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Why research into celebrities' socio-political involvement needs a broader research agenda and sharper conceptualisation

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Celebrities' socio-political involvement (i.e. in politics, social causes, etc.) has incited a lot of academic interest in recent years. Research into celebrities' socio-political involvement, however, faces the same growing pains as celebrity studies in general, including the need to move beyond discursive analyses, single case studies and Anglo-Saxon biased research towards a more diversified and systematic approach (Ferris 2010, Holmes and Redmond 2010, Turner 2010).

Turner's (2010) argument that case studies are often 'drawn from a limited pool of individual celebrities' is reflected in the study of their socio-political involvement as well, with scholars time and again reverting to archetypical examples such as Bono, Geldof, Clooney, Jolie and Winfrey. While these case studies have been crucial to develop our understanding of celebrities' socio-political involvement, the focus on global celebrities' support of (mainly) development aid issues, raises questions about the widthspan of these insights (for instance to local celebrities or other social causes). A systematic review of the socio-political involvement of 236 Flemish and international celebrities demonstrated that only one fifth of causes supported by celebrities are related to development aid (Panis and Van den Bulck 2014). Celebrities' socio-political involvement is thus much more diverse in terms of supported causes and roles they take on, than the archetypical examples which research generally focuses on, would suggest. Research should overcome this bias towards development aid issues by expanding its focus to celebrities' involvement in other causes, as some scholars already have done by looking into celebrities and environmental issues (e.g. Boykoff and Goodman 2009) or health related issues (e.g. Larson et al. 2005).

To unravel differences and similarities in celebrities' involvement in different types of social causes, a more systematic approach is therefore required. As Marsh et al. (2010, p. 322) argued, academic literature on celebrities' socio-political involvement 'is rarely systematic; more often it is superficial and anecdotal'. Looking at 'the bigger picture' of celebrities socio-political involvement, translated into more general and systematic research will not only provide a better understanding of the phenomenon, it will also allow us to situate, and hence better understand particular case studies within a collective framework. A number of academics (e.g. Brockington 2014, Panis and Van den Bulck 2012, 2014, Samman et al. 2009, Thrall et al. 2008,) have employed this broader perspective through large-scale (quantitative) media analyses or audience surveys. However, this wider (empirical) approach is still rather exceptional.

A broader research agenda that recognises the diversity of celebrities' socio-political engagement, will also instigate the need for a sharper conceptualisation. While celebrity studies in general is still very much entrenched in media and cultural studies, the socio-political involvement of celebrities has received attention from scholars across disciplines, looking at the topic from, among others, a political sciences, international development or non-profit studies perspective. These scholars are often working within their own paradigms and using their own terminology, consequently resulting in an abundance of concepts such as celebrity politics (e.g. Street 2004, West and Orman 2003), celebrity diplomacy (e.g. Cooper 2008), celebrity advocacy (e.g. Thrall et al. 2008), celebrity activism (e.g. Huliaras and Tzifakis 2010), celebrity philanthropy (e.g. Nickel and Eikenberry 2009) and celebrity humanitarianism (e.g. Cottle and Nolan 2007), to name just a few. There is nothing wrong with this array of terminology per se, as the authors often provide a good definition of their concept, yet often only in relationship to the larger paradigm these scholars are working in (e.g. defining how celebrity diplomacy relates to traditional forms of diplomacy; Wheeler 2011).

While terminology is often well defined within scholars' specific subfield, what has hardly been addressed, so far, is how these different concepts relate to each other (e.g. how celebrity advocacy is different from celebrity activism). With terminology not being systematic and constituent, concepts may overlap and this may lead to misinterpretation and misuse. Some early, and meanwhile considered standard works, such as West and Orman's *Celebrity Politics* (2003) or Cooper's *Celebrity Diplomacy* (2008), might have led scholars to adopt these terms without much reflection. Via (2010) argues that what some individuals would refer to as celebrity diplomacy, would probably be better labelled differently. An example can be found in Engle (2012), who talks about United Nations' Messengers of Peace Charlize Theron as a celebrity diplomat. Engle however does not focus on Theron's relationship with state actors, typical for diplomats, but instead emphasises the awareness raising function of the celebrity, which may make the use of the term celebrity diplomat questionable. Another example can be found in Hood (2010), who very loosely switches between the terms advocacy, activism and philanthropy in her chapter on Chinese celebrities' involvement in the HIV/AIDS problem.

If anything, it illustrates that the boundaries between different types of celebrities' socio-political involvement are fluid, and that celebrities can easily transfer from one role to another (Anderson 2011, Huddart 2005). The tendency of celebrities towards the support of less radical and widely supported issues (Meyer and Gamson 1995), might also have lead to an evolution within certain concepts, but with original terminology still being in use. The different uses of terminology not only unravels the 'complex, changing phenomenon' (Huddart 2005) that celebrities' socio-political involvement is, it also points to the variety of disciplines investigating the matter, but often not building on each other's insights. Therefore, scholars should not only frame how a concept fits within their own paradigm, but they should also emphasise how concepts relate to each other.

By broadening the research agenda and recognising the diversity of celebrities' socio-political involvement, both in society as in multidisciplinary academic research, the need for a sharper conceptualisation will only become more pressing.

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