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# The uses and functions of ageing celebrity war reporters

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## Abstract

This article starts from the premise that recognition of professional authority and celebrity status depends on the embodiment and performance of field-specific dispositional practices: there's no such thing as a natural, though we often talk about journalistic instinct as something someone simply has or doesn't have. Next, we have little control over how we are perceived by peers and publics, and what we think are active positioning or subjectifying practices are in fact, after Bourdieu, revelations of already-determined delegation. The upshot is that two journalists can arrive at diametrically opposed judgements on the basis of observation of the same actions of a colleague, and as individuals we are blithely hypocritical in forming (or reciting) evaluations of the professional identity of celebrities. Nowhere is this starker than in the discourse of age-appropriate behaviour, which this paper addresses using the examples of 'star' war reporters John Simpson, Kate Adie and Martin Bell. A certain rough-around-the-edges irreverence is central to dispositional authenticity amongst war correspondents, and for ageing hacks this incorporates gendered attitudes to sex and alcohol as well as indifference to protocol. And yet perceived age-inappropriate sexual behaviour is also used to undermine professional integrity, and the paper ends by outlining the phenomenological context that makes possible this effortless switching between amoral and moralising recognition by peers and audiences alike.

## Key words:

Star reporters; age-inappropriate behaviour; generational professional interaction; pleasures of judgement; (mis)recognition

# The uses and functions of ageing celebrity war reporters

## Introduction

This article is concerned with celebrity and ageing in journalism, specifically the sub-field of war reporting. The issue of celebrity has become particularly prominent with the rise of the star war correspondent, where a journalist's face becomes an icon of a particular conflict, or at least an avatar. Further, this is a profession where age and authority appear to be directly correlated – for journalists if not newsreaders, and perhaps less for female reporters than male. It will be seen below that age-related judgement is a game that can be played by audiences as much as those inhabiting the field, and that there are stakes in this game: age has *uses*. But age is also central to the internal dynamic of any professional field, and my starting point is Pierre Bourdieu's theorisation of the unspoken rules by which different generations vie for supremacy, seeking to disrupt or preserve the status quo. In *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger*, Bourdieu (1991b) attempts to account for the philosopher's career in strategic terms. Bourdieu's intention is not to reduce Heidegger's work to an algorithmic inevitability – its particular form could not have been predicted just by looking at the state of the philosophical field when he emerged – but he does argue that when you look back on Heidegger's oeuvre it does *make sense* purely in terms of historical context and more generally how individuals and institutions struggle for prestige, status and power. Bourdieu observes that on entering the profession, young philosophers will seek to overturn a few sacred cows – this is central to the idea of cultural consecration, meaning that the way we compete against each other is not simply about seizing someone else's cultural capital, but appropriating and changing what is recognised as valuable and authoritative. In Heidegger's case what was overthrown was the Kantian understanding of ontology, Bourdieu's point being that if you look a little more deeply you will see that what in fact transpired with the rise of Heideggerian phenomenology was a 'conservative revolution', with many of the principal tenets of neo-Kantianism remaining firmly in place.

In my interviews with war correspondents I have found a pervasive self-consciousness about age. You expect different age cohorts to make distinctions against each other in relation to habits and outlook, but here they viewed each other with palpable embarrassment – the self-described '58-year-old pillock' who finds himself apologising to a military commander for the wide-eyed, moralising behaviour of his younger colleagues; the 30-year-old 'war junkie' uncomprehending at the refusal of old hacks to embrace technologies that would make their lives so much simpler. The old hacks, incidentally, take great pride in their technological incompetence, part of the congenital inability to be impressed by anything new, dramatic or powerful that is a significant part of their cultural authority. In this article I discuss the way that reporters make use of celebrity war correspondents to set out their world view and position themselves in the journalistic field, and in particular the way that ideas about age appropriateness were used to perform Bourdieusian distinctions. I focus on three 'star reporters' in particular: BBC stalwart John Simpson (now their world news editor), Kate Adie (who, like Simpson, worked for decades in the field, and now hosts *From Our Own Correspondent* on BBC Radio 4), and Martin Bell, the former BBC correspondent and MP known as "the man in the white suit" – said suit recently on display at an exhibition in Manchester.

## The cult of celebrity in war reporting

The phenomenon of the celebrity war correspondent is not new (Knightley, 2003), and nor are critiques of the celebrification of journalism (Bourdieu, 1997). In fact, many reporters eschew the label 'correspondent' precisely as it is thought to suggest an inflated sense of self-importance, preferring to see themselves as humble journos and hacks (Tumber & Webster,

2006). This points to a tension within the journalistic trade, with writers such as Greg McLaughlin noting that it tends to attract the naturally egotistical and exhibitionist, while at the same time practices signalling fame-seeking are in general interpreted by peers negatively. In my interviews it was television reporters who were written off as insubstantial, obsessed with 'face-time', and it is true that the majority of celebrity war reporters work in television – though there are exceptions (Robert Fisk, now at the Independent, is one). Vietnam, widely regarded as the first 'television war', had its fair share of celebrity reporters in the US,<sup>1</sup> though overall these were outshone by news anchors such as Walter Cronkite and Dan Rather. The two iconic figures also illustrate age-specific valorised forms, with the younger Rather embodying the intrepid and fearless and Cronkite, fifteen years his senior, serving as a kind of national conscience. Daniel Hallin (1986) argues that these anchors helped to legitimise the war by lending it a kind of moral framework, though it's also true that Cronkite was regularly less than avuncular and reassuring, coming to refer to the conflict as 'this dirty little war'.

In the UK we have had star reporters associated with particular wars – Max Hastings in the Falklands, for instance, or Rageh Omar in Iraq – as well as those whose familiar faces seem to appear wherever there is trouble, including the three who form the focus of the present research. How do we account for their transformation from mere professionals into celebrities? It could be explained by the nature of television itself, since while there was hardly a shortage of celebrity before the age of visual popular media (William Howard Russell, considered the grandfather of war correspondents, returned from the Crimea every bit the celebrity) there is a clear relation between fame and the visual today. There is also something about the narrative structures of television news (Johnson-Cartee, 2005) that lend themselves to the parasocial relationships that are essential to celebrity culture – the feeling of intimacy between a cultural producer and her audience. In war reporting this relationship is predicated on the need to project authority, solemnity and, above all, professionalism; the ability to appear ambivalent about or distanced from the danger and drama inherent in war reporters' work is central to their cultural mythologisation (Markham, 2011). It simultaneously sets the correspondent apart, dealing with what are to most of us unimaginable horrors with unflappable determination and rigour, and offers a kind of reassurance that however heinous a war zone may be, the fact that it is being witnessed means that, eventually, everything will be all right.

Projecting this kind of authority, one which exudes journalistic skill at the same time as it addresses the individual viewer, is not something which comes easy to many. It is often thought of as being a matter of 'gut instinct' (Schultz, 2007) or having a 'nose for news', though this move is essentially deontological, preventing any further breaking down of the constituent elements of authority. If we do further unpack that which effects valorisation of the correspondent, we find that there are makers of authority which have little obviously connected to the 'stuff' of their work. These include dispositional traits such as a distinct irreverence for all (other) types of establishment authority, thoroughgoing cynicism about the motives of others, a disregard for their own safety (and sometimes that of others), an almost gleeful enjoyment of chaos and a heavily ironised outlook on life that allows for the location of humour in any situation (Markham, 2011a). War reporters are thus often described as callous, but after a correspondent quoted by McLaughlin (2002) I would suggest that the sense of the absurd and comical is more often existentialist than cruel in nature. This, too, is a function of age. Rosenblatt (1994: 14) identifies three distinct stages in the professional life of a war reporter: in the first they react to what they see with shock and revulsion, convincing themselves to persevere because their reporting could 'make a difference'; in the second, the atrocities become repetitive and routine and they become embittered and spiteful, full of scorn and derision towards those they report on, their editors and their audiences; and finally, after years or decades of observing the sheer variety of barbarity of which people are capable, "everything feels sadder and wiser, worse and strangely better".

None of this is meant to indicate that there are stable and demonstrable stereotypes pervading the field of war reporting, though it is true here as in any other genre of cultural production that

entry into it will only have been thinkable to those in possession of a particular habitus – socialisation, education, cultural exposure and so on – and that immersion in discourse of professional identity will tend to entrench certain cultures of practice (Pedelty, 1995; Johnson, 1972). If there is inculturation leading to recognisable traits and tics then this is the normal product of time spent with peers and sources rather than an imposed structuration of journalistic subjectivity. Bourdieu writes of it in terms of the instinctive, microscopic adjustments one makes to the way we speak or gesticulate; it is by no means the forced conforming to a template, though older reporters talk of their more green colleagues affecting a gravely voice and deliberately trying to put together a trenchcoat-with-dust-in-hair look for their pieces to camera. Habitus is structured, but it is a generative structure, producing an array of manifestations that it likely include substantial variation as well as the unexpected and counter-intuitive (Bourdieu, 1991a). And further, while Bourdieu’s model is perhaps limited in this regard, there is room in any field for multiple embodyable forms of valorised disposition. Put another way, the public’s appetite for celebrity is finite, meaning that there is only room for one or a handful of embodiments of particular valorised celebrity forms (forms which precede and outlast each individual who inhabits them and, for a time in the public’s eye, becomes them – see, for instance, Evans & Hesmondhalgh, 2005) – but these forms come in a range of colours and flavours.

Becoming a celebrity then depends on becoming indistinguishable from a valorised form which is collective, that is, collectively recognised as meaningful. This allows us to see the rise of the celebrity war reporter as something more than dumbing down – the notion that audiences are (or are assumed by producers to be) incapable of understanding the complexities of the news and will simply react emotionally or according to established prejudice. Hjarvard’s (2008) mediatization thesis is relevant here. It posits that the media’s influence of fields of cultural production is not simply a matter of commercialism or sensationalism but a question of *logics*. In politics, it means that messages have to be compatible with a media logic that requires recognisable personality, moral contextualisation and, I would add, guided invitation to make judgement. While war reporting is of course already mediatized, it is possible to discern the same colonisation of more traditional logics (the scoop system, objectivity, but also impact) by more visual ones which push the need for persona centre stage. Whatever it is like to be John Simpson, his identity is a collective thing – in part performed by himself as an inhabitant of a professional culture (though, given his seniority, with some powers of consecration, the ability to shift what counts as venerated), in part projected by audiences, both sides leaving unspoken the functions Simpson delivers: not only information but the comfort of familiarity and the facilitation of our understanding of our relation to the world and thus ourselves.

### **Cashing in their chips: Star reporters branch out**

I mentioned above the generalised tendency amongst war reporters to look down on personal vanity, a collective denial that the field is a fiercely competitive one, and a statement of collective membership of a romanticised ‘tribe’ which in reality is porous and uneven, especially with the increasing prevalence of freelancers and the rise of citizen journalism. Collective mythologizing is especially marked amongst war correspondents, with a keen sense of the genre’s history, triumphs and failures evident in interviews and memoirs (McLaughlin, 2002). In the latter category it is common to see reference to ‘heroes’, entailing undoubtedly genuine admiration for a predecessor but also a strategic claim on symbolic capital that is not only peer-reviewed but publicly bestowed – that is, a matter of celebrity. It is interesting that two such divergent correspondents as Simpson and John Pilger (a more overtly political reporter dedicated to rooting out the ‘real’ explanations of wars, usually Western complicity, hypocrisy and corruption)<sup>2</sup> both cite Russell and George Orwell – Orwell as much for his campaign for plain speaking as his politics. ‘Stringers’ (freelancers) have their own much-invoked godhead: Ernest Hemmingway (McLaughlin, 2002). Calling such references strategic risks characterising them as cynical; read them more closely and they are invariably couched in self-effacement. But

they are undeniably acts of positioning, insofar as they are explicitly foregrounded in journalists' publicised writings.

For as well as being known for being voracious readers and hungry students of history, war reporters are by a fair margin the most prolific writers of all journalists (Tumber & Webster, 2006). There mostly take the form of memoirs, but social commentary and fiction are also commonly tackled – each aiming at a relatively wide potential audience. This does not sit entirely well with the derision with which many reporters admit to regarding their audiences, though perhaps it is precisely news consumers' assumed cluelessness and oversensitivity that elevates the war correspondent in cultural production tout court. Or it could again be age-related: forays into other genres tend to come towards the end of a reporter's career, by which time they've accumulated ample social capital to be regarded as wise or incisive, and they on their part have lost their rancour towards their publics. There is, however, an alternative explanation that has little to do with fame-hunting or looking to cash in. This is that war reporters write because they have to: it is a compulsion, partly driven by the need to process what they have experienced, and partly because of the genuine belief that what they have seen is of vital importance. The two are not incompatible and the former need not be reduced to a merely therapeutic function – though correspondents often find the banalities of everyday domestic life unbearable on their return, a sympathetic ear often difficult to find as no one who hadn't experienced war could ever understand. There is also a reticence, especially among younger reporters, to talk about the hardship and fear that come with the job, and it is possible that writing about the politics or historical context of a conflict, whether contemporaneously or subsequently is a kind of displacement activity.

Ageing celebrity war reporters, on the other hand, tend to be much more candid about issues such as fear, as well as about other aspects of the war correspondent's life that are often left unsaid: the discomfort, lack of sleep, dehydration, bureaucratic mendacity and, often, sheer boredom. This is a clear act of demystification, something which any professional field would usually resist (it has been suggested that the enigmatic authority of war reporters has been undermined by 9/11 and other terrorist attacks in urban areas, in that journalists of other stripes and their audiences now have direct experience of what conflict is like. See Tumber & Palmer, 2004). But it is a demystification which does no damage to the older reporter who has nothing to lose and is likely to appear more authentic as a result – unguarded authenticity the central part of the relation of intimacy that may underpin the transition from war zones to book sales and media appearances. All cultural producers who move into other areas are engaging in a form of self-authorisation; ageing celebrities who do so while laying bare the often mundane reality of their trade are behaving in a way that suggests their accumulated capital has wide currency, no longer confined to its field of origin. That such a transition is quite normal for senior war correspondence is explained by another fact that most engaged in the genre will not admit to their peers or public until late in the game: war reporting is glamorous (McLaughlin, 2002). A kind of congenital inability to be impressed by drama, power or status is readily observable in the professional culture reporters habit, but several have subsequently admitted the buzz that accompanies meeting heads of state and war lords, going on diplomatic junkets and their esteemed treatment back home. Jeremy Tunstall found in his groundbreaking research (1971) that war reporters are the most highly regarded amongst journalists – as well as those with the wealthiest upbringings and educations and the shortest routes into elite positions in the field. And while often expressed with a little shame, there is an acknowledgement that whatever else war is – inhuman, brutal – it is also addictively exciting. When a young war reporter described his job to me as 'the best spectator sport in the world' he sounded callous and flippant; when veterans admit to the same feelings it sounds understandable, prompting complicity between cultural producer and audience.

### Case studies: Age and celebrity in the war correspondent interviews

What makes a journalist authoritative? The obvious answer is that they are recognised as such, by their peers, authorities in other walks of life and, perhaps, by audiences. But what is recognition, exactly? For Bourdieu it's collective, instinctive and to a degree, crucially, arbitrary. What we think we perceive when we say someone is a natural is only partly explicable by overt principles of what constitutes good work, and also implicated in misrecognised attributes that do not emerge naturally out of professional values and codes. These principles are often dispositional, which allows a journalist to wear their authority lightly rather than having to declaim it to all and sundry. They are experienced as instinct, which is not something one is born with, but something that has to be learned, internalised, mastered and then forgotten – as Goffman (1972: 293) puts it, “all these routines that allow the individual unthinking, competent performance were attained through an acquisition process whose early stages were negotiated in cold sweat.” But recognition is a collective endeavour, and this means that in reality we have little control over how we are recognised: all we can do is reveal what Foucault calls our delegation – our already present or absent authority. The upshot is that when assessing our peers, or celebrities, we already know what we think, and there is little they can do to change our minds. In some cases it means that two people with polarised views about an individual can use the same evidence to confirm their divergent positions. Andy Ruddock (2006) demonstrated the mechanics of this in the field of politics, by looking at how people with radically different opinions of celebrity politician Boris Johnson used his characterisation of Liverpool as a city with a victim complex after the murder of Ken Bigley to support their opposing claims.

In the context of war reporting, John Simpson is both widely admired and held in real affection by most of the journalists interviewed. He's undoubtedly good at his job, but the language used to account for his authority speaks to his *character*. Central to this is a certain rough-around-the-edges charm, a sense of playfulness and an antipathy to the strictures of military, political and diplomatic convention. As he has grown older, colleagues speak not so much about his continued (and undoubted) bravery in the face of peril, but the fact that *even at his age* he still relishes the chaos, remains boyishly cheeky, and enjoys the opportunities for carousing that this job presents. It bears emphasising that none of the interviewees mentioned Simpson and sex in the same sentence, though other senior hacks were admiringly referred to as “old goats” and the like, continuing their search for conquests of green young colleagues and locals into their dotage. However, the few negative comments recorded about Simpson marshalled effectively the same evidence. One finding was that there is a newly dominant principle among the younger generation of specifically *moral* authority. Now, there are still those like the aforementioned conflict junkie who conceive of war in terms of entertainment. But increasingly you see a real seriousness not just about the ethics of war reporting but its mission, its responsibility to bear witness and confront complacent societies with the reality of human suffering around the world. The breezy irreverence (mostly off-camera, to be sure) of Simpson and his ilk sits uneasily with this cohort, and again it is not just a matter of disapproval but something more instinctive, more *felt*: a sense of embarrassment or awkwardness, a sense that they should know better *at their age*.

Sex came into the frame in assessments by male journalists of female peers, and Kate Adie's name was registered on several occasions. The broader context is that there is a general suspicion amongst men in the field about what women will ‘do’ to get access to a source, with an unspoken yet unambiguous implication of sexual impropriety. When pushed on this, interviewees tended to fall back on more tenuous tales of flirting and flattery, though in order to rationalise or explain their opinions – remembering that their recognition of others' professionalism is always already present – they would often reach for other available indicators of negative symbolic capital, age inappropriate behaviour being one of them. The 58-year-old ‘pillock’ was scathing about Adie, recounting how he observed her behaving inappropriately in the company of a group of soldiers, asking me to bear in mind that she wasn't



young at this point, and specifically making reference to her celebrity. (“If the public only knew” is a phrase you hear a lot when talking to journalists, which can be interpreted as a strategic form, an act of esotericisation). Again, the implication here is that behaviour that could conceivably be labelled unethical, beyond a certain age becomes *unpleasant* to think about. It is this naturalised sense of appropriateness, what Bourdieu calls *felicity* in describing that unproblematic sense of what one does or doesn’t do in any given situation, which is the bedrock of naturalised, personalised authority. It is a sense which one either has or doesn’t have, and as such it can’t be explained.<sup>3</sup>

In the case of Martin Bell, it was his particular brand of celebrity which was adjudged to have rendered his sexual behaviour hypocritical. Now, hypocrisy in journalism is in and of itself hardly contentious; indeed, I would suggest that acting as though hypocrisy can or should be avoided is a marker of naivety amongst journalists – professional suicide in a trade where knowingness counts for everything. Bell’s accuser went out of his way to make clear that he had no personal objection to the particular behaviour involved – in this case, conducting an affair with a Bosnian interpreter. But the fact that Bell had been “pontificating” on the BBC about how he was staying in Sarajevo because he had a responsibility to the people of Bosnia, “turning himself into some great moral arbiter” – it was this that made his “hypocrisy” insupportable. Of course, whether moralising about the journalist’s duty to bear witness whilst having extramarital sex constitutes hypocrisy is at best arguable, but the point here is that even if it were, it could equally be invoked as a badge of honour in other circumstances: managing to carry off simultaneous public morality and private im- or amorality could conceivably *confirm* one’s view of a celebrity’s natural authoritativeness. But in this case it’s intended to undermine Bell’s authority, with what else but age produced as proof of the seediness of the liaison, she being 18 and “the most beautiful translator you’ve ever seen”, and he rendered not just wrong but tawdry by reference to his broken marriage and midlife crisis.

The upshot, then, is not that ageing celebrity war correspondents are viewed in a particular way, or even that there are necessarily double standards when it comes to gender: Ann Leslie, for instance, is lauded for and proud of having flirting with Idi Amin in order to secure an interview. It is certainly true that there are established criteria for positing or denying the authority of a reporter, from the way they position or distance themselves in relation to the subjects of their work, to the ruggedness of their individuality and roughness of their demeanour. Celebrity is something both sought and repelled, with star reporters fiercely maintaining an overtly ambivalent attitude to fame, in the certain knowledge that over-exposure or the wrong sort of visibility can fatally undermine journalistic integrity, associated as these are with a lack of substance (‘fluff monkeys’, as one memorably put it). Age is generally kinder to war correspondents than others, lending gravitas and perceived wisdom, and certainly women have demonstrated more staying power in the field than behind the news desk. But we have also seen that age can be used to undercut journalistic authority as it is embodied in disposition, by showing a hack to be foolish, or pitiable, or lacking self-awareness – all much worse than simply being wrong. There is a broader point here, and it is that recognition – one might say judgement – of peers’ and celebrities’ perceived authority or its absence is effortless, instinctive and often enjoyable. What was striking in this analysis was the facility with which interviewees switch between different attributes and categories to rationalise their particular recognition of celebrity war reporters, not weighed down by established tropes about ageing, fame, morality and its others but wielding each skilfully, instinctively to make their judgements flesh. Simpson, Adie and Bell thus become repositories for our always-already projections, and there is little we could learn about them that would alter the nature of these projections or the uses we make of them.

## Ageing celebrities and the pleasures of judgement

I have suggested that the relationship between ageing and celebrity is not necessarily a troubled one, but rather that ageing has uses: it enables us to make effortless, often pleasurable indictments and endorsements in a way that also positions us as media producers and consumers. But there is a risk of taking this functionalist argument too far, if we insist that our judgements are all about uses and gratifications on the one hand and strategic positioning on the other. The two are intrinsically related, as for Bourdieu the most effective strategies are those requiring little conscious work, experienced as fleeting caprice if at all. And if all judgements have this strategic function, this can only be so if there is a teleology of practice in place – one which holds that there is something about practice, all practice, which is oriented towards individual positioning and, by implication, reproduction of the broader symbolic economies in which we operate. I have argued elsewhere that this in turn rests on an esotericisation of practice which is at odds with Bourdieu's otherwise consistent and methodical unpacking of any form of symbolic mystification. In practical terms, it ascribes politicality where none can automatically be assumed, and commits us to seeing distinction-making practices as effectively interchangeable: it doesn't matter how distinctions are performed, only how they locate groups and individuals and whether they disrupt or sustain the symbolic and therefore political status quo. There is some merit in this, insofar as it directs us to look beyond ageing and celebrity to the bigger picture: social hierarchies and the role that cultural production and consumption play in underpinning or undermining them. There is also empirical evidence that backs this up. Autonomy of movement is a fiercely guarded principle amongst war reporters, and a potent marker of differentiation: there is a gulf between those who roam war zones at will and those who prefer to report from the relative safety of a hotel rooftop, though military, managerial and logistical constraints mean that there is rarely a straightforward choice between these two operating modes. But it is also true that if you take away the marker of mobility, as has often been the case in recent conflicts with the emergent tactic of 'pooling' journalists, they will simply revert to other means of performing autonomy – with gradations in attitudes towards military media handlers and home desk editors and propensity to work and socialise with colleagues (Markham, 2011b).

In the case of age-related aspersions, what is distinctive about distinction-making practices is that they are experienced not so much rationally as viscerally. The star quality of the celebrity war reporter is by definition ineffable, something which exceeds that for which we can find words. But the repugnant banality of ageing celebrity flesh is something all too describable; the celebrity is rendered not just human but *knowable*. This is the indictment that lies at the heart of the shift from integrity to indignity: it is a shift from the celebrity as cultural subject, wielding game-changing, unpredictable powers of consecration, to cultural object, something that is very much the sum of its parts. We don't want to think about Martin Bell's sex life or Kate Adie dancing in her knickers – not only for aesthetic or moral reasons but because it is simply too graspable. There is a parallel demystification in the example of silent film stars whose voices in the transition to talkies revealed them to be fatally knowable, but I would argue that ageing is different because its knownness is corporeal. There's much to be said for the extensive literature that explains our cultural revulsion to ageing flesh, but for present purposes let us focus on the finitude of corporeality. Again following Bourdieu, subjectivity is something structured at the level of the body; structuration need never emerge to consciousness but it makes its presence felt in the way we move and talk. As the object of corporeal structuration the subject is incapable of conceiving of its own corporeality, of our phenomenal status as bodies – to put it practically, it is difficult to grasp the extent to which the way we laugh is a learned, mimetic performance, incited discourse in Butler's (1997) phrase. But in this unknowability lies the strategic possibility of esotericisation: it is here that the potency of the words "there's just something about them" is realised.

There are at least three ways in which the celebrity body can be absented. In the case of our war reporters it can be in the physical doing of their work, in questions about the limitations of their

bodies simply not arising for the young and able-bodied. Second, the body can be absent in the sense that their celebrity becomes more or less entirely about the way they execute their work. It is true that this is likely to have a corporeal dimension, as celebrity reporters are often known for their demeanour or voice, but the way these crystallise as cultural objects are themselves esoteric – they are never reminders of the simple fact that these celebrities have bodies. Third, there are occasions where the perceived sexual desirability of a television reporter becomes central to their celebrity, as with Christiane Amanpour's coverage of Bosnia in the 1990s. Yet here again the body that is desired is not the reporter's own: it is a mystified cultural artefact, potentially valuable as symbolic capital, but never for audiences a *memento mori*. It is not difficult to see how younger generations of reporters would stand to benefit from the demystification of their elders, and while the efficacy of disparaging remarks about ageing is at best scattergun it offers a reasonable explanation of depictions of the behaviour of older colleagues not simply as inappropriate but embarrassing or pathetic. But what is at stake for audiences?

Here our potential responses are necessarily more speculative, and it would be tempting to reach for psychological motivations such as seeking distraction from our own mortality or comfort in the universality of decay. However, more plausible is the earlier point about the simple enjoyability of judgement. The relationship between celebrity and audience is often typified as a parasocial one, with the pretence of intimacy at its core. But I would suggest that complicity is more accurate than intimacy: there is an awareness of the masquerade of celebrity, alongside a potentially misplaced sense of agency – that we as audiences make celebrities, and we also have the power to unmake them. There is abundant evidence of this on Twitter, with grotesque physical descriptions of 'celebrities' ranging from Madonna to Germaine Greer not difficult to find. In our context what is striking about these is their implied, apparently unquestioned meaningfulness. In the Bourdieusian model (Bourdieu, 1984) it is precisely such felicitous practices, those which just happen and whose meaningfulness is given, that give the sharpest insights into the structuration of a field of cultural production (which includes its audiences). Leaving aside questions of form, of the apparent assumption of some sort of efficacy in tweeting, the givenness of meaningfulness of the deauthorisation of celebrities through their being rendered known flesh tells us more than anything that audiences unproblematically authorise themselves to make such judgements. They do not require a response from other audience members and certainly not from the celebrity industry; whether or not it is misplaced, cultural self-authorisation is experienced as a given.

The same logic applies to positive judgements about ageing made by audiences: when comments are posted on news websites about how good Helen Mirren looks in a bathing costume there is the sense that their remarks matter – if not to the celebrity herself then in an undefined way. When colleagues praise celebrity war reporters for continuing to do certain things despite their age, there are potentially different undercurrents. When interviewees heaped praise on Simpson it was out of respect primarily for his individualism, the refusal to play by the rules in a game which is ever more rule-bound. When the 'pillock' sides with the general against both rookie reporters and 'grunts', they are sharing a moment of complicity, mutually aware that the way things are done now is absurd. And when Kate Adie is lauded for her indefatigability there is a sense that she is being congratulated for having survived – not just innumerable war zones, but the strange and often surreal business of celebrity in television journalism. In all three cases what age enables, perhaps uniquely, is the possibility of second order reflection, of seeing through all the contingent rules of the game to a higher level of valorisation. This is in itself a strategic move, another self-authorisation, this time to reach beyond the arbitrary dance everyone else is engaged in to make judgements according to principles of differentiation that are unvarnished and unadorned. But the result is precisely the same as when valorisations are made by the conventional principles of celebrity: mystification – there's just something about them.

## Conclusion

In this article I have discussed the phenomenon of ageing celebrity largely in terms of the uses people make of it. In terms of cultural production it is used, whether positively or negatively, to make distinctions and challenge or defend the hierarchies of the cultural field, by valorising or devalorising ageing celebrity as symbolic capital. I have argued that audiences of war reporting use it to make judgements about the world and their relation to it, contributing to the process of subjectification but performing one's compassion or its absence. Ageing star reporters offer the possibility of something more pleasurable: either the judgement of ageing as pathetic, or the complicit, intimate recognition that celebrity is fundamentally absurd. Each case is on the face of it instrumentalist, and for the latter at least it is in line with recent trends in audience research which increasingly asks not what media do to people, but what people do with media. But the approach set out here is not voluntarist, insofar as the recognitions on which judgement is based are inevitably misrecognitions – instinctive responses to collectively internalised rules which are forgotten as such. The wider implication is that ageing celebrity is functional, but never entirely in ways of our own choosing. And even when the apparent function of ageing is precisely to reveal the contingency of celebrity, the pleasurable and positional aspects of demystification suggest that we do not understand our relationship with celebrity as well as we sometimes claim.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> James Cameron is most commonly cited by war reporters interviewed by McLaughlin (2002).

<sup>2</sup> Pilger is a striking example of the mediated recognition of the ageing celebrity reporter: widely thought to be irascible in person, his by-line photographs and other visual representations are flatteringly dashing.

<sup>3</sup> It is worth nothing that gendered suspicions cut both ways. The female war reporters I interviewed judged themselves better equipped to maintain an objective distance, while their male counterparts were too easily impressed by military equipment and paraphernalia, too eager to be 'one of the boys'.