

# Getting Development into the News

## The role of celebrity in development

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In September this year a number of public figures, including Don Cheadle, Mia Farrow and Pamela Omidyar, supported a worldwide day of fasting on the UN's International Day of Peace to draw attention to the conflict in Sudan. The date, however, coincided with Eid; the idea of 'fasting the Eid' provoked widespread ridicule among Muslims. This sort of gauche intrusion of celebrity into the serious business of news provokes three common reactions. Some people will find it ridiculous and funny. Others will be irritated by another example of an ignorant intervention whose authority depends so strongly on fame. A third set will ask 'Who are Cheadle/Farrow/Omidyar?' and will feel perhaps uneasy about the assumption they should know (they are in fact an actor, actress and philanthropist respectively).

Celebrity often arouses resentment and uncertainty when mixed with the serious business of life. Yet many worthy causes are attracted by the power of celebrity over the news. Examples are proliferating within development: Chris Martin (a musician) advertises Fair Trade foods; Colin Firth (an actor) publicly supports Oxfam; Angelina Jolie (an actress) speaks out for injustice overseas. The work of celebrity in development demands reflection.

My own enquiries into celebrity began with environmental issues in Africa. The conservation landscape there is well populated by prominent characters who share one unusual characteristic: they are almost all white. Some even appear to be aping Tarzan with no apparent loss to their credibility. Understanding how fame works in African conservation led to a broader study of celebrity and its role in environmental causes.

Some of the more frequently voiced ideas about celebrity do not withstand much scrutiny. First, it may not be that popular. Despite the high visibility of celebrities, a great many people are not interested in celebrity at all. The prominence of celebrities in most media does not mean that the majority of people are buying celebrity products. Second, celebrities' eagerness to remain in the spotlight while giving to charity can be odious, but it is just their job. Charities insist that they generate more money, and publicity, with celebrity supported events. Third, celebrity can dumb down public affairs, drowning substance with style, but pointing the finger at celebrities obscures the significance of style in all aspects of politics.

There are deeper problems which do not attract public comment. To understand these requires exploring the celebrity literature. In its present form, celebrity was a consequence of the emergence of cinema and media industries that discovered promoting stars sold more tickets. Celebrity endorsing and product placement further oiled marketing juggernauts. The celebritariat exist in order to sell things to audiences.

Celebrity-ridden media events produce images of the world for sale to publics. The natural world is rich in symbolic capital which can be married to the symbolic capital of celebrity and its associated wealth, beauty and power (Figure 1). In the field of conservation the incursions of celebrity are part of a deeper embedding of conservation within capitalism. This explains the whiteness of conservation celebrities working in Africa. White conservationists play to (white) northern publics who expect to see such figures saving African environments. It is part of these publics' identity and mythology. There is simply not such a market for black African conservationists, and this may explain why so few of them appear in northern media.

Most seriously, celebrity spectacles are not just images conforming to our notions of what the world looks like, they actively transform the world to fit that image. In wildlife conservation this is clearly visible in the way they support (northern) visions of what landscapes should look like. This can mean raising money for policies which depend upon the eviction and exclusion of rural residents from lived landscapes turning them into wilderness and pleasure grounds for tourists.

The more general problem facing celebrity in development is the weight of market demand which renders the stereotypes and prejudice surrounding international poverty so durable. People tend to follow the news to have their views confirmed (as demonstrated, perhaps, by



Figure 1: Models, in elephant-skin like velvet, pose with elephants during Thailand's national elephant day. The identities of all participants have been concealed.

our choice of newspaper). We watch television to relax, not to be challenged. Celebrities can bring development issues onto the news agenda, but what they can say is constrained by their audience. There is, however, some good news in all of this. Relationships between celebrity and audiences are not stable. How they will shift, and at whose behest, is the challenge we must now explore.

### Policy points

1. Celebrity sells, but does not guarantee sales or media success. There is no clear relationship between the size of the star and the audience for their good causes.
2. Generating high media impact can become an end in itself, but the relationship between media presence and audience activity and real change is not straight forward.
3. Celebrity hinges on vicarious involvement; many development causes hinge on different forms of more vigorous activism. Celebrity will therefore have to be used with care in any directed campaigning, with a careful eye on audience response and impacts.
4. Some of the most effective media work can involve hard hitting films which are not destined for the mass market, but which are specifically targeted at key decision makers (ministers, company boards etc).

This note is based on Dan Brockington's recently published book *Celebrity and the Environment: Fame, Wealth and Power in Conservation* (2009, Zed Books, London). His explorations into celebrity conservation are part of broader research project examining the politics and social consequences of conservation policy. He is also the author of *Nature Unbound* (2008, Earthscan, London with Rosaleen Duffy and James Igoe) and has undertaken an extensive survey of conservation NGOs in sub-Saharan Africa with Katherine Scholfield.