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Publisher: Routledge

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Third World Quarterly

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ctwq20>

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Published online: 13 Feb 2014.

To cite this article: Dan Brockington (2014) The production and construction of celebrity advocacy in international development, *Third World Quarterly*, 35:1, 88-108, DOI:

[10.1080/01436597.2014.868987](https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2014.868987)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2014.868987>

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The production and construction of celebrity advocacy in international development

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There has been a proliferation of celebrity within development publicity, media events and representations, which has received little attention from development scholars. This paper charts the rise of celebrity within development, drawing from over 120 interviews conducted with development, media and celebrity professionals. I examine how the presence of celebrity within development is mediated and the political economy of the celebrity–charity–corporate complex which results. I use these findings to interrogate recent writings on the work of celebrity advocacy in development and demonstrate that understanding the production and construction of celebrity development interventions helps substantially in understanding their effects.

Keywords: celebrity; international development; aid; NGOs

Introduction

I must first dispel a common misconception. The study of celebrity is not a shallow or trivial exercise. Critics may bemoan the intellectual content of much celebrity news, but that does not make it off-limits to the academe – quite the opposite. If it is vacuous, then we need to explain its popularity and success. Rubbish may be rubbish, but the study of rubbish is scholarship.¹

The study of celebrity in fact has an august history. Some of the earliest analyses of celebrity remain landmarks. Daniel Boorstin's *The Image*, defining celebrities as people who are 'famous for being famous', is one such.² Horkheimer and Adorno's essay 'The Culture Industry' also provides a standard critique of the intellectual value and contribution of much celebrity culture.³ Studying celebrity is a challenge to which the academic community is rising.⁴ It is now a sub-genre of media studies, with its own journal (*Celebrity Studies*) launched in 2010. Articles in all journals in the Web of Science which mention the word celebrity rise steeply in the 1990s with no sign of stalling (Figure 1).

Development studies, however, lags behind: articles mentioning celebrity in the main development journals are few (see Figure 1). Development scholars need to take celebrity more seriously than they do at present. Celebrity is an

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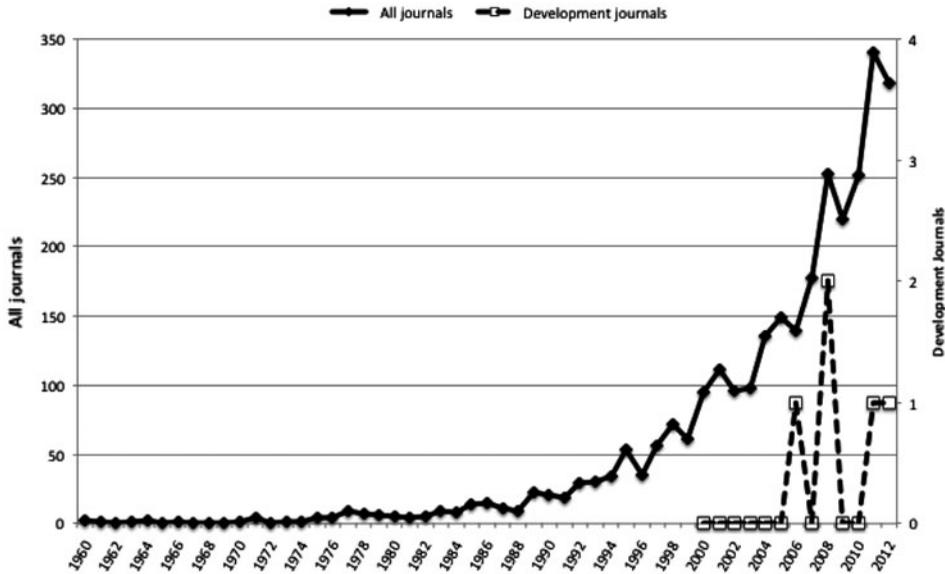


Figure 1. The number of scholarly articles mentioning 'celebrity' in the Web of Science (WOS) across all journals and development studies journals.

Note: Development Studies journals used for the search term were: *Journal of Development Studies*, *World Development*, *Development and Change*, *Third World Quarterly*, *Sustainable Development*, *Development Policy Review*, *Studies in Comparative International Development*, *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, *International Development Planning Review* and *IDS Bulletin*. Results are only shown after 2000 for Development Studies for clarity in the figure above. No articles in these journals mentioning celebrity are reported before this year in WOS.

active force within development affairs. Exploring its presence and influence helps us to understand some of the forces shaping the presentation of development issues in the global North, as well as how different publics are responding to them and how development stories can become, or fail to become, compelling.⁵

Furthermore the importance of celebrity in communicating poverty and development issues is likely to increase. The celebrity industries are expanding into the global South as internet connections, media industries and mobile phones increase their reach. Poverty is expanding in the global North as the global poor come increasingly to be found in the unequal societies of middle-income countries where celebrity industries have been present for longer.⁶ In North and South celebrity is likely to become more involved in the communication and mediation of development issues.

In this paper I examine the organisation of relations between the celebrity industries and development NGOs, focusing on those in the UK, and setting the latter within the broader charitable sector of which they are part. This involves examining both how these relationships have developed over time and how they are constructed and mediated on a day-to-day basis. I then examine elements of the political economy of these relationships – how they create and distribute benefit. Here I am interested in benefits beyond those enjoyed by development NGOs.

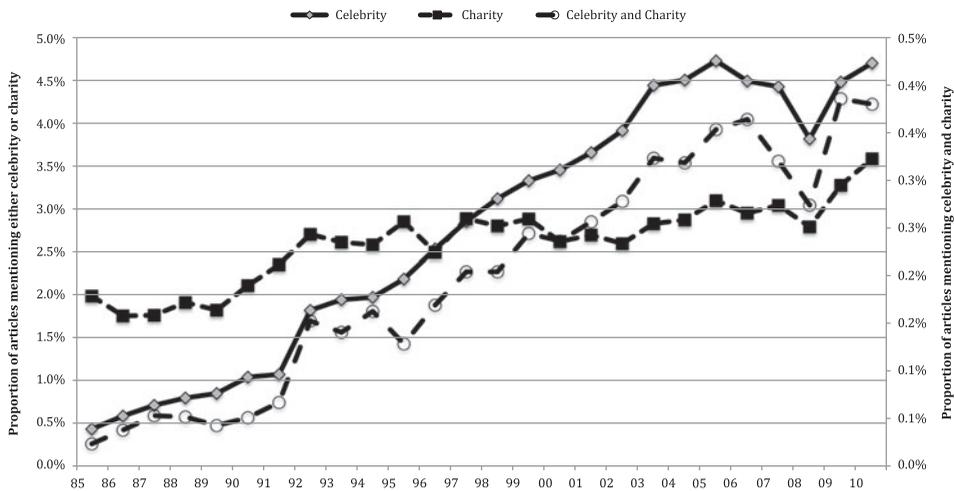


Figure 2. Trends in reporting celebrity, charity and both together.

Source: Lexus Nexus.

I will argue that the work of celebrity in development deserves attention among the new development actors of this special issue.⁷ I explore the limitations of this topic and the further research required better to understand it. I also argue that the insights I provide here into the forces, conflicts and structures producing celebrity advocacy improve our understanding of its effects.

The article proceeds thus: first, I review some of the writings on the work, history and functioning of celebrity in (largely Northern) societies and highlight some gaps in writings about celebrity advocacy. Second, I describe the methods used in this study. Third, I highlight recent developments in the history of celebrity and development. Fourth, I explain how the relationships between the celebrity industry and the development sector are forged, examining the key tensions which shape their outcomes. Then I outline the political economy of a ‘charity–celebrity–corporate’ complex which has been produced by these interactions. Finally, I conclude by considering the implications of these findings for our understanding of the implications of celebrity and development.

Celebrity and development studies

In the public mind there is often a distinction between fame and celebrity.⁸ Famous people are credible; celebrities are not, which leads to interesting questions such as ‘how can celebrities become famous?’. Turner’s definition of celebrity incorporates that distinction. He defines celebrities as those whose private lives attract more attention than their professional lives.⁹ Rojek is more inclusive and distinguishes between three forms of celebrity: ascribed greatness (enjoyed by royalty), achieved renown (won by great athletes) and attributed glory (afforded by the media to reality TV stars).¹⁰

My own definition is not based on how fame was won; it focuses on the commerce and industry that depends on celebrity. Celebrity describes public appearances which are materially beneficial, and where the benefits are enjoyed

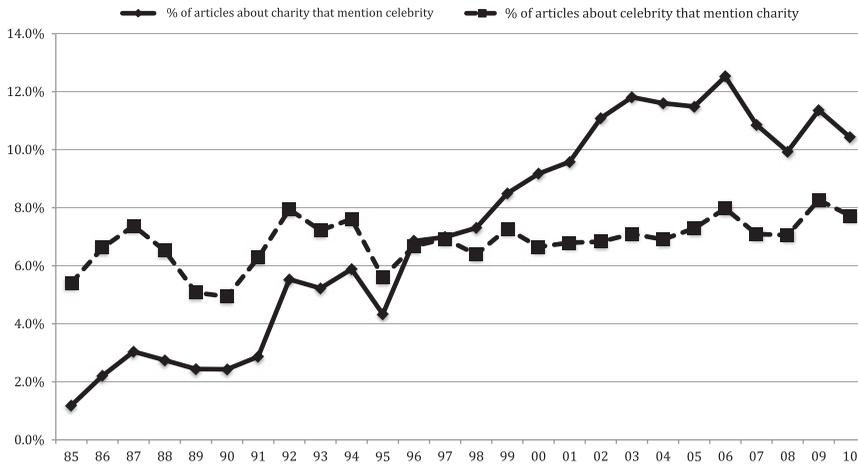


Figure 3. Trends in reporting celebrity and charity.
Source: Lexus Nexus.

by the celebrity themselves and by other stakeholders whose job it is to manage the appearance of that celebrity. According to this definition, members of the public interviewed by roving reporters would not be celebrities. Academics promoting their books in the media would only qualify if those media opportunities were provided by an agent promoting their book. In the account below I use celebrity and fame interchangeably and I refer to celebrities as ‘celebrities’, ‘famous people’ or ‘public figures’. The term ‘celebrity industries’ refers to the commercial organisations managing the work of celebrities.

Celebrity can be analysed in three main ways.¹¹ A political-economy approach examines the political and commercial interests which shape the industry.¹² Celebrity can also be read semiotically, in terms of the signs it represents and finally it can be approached from the point of view of the consumer, and audience identity.¹³ There are also analyses which focus more on who has been famous and what they have done, than on the means by which such notice has been acquired.¹⁴ The flaw in this approach is that the result is largely a list of famous names and their activities, with little insight into what drives the attention, or its consequences. If attention to celebrity is to be useful to Development Studies it will need to eschew such an approach. Rather, as I will argue below, if we are to understand the ways in which individuals matter, we need first to explore the machinery around them to be able to gauge the nature of any personal influence.

With respect to the role of celebrity in advocacy John Street has argued that the rise of celebrity-like behaviour among politicians, and of politics among celebrities, reflects the increasing importance of style within politics.¹⁵ Meyer and Gamson and Lester and Hutchins have noted that celebrity advocacy with respect to environmental causes is inherently unstable and weak.¹⁶ For Meyer and Gamson the advocacy is always at risk of being deemed inauthentic, because the celebrity advocates themselves are questioned thus. There is therefore a tendency among celebrity advocates to steer issues towards those causes which will provoke less contention and scrutiny. For Lester and Hutchins the

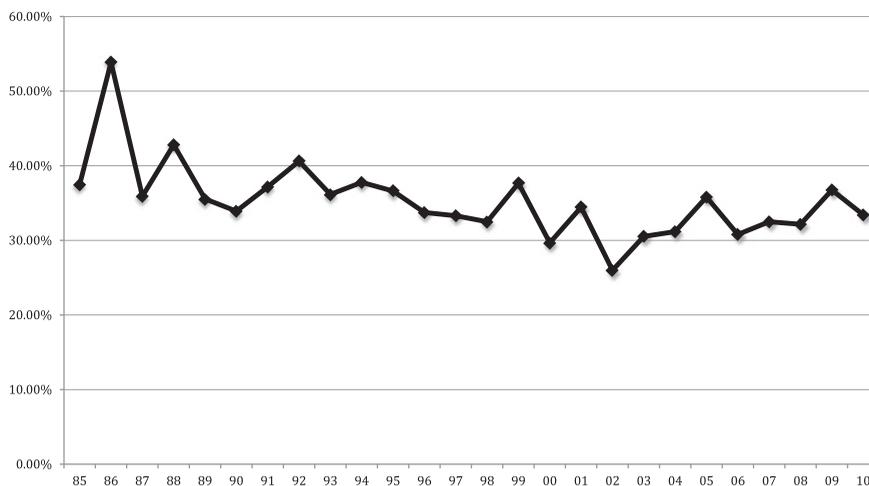


Figure 4. The proportion of articles about celebrity and charity which mention either poverty, international issues or development.

Source: Lexus Nexus.

instability derives from the marginality of environmental causes to the drivers of economic and media power. This makes it harder for environmentalists to present their case, as a sceptical media will question their media events more intensively. Other analysts observe the alignment of celebrity advocacy with hegemonic capitalist power. I have argued elsewhere that the irruption of celebrity within environmental causes is part of a more general mainstreaming of environmental movements within capitalism.¹⁷

Many authors decry the rise of ‘causumerism’, with which celebrity can be associated, and the promotion of consumption or ‘clicktivism’ as a means of tackling global problems but in ways which simply reproduce or leave unquestioned the forces producing poverty or degradation.¹⁸ Others observe that contemporary celebrity interventions in development causes merely focus the attention of Northern publics onto themselves, not towards distant strangers.¹⁹ Similarly Cameron and Haanstra argue that the trend to make development ‘sexy’ promotes Northern charity rather than an understanding of the structural causes of poverty and inequality.²⁰

Within British development NGOs there has been a questioning of the values promoted by relying on celebrity.²¹ Within the academe there is a flourishing body of criticism of the role of celebrity in recreating and reproducing hegemonic capitalist inequality.²² Kapoor adopts the most radical position, arguing that celebrity is part of the forces which create and produce inequality, and that celebrities might in fact be ‘sadists’ delighting in their position at the top of the pyramid.²³ He further suggests that the only way out of this dilemma is through a Marxist revolution and that following conventional means of tackling poverty (such as supporting NGOs) is no solution – it is better to do nothing.

Finally, some observers embrace the opportunities that celebrity’s proximity to power offers. Cooper is the most sycophantic.²⁴ He celebrates celebrity diplomacy and the ways musicians Bob Geldof and Bono and the actress Angelina Jolie have been able to advance development agendas a little too generously.

Missing thus far from these accounts are three elements necessary to understand the role and consequences of celebrity within development. First, we lack an account of how the celebrity industry and the development sector have become intertwined in recent years. Second, we do not know how relationships between celebrity and development causes are constructed. Third, we need a better understanding of the political economy of these relationships. These are the contributions that this paper provides.

Methods

I present here findings from over 120 interviews conducted between September 2010 and December 2012 with employees of different NGOs, with journalists and with agents, managers and public relations staff, mostly employed in the USA and UK. Interviewees were selected through a mixture of targeted and snowball sampling. I approached the major international development NGOs in the UK using analyses of their income, as well as major talent agencies in the UK and USA.²⁵ I interviewed staff from NGOs outside the development sector to understand better how changes in that sector fitted into the broader charitable sector. Interviews covered experience in interviewees' current employment and work for previous organisations. I supplemented these interviews with an analysis of articles which mention the words 'celebrity' and 'charity' (and derivatives of both) in the major UK newspapers, using Lexus Nexus.²⁶

I will not say who agreed to speak with me, or which organisations they work for, because I insisted on complete anonymity for all my interviewees. Each is represented as a source number below. However, I can report the breakdown of interviews according to the number of organisations in different sectors in which interviewees have worked (Table 1). It was easiest to talk to people in the non-profit and NGO sector but significant minorities were entertainment professionals and journalists.

I believe these data are representative because I have talked to a significant proportion of the important players, including most of the major development NGOs who work with celebrity. It quickly became clear that there was as common story to be told across these interviews, which I presented to my

Table 1. Country and organisation experience of the 123 interviewees consulted in this research.

Region	NGOs	Celebrity industries ¹	Media	Other ²	Total
Australasia	2				2
Asia	2				2
South America	2				2
North America	14	6		2	22
Africa	13	1			14
Europe excl UK	5				5
UK	109	24	25	14	172
Total	147	31	25	16	219

Notes: ¹Includes intermediary industries negotiating links between celebrities and NGOs.

²Includes government officials, researchers and corporate leaders.

interviewees. Their reactions were positive and, crucially, several mistook the anonymised voices of other informants for their own when reading drafts of my work. For these reasons the material below can be taken to represent the experience of diverse actors.

The development of celebrity in development

Let us first survey the variety of celebrity work for development issues. Almost all UN agencies have celebrity ambassadors, although none more than UNICEF, and most development NGOs in the UK have similar programmes.²⁷ Ambassadors go on publicised field trips (such as singer Beverley Knight's to Malawi for Christian Aid²⁸); they design handbags for Haiti (such as actress Scarlett Johansson's for Oxfam²⁹); and they facilitate access to powerful people for development activists in the North (for example, when the model Claudia Schiffer lead a lobby of a MPs in Westminster for Make Poverty History) and South (such as former Irish president Mary Robinson's visit to the Presidents of DRC and Rwanda as Honorary President of Oxfam).³⁰ Some of these engagements promote general awareness, others specific campaigns, others fundraising drives, while others are more about engaging and rewarding existing supporters at particular events (such as musician Tom Yorke's impromptu recital at a Trade Justice Movement event in 2005).³¹ In Tanzania actors such as the late Stephen Kanumba conduct public-facing campaigns on the streets to promote awareness of HIV issues and women's rights.³²

Other celebrities are setting up their own foundations and organisations to pursue their own interests, with variable success. The musician Madonna's foundation in Malawi had radically to reorganise its activities after accusations of inappropriate use of resources, and Wyclef Jean (a musician) was accused of mismanaging funds in Haiti.³³ Conversely actors George Clooney's, Don Cheadle's, Mia Farrow's and John Prenderghast's (an activist) actions around Darfur are alleged to have been too effective, directing attention and activism to inappropriate solutions which may have prolonged the conflict.³⁴ Groups like the Elders combine the power of celebrity across several different spheres. They are a select group of statesmen and women (including Desmond Tutu, Jimmy Carter and Mary Robinson) who have been brought together by Richard Branson (a businessman) and Peter Gabriel (a musician) under the nominal leadership of former South African president Nelson Mandela to lobby for particularly important development and human rights issues (such as reconciliation in Cyprus).³⁵ Similarly the Clinton Global Initiative (led by former US president Bill Clinton) seeks to leverage celebrity influence in the political and entertainment fields to encourage philanthropy in the USA.

There is a popular history of the work of celebrity in development issues. We know that the Ethiopian famine in 1984 prompted the Bob Geldof to set up Band Aid and his colleagues in America to set up 'USA for Africa'. The phenomenally successful singles these groups released begat the Live Aid concerts in 1985. Those 'mega-events', combined with Nelson Mandela concerts, the Amnesty International tour, Sun City album and the start of Comic Relief make the late 1980s the moment when humanitarian activism awoke to the power of the celebrity industry.³⁶ Kofi Anan, the former Secretary General of the United Nations, made substantial use of celebrity within the UN in the

1990s.³⁷ Since then notable moments combining celebrity with development issues have occurred with the International Campaign to Ban Landmines campaign, during the Jubilee 2000 campaign, the Make Poverty History campaign in 2005, the Save Darfur Coalition (since 2004) and in the Live Earth concerts of 2007.

Many of these episodes have been controversial. The imagery promoted during the early work in Ethiopia prompted a detailed enquiry into African imagery in development.³⁸ Celebrity in the Make Poverty History campaign was perceived to be associated with over-simplistic messages, and the problematic timing of the Live 8 concerts (clashing with major planned protest marches) produced tension between some NGOs and celebrity advocates.³⁹ A further tension concerns the Save Darfur Coalition. A number of observers objected to the characterisation of the violence in Darfur by the Coalition and questioned the effectiveness of the measures which the coalition advocated to bring an end to that violence.⁴⁰ Partly as a result of these tensions, there is often a reaction against celebrity within the development movement. This is visible in the comments pages of the *Guardian* newspaper whenever Bono's name is mentioned in conjunction with development causes.⁴¹

However, both the common history of celebrity and development and the reaction against it conceal much. They conceal the fact that what we now call development issues enjoyed the heights of fame many decades ago. Campaigns against slavery and the pursuit of progress in supposedly uncivilised lands produced some of the greatest public figures of the era (David Livingstone, Edward Morrell and William Wilberforce). In the 20th century concern for these issues continued to produce public figures but not noticeably so after Albert Schweitzer won his Nobel Prize in 1952. Between then and the mid-1980s Mother Teresa was the only public figure of any note who emerged to champion development issues.⁴²

The common history also conceals the fact that the relationships between the celebrity industry and the development sector have changed substantially quite recently. Since about 2000 they have become formalised, more intensive, competitive (in that charities are competing to get access to celebrities) and systematically organised. Perhaps the most important change is the establishment of a cadre of full-time, dedicated liaison officers working for NGOs. Seventy-five per cent of the 30 largest charities in the UK have such a position.⁴³ The majority of organisations whose employees I have spoken to had created full-time celebrity liaison posts since 2000. Since 2004 a celebrity liaison officers' forum has been meeting in London monthly to share experience and expertise. A blog (<http://charitycelebrity.blogspot.com>) set up by one of the more experienced liaison officers in 2010 had over 1000 readers less than a year later; it now has over 500 Twitter followers and forms an occasional column in the *Guardian's* Voluntary Sector Network. The Media Trust, which exists to promote effective media engagement by charities in the UK, has been organising workshops since 2003 to advise NGOs on how to work with celebrity. The Red Pages, a company selling access contact details of over 25,000 public figures in the UK, began listing celebrity ailments systematically (to facilitate health charities' approaches) in around 2004.

There has been an equivalent shift within the celebrity industry, with three of the four major talent agencies in Hollywood setting up foundations to promote

charitable activities to their clients since 2000 (William Morris, 2000; Creative Artists Agency, 2001; United Talent Agency, 2004). These foundations now broker relationships between major international NGOs searching for talent.⁴⁴ There are also several specialist liaison companies. The Global Philanthropy Group (begun in 2007) specialises in advising the philanthropy of high net worth and high-profile individuals in the USA. The Cause Effect Agency (also US-based) first began trading in 2005. In the UK Cause Celeb has met less success since starting up in 2004, but Independent Celebrity Liaison (established in 2011) has done relatively well.⁴⁵

There have also been increasing efforts to catalogue all these activities. The *Look to the Stars* website, which documents the work of celebrities for good causes was set up in 2006.⁴⁶ The *Ecorazzi* website, concentrating on environmental issues, was set up in the same year. MTV established a website aimed at its activist viewers in 2008. *Third Sector's* column dedicated to the work of celebrity in NGOs first appeared in 2002; it became weekly in 2005.⁴⁷ The Red Page's weekly newsletter detailing deals between celebrities and brands, and celebrities and charities (or all three) first came out in 2007 and went bi-weekly two years later.

Finally, the effects of all this activity are clearly visible in the long-term trends in the reporting of charitable and celebrity activity in British newspapers. There has been an increase in the proportion of articles mentioning celebrity, the proportion mentioning charity, and the proportion mentioning both (Figure 2). The contrasting trends between the proportion of charity articles that mention celebrity, and the proportion of celebrity articles that mention charity, are more interesting (Figure 3). This demonstrates that only a small proportion of celebrity articles include any mention of anything charitable, and mention does not change much over time. There is, however, a marked increase in mention of celebrity in articles about charities. In other words, while the world of celebrity remains little altered by charitable activities, reporting on charities has been markedly reoriented to include the celebrity industry. International development issues have maintained a constant presence within these trends (Figure 4).

In summary, relations between the charitable sector and celebrity industries have become more organised and systematic in the past 10 years. They have become more professional. To understand the consequences of this shift within the development sector, however, we have to appreciate better how these relationships are constructed and nurtured.

Constructing effective relationships

There are doubtless cases where the enthusiasm of the celebrity explains their relationship with development NGOs. But this does not explain all celebrity activism, nor could it explain how any of these desires are brought into the public domain in effective and convincing ways. The interactions between celebrity and development cannot be conceived as merely interactions between individuals. They are encounters between development organisations and celebrity industries.

We will view these interactions from the perspective of the celebrity liaison officers of NGOs who mediate them. There are several elements to their work. First, making the approach; second developing the relationship; third coping

with the expectations and demands of colleagues in NGOs; and, fourth, working with agents and managers of celebrities.

When NGOs approach public figures for support (and it is almost always that way round), they have to have worked out how 'their artists [are] going to have credibility and relevance'. Relevance is not given. It has to be recognised, and then realised (ie brought into effect) by the NGOs, the public figures and those surrounding them. In the first instance this may require that liaison officers know the field, who is out there in the public eye, and what they are interested in. This requires exploring people's backgrounds and interests as well as contemporary gossip. As one put it: 'my job is to read everything'. The Red Pages began listing celebrity ailments and charitable interests in the early 2000s precisely in order to improve the value of their list to NGO clients. Tracking people before making an 'ask' (a request for action or assistance) can take longer than a year.⁴⁸

It is one of the continual struggles of the job for all but the most prestigious NGOs that all the work can fall at the first hurdle. Public figures, their agents and contacts, receive hundreds of requests weekly to work for free for good causes. They refuse or ignore the vast majority; a thick skin is required to cope with all the refusals. There are coping strategies. The UN agencies, for example, meet quarterly to ensure that they are not approaching the same people with different requests. The celebrity liaison officer's forum in the UK serves a similar purpose. Avoiding an instant rejection requires 'pitching something that they might be interested in and...that means doing lots of research'. Agents insist that well designed letters, tailored to their client alone, are vital if they are to consider the 'ask'. However they also typically advise their clients to choose up to three organisations with which they would work for up to 12 days a year (or two to three 'asks' per organisation). This makes it easier for the agents to handle, and refuse, 'asks' from other organisations.⁴⁹

The distinguishing feature of professional relations between celebrities and NGOs is the way NGO staff seek to build lasting relationships with celebrity patrons. Some of the liaison officers with whom I spoke were the first to hold their positions; they observed that the first thing they had to do was to turn what had been incidental fragmented encounters between their organisation and public figures into more lasting relationships. As one put it, the liaison officer's role is to 'stay in their lives'.⁵⁰ This could involve thank you cards, flowers or gifts donated by corporate partners following appearances, as well birthday cards and bespoke, personalised newsletters. They keep patrons up to date with the outcomes of their actions, reporting the outcome of fundraising ventures, of how funds were used and providing updates on people encountered in field trips.⁵¹

The 'asks' themselves can be a means of developing relationships. Some organisations deliberately designed publicity events as opportunities to develop relationships with celebrities. One liaison officer was 'working to invent' more domestic events rather than relying on the more taxing commitment of an international field trip. Other liaison officers designed gradations of events specifically to initiate and then deepen relationships.⁵²

One of the problems facing smaller organisations is precisely that they are not able to generate the right sort of meetings to enable them to develop relationships with public figures:

It is difficult when you work for a small charity to provide the range of things to...keep people's interests up...It was easy at [a large charity]...there were always events going on...you wanted someone to keep their involvement...and therefore you could invite them to open something or come to something...at a smaller agency that is much more difficult, you don't have those kind of on-going things...so you are working much harder...to find things which allow you to maintain that relationship with people, which is really important as otherwise they forget you and move on.⁵³

For many development organisations a key component of relationship building is the field trip overseas. The field trips serve three purposes. First, for the public figures, the trips can have a dramatic personal impact:

If we can get someone to the field and work around their interests and availability, without a doubt most people find it's a really moving, engaging and inspiring experience.⁵⁴

The dry statistics of briefings about poverty are replaced by real people in difficult circumstances:

everything [in the briefings] will be absolutely reinforced in the most simple black and white way when you go on a trip.⁵⁵

Second is the effect of this experience on the relationship between the public figures and the organisation:

there are just so many examples that I could give you of the difference that a trip like that makes to a celebrity and just in terms of really engaging them and really cementing the relationship.⁵⁶

Field trips allow for quality time spent with the liaison officers and public figures at a time when these figures may also be rapidly changing their world-view.

Third, field trips help celebrities to pass the authenticity test demanded by sceptical publics. Coping with the difficult circumstances of a field trip 'provides huge credibility to the role'. When public figures handle interviews they can speak with more conviction and ease, they are able to tell stories of people they met, adding much more colour.⁵⁷

Field trips can go wrong. The public figure can fail to connect with the people they meet, or cope with the shock of their new circumstances; they can place unreasonable demands on the time of country offices, and they can be poorly portrayed in the press coverage which results. Memories of these trips still echo around the celebrity liaison and press communities, if not in the public mind. Sometimes field trips are conducted in private, to nurture the relationship, but this is rare, for some form of publicity is usually required to justify any trip. Besides, part of the skill is to avoid problematic publicity by getting the trip right – negotiating it with the field staff who will host the visit, inviting the right journalists and communicating effectively with the celebrities themselves.⁵⁸

Ultimately successful relationship building hinges on treating public figures as human beings. The fact that they donate their time, and often cover their own costs, makes them effectively major donors-in-kind and they need to be treated as such by the causes they support. Celebrities want relationships with NGOs which matter and which can be nurtured over time, and which feel authentic to them.⁵⁹

Developing strong relationships requires negotiating three significant constraints. It requires understanding the uncertainty that defines the professions of many celebrities – one can never tell where or when the next job will come up. One interviewee called the effect ‘Steven Spielberg’: any moment someone more important may call your celebrity in to do a lucrative job.⁶⁰

Second, it requires coping with colleagues with much expectation, but little understanding, of celebrity. These people they are keen to use public figures, do not know how to, but do not realise that. One person found it ‘maddening...half of my job, half of my week, is about managing the expectations of my colleagues’. This was a common theme in the interviews.⁶¹

They say ‘we need a celebrity for this, I’m like no you don’t, you don’t need a celebrity’.⁶²

Part of the skill of celebrity liaison is to promote events when celebrity is *not* used. Publicity events need to stand up creatively without any celebrity presence. Simply adding celebrity to create attention will not work; ‘it still has to come back down to being a good story either to get the celebrity or to get the coverage’.⁶³

Third, there are the unequal power relations that define interactions between celebrities and charities. Even the most prestigious organisations can find that the top people have ‘lots of layers’ and are hard to get to. Agents were particularly important because they could control schedules and shut down potential events. Some liaison officers therefore ‘treat the agent as well as I treat the celebrity’. It helps that there is a mutual interest in these relationships working successfully for all sides: ‘we all know we need something out of this, both parties need something out of this relationship’. Ultimately this should lead to a close, trusted relationship whereby the NGO can become another reliable means of managing the public persona of the celebrity.⁶⁴

my goal is not to have anything to be approved by a publicist...because quite honestly I don’t want you to look bad either...The ideal is for when they have their [organisation M] hat on for me to be their [organisation M] publicist and for that to be enough.⁶⁵

After all, in the long term the celebrities come and go, but the agents remain.⁶⁶

In sum, particular staff within some development NGOs are deeply engaged in working closely with agents, publicists, managers and celebrities. These interactions are, from the point of view of the NGOs, designed to produce deeper and more meaningful relationships between NGOs and celebrities, and the appearance of deeper and more meaningful relationships. We need now to consider how these relationships create and distribute benefit, that is, the political economy of celebrity and development interactions.

The political economy of celebrity advocacy

I want to examine two elements of this political economy: first, the creation of a specific niche element of the celebrity industry now concerned with charitable activities; second, the role of corporate interest in fuelling the celebrity–charity–corporate complex.

The fact that celebrity–charity interactions now constitute a specific niche within the celebrity industry is visible in ways in which the media deliberately seek contacts with charities in order to conduct their business:

If we have a target list for celebrities...if we are looking for an interview...we definitely might go through a charity if we know that there is something coming up in a campaign...We are often approached by charities about certain [tasks] and we might use that as an excuse to try and get a particular celebrity. So we will look for them to chase a certain celebrity for us.⁶⁷

Television programmes like ‘Celebrity who Wants to be a Millionaire’ depend upon good links with charities in order to function. The contestants win money for their chosen charity, and celebrity liaison officers’ links are required in order to source appropriate talent for the shows.⁶⁸

The niche is also visible in the brand images of certain celebrities. Geldof’s role as a chairman of the recently launched 8 Miles private equity fund has credibility and appeal because the fund seeks to invest in African business opportunities.⁶⁹ Another example is a recent advertising campaign featuring Bono, his wife Ali Hewson and Angelina Jolie, who all appeared in a series of advertisements for Louis Vuitton bags. Bono and Hewson were pictured leaving a small plane somewhere in Africa, with the caption ‘Every Journey Begins in Africa’.⁷⁰ Angelina Jolie was pictured in Cambodia with the same campaign.⁷¹ The power of the images depends on the brand values that Bono and Jolie have so strongly cultivated with respect to development philanthropy.⁷²

Note, however, that Bono and Hewson earned no fee from their appearance in these advertisements. That was donated to charities, as was a portion of Jolie’s. There were fringe benefits (extending Bono’s and Jolie’s brand, and mention of Hewson’s clothing range – Edun – in which Vuitton had a 49% stake) but there is no indication that this was particularly profitable to these celebrities personally. It may well have been most beneficial for Louis Vuitton, which leveraged the brand value of these figures.

Crucial to understanding the political economy of celebrity advocacy is the role of corporate interests. The rise and systematisation of the celebrity–charity–corporate complex is not just an important part of the media industries, it is part of a more general orienting of the corporate sector towards the celebrity sector, for economic as well as more personal reasons. Properly to understand the shift that has taken place through the intertwining of the celebrity industries and charitable sector we have to appreciate the role of corporate interest in both.

One of the strongest and most persistent themes that emerged across all the interviews was the importance of corporate interest in celebrity. Corporate sponsors of NGOs simply have a reputation in the third sector of loving celebrity associations. The corporate teams within NGOs can be those who make the most requests for celebrity involvement. This interest is both a vehicle for driving the

presence of celebrity within NGOs and a powerful force shaping the conduct of negotiations between the latter and the celebrity industry.⁷³

It's very expensive for a corporation to get a celebrity spokesperson, so they love it when by doing good works they also get to grab a few photos...or do a joint press conference with a celebrity. It's a big added benefit...They love getting that opportunity to be associated with a celebrity for free.⁷⁴

NGOs cultivate that enthusiasm. Numerous NGOs now seek to cultivate support from businesses, and to be chosen as that business's charity of the year by offering associations with their celebrity supporters on their websites.

Corporate interest in charitable causes can reflect cause-related marketing opportunities. It is good business sense to build relationships with NGOs where that provides access to fashionable events and people:

in the first instance the draw is going to be that to have [public figure E] associated with their product is highly desirable and to sponsor an event that we do at [location F] which is very elite, which an awful lot of very rich or famous people come to is perfect to their brand.⁷⁵

In one instance the very level of celebrity involvement in a fundraising campaign was determined by the corporate preference for celebrity involvement:

[We asked] do we in fact even involve celebrities or is it that we have real women...in the ads. We came to the conclusion that actually the corporates like to be associated with the campaign because of the kudos it holds and because of the level of celebrities it has supporting it. Because the majority of the income is raised through corporate partners...we do actually need to have celebrity support to keep them engaged.⁷⁶

Corporate interest in access to talent can be so strong that I have come across instances where NGOs became obliged to deliver public figures to corporate events and resorted to buying in the talent for a day from appropriate agencies.⁷⁷

The interest of businesses in charities' celebrities carries two major risks. First, celebrities will endorse charities without charge, but they do charge companies. When corporates become involved with charitable events there is a risk of free endorsement. This would deprive public figures, and their agents, of their income, and agents would 'have a fit' if that happened. Getting things right here is so important that more than one organisation has produced written guidelines as to how to behave in such circumstances.⁷⁸

The second complication is that public figures' corporate endorsements and general behaviour can threaten the brand of the NGOs with whom they then associate. For the larger NGOs the risks of association with public figures were 'all about the brand', which meant what these figures might do to the NGO brand. For, 'that is the other side of celebrity...if you screw up you screw up in the headlights'. Some undertake careful due diligence on the public figures with whom they build relationships, before they get serious, to prevent any embarrassment. Even then things can go wrong, if public figures subsequently develop

relationships with companies who are doing things the NGOs oppose. Or if, for example, they behave in ways which are detrimental to the campaign, such as when Salman Khan shot a protected antelope in India shortly after appearing in a calendar for the WWF, or when Ralph Fiennes was reported to have had casual sex with an air hostess en route to India to promote HIV/AIDS awareness for UNICEF.⁷⁹

Finally, we must note that corporate interest in the celebrity–charity–corporate complex (and the rise of corporate social responsibility more generally) cannot be reduced to profit motives. One of the reasons why corporates are star struck is because corporate elites enjoy meeting publicly desirable figures in person:

A lot of middle aged men melt at the idea...A lot of middle aged business men, and young ones and older ones actually just kind of fawn at the idea of somebody reasonably well known and reasonably attractive. I'm sure that there are equally a number of business women [who are similar].⁸⁰

Sometimes the value of meeting people is not just about the physical attractiveness of the person, but reflects their enduring influence through decades of media presence.

[Company G] absolutely loved [public figure H]...she's very special to a group of men of a certain age...She's...lovely and charming and articulate...she delivers both emotionally and rationally and...appeals to the softer side of them.⁸¹

Similarly, many observers commented on the power of celebrity to give them access to high-level political circles:⁸²

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.⁸³

In summary, the construction of the celebrity–charity–corporate complex has become a niche element of the celebrity industries. These associations are, however, attractive to corporate sponsors of charities because of the valuable publicity and associations they can create, and because of the personal pleasure the company of the famous affords.

Discussion

Does any of this matter? Have we just emerged from this account with the rubbish of celebrity more deeply engrained beneath our fingernails? I believe that the depth and sophistication of the organisation of relationships between celebrity and the charitable sector described above, the carefully constructed and negotiated relationships and the importance of these relationships with charitable and development causes for the celebrity industries and corporate associations means that the presence of celebrity does need to be taken seriously by the

development studies community. These people have become an important set of development actors, of whose presence and influence we need to take better notice.

At the same time we must recognise the limits of this field. Celebrity's increasingly sophisticated association with development issues is often marginal to the way in which these issues are played out in individual countries. Celebrities can be associated with significant fundraising efforts, but these funds themselves are only a minority of the development aid, and the effectiveness and influence of the organisations which wield them are substantially questioned.⁸⁴ The proliferation of celebrity associations with development causes in the media is no indication that celebrity matters that much on the ground.

But, in a sense, that is the contribution of this paper. In outlining the history of the celebrity and development intertwining, in explaining how these associations come about, and in plotting the distribution of these benefits, the paper has described a realm which is decidedly marginal to many development activities and issues in the South. The value of this account is that it delineates the limits of interest in the topic for development scholars. The interests outlined above are important, as I have approached them, for understanding the political economy and representation of development issues in the North.

However, we must also recognise that celebrity may well become more important in the future. I have worked mainly in the UK and talked to largely Northern practitioners and professionals. Celebrity cultures, however, vary from country to country, as do their roles and interactions with development causes. The work of celebrity and development in India, Brazil or Nigeria, where there are strong entertainment industries, and development issues, may produce different accounts. When Southern-based NGOs work with their own national celebrities in public-facing campaigns, they do so with figures who will be listened to by the intended beneficiaries of their development activities, not potential funders or Northern-based activists.⁸⁵

But the importance of celebrities' work does not just lie in these mediating roles for Northern audiences. Celebrity works in development because it facilitates access to elites, because the powerful want to meet the famous. Here a different set of interactions may be taking place, which I have not been able to describe. Altogether different methods would be required to do so. The work of celebrity elites with other political elites in shaping economic and social policies important for development issues will require greater scrutiny.

Finally, this contribution creates the space to understand the role of individuals better in celebrified development. Celebrity studies can be vitiated by its individualistic approach, which focuses too much on the celebrity and not enough on the broader structures of which they are part.⁸⁶ The same focus on a few individuals, to the detriment of our understanding of the broader processes of which they are part, affects some contributions on celebrity in development, even as they focus on those broader structures.⁸⁷ The result is that the academic study of celebrity can be, as Turner observed, rather too similar to popular celebrity culture.⁸⁸ We become preoccupied with individual personae, characters and escapades, rather than with the more powerful forces producing them.

However, once we do understand the structures, then the space for individuals opens up. For understanding the structures and industries at work makes it

possible to identify domains and occasions where a particular individual's influence and actions have been important. For example, in the 1960s musician Nina Simone's creation of *Mississippi Goddam!* owed little to any celebrity–charity machinery; more recently the outspoken remarks of the Dixie Chicks against President Bush were similarly spontaneous.⁸⁹ Likewise, where individuals are involved in promoting less desirable change, so too understanding the structures at play makes it easier to understand the individual role.

My hope therefore is that celebrity will be taken a little bit more seriously by the Development Studies discipline and the way to take it seriously is to engage with the mechanisms producing and constructing celebrity and development interactions. Doing so will make it possible to respond more effectively and intelligently to the associations between famous people and good causes. We may well conclude that these associations are best avoided. Or we may identify certain types of interaction that can be promoted effectively and justly in ways which make the world a better place to live in. Or we may need even to consider the possibility that some celebrities may wish to free themselves from the hegemonic regimes of which they are part. All such responses must be grounded in a deeper understanding of the production of celebrity advocacy.

Acknowledgements

This research has been made possible by virtue of an ESRC Fellowship (070-27-0035) and the kind cooperation of all my interviewees. I am grateful for comments on the text and project from Bram Buscher, Graham Harrison, Jim Igoe, Lisa Richey, Stefano Ponte and an anonymous reviewer.

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Notes

1. I follow here Dreben's paraphrase of Saul Lieberman's introduction to Gershom Scholem's lectures on Merkabah Mysticism in 1957, when Lieberman declared that 'nonsense is nonsense but the study of nonsense is scholarship'. Quoted in Socher, "The History of Nonsense." I am not implying that celebrity is rubbish; my language is addressed to those who think it is.
2. Boorstin, *The Image*.
3. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The book first appeared in German in 1944.
4. Beer and Penfold-Mounce, "Researching Glossy Topics."
5. Lewis et al., "The Fiction of Development"; Goodman, "The Mirror of Consumption"; and Richey and Ponte, *Brand Aid*.
6. Sumner, "Where do the Poor Live?"
7. See also Ponte and Richey, this issue.
8. Epstein, "Celebrity Culture."
9. Turner, *Understanding Celebrity*, 3.
10. Rojek, *Celebrity*.
11. *Ibid*; Turner, *Understanding Celebrity*; and Ferris, "The Sociology of Celebrity."
12. Marshall, *Celebrity and Power*; and Turner et al., *Fame Games*.
13. Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*; Gamson, *Claims to Fame*; and Alexander, "The Celebrity-Icon."
14. Gundle, *Glamour*; and Inglis, *A Short History of Celebrity*.

15. Street, "Celebrity Politicians."
16. Meyer & Gamson, "The Challenge of Cultural Elites." Hutchins & Lester.
17. Brockington, "Powerful Environmentalisms"; and Brockington, *Celebrity and the Environment*.
18. Dieter & Kumar, "The Downside of Celebrity Diplomacy"; Littler, "'I Feel Your Pain'"; Boykoff & Goodman, "Conspicuous Redemption"; Yrjölä, "The Invisible Violence of Celebrity Humanitarianism"; Davis, "Feeding the World a Line?"; Richey & Ponte, *Brand Aid*; Yrjölä, "From Street into the World"; Hawkins, "A New Frontier in Development?"; and Hawkins, "Shopping to Save Lives."
19. Chouliaraki, "The Theatricality of Humanitarianism."
20. Cameron & Haanstra, "Development Made Sexy."
21. Darnton & Kirk, *Finding Frames*.
22. Biccum, "Marketing Development"; Yrjölä, "The Invisible Violence of Celebrity Humanitarianism"; Yrjölä, "From Street into the World"; and Kapoor, *Celebrity Humanitarianism*.
23. Kapoor, *Celebrity Humanitarianism*.
24. Cooper, *Celebrity Diplomacy and the G 8*; Cooper, "Beyond One Image Fits All"; and Cooper, *Celebrity Diplomacy*.
25. Atkinson et al., "Charitable Giving for Overseas Development."
26. Brockington, "Trends in Reporting on Celebrity, Charities and Development and Humanitarian NGOs."
27. Fall & Tang, *Goodwill Ambassadors in the United Nations System*.
28. <http://www.mirror.co.uk/3am/celebrity-news/beverley-knights-malawi-mission-275884>.
29. <http://www.oxfam.org/en/pressroom/pressrelease/2010-02-04/scarlett-johansson-designs-handbag-haiti>.
30. Sireau, *Make Poverty History*; and http://www.realizingrights.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=400&Itemid=104.
31. http://wn.com/trade_justice_movement?upload_time=all_time&orderby=relevance. Accessed June 3, 2012.
32. Sources 102, 104.
33. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/madonna-malawi-and-the-mismanaged-millions-2253507.html>. Accessed June 3, 2012; and <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2010/jan/19/wyclef-jean-haiti>.
34. De Waal, "The Humanitarian Carnival"; Flint & De Waal, *Darfur*; and Crilly, *Saving Darfur*.
35. <http://www.theelders.org/home>.
36. Garofalo, "Understanding Mega-Events."
37. Alleyne, "The United Nations' Celebrity Diplomacy"; and Wheeler, "Celebrity Diplomacy."
38. van der Gaag & Nash, *Images of Africa*.
39. Sireau, *Make Poverty History*.
40. De Waal, "The Humanitarian Carnival"; Flint & De Waal, *Darfur*; and Crilly, *Saving Darfur*.
41. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/lostinshowbiz/2010/sep/23/bono-one-millennium-development-goals> & <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/sep/27/down-with-bono-bashing>. Accessed February 21, 2012.
42. West, "Angelina, Mia and Bono." Brainard & Chollet, *Global Development 2.0* provide an account of interactions after the Second World War and leading up to the 1980s, as does, more humorously, Wolfe, *Radical Chic*.
43. "Celebrity Activists," BBC Radio 4, February 2011.
44. Sources 3 and 85; and Foreman, "How Hollywood finds its Charitable Causes."
45. Sources 21, 55 and 69. This kind of organisation has existed before but its earlier iterations were not always sustainable. One such, Celebrity Outreach Inc., began as a non-profit in 1988 connecting public figures to other non-profits in the USA. In the late 1990s it morphed into a company that acquired signed celebrity memorabilia wholesale for auction by charities. It is struggling now because, as part of the intensification of relations between charities and sports companies, the latter are now themselves selling this sort of memorabilia directly to the NGOs for auction. Source 10.
46. Source 11.
47. *Third Sector* is a trade journal for NGOs in the UK.
48. This paragraph is based on sources 9, 26, 35, 37, 45, 51, 74 and 81.
49. Sources 23, 35, 76, 85, 94 and 108.
50. Sources 45, 65, 71 and 77.
51. Sources 14, 23, 37, 67, 70, 71, 77 and 86.
52. Sources 26 and 37.
53. Source 48.
54. Source 85.
55. Source 74
56. Source 53
57. Sources 53, 74 and 85.
58. Sources 14, 25, 26, 29, 31, 35, 51, 56, 76 and 77.
59. Sources 35, 51, 53, 55, 70 and 71. Cf. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/voluntary-sector-network/2012/feb/13/celebrity-supporters-more-than-volunteers>. Accessed February 18, 2012.
60. Sources 14, 21, 35, 37, 45, 49 and 86.
61. Source 9, 35, 51, 53, 54 and 77.

62. Source 54.
63. Sources 9, 26, 48, 51, 64, 77, 93.
64. Source 37, 51 and 85.
65. Source 85.
66. Source 35.
67. Source 90.
68. Source 96.
69. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/mar/01/bob-geldof-africa-private-equity>. Accessed June 2, 2012.
70. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1308429/Stuck-Louis-Vuitton-moment-Bono-Ali-Hewson-pose-French-megabrand-clothes-ethical-label.html>. Accessed June 2, 2012.
71. <http://fashion.telegraph.co.uk/Article.aspx?Id=TMG8572326>. Accessed June 2, 2012. The photographs of Jolie and Bono were taken by Annie Leibovitz, who is herself a celebrity photographer of celebrities and who has built her reputation partly on development-focused pictures, including the cover of the 'Africa Issue' of *Vanity Fair* in July 2007. This featured 21 famous faces in an issue guest edited by Bono and dedicated to African development issues. See http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2007/07/onthecover_slideshow200707#intro. Accessed June 2, 2012.
72. The advertisements may not have worked with the public, but that is a different matter. The advertisers thought they would and they thought this because of these figures' brands.
73. Source 35, 48 and 77.
74. Source 55. Similar sentiments were repeated by sources 51, 63 and 76.
75. Source 67.
76. Source 63.
77. Source 34. Corporate pressure explains both the incidents of charities hiring celebrity support mentioned above.
78. Source 51, 61 and 71.
79. Sources 14, 34, 53 and 80. An example of such misalignment between corporate behaviour and NGO work occurred when Oxfam ambassador Kirsten Davies endorsed beauty products made in the Occupied Palestinian Territories by an Israeli firm. See <http://codepink.org/blog/2009/08/official-release-oxfam-suspends-ahava-spokeswoman-kristin-davis-from-all-publicity-work/>. Accessed February 18, 2012. On Kahn, see Brockington, *Celebrity and the Environment*. On Fiennes, see <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-436846/Air-stewardess-secrets-mile-high-sex-romp-Ralph-Fiennes.html>. Accessed June 3, 2012.
80. Source 75.
81. Source 48.
82. Sources 40, 77, 81 and 93.
83. Source 93.
84. Bebbington et al., *Can NGOs Make a Difference?*.
85. Sources 101, 102, 104, 106 and 107.
86. Gundle, *Glamour*; and Inglis, *A Short History of Celebrity*.
87. Tester, *Humanitarianism and Modern Culture*; Kapoor, *Celebrity Humanitarianism*; and Browne, *The Frontman*.
88. Turner, "Approaching Celebrity Studies."
89. Street, *Rebel Rock*; and Lynskey, *33 Revolutions per Minute*.

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