

Celebrities: get them out of here

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2008/01/25/celebrities-get-them-out-of-here/

2008-1-25

Britain's premier political discussion programme [Question Time](#) turned into what [Iain Dale](#) has rightly called 'car crash TV' last night as former Blur drummer [Alex James](#) attempted to comment on the week's events. He was dreadful. This is not some outstanding artist with radical views or a gritty sense of what people on the street really think. This was a self-regarding middle-aged grammar school boy who has a house – a very big house – in the country where he plays at being a farmer. A kind of pop Prince Charles. And like HRH, James is obviously not very bright and rather confused. But he is a celebrity and so for some reason the licence-fee payer should give him a platform. It's not that I disagreed with what (I think) he was saying all the time. I thought it was good to hear someone refusing to panic about street crime, for example. Though how someone who lives in a mansion in Oxfordshire can know about this I am not sure.

Why does mainstream media think that celebrities like James have anything to say? Bizarrely, it seems that the BBC are giving him other work including a [Panorama](#) next Monday when this former cocaine-user goes to Colombia to investigate the drugs trade.

Of course, I do know why celebrities are hired to do this. Look at the success of Jamie Oliver at raising issues around food and Bob Geldof's ability to get people to think about global poverty. Celebrities catch the public eye for a cause or for a TV programme. The argument is that once you have the audience's attention you can then hit them with the real journalism. Unfortunately, celebrity too often replaces the journalism itself.

I prefer it when the journalists themselves become the celebrity. Take [Evan Davies](#), the BBC's Economics Editor who became far better known through his presenter role on the hugely popular entrepreneur game show [Dragon's Den](#). But the fact is that Evan is very clever and really does know about economics and business. His celebrity does not detract from his journalism, it is founded upon it.

There are wider dangers. It seems that we now expect our politicians, for example, to act like celebrities. We judge them on their personalities rather than their policies. So David Cameron has to pretend that he is not a posh Eton-educated marketing man from Notting Hill. Gordon Brown has to convince us that he is deeply interesting and human when we all know that he is a grumpy robot.

[Polis](#) will be discussing the Media Celebrity and Politics at the London School of Economics on February 25th and, of course, we have picked some top celebrities to address the issues. We have Kevin MacGuire of the Mirror, Lembit Opik MP, former Labour spinner and MP Derek Draper and Angela Philips from Goldsmith's Univeristy. They have all happily taken their time in the media limelight to further their careers and express their views but they all have reservations about the way that it is taking over our public culture.

Reserve a seat by emailing polis@lse.ac.uk

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science