

Jade Goody, death and the media

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2009-3-13

I have just been interviewed by CNN India about Jade Goody, which may sound a bit like asking Piers Morgan to comment on mystic hermits of the early Middle Ages. But in fact, I do know something about this subject and I think it matters.

I find it fascinating how journalists frame their coverage. “Is it right that she should make money out of her illness?” Well, duh, why not? The media has happily made money out of misery for decades. “Is this not all a fake media construction?” Well, duh, again. Has not 80% of the stuff in our newspapers and TVs always been a concoction in complicity between media folk and the rest of society?



There is always the assumption that ‘celebrity’ is worthless. In fact, Jade has demonstrated how valuable it is. First, she sets off a national debate about the nature of racism, now she is raising the profile of cervical cancer.

But perhaps, most interestingly, she is provoking an interesting argument about the media and death. Ironically, film-maker [Paul Watson](#) got into all sorts of problems when he ‘showed’ someone’s death. In fact, his touching film about voluntary euthanasia became a minor scandal because he had *not* actually shown what he claimed in the film : the actual moment of death.

As journalists we never show the moment of death. We also tend to avoid graphic representations of the true brutality of its aftermath. One of the things that I broadcast that caused most viewer offence was a man moaning in pain as he was removed from a collapsed building. God knows how people would have reacted if we had shown the crushed bodies of those who did not escape. Yet if it is a fact of life, then why not show death?

What we see of Jade’s final moments is still to be decided. I personally hope that we don’t witness her final demise. I feel that death is still the most private of moments. It is the point at which we are, of course, most powerless. Our humanity is defined by the fact that it ends. Where possible, the instance of oblivion should only be shared with those who really know and care about us.

I watched my father die suddenly when I was quite young and the scene is still seared on my memory, like a piece of film on a loop. I don’t think Jade’s children want that part of their lives to be broadcast.

But she has already proved the value of celebrity. By definition, it is a status of no innate worth. Yet through the media it can communicate emotions, ideas and arguments that ordinary journalists and politicians often fail to articulate.

When Polis held a [debate on celebrity](#) I was intrigued by how all the academics, MPs and journalists who took part agreed that they had much to learn from the B Listers who have the public’s ear.

And amazingly, Jade has the attention of a global audience. The reporter from CNN India told me that thanks to her appearance on India’s own version of Big Brother, Jade is now redeemed in their eyes. Indeed, people all over southern Asia are saying prayers for her.

By all means let’s get this in perspective. [The death of the policeman in Northern Ireland](#) is more ‘important’ than Jade’s impending demise. The dignity and solidarity shown at his funeral commends itself to that community and the media in its serious coverage of a hugely symbolic as well as tragic event.

Celebrities don't make history in the same way. The media should not confuse the two. But in her own, highly mediated and yet hugely human way, Jade has added something more than just 15 minutes of fame.

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