

Charities and celebrities: a media myth?

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Angelina Jolie in Africa for the UN

If you want to get noticed, get a celebrity. That's been the maxim for charities desperately seeking column inches to promote their causes. However, recent research has questioned whether journalists are always so easily attracted by actors and pop singers claiming to have a conscience.

In this guest blog Dan Brockington from Manchester University describes his work on charity and celebrity and asks for your help in finding out more. If it's an issue that interests you, put March 8th 2012 in your diary when we'll have an event on this topic – email us at Polis@lse.ac.uk to register your interest.

There is a common myth that using a celebrity in a campaign automatically secures charities media attention. However, people who work with celebrity in NGO press offices (who I

have been interviewing as part of a [research project](#)) are quick to tell you that you cannot just add celebrity and stir to produce something appealing.

Unless the story or event stands creatively on its own it will not be interesting, either to the press, or (if they have any sense) the celebrity. People who work with celebrities in their professional capacity complain that many of the asks from charities are simply boring – they don't have the creative edge many artists are looking for.

There are signs now that this thinking may be having an effect on the reporting of celebrity advocacy. [Thrall and colleague's analysis of coverage of the New York Times](#) observed that there were some serious A-listers whose advocacy was substantially under-reported. Between 1981 and 2006 Bono could get 404 stories on his work, but Pierce Brosnan, Harrison Ford and Leonardo DiCaprio could then only muster 21 articles between them in support of specific environmental issues.

In the British press [my preliminary analyses](#) of newspaper trends suggest that the steady increase of celebrity stories that dominated the 1990s has ceased, and may even have begun to decline.

There seems to be a decrease in associations between celebrity and charity stories more generally. When a large number of articles do come out in the tabloids about development and humanitarian issues (such as in 2005 during the Make Poverty History campaign), this appeared actually to be associated with a decrease in articles about development issues which also mentioned celebrity.

Findings like this are best treated sceptically and questioned rigorously – that's the purpose of this blog and the recent Third Sector article. I want this work tested. It's important to point out that the newspapers this work is based on do not include the Star, Express or the Daily Mail, nor can I get records of the tabloids from the database I am using that goes back beyond the mid-1990s.

But perhaps the biggest health warning we should attach to this work is that it is only a study of newspapers and the work of celebrity appears in glossy magazines, in film, on television, YouTube, websites and radio.

There are significant limits to what we can infer in trends in output on one medium. If, as Thrall and colleagues observe, celebrity advocacy is best used in narrow-casting (not broadcasting) then perhaps we need to pay more attention to the websites and specialist publications where that takes place.

Nevertheless, to the extent that newspapers are interesting to people learning about celebrity, it will be useful to explore trends in their output. I would therefore be really interested to know what you make of this work. Perhaps the most curious thing about it is that such results could be surprising at all.

For if we had an empirical approach to the use and study of celebrity, the data I report would already have been widely and frequently available. The assumption that celebrity is a publicity juggernaut which simply works is one that celebrity liaison officers at NGOs are themselves keen to reject. What would be really interesting would be a more effective picture of the different sorts of audiences different sorts of celebrity cater for and produce.

By Dan Brockington

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