



Routledge Advances in Health and Social Policy

CELEBRITY PHILANTHROPY AND ACTIVISM

**MEDIATED INTERVENTIONS IN THE GLOBAL
PUBLIC SPHERE**

Hilde Van den Bulck



Celebrity Philanthropy and Activism

In recent years, celebrity philanthropy and activism has attracted much attention from the media, sparking a great deal of public interest. As exponents and endorsers of the marketisation and corporatisation of philanthropy and activism, globally renowned super-celebrities habitually lend their name, time and energy to a range of causes. They help raise awareness, generate funds and endeavour to evoke social and political responses to crucial societal issues. These can range from domestic violence, cancer prevention, climate change and transgender acceptance, to refugee problems and fighting poverty at home and abroad. But in what ways do (mediated communications about) these celebrities have the power to define what is going wrong in the world, who or what is to blame, how this can be solved and how this is to be evaluated morally and ethically? Does celebrity humanitarianism and activism serve to reinforce postcolonial power relations or does it help solve social problems, advancing traditional views on how society is, and should be, organised? Importantly, more than conceptual and empirical exploration of celebrity philanthropy and activism as such, this book analyses the mediated communication, the mediatised narratives that these endeavours provide.

Combining insights from philanthropy and welfare regime studies, international politics and diplomacy, postcolonial studies, but also from marketing, from celebrity, star and fan studies, and from media, communication and cultural studies, this book critically analyses the mediated discourses and debates that celebrity philanthropy and activism provokes, and considers wider ethical and theoretical perspectives. It will be of interest to all scholars and students working in sociology, health and social care and social policy.

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To Sofie, Super Girl



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Introduction

Why this book?

This book deals with the mediated communication about celebrity philanthropy and activism, analysing how it provides inroads for audiences and society to discuss societal issues through the complex spectre that is the celebrity construct. In particular, it focusses on a specific range of issues that dominate celebrities' societal engagement: international relations and diplomacy, development and humanitarianism. Indeed, under the watchful eye of media and audiences, celebrities – of global fame and local appeal, from the fields of entertainment and other spheres of life – engage in philanthropy and activism aimed at making the world 'a better place'.

Examples abound and flood our media feeds on a daily basis. *People Magazine* reports on US pop star Madonna's emotional speech at the opening of a children's hospital wing in Malawi, named after her adopted daughter Macy James and funded by her *Raising Malawi Foundation*, and provides a discursive space for Madonna to publicly look back on the struggles surrounding her transnational adoptions and philanthropic endeavours. Irish singer and Live Aid founder Bob Geldof calls out Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi for the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya people. US actress-turned-director and proclaimed Earth Mother Angelina Jolie raises awareness for the plight of refugees across the world as special envoy of the UNHCR, speaking to world leaders and appealing to wider audiences through interviews, opinion pieces and documentaries. These are just some of the still growing number of highly mediated stories regarding celebrities engaging in philanthropy and activism on the global stage, the focus of this book. Crucially, the book wants to provide not so much a conceptual and empirical exploration of celebrity philanthropy and activism as such but of the mediated communication, the mediated narratives that these endeavours provide. These are ideological stories about world relations, what is going wrong in the world, who and what are to blame, who and what are to solve it and how this must be evaluated. The topic requires a multi-disciplinary approach, as a thorough analysis hereof requires an understanding of various aspects that have

been studied from different perspectives. As such, the book pays tribute to, as well as brings together, insights from philanthropy and welfare regime studies, over international politics and diplomacy to postcolonial studies, but also from marketing, from celebrity, star and fan studies, and from media, communication to cultural studies. An important motivation to write this book was the observation that scholars have not yet fully explored how the combination of knowledge and analytical tools from these various disciplines furthers our understanding of the crucial societal and cultural functions that (mediated communication about) celebrity philanthropy and activism performs, something this book wants to help rectify.

Roadmap for the reader of this book

The first part of the book analyses mediated communication about celebrity philanthropy and activism in its various relevant contexts, tapping into insights from different disciplines. Chapter 1 is based in philanthropy and welfare regime studies, political science and marketing. It takes a look at the historical roots and contemporary developments of the key domains of philanthropy and of activism which are considered, respectively, top-down and bottom-up efforts to rectify societal shortcomings, inequalities and injustices. In the process, they create discursive views on the relationships between individuals, society and the State. Mostly, the chapter explores how celebrities' societal engagement fits contemporary trends of marketisation and corporatisation of philanthropy and activism, both as an exponent and an endorser hereof. These trends and celebrities' role in them are assessed critically. Chapter 2, in turn, aims at understanding the other main concept in this book, celebrity, and takes inspiration from celebrity, star and fan studies as well as media, communication and cultural studies. It analyses celebrity philanthropy and activism as part of the characteristics of celebrity culture, starting from the idea of celebrity as a construct. Celebrity is seen to result from negotiations between a set of actors in the celebrity apparatus: the person wanting to be/remain famous, his/her entourage, the media and audiences. It is argued that both our contact with and understanding of celebrity philanthropy and activism crucially hinges on the various negotiated relationships between these actors. The chapter subsequently relates this to the dynamics and motivations as well as the pros and cons of a celebrity's philanthropy and activism, effectively exploring how these endeavours fit in with other aspects of a celebrity persona and elaborating on the notion of a celebrity's legitimate standing. Contextualisation is completed in Chapter 3, which analyses the mediated nature of celebrity in general and of celebrity philanthropy and activism in particular. To this end, it takes inspiration from media, communication and cultural studies in general and journalism, framing and critical discourse studies in particular. It analyses celebrity journalism and the key values, selection criteria and routines that underpin it, before looking at these

aspects for news regarding celebrity philanthropy and activism, combining theoretical insights with empirical evidence. Subsequently, the chapter introduces an understanding of the mediated communication about celebrities' societal engagement as stories, i.e. narratives about celebrity and about society. It explains how this can be studied by means of inductive, qualitative framing analysis, the main analytical framework for the case studies in the second part of the book. Finally, this chapter takes a look at how audiences deal with celebrity stories, bringing their own relationship with the celebrity, interaction with peers and personal experiences to the interpretation of mediated communication about celebrity philanthropy and activism.

Celebrity philanthropy and activism cover a wide range of topics and issues both in the domain of the private and of the public, from speaking out about domestic violence, to lobbying green energy or raising money to treat illnesses. Part II of the book focusses on a broad area that has generated a lot of attention and efforts from celebrities: the fields of international relations and diplomacy, development and humanitarianism. Celebrity's societal engagement in these issues is praised for raising awareness to all kinds of problems in international relations and development, for sourcing funds to help solve these problems through humanitarian action and for lobbying politicians to help improve the plight of the underprivileged through diplomacy and development efforts. Critics suggest that this celebrity involvement bears witness and further contributes to the spread of neoliberal modernisation and cultural imperialist paradigms with regard to global inequality. It is believed to effectively emphasise a postcolonial continuation of notions of 'The West and The Rest', while ignoring alternative views of international relations and development based on structural changes, self-reliance and an understanding of development as equal partners. The second part of this book empirically studies and evaluates these claims through analyses of the mediated communication about celebrities' efforts, dissecting the stories about world relations that accompany it. Chapter 4 discusses how celebrities are part of and endorse the marketisation of philanthropy and activism in this particular domain. It shows how celebrities, through their philanthropic and activist efforts, express wider held views on world problems and relations, appointing blame, suggesting solutions and implying relationships between various parts of the world that echo neoliberal agenda's and colonial notions of 'the West and the Rest'. It explores how celebrities' persona and actions affect these mediated stories. This is done by focussing on a range of high profile cases of involvement from an elite of so-called celebrity visionary leaders. The next, fifth, chapter further elaborates on the meaning created by these mediated communications through the lens of celebrity philanthropic and activist documentaries. Analysing twenty documentaries in which the celebrity features as the author and authoritative voice, it presents the framing of international political, development and humanitarian issues as stories about world relations, power and responsibility. This shows that a majority of frames confirms

uneven power relations between 'the West and the Rest' and that many celebrities consider their involvement as a duty, echoing the notion of 'the White Man's burden'. Finally, Chapter 6 focusses on (the gendered nature of) a particular set of stories about celebrity 'taking home' their engagement in international relations and diplomacy, development and humanitarianism, presented as the merging of the political and the private persona. On the one hand, analysis is provided of romantic relationships, focussing on US actor and philanthropist-activist George Clooney's relationship with human rights lawyer and activist Amal Alamuddin and, on the other hand, transnational adoptions by US pop star Madonna and actress-director Angelina Jolie. Analysis of the later issue of transnational adoptions shows different interpretations of racial issues, world relations and 'good parenting'. At the same time, it is a story about the responsibility of these female celebrities, i.e. 'the White Woman's burden'. As such, contemporary female celebrities' efforts are related to the historical role of women in global processes of imperialism and to notions of motherhood and parenting.

Part I

Celebrity philanthropy and activism

Origins, celebrity and the media
