The Politics of Celebrity Advocacy

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For good reason, the work of celebrity in society, particularly celebrity advocacy in politics, tends to be divisive. There are three camps. Some people dislike it, for it is the realm of the ridiculous, the unequal and undeserving. This is a sphere in which famous singers will eat at vegan restaurants, but do so wearing fur coats, and where moneyed party goers can spend hundreds of thousands of pounds on fundraising parties that scarcely cover their costs. Ilan Kapoor can scarcely contain his vitriol at the prospect. Writing on the motives of celebrity advocates in *Celebrity Humanitarianism* he imagines that

perhaps they are sadists, secretly enjoying, not just the excessive pleasures of capital, but also the pain and degradation that capitalism inflicts on the Other. Despite public expressions of guilt, perhaps they derive obscene satisfaction and fascination from the global system of inequality which places *them* as the dominant. (p. 34)

Opposing that is the view that celebrities are inspiringly good people. Blessed in life with good things and good fortune, and working very hard, they are merely trying to give back. The fact that celebrities are prepared to swim the length of polluted rivers, catching unpleasant illnesses along the way, or run over 40 marathons in less than two months surely indicates their commitment and authenticity. Whole websites are now dedicated to this generous and altruistic behaviour, with the declared objective of trying 'to out-nice everybody' in their portrayals of their heroes and heroines. And many not-for-profit organisations and acting agencies are re-orientating themselves to the possibilities and potentialities that celebrity advocacy can offer them.

These two camps tend to dominate public debate about celebrity advocacy; indeed, on celebrity generally. There is the torrent of media in favour of celebrity, or somehow delighting in their appearance (as saints or fools), and there are the vehement cries of those who insist that this is a form of social pathology. The debate seems to insist that

people 'get' celebrity in one of two ways: either they love it, or they love to hate it. This is visible in cerebral commentators. Fred Inglis, for example, in his *Short History of Celebrity* suggests that 'when celebrities are mentioned or flash onto the TV, everyone in the cultivated classes is ready with their dose of denigration, while everyone else watches with more or less envy, admiration, or malice' (p. 270).

I, however, find this argument rather strange, for it leaves out the possibility of the third option: not being interested. In their noisiness these two arguments tend rather to overshadow the third camp. For there is a group of people who do not realise that very much celebrity advocacy is happening, and are not particularly interested in it when it does happen. This group is not particularly noticeable because it is not, for obvious reasons, vocal in the debate. But that does not mean it is not large or significant.

The role of celebrity advocacy in politics and good causes is a surprisingly important issue. Upon it hinges one of the key questions about the performance and nature of democracy in our times, for it is claimed that celebrities can re-invigorate participation in politics, particularly among disenfranchised and alienated (young) voters. It is also simultaneously alleged that celebrities, and the high attention they guarantee, merely simulate participation in the staged media-events of present day democracies. This is participation in agendas set on behalf of politicians, and not a calling to account of our representatives. Knowing what celebrity advocates do to our politics is therefore an important issue. This will require a better understanding of how people respond to celebrity advocacy.

Unpopular Celebrity

The argument I want to present to you makes things a bit stranger, and more complicated. It is specific to British publics, for that is where I have done my research, but is also applicable more broadly. For I believe that, notwithstanding the power of celebrity to stage something occasionally spectacular, and notwithstanding its appeal to particular niche markets, in the main, celebrity advocacy fails to enthuse, or even turn the heads of most of the public. But I will also argue that that does not matter very much. Regardless of how people actually respond to celebrity advocacy (and most people simply do not most of the time) it is quite clear that there is a dominant and powerful *belief* in the power of celebrity advocacy. It is that belief, that faith, rather than any demonstrated actual effects, which gives celebrity advocacy its political power and social roles.

This will probably surprise you, and may even sound a bit ridiculous. Celebrity fills our television screens, newspapers and magazines. How could cold-headed profit-maximising firms put it there without knowing that it would generate good revenues? But the point here is not that celebrity is not profitable – but rather that we cannot tell how pervasive use and response to celebrity is simply from the fact that it is available to use. That tells us about the *production* of celebrity, but not its *consumption*.

The remarkable fact is that there seems to be hardly any research which has attempted to explore levels of interest in celebrity affairs. Working in the UK, I was able to find just one large-scale survey (conducted in 2005). I repeated its questions in 2011. The headline finding in both cases is, unsurprisingly, that interest in celebrity is restricted. It is not pervasive, but is most popular for particular age and gender groups (younger women in particular).

Or you might be surprised because you know that there is a great deal of research into celebrity advertising, with over 100 papers published, much of which shows significant celebrity effects in advertising. That, however, is part of the problem. For this has long tended to be research undertaken by marketing professors based in the US who test responses of the nearest available population to them – college students. The result has been that, until the end of the last millennium, almost no research had been conducted outside the US, and 75% of it had been conducted on college students. This is a weakness, because college students and US citizens are among the most receptive audiences of celebrity advertising. Once you begin to widen the net to more diverse populations, the responses can become much more varied. Celebrity advocacy resonates with fewer people when you starting testing populations not found in the marketing classes of US liberal arts colleges.

Viewed skeptically, and with the insistence that interest in celebrity can be proven empirically, the power of celebrity advocacy has surprisingly weak foundations. There are in fact robust reasons for questioning the significance of celebrity advocacy, at least for British audiences. Large-scale surveys and focus groups tend to point to the same set of responses. Most people do not identify with this form of advocacy. They do not notice it particularly, and they do not know the celebrity ambassadors of non-profits with major ambassador programmes. Most people, most of the time, are not able to talk about it in much depth.

The irony, however, is that in the same breath as they tell you that celebrity advocacy has not engaged them, participants in focus groups will then repeatedly go on to explain that celebrity advocacy is a powerful tool because it 'raises awareness'. The same people who are ignoring it often welcome celebrity advocacy because they think that it will guarantee the media spotlight and public attention. Most people (74%) think that other people pay more attention to celebrity advocates than they do. This is impossible. Only 3% think that other people can pay less attention to it than they themselves do.

The Uses of Unpopular Celebrity

We cannot conclude from this, however, that celebrity advocacy is a waste of time. Non-profits have spent a great deal of time and considerable resources investing in celebrity ambassador programmes. Most of the largest have bespoke celebrity liaison officers. These officers will be the first to say that simply adding celebrity to media events does not work, that celebrity does not guarantee press coverage or media attention, that their relationships with non-profits and media appearances have to be carefully thought through and the precise audience carefully identified.

The techniques I have used to explore the influence of celebrity advocacy are most appropriate for exploring how much is picked up from mainstream broadcast media. There is considerable evidence to suggest that in fact celebrity advocates work best when narrowcasting to niche groups. And measured against these more specific targets celebrity advocacy can offer, and has often delivered, the goals sought for it.

There are, moreover, two particular niche groups with whom celebrity advocates work extremely well. The first is corporate leaders and sponsors. It is quite plain from talking to people working in non-profits that one of the driving forces of the rise of celebrity advocacy in these organisations is corporate hunger for access to celebrity. Corporate Social Responsibility agendas are intimately tied to marketing priorities these days and any form of corporate generosity that will also be good publicity is seized upon. That is why many non-profits, on their corporate sponsorship pages, advertise the possibilities of working with celebrity patrons, for celebrity is expensive to access under normal commercial circumstances. Moreover, for corporate leaders, access to public figures is one of the prizes of success in their position. They expect it, and they enjoy it.

Indeed, so strong is this drive that it can generate one of the most significant tensions in the non-profit – celebrity interactions. For a celebrity's principal business model is to be paid to appear, and all the industries around them are about regulating access to that appearance. Charity work, however, is done for free. And should that charity work lead, inadvertently, to free corporate sponsorship by the celebrity then, in the words of one liaison officer 'the agent would have a fit'. More than one non-profit has introduced written guidelines to allow their staff to negotiate this tricky territory.

The second group for whom celebrity advocacy works powerfully is political elites. Time and again I was told that having celebrities with you made it easier to access politicians. As one leading figure in the sector put it:

You might be able to meet with someone lower down in the office but suddenly you are meeting with the chief of staff or with the principal instead of a staff member two or three levels below because you are accompanied by a celebrity. You also might be able to get a hearing on Capitol Hill because one of those testifying would be a celebrity… That happens all the time.

And the reason for this political interest is that politicians are also highly invested in the belief in the power of celebrity advocacy. They are the second niche group. Access to such leaders and their thinking about celebrity is hard, but it is plainly visible in analyses of campaigning. It is also visible in the records of high-level elite meetings. One such, at the Brookings Institute in 2007, met specifically to discuss the power and influence of celebrity advocates. Their endorsement of their work could not have been clearer. First they listed their good works:

Whether rock stars, movie stars, moral leaders, or political icons, these "celanthropists" are infusing antipoverty campaigns with their own charisma and brand allure. Some are adept at crystallizing complex issues in catchy slogans like "Drop the Debt" and "Make Poverty History." Others have made energetic use of the popular media to attract new development audiences: witness MTV's Diary of Angelina Jolie and Dr. Jeffrey Sachs in Africa. Seasoned performers on the global stage, these development champions are eloquent and impassioned in their appeals on behalf of the impoverished – invoking emotional language and images designed to anger, engage, and inspire action. (p. 16)

And then they evaluated it, determining that: 'it works. The public is answering their call in unprecedented numbers.' (*ibid*)

Why, if focus groups and surveys are suggesting that celebrity advocacy does not resonate with publics, do their elected representatives feel that they do? Celebrity advocacy clearly does demonstrate some forms of popularity. This is clear, in the words of the same report, in the

hundreds of thousands who attended the ten "Live8" concerts in the run-up to the Gleneagles summit, the more than 2.4 million signatures for the ONE Campaign, and the 63.5 million-strong audience for the 2007 U.S. television special American Idol: Idol Gives Back. (p. 6)

In such circumstances it is quite understandable for politicians to think that this activity is but the tip of an iceberg. But that is not the appropriate conclusion to draw. This activity is not the tip, it is all there is to it, and some aspects (such as the Live8 concerts) have proven to be merely sporadic and un-sustained interest.

Instead we need to see this activity as indicative of a different form of politics at work. These are expressions of rather passive audiences. Political opinion is demonstrated by switching on televisions, texting and signing on-line petitions. Yet the signs of democratic disillusion which so worry some commentators are welcomed here by political leaders as evidence of success.

Celebrity advocacy is therefore a manifestation of what is commonly called post-democratic politics. This is a form of rule which has all the appearances of democracy, and many of its formal institutions (multi-party free elections, a free press, separation of the powers of government); however, participation in the practices of democracy is slight and instead most rule-making and decision-taking is found in the domain of elite lobbies.

But note the twist to the way in which celebrity advocacy works in post-democracies. It does not act to invigorate publics in sham episodes of participation. Most publics appear not to be invigorated at all. Celebrity advocacy, in the very act of its popular appeal, is another element in the alienation of the public from politics. Rather, celebrity advocates appeal to elites. It is an embodiment of their fantasy of what politics should be.

Nonetheless, within post-democratic environments celebrity advocates are most welcome allies for non-profits, for they will give to the organisations they support welcome access to otherwise inaccessible places. We must also realise that this may prove a Faustian bargain. The cost of working with such supporters is that it will strengthen the hold of post-democratic practice more generally. It will enable you to win the battle, but what about the war?

About the author:

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