Celebrity Advocacy and Public Engagement:
The Divergent Uses of Celebrity

Tim Markham

Birkbeck, University of London

t.markham@bbk.ac.uk

Abstract:

This article sounds a cautionary note about the instrumental use of celebrity advocacy to (re)engage audiences in public life. It begins by setting out the steps necessary to achieve public recognition of a social problem requiring a response. It then presents empirical evidence which suggests that those most interested in celebrity, while also paying attention to the main stories of the day, are also least likely to participate in any form of politics. However, this does not rule out the possibility of forging a link between celebrity and public engagement, raising questions about what would potentially sustain such an articulation. After discussing the broader cultural context of celebrity advocacy in which perceived authenticity functions valorised form of symbolic capital, the article outlines a phenomenological approach to understanding the uses audiences make of celebrity advocacy, using the example of a Ewan McGregor UNICEF appeal for illustration. It concludes that while media encounters with celebrities can underpin a viewer's sense of self, this is as likely to lead to the rationalisation of inaction as a positive response to a charity appeal.

Keywords:

Celebrity advocacy; public engagement; audience studies; phenomenology; subjectification; charity appeals

Celebrity Advocacy and Public Engagement:
The Divergent Uses of Celebrity

1. Introduction: The laboriousness of issue recognition

The starting point of this article is that, whatever we might think politically or morally about celebrity advocacy, recent evidence (Thrall et al., 2008) suggests in fairly strong terms that it does not work. It has certainly become a central plank of many if not most campaigns for social justice and humanitarian aid, but it does little to raise awareness in any way that leads to public engagement in and tangible support for an issue. The aim of the article is to explain this efficacy gap by focussing on the complicit, learned but instinctive relation that can exist between a celebrity and her followers, as well as media consumers' well-honed ability to compartmentalise this relationship and filter out dissonant or difficult messages. Issue advocacy is hard work, and it is not difficult to see why celebrities are enlisted to lubricate the machinery of public relations campaigns for humanitarian or social justice issues. The most profound obstacle is that no social problems simply exist (Best, 2007). There are phenomena that occur and are experienced, but for any of these to be widely recognised as a *problem* requiring intervention is not as straightforward as it sounds. For Best, the first principle of issue recognition is that it cannot be magicked out of thin air: it has to fit with established narratives of concern, justice and fear. Newspaper journalists know this well: announcing a new moral panic requires a lot of groundwork, and it only succeeds if there are buttons in place to press. Some, like road rage or satanic abduction, are short-lived in the public's memory, while others such as the more recent 'meow meow' (mephedrone) 'legal high' hype[1] had to overcome a lot of scepticism. This is no doubt due in part to the lessons learned from previous scandals, exaggerations and outright hoaxes – in the case of singer Phil Collins' appearance on current affairs satire programme *The Day Today* to front a confected anti-paedophilia campaign called 'Nonce Sense'. Angela McRobbie (1995), meanwhile, notes that even when the requisite folk devil has a self-interest in spreading new recognition of a new social 'problem', as is often the case with youth cultures that self-identify through their perceived transgressions of social norms, success is not guaranteed: the rave generation made several attempts at notoriety before being taken seriously.

The upshot is that there needs to be fertile ground for celebrity advocates to work with: an established fear, or a predisposition towards compassion when confronted with poverty, disease or injustice. I have argued elsewhere (Markham, 2011) that it matters little if that compassion is genuine, learned or essentially performative – even if audiences are motivated by competitive compassion, the outcome may well be the same. But conformity to established categories is a constraining factor, and Milan Kundera amongst others has noted our inability to pay attention to more than a couple of the same 'kind' of issue or crisis at any one time (Moeller, 1999: 10-11). Further, while it is fair to point to our susceptibility to compassion fatigue (Moeller, 1999), it can be countered countered that awareness of issues can also be raised by associating them with others: other research (Markham, 2011) suggests that commitments to causes comes in clusters, that you are more likely to care about Syria if you have a pre-existing interest in Palestine, or that you are more likely to respond to campaigns against female genital

mutilation if violence against women is already on your radar. From the perspective of the budding celebrity advocate, it appears that in order to be taken seriously the main pitfall to avoid is dilettantism: Bono has shown the dangers of popping up in too many dispersed advocacy contexts; Clooney just about works in Sudan because of a less scattergun track record. It is a fine line and audiences are fickle, though it helps if we understand what function aligning oneself has to a cause serves for media consumers: in short, it helps them to position themselves socially (e.g., as compassionate), and positioning is easier to achieve in relation to coherent sets of issues rather than in response to prompts from unexpected sources.

Joel Best sets out four other elements that need to be established in order for something to be recognised as a problem requiring action. Nominalisation – a widely recognised label for an issue that serves as shorthand – is essential, and here it is likely that celebrities can be effective, alongside journalists and PR practitioners, in turning a conflict zone ('Darfur', say) or a humanitarian issue ('blood diamonds') into a household name. Domain expansion can signify different processes. On the one hand it can mean the linking of an issue to larger, better established issues – an unsuccessful example being the association of film piracy to terrorism. But it can also mean a discursive expansion, and beyond the simple question of more people discussing an issue are ways of assessing its cultural purchase: when an issue moves beyond the confines of the news pages to gossip, fashion and the television listings – the kind of unboxing that seems well served by celebrity advocacy. Third, establishing any phenomenon as a social problem requiring remedial action relies on active campaigning: it is never enough just to present the facts, and a celebrity advocate cannot be successful without a tightly-drilled team of campaigners surrounding them. And fourthly, official actors cannot be ignored: celebrities cannot usually effect change of their own accord, but only by rallying or cajoling or shaming those in power to do so.

However, even with all of these criteria fulfilled there remains the possibility of unintended consequences. Beyond the embarrassment of being duped, Collins demonstrated the risks faced by celebrities engaging in advocacy in terms of the mostly tacit rules of the field of celebrity culture. The first risk is the appearance of self-importance, which in certain corners of that field can constitute significantly negative symbolic capital. The second, I would argue, is the appearance of earnestness: while some celebrities have licence to be sincere, we return towards the end of this article to the notion that particularly in the UK a certain level of irony or reflexiveness is central to the audience's experience of complicity with celebrities. We could put this simply in terms of the difficulty faced by any individual in transitioning from one field to another and finding that their symbolic capital is not recognised as currency in their new environment. But instead of thinking about this in strictly Bourdieusian terms (2005) as interaction or competition between two cultural fields with their own internal logics, it is worth considering how valorisation or devalorisation of behaviour proceeds outside of those logics – that is, value as conferred by audiences (Couldry, 2003). Although not a universal phenomenon, it appears that many media consumers have developed an extensive if largely unvoiced sense of the rules of the 'game' (Bourdieu, 1990: 66) in both celebrity and the world of social justice, and will be as quick to detect inappropriateness in celebrity incursions into humanitarian issues as they would to spot a politician's doomed attempt to appear at home in the field of popular culture. None of this is to say that successful transitions are impossible, as many people's gleeful response to actress Joanna Lumley's belittling of a British MP in a press conference[2] about the rights of Ghurkha soldiers proved. But it does suggest that in thinking about the usefulness of

celebrities we do not fully understand how audiences assess them, respond to them and make their own uses of them.

2. Audience attitudes towards celebrity: lessons from the Media Consumption and the Future of Public Connection project

What, then, does the evidence suggest? It is first worth reflecting on the empirical data garnered in the Media Consumption and the Future of Public Connection research project (See Couldry, Livingstone & Markham, 2007), which took both quantitative and qualitative forms. The quantitative data was hardly unequivocal, but it did suggest certain clear themes. The first is that around one in seven people can be defined as dedicated followers of celebrity, and that doing so does not come at the expense of following the main news items of the day – though it is certainly true that an interest in celebrity is largely mutually exclusive with, say, economics and international politics. The second was predictable and superficially dispiriting: that compared to the population at large, those in the 'celebrity cluster' were overwhelmingly female, young, likely to have low social capital and unlikeliest to vote. There was no question of ascribing causality in these findings, though it was interesting that this group of media consumers were also likely to have relatively high levels of trust in the media, and it would be tempting to speculate about the potential relationship between an absence of media criticality and a feeling of social disconnection. By no means did this lead the research down the "media consumption causes alienation" route: care was taken to avoid pathologising political inaction and inattention, and the qualitative component of the project identified a number of individuals who were happy living in a world without politics. Following Lisbet van Zoonen's defence of the personalisation of politics (2005), the investigation also open to more or less any form of felt public connection, and wanted to know if there were articulations between media use and some kind of public space. While the survey data found that those engaged in celebrity culture are unlikely to participate in any form of public action (the threshold for this was set deliberately low, including signing a petition and changing consumer behaviour as evidence of action), there was also an interest in exploring the broader question of orientation, the stabilised set of contingent objects and values that underpin everyday experience (Couldry & Markham, 2007). One participant in the qualitative phase of the project, for instance, was a soccer fanatic, and used sport to connect to debates about morality and national identity. It is plausible then that audiences will use celebrity in order to think about and participate in wider discussions about public issues, however defined.

And yet, the evidence suggested that while celebrities have many uses, they cannot easily be used instrumentally to further a particular cause. For a start, in the majority of cases it was perceived misbehaviour on the part of celebrities that led to incursions into debates or, more accurately, statements of position in various discourses. This was a few years ago, and criticisms of UK *Big Brother* contestant Jade Goody for apparently racist remarks was a popular way to demonstrate non-racist credentials. But it appears that a celebrity actively campaigning for racial equality or tolerance simply does not offer the same efficacy in terms of performance of identity. It is often been noted that Goody's cancer diagnosis, like Kylie Minogue's as well as Angelina Jolie's preventative mastectomy, led to increased demand for screening, but this suggests that successful advocacy would inevitably be contingent on personal suffering. Beyond these issues of public offence and private suffering, interestingly, there was a fair amount of

resistance using celebrities' private lives in order to demonstrate moral credentials. Speculations about the Beckhams' marriage, for instance, was largely used to express disdain for others' prurience and the general absence of ethical principles in the media, rather than to demonstrate an individual's commitment to family and fidelity ("Why do we (the public) need to know what the Beckhams do with their private lives?"). This would indicate that private indiscretion does not necessarily undermine the scope for public advocacy, in line with the broader argument here that audiences make very specific demands of celebrities and are adept at separating their useful and extraneous functions. This in turn relates to the phenomenological question of recognition, to which we return to below.

More often than not, though, participants in the project who expressed an interest in celebrity went out of their way to contextualise or qualify its importance in their lives. It is true that there is likely to be a performative element to this, not wishing to be seen as culturally inferior for taking celebrity seriously. But there is also a richness of ethnographic detail in how celebrity content functions as a source of pleasure, ranging from gleefulness rather than self-deprecation in describing the trashiness of celeb culture, to well thought-through discussions of how celebrity media form the basis of conversations at work – exchanges that seem to come with firmly established ground rules, namely a commitment to keeping up with what's going on while ensuring that things never get too serious. It is this kind of structure and reflexivity about the way celebrity is used that compelled us to look carefully at the question of enjoyment, rather than seeing pleasure as the 'mere' alternative to substantive mediated public connection. Celebrity cluster respondents were on the whole quite clear about what they get out of it ("It is the whole car crash thing. It's compelling"; "I do keep up to date with what's going on... mainly the gossipy side of the media, you know like Heat and Ok magazine, yes I get those every week. What girl isn't in to that really?"), and did not appear receptive to being led by celebrities towards other more serious uses of this kind of media. We return later to the question of why this might be the case, and while it has been suggested here that it is in part being about audiences knowing what they want, it is also a matter of orientation. And that orientation – a knowing, complicit acknowledgement of the fundamental contingency of media, and yet a simultaneous investment in media despite that contingency – does not sit easily with a straight discussion of political or social issues. The ability to wear celebrity lightly is not simply a watered down version of 'real' mediated engagement but a mastery of a distinct set of practices, a mastery which demonstrates a cultural competence which is perhaps more about process than content, but also a way of restricting group membership to the initiated.

It is important to recognise that this is distinct from the claim that celebrity advocacy is a non-starter because we do not take celebrities seriously enough for them to be recognised as authorities in or gateways into public deliberation. While the Habermasian public sphere has been widely criticised (Fraser, 1990) for being overly rationalist, the position taken here is that the correct response is not simply to prioritise the opposite. Van Zoonen, for instance, argues that more attention should be paid to affect rather than facts, to the personal instead of the abstractly political, and John Fiske (1992) takes this argument to its logical conclusion by explicitly elevating the popular over the principled in terms of their democratic potential. However, both authors are aware that media orientations are much more subtle than this binary view allows. It is not a matter of arguing either that celebrity is simply too superficial to serve as a connection to 'serious' issues, nor that what the public sphere needs is exactly this kind of personalisation or popularisation. Rather, it is a matter of understanding the distinct

ways in which audiences relate to celebrities and to public issues. It is true that the logics underpinning these orientations are not compatible, but their differences cannot be reduced to seriousness versus pleasure. The orientation to celebrity is not just about amusement but an active calling forth to engage in a game whose rules are at once absurd and meaningful. It is perhaps too much of a cliché to avow that audiences consume celebrity culture ironically, but the point stands that there is a collective, knowing suspension of disbelief in the embrace of celebrity that does not fit the logic of public deliberation. Good faith in Habermas's public sphere requires a goal-oriented belief in the possibility of rational resolution; engagement with celebrity culture necessitates a willingness to abandon oneself to the vicissitudes of whatever may come next.

3. Cultures of authenticity

It is worth at this point taking a brief step back to consider the broader context against which celebrities acting as spokespeople for causes and issues might be thought to make sense – that is, to be unproblematically recognisable as a potentially meaningful culture of practice. This is a context in which deference to professional, expert and institutional knowledge has been in long decline, with amateur and non-elite knowledge increasingly valorised as knowledge because of its perceived anti-establishment status (Sennett, 1973; MacIntyre, 1981). There is an elevated role then for the authenticity of personal experience (Chouliaraki, 2010), which can be argued to represent a form of democratisation, since no specialist training or professional status is needed to acquire it, but it can alternatively be seen as a kind of demotic turn, hollowing out formerly autonomous spaces of knowledge production and subjecting them to market principles of popularity (Bourdieu, 1994). One would think that celebrities would profit in such a symbolic economy, able as many are to project a seemingly knowable and certainly un-professional identity that has none of the vested interests of those working within political bureaucracies or even the international aid circuit. And yet that transfer of status is not automatic. While there are some markers of authenticity that seem to function well – again, personal suffering is a good example – there are others, such as simply feeling really strongly about an issue and deciding to do something about it, which draw our attention to things that we do not usually talk about when enjoying the celebrity spectacle: implicitly, the rules governing the legitimacy of public status associated with some but by no means all forms of fame. There are readers of celebrity content online who praise individual celebrities (pop artist Lady Gaga, for instance) for playing the media game well, indicating that the suspension of disbelief does not go so far as denying the existence of a competitive entertainment industry. But it is at the point where audiences are alerted to the broader question of the relative social importance or influence of an individual celebrity that any thought of authenticity is potentially undermined.

All of which would suggest that those who invest in celebrity culture want celebrities to know their place. This rather overstates the power that audiences have, and even feel they have, over celebrities – the debatable sense that we built you up, and we can pull you down, too. I would suggest that if there is an element of power in the pleasure audiences take from celebrities, it is one that comes without ownership. Instead, it is a more diffuse and distant spectating as the media judges on our behalf. There is an aspect of confessional culture about this, in the enjoyment derived from seeing celebrities bare their souls, but there is also confessionalism of a

Foucauldian nature (Dent, 2008): watching as the celebrity is repeatedly called forth and praised or criticised, a kind of voyeurism into what instinctively should take place in the privacy of the confession both. Perhaps the highest profile example of this phenomenon in recent years is the global success of the online version of British right-wing, mid-market newspaper the *Daily Mail* (www.dailymail.co.uk), its format a never-ending litany of small judgements about weight, style, relationship status and success. We could certainly speak of disciplinary discourse on the part of the audience as they make unthinking comparisons between their bodies and those on display in the Femail Today sidebar, but it is not the celebrities who have delegated authority in this context – even when being lauded for weight loss or landing a new man. This repetitive positioning of celebs according to a minefield of expectations and regulations is a pivotal characteristic of the field, and to attempt to step outside this judgement treadmill is regarded with suspicion.

Before moving on to what might be called the phenomenology of celebrity consumption, it bears emphasising that a majority of participants in the qualitative phase of the Public Connection project were openly hostile to the phenomenon of celebrity culture. The performative aspect of this data gathering makes it difficult to tell how widespread genuine approbation is: whatever people say, a glance at the most read stories on the msnbc.com, abc.com.au or bbc.co.uk reveals at least significant interest in the lives of celebrities. But in the qualitative material in particular there are critical passages whose veracity is not in question: in one instance where a respondent feels palpably let down by his family's and friends' celebrity curiosity –

> "What I find quite astonishing really is that most people I know really just do not care about what's going on. They're focussed on their own thing and as long as they know that David Beckham's got a new haircut and that they can go and get it done at the salon just like his ... and they just carry on with stuff."

– and in several others where participants talk about the effect that celebrity culture is having on children and standards of public discourse:

> "I mean now you're getting the contents of what goes in people's bedrooms ... if that's going to be the case, then I mean there is no need for things like Eastenders, there is no need for the news, there is no need for anything because these are the celebrities ... and we're just going to watch them live out their lives like it's a 24 hour thing ... a great Big Brother, we're just going to watch them have sex, we're going to watch them eat their food, we're going to watch them have affairs and mess up their lives. So where do you draw the line? I don't know."

Interestingly, however, there are a few signs here that advocacy would not be entirely unwelcome: it is true that in the majority of cases celebrities are derided for presuming that anyone would be interested in their views on climate change or the Iraq war, but there are also moments where any potential embrace of the serious is seen as a step in the right direction. Next we turn to the potential democratic benefits of celebrity advocacy and its limitations in practice.

4. Thinking phenomenologically about celebrity advocacy

If there is a democratic aspect to celebrity advocacy, it is important to set out which particular democratic principles are in play. Of the various options offered by conventional political theory, it would appear that representation is the likeliest candidate – meaning that what is most important in a democratic society is that as wide a range of issues and attitudes get a hearing in the public sphere or other deliberative spaces as possible. Beyond simply reflecting the concerns of the members of a society in a roughly proportionate manner, there is a principle of exposure at stake – the idea that there are issues which by and large a population is not concerned about, but certain individuals are authorised to argue that they should be concerned. Such authorisation is a knotty concept to delineate. We have culturally recognised groups such as war reporters whose role we accept is to bring issues to our attention that we had not previously acknowledged. I have argued elsewhere (Markham, 2011), however, that the recognition of authority in conflict journalism is only partly related to this duty to bear witness and also associated with conceivably anti-democratic phenomena such as elitism and esotericisation. Further, there is a split in this community between those who seek only representation of injustice and suffering, and those who actively campaign for political and humanitarian intervention in the regions they report from. The latter camp are perceived in a similar fashion to charity workers: it is not that they are seen as self-serving, but there is an awareness that their aim is to grab our attention, potentially at the expense of balance or neutrality. In research into humanitarian advertising campaigns Chouliaraki (2006) finds that audiences are quick to spot manipulation, and will resist messages seen as being sold too hard. We know that media in all its forms is motivated by attention-seeking, and Zengotita (2005) argues convincingly that in general we find this pleasurable: it is flattering, and we derive a certain satisfaction from bestowing our gaze upon this media form rather than that. Depriving us of that choice, on the other hand, provokes a response in which we attempt to reassert our agency by consciously redirecting our attention elsewhere.

In Chouliaraki's work this means that rather than being didactic, humanitarian advertising needs to invite the viewer in – an invitation which is given almost lightly, and centred upon a partial collapse of the distance of suffering so that it is neither othered or thrust in our faces but rather something which is meaningful in the context of our everyday lives. For present purposes, the question is whether celebrity advocates can perform the same role, making it easier for audiences to make the difficult transition from the phenomenal cocoon of quotidian experience to suffering or injustice which is not only beyond our ken but under normal circumstances, in the phenomenological sense, unknowable. And as such, this is the appropriate juncture at which to set out the phenomenological approach to celebrity advocacy. This is based on two parallel rejections, each of which offers a useful corrective to the sometimes simplistic way that we think about our relationship with media. Historically, conventional approaches focussed on content and the question of what effects the media has on its audiences, with the functionalist view looking at the overall impact on exposure to media (or specific genres) and instrumentalists, including social and humanitarian campaigners, asking how media can be designed to produce particular results - such as donating to a cause. But this focus on the efficacy of media messages came under criticism from the 1970s onwards (Katz et al., 1973) based as it is on the misconception of media consumption as discrete moments rather than cumulative cultures of practice, and the broader fallacy that the media are somehow external to our subjectivity rather than something constitutive of it. Thus, as the familiar trope has it, media

theorists turned their attention away from what the media does to people and toward what people do with media.

While there is room within this central question for a wide range of approaches, the dominant model in recent years has been hermeneutic (see, for instance, Moores, 2000; Bird, 2003; Coleman, 2010): seeking to understand how people experience media, preferably by asking them or observing them in their natural habitat rather than imposing theories about preferred readings, hegemony and cultural reproduction. For campaigners, this ethnographic epistemology of taking people at their word and believing what we observe reduces to a kind of market research: yes, audiences respond better to messages that acknowledge their essentially compassionate nature than guilt-tripping; they do not resent having new issues of injustice and suffering brought to their attention, but would prefer that it is not done in a manipulative or heavy-handed way. Presumably market research is a sophisticated enough art these days not to assume that simply asking people what they like and giving it to them is an effective means of raising awareness about social or humanitarian issues: to my knowledge, pornography has not yet been enlisted in the battle against poverty and injustice. And yet it does not appear complex enough to account for the sheer range of responses that audiences have to celebrity advocacy – sometimes indifferent, sometimes contradictory, potentially at the same time. Angelina Jolie seems to have just about maintained credibility in her work in Sudan, while Sting for all his efforts to preserve the rainforests of Brazil is commonly regarded as sanctimonious, Bono is 'smug' despite or because of his campaigning for debt relief, and Richard Gere, while admired by some for campaigning for Tibetan independence is seen by others as anything from delusional to a CIA stooge (Markham, 2011).

The phenomenological approach (see especially Bourdieu, 1990: 52-65; Bourdieu, 2000: 173; Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 167; Goffman, 1972: 293; Fraser & Honneth, 2003; McNay, 2008) does not claim to be able to prevent any PR disasters a celebrity advocate might otherwise stumble into. But it is distinct from the ethnographic perspective in that it seeks to explain why audiences respond the way they do: usually instinctively, motivated by learned pleasure or simple habit and, especially, according to pre-dispositional orientations to the world that cultural producers can do little to shift. This means that audiences are primed to recognise things that have symbolic value, not so much because those things are important to them, but because the recognition of value is itself a valorised practice, one which allows them to position themselves relationally in a cultural space and thus engage in acts of subjectification. This last point could be taken in several directions but here it is meant in the existential sense of performing selfhood in the face of the self's impossibility (see, for instance, Butler, 1990). If this sounds abstract, we can think back to one of the constituents of the conscious experience of selfhood: authenticity. The opening gambit for phenomenologists is that authenticity never just is, it is not something we have due to the fact of our existence, but something that has to be learned, performed and recognised. And one of the ways it is recognised is through the learned and then instinctive recognition of inauthenticity in observed behaviour – smugness, say, or sanctimony. This is not to make grand claims about the distaste for piety and earnestness in contemporary Western culture, but rather to suggest that recognising such values, whether justified or not, is useful. It is certainly evident that making negative judgements about celebrities is experienced by many as pleasurable, in the light of Zengotita's claim about the power we feel in choosing to attend or not attend, like or dislike. But value judgements are inevitably subjectifying practices as well, and potentially a rationalisation of *not* contributing to

a cause, preserving as they do the sense that one is fundamentally decent – and rightly intolerant of self-importance in celebrities. By mocking Geri Halliwell's appointment as UN global ambassador I am able to establish my credentials (if only to myself) as someone who believes that integrity and gravitas underpin the appropriate orientation towards human rights, a distinction-making exercise that excuses me from more direct demonstrations of political commitment.

The risk in this approach is that in casting celebrities as primarily useful for ourselves, it renders them effectively interchangeable, what used to be called floating signifiers into which we project whatever it is we are predisposed to project. In some cases there is evidence to back this up: show two people of divergent political persuasions the same footage of a speech by Barack Obama and they are likely to find confirmation of their existing views on the man and in particular his perceived authenticity or inauthenticity (see also Ruddock, 2006; Hay, 2011). However, it remains important to be aware of not only the content of a Boris Johnson clip, nor just what audiences do with that content, but how they actively engage with this symbolic form and why. To return to celebrity advocacy, let us consider the cinema advertisement broadcast in 2011 in which Ewan McGregor appealed for donations in aid of the relief effort after the Japanese earthquake and tsunami. We know enough not to assume or predict reactions to this celebrity, and it is true that those who know him chiefly through his role in *Star Wars* will have a different take on the 'non-acting' McGregor than fans of *Trainspotting*. But by looking at the choices made in producing this appeal we can gain some insight into what was assumed of (cinema) audiences as well as the frames of reference and even symbolic economies that usually go unvoiced. The latter term is not meant as a recourse to political economy, but instead to point to the often unacknowledged criteria, varying across relational spaces, according to which symbolic or cultural value is ascribed.

Figure 1: Ewan McGregor in the UNICEF appeal for survivors of the Japanese earthquake and tsunami. Source: YouTube.

Whether successful or not, the core of this appeal appears to be a lack of pretence. The choice of McGregor is telling: despite being Hollywood A-list his 'authentic' or perceived off-screen personality is irreverent. A phenomenological analysis would seek to take this to its logical conclusion, exploring not just the use of someone unaffected and likeable to front a humanitarian campaign, but the broader implication that we are predisposed, or presumed to be predisposed, to trust someone who is seen as anti-establishment. That recognition does not simply happen, but is learned – at the individual level by a combination of symbolic markers from the actor's facial features and expressions (cheeky, a bit rough around the edges), hair (spiky, a little dishevelled and voice (broad Scottish, a choice perhaps not dissimilar to the BBC's recent turn to regional accents in continuity announcements, potentially part of an attempt to seem less establishment); and at the cultural level by a shift towards the valorisation of unofficial, non-professional authority. The pervading tone of the appeal can be summed up as an acknowledgement of the artifice and absurdity of the media most of the time, as well as an indication that this is not most of the time: this is real. In part this is achieved through the visual design of the appeal – a bare studio with simple white backdrop, white lighting and a clear camera filter. This is interesting in itself as it suggests we recognise authenticity in the explicit absence of production values – the pointedly empty studio – rather than a setting such as outside or at home, where the audience would not be prompted to think about the film's production. This simultaneous drawing of attention to and disavowal of the producedness of the appeal might then be thought of as akin to the way authenticity was often indicated in the cinematography of the French New Wave, with jump-cuts and awkward camera angles drawing attention to the film-making process. In any case it flatters the audience and draws them into a relation of complicity: we know that you know that this is a piece of media, and you will instinctively and rightly respond with scepticism, but because we're both in on it we can get past the bullshit and cut to the truth.

The actor is also central to this sense of complicity. In particular, he has a facial expression and mode of delivery that is both disarmingly unaffected (lack of affectation being, again, something whose performance and recognition has to be learned) and slightly quizzical (his default setting has one eyebrow a little raised), which invites an ironic reaction to the appeal. It is not difficult to see the intended impact of his performance, again an acknowledgement that usually when you see me on screen it is in a film that's made people like me a lot of money; it is a relentlessly commercial industry where someone is always trying to sell you something – but this is different. However, this could prompt multiple responses, once more according to what different groups of individuals are predisposed to recognise in media, and the uses that this recognition serves. Thus, for those instinctively looking for an authentic account of what's going on in the world there may well be a rationalisation of following the culturally legitimate advice to follow about what to pay attention to and how to act upon it. For others instinctively primed for confirmation of their reflexive, referential relationship with the media, this is what they will experience. Interestingly, there seems little scope for a loss of credibility on McGregor's part – he has established both credentials for charity campaigning and a recognised sense of the perversity of the film business that insures him against any perception of self-importance. On the audience's part, there is the option of taking pleasure in the invitation of complicity as well as declining to answer the appeal to donate right there and then, the knowingness of the experience ensuring that one's own compassionate subjectivity is not challenged.

5. Conclusion

This article has taken seriously the proposition that rather than asking how celebrities can be used by humanitarian and social justice campaigns to prompt audiences to take notice and potentially act on issues, we need to look more closely at the other side of the equation and ask what audiences do with celebrities. Central to this question is orientation: one's lived relation to the world through the repeated, instinctive recognition of positive and negative symbolic value, and how it serves to underpin self-presentation and social positioning. But against the ethnographic turn in media research, I have argued that there is little volition in orientation. Not only do campaigners and celebrity handlers have little agency in shaping the responses audiences have to exposure to stars, but audiences too are instinctively predisposed to recognise certain symbolic forms and categories rather than others. This is not about the limits of image management, however. Even divergent audiences will tend to have their instincts confirmed when presented with the same celebrity – instincts about their own identities as compassionate or unimpressionable or savvy as much as instincts about the celeb in question. But we can go further than this apparently flatly structuralist approach by asking exactly what is going on in the mediated encounter between the star and the audience. Complicity appears to be the principal feature of this encounter, a recognition of authenticity where such a thing is learned and performed by both parties rather than simply being. Complicity is both pleasurable and useful, the latter in terms of making sense of our naturalised orientations in relation to public life: it affirms the hunch that there is something absurd about the way we relate to and through media while clinching our investment in it. But ultimately for those already oriented away from public action it can only sustain an ironised distance from the cause being advocated, frustrating to the humanitarian campaigner but perhaps no less enjoyable for those in the celebrity cluster.

References

Best, J. (2007) *Social Problems.* London: W. W. Norton & Co.

Bird, S. E. (2003) *The Audience in Everyday Life: Living in a media world.* Philadelphia, PA: Taylor & Francis.

Bourdieu, P. (1990) *The Logic of Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1994) *The Field of Cultural Production.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (2000) *Pascalien Meditations*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (2005) 'The Political Field, the Social Science Field and the Journalistic Field'. In Benson, R. & Neveu, E. (eds) *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field.* Cambridge: Polity.

Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity.* London: Routledge.

Chouliaraki, L. (2006) *The Spectatorship of Suffering.* Cambridge: Polity.

Chouliaraki, L. (2010) 'Ordinary Witnessing in Post-television News: Towards a new moral imagination'. *Critical Discourse Studies* 7(3): 305-19.

Coleman, E. G. (2010) "Ethnographic approaches to digital media". *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39: 487-505.

Couldry, N. (2003) 'Media Meta-capital: Extending the range of Bourdieu's field theory'. *Theory and Society* 32(5-6): 653-77.

Couldry, N., Livingstone, S. & Markham, T. (2007) *Media Consumption and the Future of Public Connection: Beyond the presumption of attention.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Couldry, N., & Markham, T. (2007). "Celebrity Culture and Public Connection: Bridge or Chasm? *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 10(4): 403-421.

Dent, C. (2008) "'Journalists are the Confessors of the Public', says one Foucaultian'. *Journalism* 9(2): 200-19.

Fiske, J. (1992) 'Popularity and the Politics of Information'. In Dahlgren, P. & Sparks, C. (eds) *Journalism and Popular Culture.* London: Sage, pp. 45-63.

Fraser, N. (1990) 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy'. *Social Text* 25/26: 56-80.

Fraser, N. & Honneth, A. (2003) *Redistribution or Recognition: A political-philosophical exchange*. London: Verso.

Goffman, E. (1972) *Interaction Ritual: Essays on face-to-face behaviour*. London: Allen Lane.

Hammond, P. (2007) *Media, War and Postmodernity.* Oxford: Routledge.

Hay, J. (2011) "'Popular Culture' in a Critique of the New Political Reason". *Cultural Studies* 25(4-5): 659-84.

Katz, E., Blumler, J. & Gurevitch, M. (1973) 'Uses and Gratifications Research'. *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 37 (1973–1974): 509-23.

MacIntyre, A. (1981) *After Virtue.* Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Markham, T. (2011) *The Politics of War Reporting: Authority, Authenticity and Morality.* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

McNay, L. (2008) *Against Recognition*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

McRobbie, A. & Thornton, S. (1995) 'Rethinking Moral Panic for Multi-Mediated Social Worlds'. *British Journal of Sociology* 46(4): 559-574*.*

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962) *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Moeller, S. (1999) *Compassion Fatigue.* London: Routledge.

Moores, S. (2000) *Media and Everyday Life in Modern Society.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Ruddock, A. (2006) "Invisible Centers: Boris Johnson, authenticity, cultural citizenship and a centrifugal model of media power". *Social Semiotics* 16(2): 263-282.

Sennett, R. (1973) *The Fall of Public Man.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thrall, A. T. et al. (2008) 'Star Power: Celebrity advocacy and the evolution of the public sphere'. *International Journal of Press/Politics* 13(4): 362-85.

Van Zoonen, L. (2005) *Entertaining the Citizen: When politics and popular culture converge.* London: Rowman & Littlefield.

Zengotita, T. de (2005) *Mediated: How the media shape your world.* London: Bloomsbury.

Notes

[1] See, for instance, "Meow Meow: The Party Drug That Fries Your Brain", news.com.au, 20 September 2012. *http://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/meow-meow-the-party-drug-that-fries-your-brain/story-fneszs56-1226478007544* [accessed 3 September 2013].

[2] See, for instance, "Joanna Lumley Confronts Stunned Minister Over Gurkha Promises", theguardian.com, 8 May 2009. *http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2009/may/08/gurkhas-joanna-lumley-phil-woolas* [accessed 3 September 2013].