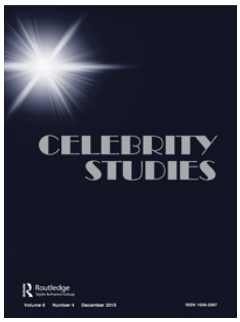

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EDITORIAL

Celebrity advocacy: international and comparative perspectives

A journalist, challenging me on some recently published findings in the summer of last year, made a strange claim. We were discussing the appeal of celebrity and I was suggesting that appeal is limited among the British public. He found that difficult to accept. 'The British public', he wrote to me, '[has] an insatiable appetite for knowing everything there is to know about A-, B-, and even C-list celebrities.'

This was an extraordinary remark. For it meant that all Britons, regardless of age, gender or anything else, are always desperate to know anything about the most minor public figures. It cannot be true. But the fact that it was uttered by an intelligent observer demonstrates that, as I have described elsewhere (Brockington 2014), there is a powerful belief in the appeal of celebrity. That belief far exceeds our understanding of how that appeal works, and with whom. A key aspect of that, which this issue of *Celebrity Studies* explores, is the role of celebrity in supporting worthy causes, which I call 'celebrity advocacy'.

There is a growing attempt better to understand celebrity advocacy, philanthropy and support for diverse issues in several academic fields. There are now several book-length studies (Cooper 2008, Brockington 2009, 2014, Richey and Ponte 2011, Kapoor 2012, Wheeler 2013), an edited collection (Tsaliki *et al*. 2011) and numerous journal articles (Street 2003, 2004, 2012, Biccum 2007, Brockington 2008, Richey and Ponte 2008, Samman *et al*. 2009, Yrjölä 2009, 2011, Marsh *et al*. 2010, Biccum 2011, Repo and Yrjölä 2011, Van den Bulck *et al*. 2011; Wheeler 2011, Chouliaraki 2012, Driessens 2013) exploring different facets of the phenomenon. The present collection is one of two that derive from the presentation of nearly 30 papers at a symposium called 'Capitalism, Democracy and Celebrity Advocacy'. This was held in Manchester in June 2012 to explore different facets of celebrity advocacy for good causes.[1] Research into celebrity advocacy is proving a rich and varied stream of scholarship.

The articles in this issue are united in making three important contributions to this body of work. First, in the diversity of methods the authors deploy we attempt to capture the variety of techniques that can, and need, to be employed in understanding different aspects of celebrity. The authors here draw on Lacanian psychology (Fletcher), performance studies (Yessayan), development studies (Christiansen and Richey), quantitative analyses of survey and experimental data (my contribution), historical studies (Littler; Huliaras and Tzifakis), political science (Budabin), individual case studies (Huliaras and Tzifakis; Hood) and country-specific readings of celebrity communications (Christiansen and Richey).

Second, there is the articles' contribution to current debates about celebrity advocacy. As we have just seen, much of the public discussion is about whether celebrity advocacy 'works' or not; that is, does it raise awareness/funds, or does it simply benefit the celebrity? A significant part of the academic debate is pre-occupied with the moral rights and wrongs of celebrity advocacy existing in the first place (see, for example, the work of Kapoor, Yrjölä and Cooper). Our stance is somewhat different. Rather than ask whether it works or not (or whether it should), we ask how does the communication attempted by celebrity

advocacy work (Fletcher; Yessayan; Christiansen and Richey)? How do we know whom it is reaching (my contribution)? Rather than condemn celebrity advocacy for its inherent elitism, or praise it for its existence, we ask whether celebrity advocacy can be said to 'work' and on whose terms is it doing so? Furthermore, we ask what is not achieved even if it is successful in its own terms (Huliaras and Tzifakis; Budabin; Yessayan)?

Another way of saying this is that in some senses discussion of celebrity advocacy has jumped ahead of itself. We need to step back and be more empirical, and context specific, asking who is saying what, to whom, and why. Then we will be in a better position to evaluate and appraise the contributions of celebrity advocates.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, we try to break from the Anglophone, US–UK–Australia dominance that tends to characterise celebrity studies. The problem is not that we know too much about celebrity in these countries. It is just that we know too little about celebrity elsewhere, and there is a risk that understandings of the workings and reach of celebrity will be inappropriately exported. Hood, and Christiansen and Richey hinge their articles on this point. My contribution demonstrates the depth and pervasiveness of US bias in studies of celebrity advertising. Our other articles examine celebrity in very different geographical contexts (Jordan), with respect to international disputes (the Balkans, Darfur) or else are concerned to understand celebrity advocacy's role in particular configurations of capitalism (Fletcher; Littler).

Rather than interpret things in the light of Anglophone readings and workings of celebrity, this collection helps to promote a more comparative perspective. This takes as it starting point the fact that the way celebrity, and celebrity advocacy, works in different countries will vary according to the specificities of each country's histories, media and global connections. This is not to deny the existence of global celebrity, or its importance. It simply asserts that what the global looks like, and the work that it does, depends on, and varies with, the place and position of its myriad viewers.

In taking this position we can begin to ask some challenging questions which have not yet featured strongly in celebrity studies. For instance, a more deliberately comparative perspective could be useful to explore different trajectories and developments of the celebrity industries in different countries. To illustrate with one minor, but stark fact: it is probably not widely known that the use of celebrity in advertisements is relatively weak in the US, compared with South Korea and Japan. Yet the difference is marked: in the US, celebrity features in around 10% of television adverts, compared with nearly 57% and 70% of advertisements in the other countries respectively (Choi *et al*. 2005, Money *et al*. 2006). The contrasting histories of celebrity in advertising are yet to be written, and yet it is possible that much can be learnt from exploring the different characteristics in the organisation and management of celebrity, in industry relations, and consumer interest and identification in different national and regional contexts.

More daring still, we can begin to explore the foundations of the belief in celebrity power in different places. For where celebrity is expected to have reach and influence, it becomes possible to ask how extensive that reach is. If it is weak, or weaker than expected, then we can ask 'why that might be?' This risks posing a counter-factual ('why are people not interested in celebrity?'), which is hard to answer, but the issue of why people's interest in celebrity is so much lower than it is expected to be could become important. This issue has not, for obvious reasons, pre-occupied celebrity studies much. But where interest in celebrity is expected to be dominant, exploring that dominance will also require understanding the various ways in which celebrity does not appeal, in the

connections and identity work it is not involved in. As I have argued elsewhere (Brockington 2014), we need to create the space to explore the muted, and non-responses, to attempts to engage people through celebrity.

Note that we do not, on the basis of these articles, attempt a more general theory of the weaknesses and lack of connection that can afflict celebrity advocacy, or how it works differently in different countries and regions. We are not ready for that yet. But we may soon be. Driessens (2013) has already made an important contribution here; drawing on Bourdieu's field theory, he argues that celebrity advocates bring a particular capital – their recognisability in different fields – which is distinct from the symbolic power (hinging on recognition in specific fields). Clearly this framework could be used to explore the extent, depth and limits to recognisability in different contexts.

Turning to the articles themselves, we can group them according to two common themes. One set is concerned with the conditions under which celebrity advocacy undertakes its work, and attains its achievements. Combined with that is a continual awareness of what the spotlight of celebrity conceals, in terms of structural problems and inequalities. Four of the articles (Budabin; Hood; Yessayan; Huliaras and Tzifakis) do this through exploring the particularities of the genesis, and performances of celebrity advocates, and from those case studies and histories.

Budabin examines how celebrity advocacy can function, demonstrating their role as norm entrepreneurs. She draws on political science writings about the growth and expansion of norms, and appropriately enough illustrates with the case of the idea of 'genocide'. She then examines the circumstances behind the rise of lobbying around the 'genocide Olympics' by activists in the US who were campaigning against horrendous levels of violence in Darfur. She also shows that while celebrity can be successful in its own right on such terms, this does not necessarily lead to broader success in terms of the ultimate goals of the campaign. Because after the pressure point of the Olympics had been lost, so also did China's policy in Sudan change.

Hood explores how the construction of Chinese celebrity is shaped by the state. Her case is that of Peng Liyuan, China's current first lady, but famous before then as a folk singer and sponsor of diverse good causes. By examining Liyuan's history, Hood demonstrates the central role of the state in shaping and directing celebrity careers, and celebrity advocacy. She also shows how that form of celebrity advocacy distracts attention from structural injustices in China.

Yessayan's subject is Queen Rania of Jordan and her YouTube performances aimed at challenging US stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims. Through a careful and detailed use of performance analysis, and informed by her own work as a dancer for the Jordanian monarchy, Yessayan situates the work of Queen Rania both nationally and internationally. She argues that it both reinforces stereotypes even as it challenges them – for the queen invokes them in order to make her points – and serves to legitimise the Jordanian monarchy in the eyes of an international audience.

Huliaras and Tzifakis explore motivations and patterns in the nature of celebrity interventions looking at the more committed activists. They are keen to understand what motivated some of the most prominent celebrity interventions in the Balkans conflict. They found that it is difficult to tie these interventions to any particular dynamics internal to those conflicts. Rather, they conclude that their rhythm and developments are tied to separate sets of social networks that, we can surmise, generally govern and guide celebrity interventions. Equally, we can expect the effects of these interventions to be

similarly dislocated from events on the ground, except to the extent that these same social networks connect with social networks on the ground.[2]

Two papers tackle structural problems by exploring how celebrity advocacy functions in different forms of capitalism. Fletcher explores the psychological work done by celebrity advocacy, drawing on Lacan and Žižek. He argues that celebrity advocates function in a sense of cynical reason and as a means of papering over the contradictions in capitalism. This celebrity obfuscation serves the contradictions of a neoliberal environmental project very well. Fletcher's paper can be usefully read in conjunction with Olivier Driessens' (2013) recent contribution discussed earlier. Fletcher's contribution offers a means of interpreting how that recognisability Driessens identifies serves the lacunae of capitalism's environmental narratives and discourse.

Littler examines the rise of celebrity philanthropy in historical perspective, comparing its rise now with previous historical junctures when philanthropy was prominent socially, particularly during the nineteenth century. She argues that while there are commonalities (in, for example, the utility of philanthropy in concealing the unpleasant origins of some fortunes), there are crucial differences. The earlier philanthropy belonged to the liberal era, and gave rise to more systematic state-supported social welfare. The current forms belong to a neoliberal order, quite different from liberalism, which is bent upon surrendering as much decision-making regarding the distribution of resources to the market, with all the questionable (lack of) morality that entails.

Finally we have two contributions that emphasise the importance of context, particularly national context, in understanding how celebrity advocacy works, or not. My article discovers a geographical bias in one body of research – that of celebrity endorsements. I show that studies of celebrity marketing have been excessively dominated by studies of US audiences (and particularly US college students), but that the celebrity marketing literature has not realised that. Given that there is evidence to show that these audiences are unusually persuaded by celebrity, there is therefore a clear need for studies of celebrity endorsement to break beyond its normal audiences. What we need is a more comparative celebrity studies, one that is grounded in the variety and difference of responses to celebrity within different audiences. Overviews of existing scholarship, as I have provided here, can make that point well.

Christiansen and Richey's work revolves around the need to break from the dominance of Anglo-American readings of celebrity, to understand how celebrity performances, and in particular celebrity development performances, need to be interpreted in different countries' particular histories of interaction with development assistance and race. Through a careful reading of an Afro-Danish celebrity's work as a comedian and, more lately, an activist, they offer an interpretation that hinges on particularly Danish constructions of race, and on the interplay between black Danish celebrities and their (predominantly white) audiences. This functions quite differently from the role of African-American celebrities performing similar roles in the US.

Curiously, despite their diversity, the one thing that this collection cannot do is challenge the journalist's prejudice with which we began. But there is no shame in that. In part, the other collection from the symposium from which this issue came provides plenty of material, concentrating as it does on varied sources of evidence which can tell us more about how British audiences respond to celebrity advocacy (Brockington and Henson 2015, Markham 2015, Scott 2015). In part because, by providing such varied and careful analyses in different contexts, we do offer a more intelligent starting point for

approaching celebrity advocacy in diverse places. Our hope is that eventually, as well as contributing to academic debate, the ideas and work here will also inform more general public discussions on democracy, nationalism and the nature of capitalism, and the place(s) and opportunities of celebrity advocacy therein.

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Notes

1. For a full report on the symposium and the research project of which it was part, see www.celebrityanddevelopment.wordpress.com. The first was published in 2014 in the *International Journal of Cultural Studies* and examined different forms of audience reception and consumption of celebrity advocacy, focusing exclusively on British audiences (Brockington and Henson 2015, Markham 2015, Scott 2015).
2. Carnie's study of Vanessa Redgrave's activism in this same area, through UNICEF and artistic circles well connected to Sarajevo, provides interesting parallels and contrasts to the cases presented here (Carnie 2003).

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