

Graffiti and public speaking have an ancient pedigree. In classical Greece and Rome, public speaking was known as rhetoric – the composition and delivery of speeches. It was an important skill in public and private life. The Greek philosopher Aristotle and the Roman orator Quintilian practised oratory, and it was an essential part of a liberal arts education during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

The first parliament in the modern sense, from the French *parler* meaning “to talk” or “to discuss”, dates to 12th century Sicily, where representatives of the nobility, the church, and autonomous towns had decision-making powers. In the 13th century the term “parliament” was used to designate an advisory body among the French-speaking nobility in England. And from the 18th century onwards, rhetoric or “the good person speaking well” – the art of persuasion – became the basis of democratic politics, although direct election by the people lagged behind.

We can imagine that speaking in community – in the form of talking circles and discussions with elders – was the basis for tribal decision-making since the beginning of history. Similarly, expressing discontent through informal public writing or drawing must have had its counterpart in every culture. In fact, graffiti has long existed, with examples dating back to Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece, and the Roman Empire.

Interestingly, the only known source of the Safaitic language, an Ancient North Arabian dialect, is from graffiti: inscriptions scratched on the surface of rocks and boulders in the basalt desert of southern Syria, eastern Jordan and northern Saudi Arabia. Safaitic dates from the first century BC to the fourth century AD.

A whole genre of artistic expression today is based upon spray paint graffiti styles conveying social and political messages. And within hip hop culture, graffiti has evolved alongside hip hop music and both were derided before finding an unassailable place in youth culture. Hip hop can be seen as a kind of oral graffiti that harks back to

public speaking – a kind of rhetoric of the people.

It is as forms of non-elitist media that graffiti and hip hop have put pressure on the more formal boundaries of communication. Young people, who may feel themselves and their concerns ignored by decision-makers and by traditional mass media, find creative outlets of their own and especially in what appear to be the unbounded domains of social media. Itunu Bodunrin, writing in this issue of *Media Development*, makes this clear:

“Despite the difficulties encountered in utilizing hip-hop as a protest tool in many urban cities in South Africa today, many marginalized youths in the peripheries continue to engage in rap as a means to create spaces to penetrate a public domain that often excludes them in favour of adults, while some rural communities with no access to mainstream media (radio, TV, internet etc.) also utilise graffiti to protest perceived injustice.”

In *Fissures in the Media Landscape: An international study of citizens' media* (2001), Clemencia Rodriguez makes the point that:

“Producing alternative media messages implies much more than simply challenging the mainstream media ... It implies having the opportunity to create one's own images of self and environment; it implies being able to recodify one's own identity with the signs and codes that one chooses, thereby disrupting the traditional acceptance of those imposed by outside sources.”

Hip hop and graffiti do just that. Identity is affirmed and alternative views and opinions given space. Soapbox oratory, early forms of social media like graffiti and hip hop, and later forms of mobile social media which allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content embody true freedom of expression. But what is really at stake is who is listening? And more to the point – for good or ill – who is acting on what they hear? ■