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Opinion – From Royalty to Rock Stars: Royal Celebrity and Contemporary Politics

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NATHALIE WEIDHASE, MAY 19 2021

The interview made media waves on both sides of the Atlantic, drawing an audience of over 17 million viewers in the US and 11 million in the UK. While the viewing figures may have been similar across the Atlantic, the tone of the press reception couldn't have been more different. While US news media took on a protective tone, firmly embracing Markle as their 'American Princess', the UK's reception was much colder. In the aftermath of the interview, much of the coverage questioned the couple's ties to the royal family and the UK more broadly, with some news outlets even suggesting to strip the couple not only of their royal titles, but in the case of Prince Harry, his British citizenship.

While particularly right-leaning and conservative news outlets strove to emphasise the couple's national irrelevance, other media outlets considered the fallout of the interview a matter of international politics. The BBC asked John Kerry whether the revelations in the Oprah Winfrey interview will change opinions of the UK in the US. In his response he highlighted Prince Charles' work on environmental issues and affirmed that 'this is much bigger than an interview or a moment in a family – we are strongly linked by unbreakable bonds', and asked that the family and the relationship between the two countries into perspective, reaffirming the bond between these two nations.

Similarly, US President Joe Biden's spokesperson responded to the interview by highlighting the bravery required to talk about mental health struggles while stressing the strength of the transatlantic relationship, as if this could have been seriously tested by a celebrity interview. Not the first president to comment on Markle (Donald Trump famously called Markle 'nasty' after being snubbed for the royal wedding in May 2018), Biden's more diplomatic avoidance of taking sides shows however that the British royal family continues to be considered soft diplomacy currency in addition to their official role as head of state, particularly at a time when the UK continues to deal with the fallout from the Brexit referendum and finally leaving the EU after the end of the transition period later this year.

Key moments in Markle's journey through the royal family coincided with key moments in UK political and cultural life. Reports of Harry and Meghan dating first emerged just after the UK's vote to leave the European Union in June 2016, their wedding took place at the height of Article 50 negotiations, and their exit from frontline royal duties took place just as the UK officially left the EU in January 2020 (and was thus aptly titled 'Megxit'). As I have argued elsewhere, Meghan Markle's entry into the royal family during the height of the Brexit vote fallout was often used to construct an image of the UK that was less racist than, for example, the increase in reports of hate crimes and the dominance of post-imperial discourses may indicate.

Furthermore, the royal wedding in May 2018 was celebrated for its domestic and foreign political potential; at home to unite a divided country, and abroad to strengthen links with the Commonwealth and the 'Special Relationship'. At the same time, however, even before 'Megxit', negative voices already grew louder and focused on the ways in which she didn't 'fit', often in subtly or not so subtly racist terms. As a mixed-race American feminist, she became a hypervisible (involuntary) representative of the 'metropolitan elite' out of touch with ordinary people, particularly in contrast to other, White members of the royal family, who were seen as authentic representatives of the British people.

Post-Oprah interview, both Markle and Prince Harry seem to embrace this identity in the forging of their work as

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celebrity humanitarians. Next to the Oprah interview and their well-publicised Netflix deal, their most high-profile engagement so far is probably their appearance at the Global Citizen 'Vax Live' concert earlier this month, advocating and raising funds for global vaccine distribution alongside politicians such as Joe Biden and celebrities including Jennifer Lopez and Selina Gomez. To some degree, here they of course continue the work of royalty, championing worthy causes.

There are some differences however: where British royal work abroad, particularly in Commonwealth countries, serves to strengthen settler colonial ties and British interests, the work of the royal couple is less focused on British interests only. At 'Vax Live' then, Prince Harry's speech in front of vaccinated healthcare workers in LA was filmed and soon made its way onto Twitter, where users remarked on the semiotics of Prince Harry giving a speech in front of the 'Global Citizen' logo. While some Twitter users saw this as a visualisation of the new direction the couple were taking, UK outlets focused on the increasing unwelcome celebritisation of the former frontline royals: *The Mail Online* titled 'Harry plays the rock star', and similarly *The Daily Telegraph* remarks 'Duke gets a rock star at global vaccination extravaganza'. This is considered incompatible with the rules and norms of the royal family, and indeed seen as patronising preaching.

What crystallises in both the reactions to the Oprah interview and the Vax Live concert is an increased blurring of the lines between celebrity, royalty, and politics. The royal family continues to be considered a key player in the field of soft diplomacy by news media, but not all political action is welcomed. As the UK media and politicians continue to look inwards by whipping up populist 'culture war' narratives often steeped in nationalist rhetoric, the Sussexes' politics and activism are seen to represent the anti-thesis of patriotic pride. While Brexiteers embraced post-imperial desires to bring back the spirit of the buccaneers in the form of international trade agreements, the couple's embrace of commercial and charity activities abroad are not seen as positive PR opportunities for the UK. Instead, Harry and Meghan's international ventures (and increased focus on the American market) are considered not just a betrayal of the royal family, but of Britain itself.

About the author:

Nathalie Weidhase is a Lecturer in Media and Communication at the University of Surrey. She has previously published on women in popular music, celebrity feminism, and the royal family and Brexit, and her current research is concerned with the gendering of populist discourses in popular media and culture.