was opposed to Bush and his war in light of the rhetoric disseminated by those opposed to military invasion and the number of media reports contradicting the statements made by the U.S. government' Falah et al. (2006, 160).

Clearly, media are part of the story, and this is especially pronounced in geopolitics. When looking at the December 2006 special issue of *Newsweek* on the 'new geopolitics of oil,' Dittmer and Dodds (2008, 438) observe that '[s]trikingly, none of the *Newsweek* contributors devoted any time to defining the term "geopolitics." In effect, it is assumed to refer to the "fixed" geographies of the earth including the distribution of so-called natural resources' (Dittmer and Dodds 2008, 438). In a sense, this is not striking, but it is unfortunate (consider again the shock in France when *Le Monde* ran an editorial ending with 'C'est de la géopolitique!': see Chap. 2). However, this may be specific to US, or anglophone discourse; additionally, there may be generational effects: we need more research to find out.

² Something which Ó Tuathail (1996, 175) sees as a product of Cartesian perspectivalism: see discussion in Chap. 3.

Tabloid Truth Telling

Debrix (2007) looks at the ways in which television news in the USA feeds back to elites. The USA has an especially aggressive type of tabloid geopolitics in which viewers are constantly told of the dangers facing the USA (see the discussion of *The O'Reilly Factor* in Dittmer and Dodds (2008, 439)). Because of the volume of talk shows and news programmes presented in sensationalist ways, Debrix (2007) argues that the 'intellectuals' of statecraft in the USA start to present geopolitics in the same way: as 'eye-catching, fear-inducing, spectacular, shocking, scandalising, and overtly simplistic' (Debrix 2007). As such, international relations (IR) scholars start presenting their work in terms of danger, national security, terror and war. Again, this presents opportunities for new research: is this the case in other countries? Have IR scholars always framed their narratives in these ways (for instance, during the Cold War) or has something changed? Have social media changed the dynamic?

Debrix (2007, 923) refers to tabloid geopolitics as something which entertains, shocks, sensationalises and simplifies. It does this by giving 'common sense' explanations and fancy maps to create a sense of fear and inevitable danger. In an earlier piece, Debrix argued that tabloid geopolitics works from the assumption that Americans do not want to hear about their everyday life: 'Americans do not want to read or hear that they are underpaid, overworked, bullied at work, in the home, when serving their country in foreign lands. They want glamorous stories, scandals, exceptional events, news they can build dreams on or develop a sense of anger from. In short, they want to be entertained' (Debrix 2003, 152). Glynn (2000) argues that this creates an environment in which people are constantly seeking new bits of exciting news, before the first bit has even finished; a mix of 'exhaustion and desire for the next media event, long before the present one has even reached its culmination' (Glynn 2000, 18–19). Glynn was writing with reference to the O.J. Simpson case and the death of Princess Diana; his argument applies even more in the age of social media.

Tabloid Realism and Maps

One of the most powerful parts of the tabloid geopolitical discourse is the map. Some of the 'tricks of the cartographic trade' (Harley 1989, 7) were discussed in Chap. 2, but tabloid realism takes these to the next level: 'tabloid realist maps are no longer the binary, simplistic red versus blue



Fig. 4.1 GWNN’s Fox Krieger, the Colossus of Cyprus, is accompanied by an expert

cartographical representations of the Cold war era. They are now fluid, multi-dimensional, almost “holographic” projections of this geopolitical discourse. This does not mean, though, that these different-looking maps are necessarily less artificial, delimiting and reality producing than the older maps’ (Debrix 2003, 162). Consider the map presented in Fig. 4.1. When cartoonist Edward Linley Sambourne drew his cartoon of ‘The Rhodes Colossus Striding from Cape Town to Cairo’ in *Punch* magazine in 1892, it was intended as a piece of satire. Yet in daily news broadcasts today, there is no satire; people standing on maps and surveying the world beneath their feet are the new normal. Thankfully, news anchors have experts (Fig. 4.2) to explain these maps and their geopolitical reality to us, which is the subject of the next section.

EXPERTS, WISE MEN, AND GEOPOLITICIANS

On 10 January 2015, three days after the *Charlie Hebdo* murders, Fox News anchor Jeanine Piro, host of ‘Justice with Judge Jeanine’ welcomed a guest expert onto the programme, Steven Emerson. We can tell he is an expert, because of the description on his website:



Fig. 4.2 An expert on Wolf News tells us about religion in Europe: ‘there are actual cities, like Birmingham, that are totally Muslim, where non-Muslims just simply don’t go’

Steven Emerson is considered one of the leading authorities on Islamic extremist networks, financing and operations. He serves as the Executive Director of The Investigative Project on Terrorism, one of the world’s largest storehouses of archival data and intelligence on Islamic and Middle Eastern terrorist groups. Emerson and his staff frequently provide briefings to U.S. government and law enforcement agencies, members of Congress and congressional committees, and print and electronic media, both national and international. Since 9–11, Emerson has testified before and briefed Congress dozens of times on terrorist financing and operational networks of Al Qaeda, Hamas, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, and the rest of the worldwide Islamic militant spectrum (steveemerson.com 2015).

Expanding the analysis from France to other parts of Europe, he made the claim that ‘in Britain, it’s not just no-go zones, there are actual cities, like Birmingham, that are totally Muslim, where non-Muslims just simply don’t go in, and parts of London, there are actually Muslim religious police, that actually beat, and actually wound, seriously, anyone who doesn’t dress according to Muslim, religious Muslim attire.’ This caused surprise to some, including the British Prime Minister, David Cameron,

who on hearing this news over breakfast choked on his porridge and thought it was April Fool's Day (Wemple 2015).

Both Fox News and Emerson have since apologised for their account (and we must surely raise our hats to Emerson for his clearly sincere apology, and his decision to do the right thing by making donations to Birmingham Children's Hospital, Birmingham St. Mary's Hospice and Acorns Children's Hospice). But the case does raise the issue of the power of experts, and their relationship with popular geopolitics.

Experts, like many aspects of popular geopolitics, have been understudied, especially in a cross-country comparative setting. They have been described as a 'state's privileged story tellers' (Dodds 1993, 71) but there is seldom any questioning of their claims to this expertise or the power relations behind them. Dodds (1993) also acknowledges the exalted position they hold: '[t]hose who comment on foreign policy and international affairs occupy a privileged position in society. One only had to watch the television during the Gulf war to witness the sway given to the commentaries of those armchair strategists' (Dodds 1993, 70).

There are different types of experts. Some experts have direct links to the policy community; others have more tenuous links through think tanks. Debrix (2003) specifically focuses on Robert Kaplan (see the preface of this book), writing that you are 'in trouble when Kaplan seems like your best bet to redefine geographical realities, diagnose foreign policy threats, and prescribe new ways of thinking about national security in the twenty-first century. In... Kaplan's endless succession of doomsday prophecies, we are witnessing... tabloid realism at its best (or worst)' (Debrix 2003, 151).

Sometimes, experts come directly from the military, which is a particular concern for Ó Tuathail (1998, 4), who points out that if enough military experts frame an issue in terms of its danger to national security, and the need to control a region or buy a certain weapon, then there is a good chance that the military institutions will receive extra funding.

Additionally, organisations such as the Royal Institute for International Affairs (Chatham House) or the International Institute for Strategic Studies deserve attention, as they play 'an important role in cultivating and sustaining an elite audience... This collective group, as feminist writers such as Christine Sylvester have noted, is overwhelmingly a white, middle class, university or military educated male elite' (Dodds 1993, 72).

Celebrity Geopolitics

If the link between experts and policy is an area we do not quite understand, the link between celebrities and policy is an even more understudied area. As Benwell et al. (2012) points out, ‘celebrities can issue official and policy-prescriptive statements endorsed by others such as the academic economist Jeffrey Sachs’ (Benwell et al. 2012, 1).

There is a long history of celebrity involvement in geopolitics. For instance, Benwell et al. (2012) look at Jane Fonda and Muhammad Ali’s criticism of the US involvement in Vietnam in the 1960s. More recently, they look at George Clooney being arrested outside the Sudanese Embassy in the USA in 2012, as he protested against the Sudanese government’s actions in Darfur. Additionally, they look at Bono and Bob Geldof’s campaign over the famine in Ethiopia, Richard Gere’s campaign on Tibetan independence, Oprah Winfrey on education in South Africa, Madonna on health care in Malawi and the involvement in the Falklands/Malvinas by Sean Penn and Pink Floyd’s Roger Waters (Benwell et al. 2012). These celebrity geopoliticians can be given impressive titles, such as UN Goodwill Ambassador (Céline Dion) or UN Messenger of Peace (Michael Douglas). Yet again, they are mostly understudied in formal analyses of popular geopolitics.

CARTOONS

As the discussion of the *Charlie Hebdo* murders at the start of the chapter shows, the impact of cartoons on geopolitics can hardly be overstated. Ridanpää (2009) explores how the publication of cartoons of the Muhammed in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* became a ‘geopolitical conflict which caused unexpected reactions at various levels of the social and political bureaucracy’ (Ridanpää 2009, 730).

Cartoonists have long faced violence from state and non-state actors. Dodds (2007, 158) looks at how cartoonists have faced violence, intimidation and death because their work ridicules the powerful and contributes to stereotypes.³ As far back as 1831, French cartoonist Honoré Daumier was given a six-month prison sentence for drawing King Louis Philippe as a

³ Humour has been used in similar ways: see Purcell et al. (2010) and Lockyer and Pickering (2008).

monster (Tunç 2002, 48). More recently, Uruguayan cartoonist Francisco Laurenzo Pons was arrested and tortured in 1978, Lebanese cartoonist Naji Salim-al-Ali was shot dead in London in the 1980s, Iranian cartoonist Manouchehr Karimzadeh was put in prison by the Islamic Revolutionary Court and Yugoslavian cartoonist Predrag Koraksic (Corax) was taken to court for offending politicians in 1993 (Tunç 2002, 49).

Nevertheless, there has been a belief that cartoonists are somehow inferior to other journalists, and as a result they become outsiders in the journalistic community. This outsider status, however, allows them to use satire in a way in which their journalistic colleagues cannot (Ridanpää 2009, 732).

The study of cartoons is useful, as it shows us clearly the importance of not just focusing on elites (see Dodds (2010)). Ridanpää (2009) looks at reactions to the cartoons in *Jyllands-Posten*: ‘The reactions were world-wide, drastically intensive and occurred at several administrative levels. There were political meetings all over the world, public protests, boycotts of Danish products, public criticism in the media, official statements and apologies issued by various international organisations and national governments, serious threats, closures of embassies and armed conflicts’ (Ridanpää 2009, 736).

Clearly, non-elites can have profound influences on popular geopolitics. We need to pay attention to them.

CINEMA

Associations between cinema and politics are as old as the moving image itself⁴ as politicians and government sought to harness this powerful vehicle of propaganda. Dodds (2006, 119) points out that that film has long been seen as a means of producing, circulating and contesting geopolitics.

Perhaps not surprisingly, much has been written about relations between the US government and Hollywood⁵ (again, more research is needed from other countries). Crampton and Power (2005, 244) regard Hollywood itself as a geopolitician, and film as a geopolitical site.

⁴ See Kalfus (2003) for a hugely entertaining (fictional) account of cinema and propaganda in revolutionary Russia.

⁵ For more on Hollywood and popular geopolitics, see Dodds (2008).

Cinema Reflecting Geopolitics

Parallels between the James Bond films and contemporary geopolitics have been drawn. Dodds (2006) links Osama bin Laden with the Blofeld character, and al Qaeda with the criminal organisation, SPECTRE. Similarly, Saunders (2012) sees zombie films as being reflective of geopolitics: the films *28 Days Later* and *28 Weeks Later* are contextualised in terms of Britain as a declining island nation, with links made between foot and mouth disease, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and avian flu.

Yet ultimately, such accounts are unsatisfying. Yes, we can see geopolitics on the silver screen, but in these analyses, that is where it stops. As researchers of geography and conflict, we want to see cinema feeding back; we want to find evidence of it influencing policy.

Geopolitics Reflecting Cinema

More interesting is when Hollywood feeds back: when cinematic representation starts influencing reality. The ‘Saving Private Lynch’ case is particularly informative. Private Jessica Lynch was ‘rescued’ from an Iraqi hospital in Nasiriyah where she was being held prisoner. According to an Iraqi doctor at the hospital, Anmar Uday, ‘It was like a Hollywood film. They cried, “go, go, go” with guns and blanks and the sound of explosions. They made a show – an action movie like Sylvester Stallone or Jackie Chan, with jumping and shouting, breaking down the doors’ (Kampfner 2003). The Pentagon claimed she had suffered bullet and stab wounds, torture and interrogation. According to the BBC’s *Correspondent* programme, however, she did not receive any bullet or stab wounds and indeed ‘had received the best medical treatment available including blood donated by hospital staff, and the “rescue” was from a hospital long deserted by the Iraqi army. The film of *Saving Private Jessica*, it was suggested, included US forces firing blanks to liven up the action’ (Crampton and Power 2005, 257).

COMICS

Dittmer (2005, 628) argues that comics are important to geopolitics, as they appeal to a young audience exactly when they are starting to form their socio-spatial frameworks. Dittmer looks to that most patriotic of US cartoons: Captain America. Dittmer (2005, 629) looks back the very first

issue, in which the comic takes part in constructing a geopolitical ‘reality’ in which there is a ‘war-mongering’ Europe and a ‘peace-loving’ America.

Dittmer argues that Captain America presents US foreign policy as being defensive, not offensive. To make this case, he focuses on Captain America’s weapon: a shield which is unusual for American comic characters; most have a rather more dramatic, offensive weapon. Dittmer (2005, 630) argues that this is important means through which to create the idea that American foreign policy interests are purely defensive.

Again, though, it is hard to see how this research could be used to look at how comics feed back to the policy community, or how seriously people take them. Also, non-American cases need to be considered, such as manga in Japan (consider for instance the *Hadashi no Gen* series by Hiroshima survivor Keiji Nakazawa).

CONSPIRACY

Conspiracies also need to be considered as part of popular geopolitics. For Jones (2012, 45), conspiracies are not just beliefs held on the fringes of society; they are common-place. They cross the spheres of politics, science and popular culture and should be seen as important to mainstream public debate.

In the case of conspiracy, we can see instances of feedback to overseas elites. Jones (2012) cites the case in 2010 of the then Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad addressing the UN General Assembly, in which he claimed that the majority of Americans believed that parts of the US government organised the 9/11 attacks to stimulate the US economy.

Jones (2012, 45) goes on to conclude that ‘there is an imperative for geographers to critically interrogate the discourses... of conspiracy which circulate across and between actors, networks, scales and territories, and which have the capacity to shape how people understand the world around them and, thus, how they choose to act within it.’ It is especially important that this research includes countries other than the USA.

CASE STUDY: USING TWITTER TO UNDERSTAND POPULAR GEOPOLITICS

At the start of this chapter, the distinction between two types of popular geopolitics-elite and non-elite-highlighted by Purcell et al. (2010) was

discussed. For them, studying modern, Internet-based media fell into the non-elite camp. Yet, this is perhaps a mistake: as elites use social media as well, there must surely be a feedback. This is an exciting area for future research.

By way of a short example of what this research could look like, it is worth taking a brief look at the use of social media on geopolitical themes. For the past few years, writers in print media have claimed that social media have been used as a new way of spreading revolutionary movements. For example, in the provocatively titled ‘Can water cannons cope with flash mob riots?’, Hambling (2014) argued that, ‘[b]efore social media, the only way for rioters to join in was to follow the noise. Now they can create their own flash mobs wherever the police are weakest.’ Perhaps, this is the case. Yet in the same week that this article was published, the Ukrainian uprising had made its way to Maidan Square in Kiev. We might expect that Twitter would be used as a means of moving ‘flash mobs’ through the city. Yet a quick analysis of the 2679 geo-coded tweets sent during the week of 17–24 January 2014 containing the Ukrainian word for Kiev shows that the young people on the streets of the capital were getting on with their lives as usual, sending tweets such as ‘I’m at @Fazenda_Bar’; ‘I’m at Skybar’; ‘#skybar #nightlife #party...’

‘American Horror Story: Ebola’ or: ‘Ebola is in Salem’

Diseases do not respect borders, and diseases have been subject to the earliest forms of geo-spatial analysis (see Snow (1855)). In October 2014, the Ebola virus started to trend on Twitter, revealing the fears of many people about the disease. It is hard to determine exactly how many tweets were sent on the subject of Ebola. However, in preparing this case study, a census day was set (16 October 2014) during which, at some points, over 40 tweets with the word ‘ebola’ in them were being sent every second. We can determine the geographic coordinates of approximately two per cent of these, and of them, the overwhelming majority came from the USA, as is shown in Fig. 4.3.⁶

⁶ There are many reasons why this may be the case, and an important one which should not be overlooked is that Twitter is a US-based company. Also, this analysis makes no attempt to control for population or age. It was possible to identify tweets with the word ‘ebola’ sent from 107 countries on 16 October 2014, and the ten countries tweeting ‘ebola’ the most were: (1) USA; (2) UK; (3) Spain; (4) Mexico; (5) Brazil; (6) Argentina; (7) France;

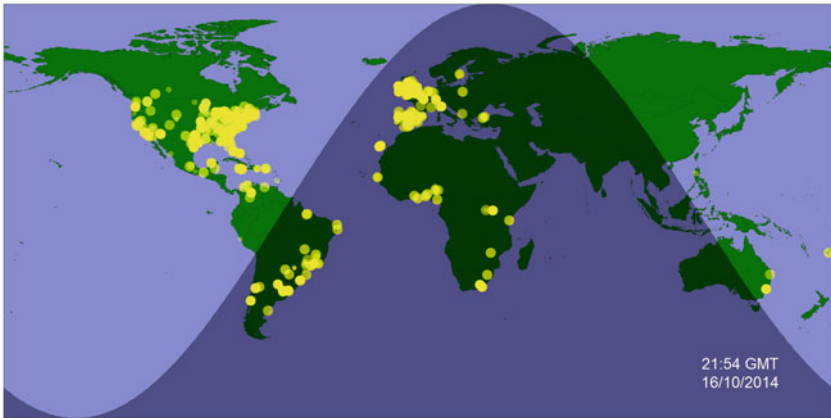


Fig. 4.3 Still from short animation on Ebola tweets. For the video, visit <https://youtu.be/1MX08jjWshg>

By analysing these tweets, we can learn something about the fears people have in US society, and how these fears far transcend a virus. We can reduce the US-based tweets to 15 categories, many of which overlap (Fig. 4.4). Interestingly, one of the biggest areas of overlap is ‘Anti-Democrat/Anti-Obama’ which overlaps with ‘Schools,’ ‘Racism,’ ‘Religion,’ ‘Conspiracy theorists’ and ‘Conflating other issues.’

Selection of US ‘Ebola’ Tweets, Divided into 15 Categories

Advice to Government

- @[x] oBAMA OPEN THE ALCATRAZ PENITENTIARY AND EQUIP MEDICALLY FOR EBOLA QUARANTINE ASYLUM USE.
- @tedcruz just past a idea to Gov Perry Sen Ted. He is in the UK. Home of Glaxo SK. big on vaccines. Idea Ebola research. IDEA..
- Should the people treating Ebola patients be thoroughly washed in some type of body solution to prevent them from catching the disease

(8) Canada; (9) Colombia; (10) Turkey. It should be noted, though, that of the geo-coded tweets, users in the USA sent more ‘ebola’ tweets than the other 106 countries combined.

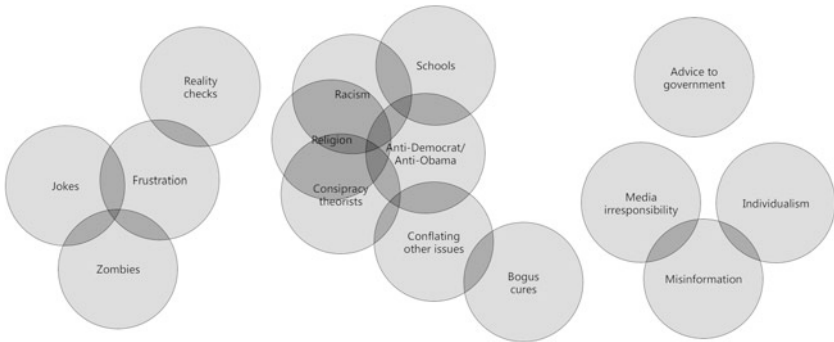


Fig. 4.4 US-based ebola tweet categories

- The CDC hasn't stopped Ebola yet, so we should just keep cutting their budget until they do.
- I ask everyone Why have we not converted vacant Airforce hangers into hospitals JUST FOR EBOLA anyone with 1/2 brain will agree
- TO STOP WORLDWIDE EBOLA EPIDEMIC ALL AIRPLANE FLIGHTS SHOULD BE BANNED WORLDWIDE . OR ELSE WORLD CATASTROPHE.
- You want to stop the spread of ebola? Stop the fucking flights. Is it that difficult?

Anti-Democrat/Anti-Obama

(Overlaps with Racism; Conflating other issues; Conspiracy Theorists)

- @[x] @[x] And who's the asshole that lives at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue that insisted we let the ebola into America? Rick Perry?
- @[x] ANYONE believe serial liar Obama anymore? 'In the unlikely event that Ebola reaches US'? He's playing politics w/R lives!
- @gretawire @BarackObama @FoxNews Dumbest man in free world. #notravelban #Ebola #youcannotbeserious
- @NBCNews Let's ALL thank Democrats & Obama for bringing Ebola 2 the US instead of shutting R borders this November by voting 4 GOP!

- How do we know for sure that #Ebola isn't airborne? Just b/c Govt says it's not? How many times has this Admin. lied to us? I call BS on it!
- If you truly believe Obama has a handle on the Ebola Crisis you gotta b #obamatised
- #Ebola is the Black Plague of our times yet president can't wait to infect America with.. because he wants us to die..http://[x]
- President can't wait to infect USA with #Ebola http://[x]
- Ebola, ISIS, Exec Orders, aiding & abetting the enemy: impeachable offenses ladies and gentlemen. Yet all I hear is crickets. #impeachment
- @[x] @[x] Yes. I hear Pres Ebola also nominated a witch doctor from his old village and the repubs blocked him too, asshole

Bogus Cures

(Overlaps with Conflating Other Issues)

- #Ebola cured by MotherNature Breath copper,it's energy kills virus in lungs,vascular system,organs Biologist know all about copper ,kills
- Put money marijuana slows the effects of Ebola

Conflating Other Issues

(Overlaps with Anti-Democrat/Anti-Obama; Conspiracy Theorists)

- Illegal immigrants entering the country & being mainstreamed into our communities. Open travel from #Ebola nations. #ISIS. #secure-bordersNOW
- It's awesome how public funding from the middle class is expected to fund the Ebola fight. . .
- Imagine if we infected one ISIS member with Ebola and then released him back into the wild. . . Your move Obama
- I wonder if ISIS has the chemical weapons to kill Ebola?
- As America Faces Ebola, ISIS and Russia, Obama Prepares to Fight Problems We Don't Have, Like Global Warming—http://[x]
- #Ebola is an engine of destruction to #Capitalism and an opportunity for statists, yes? Say you're a #Communist in the White House and. . .

- Today, fire Dr. Tom Frieden For LYING about Ebola for Barry Sactoro's ignorance and cover-up. Chemical weapons found in Iran Bush was RIGHT.
- Liberal MSNBC literally blames Ebola on the republican party. How fucking dumb can you get?! lololol
- @[x] so he'll send nat guard to Africa to fight Ebola but not Texas to defend border
- Worried about Ebola and ISIS? Come to [name of gym] and make yourself harder to kill

Conspiracy Theorists

(Overlaps with Racism; Anti-Democrat/Anti-Obama)

- For y'all that don't know, Ebola was created in Fort Detrick, Maryland, by the U.S. Army as part of biological warfare. Look it up.
- Ya I'm crazy, but Ebola is government planned
- Government can't give me Ebola [http://\[x\]](http://[x])
- Ebola vaccine only works on white-skinned people, yawa manufactured disease ment to control population
- This Ebola Shit Scaring me &, I know the president & Government got something to do with it. This YouTube tell it all.
- @[x]: The Democrat Party has brought Ebola and numerous other infectious diseases to the US. #TGDN
- @[x] the Germans cured Ebola all ready
- let me tell y'all.. EBOLA is about to destroy our country & your government is doing it on purpose!
- This Ebola thing is on purpose.. It has to be. And it sick man.
- My dad is literally trying to convince me it's the government giving people Ebola to kill off the population. I'm done.
- This Ebola shit preplanned, I stay woke. They gone say we got a vaccine soon n then folk gone flock 2it outta fear. Not me, fuck that
- I'm really starting to believe Ebola is population control if you think about it cause it's spreading at a very rapid rate.
- This Ebola breakout crazy as fuck & if you think it just 'spontaneously' happen you dumb as fuck.. the government is behind all this shit.

Frustration

(Overlaps with Reality Checks; Zombies)

- I might have to stay off Twitter until you all stop complaining about Ebola. The lack of education on the topic is annoying me.
- Is there a way to filter the word 'Ebola' off of my phone? #stop.
- Pls stop talking about Ebola.
- Ok. Enough on the Ebola 'Epidemic' in US. Making this worse than it is. manufactured headlines. . .shameless #AC360 #msnbc #FoxNews.

Individualism

(Overlaps with Misinformation)

- First Ebola now, [x] having a baby! #CrazyWorld ima be a uncle.
- I'm gonna need the CDC to get their shit together in handing EBOLA
- Nothing scares me more than knowing there's an Ebola Patient in Georgia.
- If i get ebola. PUT A FUCKING BULLET IN MT FUCKING HEAD
- @[x] EBOLA IS IN OHIO AND [x] HAS TO GO TO OHIO IN DECEMBER NO OMG NO
- @[x] I have ebola
- ebola in ohio is all the more reason for me to go to ucla
- x is in Dallas right now eating at Taco Bell and I'm not okay with that because if he catches Ebola, I catch Ebola
- we're less than a hour away from ebola
- I'm too scared to go to the doctors in fear they're going to tell me I have ebola
- @[x] Ebola is in Richmond VA, it's getting closer and closer.
- That feeling when they close the school 2 doors down from the Starbucks I go to & use the communal creamer. #ebola #EbolaOutbreak #nowords
- Thank god I work outpatient bc if Ebola is suspected at my hospital id out the door
- everybody keep texting me about Ebola, I'm in Toledo not Cleveland
- My friend waited until we were done hanging out to tell me she has a fever of 104. THANKS NOW I PROBS CONTRACTED EBOLA

Jokes

(Overlaps with Zombies; Frustration)

- If ebola ends up in Vegas, will it stay in Vegas?
- @[x]: Yo momma so nasty ebola's trying to avoid catching HER
- STOP WITH THE DAMN EBOLA JOKES. THEY ARE SO FUCKING ANNOYING.

Media Irresponsibility

(Overlaps with Misinformation)

- Follow 12News all day for Ebola advice & info in our #FactsNotFear series. 12News has you covered. #FactsNotFear
- 'CBSDenver: #BREAKING: Frontier plane that carried #Ebola patient from DFW to Ohio just landed at #DIA.' http:[x]
- @[x]: Ebola patient [x] has arrived at Emory #fox5atl http:[x]
- I can't stand the media trying to downplay this Ebola epidemic. #CDCfail
- Driving to Atlanta, seems BBC world news is more diverse, informative and interesting vs CNN (The Ebola Network). #BBC #CNN
- @[x] @[x] @IDPH Tens of millions of impoverished Americans without health Insurance could be a huge factor in #Ebola outbreak.
- -@[x] Cultural practices in the U.S., fast food, events, work habits, public transportation could prove highly infectious. #Ebola

Misinformation

(Overlaps with Media Irresponsibility; Individualism)

- @[x] holy shit, Ebola outbreak at town hall! We're all fucked!!
- Ebola just hit in Cleveland
- Watching the news well y'all boys Ebola is coming to Ft. Laud
- Ebola in philly
- Ebola is in Salem. Alright
- Apparently Ebola is in mms, butterfingers, and snickers. Great. Thanks africa

Racism

(Overlaps with Anti-Democrat/Anti-Obama; Religion)

- Not to be racist, but have you guys noticed that Ebola inflicts only black people. What the fuck is actually going on?
- Mother fucker is willing to risk 300 million lives over not rejecting a bunch of black Africans from bringing ebola to the U.S.
- Islam doesn't preach hate and murder even tho they preach hate and murder. Ebola won't spread in US. Keep listening to Obama PREACH IDIOTS
- Black people are so effing ignorant, y'all can't even take Ebola serious cuss all the memes, grow up. Y'all laughin till ya mom get it! #foh
- Man if a nigga fr say he got Ebola and that nigga touch me imma literally knock his head off

Reality Checks

(Overlaps with Frustration)

- The flu killed 52000 Americans last year, 1 person has died from Ebola.
- People are way too freaked out about Ebola. You are much more likely to die while texting and driving. Please stop fear-mongering.
- @[x] #so #ebola In 2012, 33,561 died in car wrecks, why is nobody complaining about that being an epidemic? #so #ebola

Religion

(Overlaps with Anti-Democrat/Anti-Obama; Conspiracy Theorists; Racism)

- @[x] @[x] @[x] @[x] @[x] Ebola & Obama... 'pestilences' as promised.. #[x] #[x] #[x] #[x] #[x]
- via @[x] - What Christians Should Know About the Ebola Crisis [http://\[x\]](http://[x])
- BECAUSE EBOLA AFFECTS CHRISTIANS AND NON CHRISTIANS DIFFERENTLY [http://\[x\]](http://[x])
- @[x] Ebola was created by man and so was this 1947 ISRAEL. He has a dispensationalism teaching that is a lie. #synagogueofsatan israel

- Thankfully I know Jesus. #EbolaDallas #EbolaOutbreak #Ebola
- Eliminate Ebola by declaring in Jesus' Name it must GO! Show your faith! Use your faith! #Ebola #[x]
- If you contract the Ebola virus, will you still trust God? #AlwaysWas-InHisHands

Schools

(Overlaps with Racism; Anti-Democrat/Anti-Obama)

- 'I can only hate one person, and that is Obama. Because he sent us Ebola, he's not even American.' -Wise words of a 6th grader
- I HOPE MY 5TH BLOCK TEACHER GET EBOLA & DIE
- @[x]: No school due to the ebola outbreak. Nothing to celebrate over. . . [http://\[x\]](http://[x]) Is This Real?
- If ebola starts spreading like crazy I'm dropping out of school bc screw it were all gonna die
- '@[x]: Ohio schools closed on Thursday 10/16 because of outbreak of Ebola. Check if your school is open at: [http://\[x\]](http://[x])'
- Mommy just told me. I'm going to catch Ebola at the gym. . .
- not going to school tomorrow. I refuse to get Ebola
- Three [x] schools closed as Ebola precaution: Three [x] Independent School District schools are closed

Zombies

(Overlaps with Jokes; Frustration)

- The no of people that actually believe Ebola turns you into a zombie is ridiculous ! They should actually be jailed for stupidity ! #Ebola
- I hate this world now because people are talking about Ebola and all that crap and it's gonna cause a zombie apocalypse.
- my dad says ebola is going to be like a zombie apocalypse as that it is Obama's fault

Summary

Clearly, the trends found in these tweets intersect well with the themes which have emerged in this chapter on popular geopolitics. Also, as

Twitter gives us the ability to geocode tweets, we can start to do serious analyses with them, both cross-nationally and sub-nationally. As these new, popular data are available, we should start using them. But perhaps most interestingly, as Twitter is used by people from a diverse cross section of society, it starts to break down the elite/non-elite distinction discussed at the start of this chapter. Political geographers have been reluctant to engage with popular media. It is time to start engaging.

CONCLUSION

Studies of popular geopolitics have proceeded in a rather fitful way. One of the reasons for this is that the people involved keep changing. Researchers have engaged with popular geopolitics for a while and then moved on to other things. Few people have stayed with the field for a number of years (Dittmer 2010, xviii).

In order to move the field forward, we need to start filling the gaps in the literature. One gap is that of audience research. Dittmer and Dodds (2008, 445) point out that ‘there has been an acknowledgement that popular geopolitical studies have still to demonstrate in detail how and in what manner certain films, magazines and the Internet are indeed consumed. ‘But we need to know more about how they are consumed. We need to know how they feed back into the formation of foreign policy, and perhaps most interestingly how public opinion in one country affects foreign policy in another.

While many researchers talk about the relationship between elite and pluralist models of foreign policy, few actually do any empirical research on it. There is a good reason for this: it is difficult. Woon (2014) cites two reasons for this difficulty: ‘first, audience interpretations are multitudinal and hard to pin down. Comparing people’s popular geopolitical imaginations thus becomes an exercise in futility, rendering it highly difficult to make generalised conclusions about the entire audience. Second, audiences are often deluged with mediated messages from a variety of popular sources and it is in the aggregate that they have an impact. It thus becomes a “fruitless task to identify one cultural artifact as having an effect on people in all but the most unusual circumstances”.’ (Woon 2014, 660) But thankfully, researchers are finding creative ways to overcome these obstacles, and move popular geopolitics in new, policy-relevant ways. As has been discussed earlier, Tago’s research illustrates this

trend, with research which has been presented to the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Tago (2010); Ikeda and Tago (2014); Tago and Ikeda (2015); Pilster et al. (2015); Kohama et al. (2016)). Similarly, Woon (2014) is another notable exception: Woon carries out semi-structured interviews in the Philippines, looks at representations of life in Mindanao and studies how the *Philippines Daily Inquirer* (the newspaper with the highest readership and circulation in the Philippines) covers conflict there. In so doing, not only is this work actually doing empirical research in popular geopolitics but it is also moving beyond the US bias: ‘although geographers have been pivotal in elucidating how wars against terrorism waged in different parts of the world have to be constructed as “just” in order to gain moral legitimacy, there seems to be an overwhelming focus on critiquing the US’s justifications of its “war on terror” policies in foreign, sovereign territories. This paper however departs from these above works insofar as it casts attention on the Philippines government’s internal war against its own ‘dissident’ citizenry’ (Woon 2014, 659).

Finally, Dittmer and Dodds (2008) highlight another area in which popular geopolitics needs to move: ‘new media associated with the Internet deserve greater scrutiny and need to be tied to the popular geopolitical corpus in the light of the growing importance of activities such as blurbs, blogging and threads using online platforms and other sites such as the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) around the world’ (Dittmer and Dodds 2008, 445). Since Dittmer and Dodds (2008), the number of people using social media on a daily basis has increased enormously, and this includes people from many parts of society. As researchers of popular geopolitics trying to understand how decisions are made about human conflict, we absolutely need to research these new media as they are breaking apart the old distinctions between elites and non-elites which popular geopolitics was built on.

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