

THE CONVERSATION

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Surprise, surprise, Twitter is outraged by Blair's GQ award

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Yup, that's GQ's new Philanthropist of the Year. John Stillwell/PA Wire

It doesn't take someone with the mentality of a conspiracy theorist to conclude that the decision by GQ magazine to name to Tony Blair as philanthropist of the year was one taken in the full knowledge that it would generate a huge amount of publicity. The fury seen on Twitter and subsequent widespread reporting of this outrage proves it.

The GQ awards are known for their propensity to "shock" – last year professional controversialist Russell Brand was dramatically thrown out of the ceremony for highlighting that Hugo Boss, the event's sponsor, had links to the Third Reich. Brand said:

If anyone knows a bit about history and fashion, you know it was Hugo Boss who made uniforms for the Nazis ... But they looked fucking fantastic, let's face it, while they were killing people on the basis of their religion and sexuality.

This drama was almost paralleled when Blair accepted his award by speaking about "the pulse of progress beating a little harder". It was not long before the tablets and phones of Britain lit up with

quicken pulses of the outraged.

The **Mail Online** dutifully recorded the disgust of the British public. A James Headspeath tweeted: "Tony Blair has won philanthropist of the year at the GQ awards seeing off tough competition from Kim Jung Un and Isis." Another tweeter wrote: "Benjamin Netanyahu and Vladimir Putin are not amused." For good measure, and to validate the nation's indignation, the Mail made clear that the world of celebrity had also voiced its disapproval. Gary Lineker tweeted: "Finally these awards have grasped irony."

This was not just tabloid fodder – **The Guardian** and **The Independent** also highlighted the Lineker tweet and various other reactions ranging from the bemused to the outraged. Labour MP John Mann is quoted as saying:

It sends the wrong message. This sort of award should go to an unsung hero who has given up their time for charity.

"The outraged taking to Twitter." I'm not sure there can be a more dispiriting phrase in modern journalism. The frequency with which article after article resorts to screen grabs from the serially outraged to exemplify the nation's supposed disgust is evidence not so much of lazy writing but of modern news culture's demand for new news, 24/7. And it's precisely this situation which creates the environment for PR stunts such as Blair's award – such events gain news currency.

Let's be sure about GQ's motives, too. Richard Dodson, the awards' producer, freely admitted that Blair was chosen because he was likely to garner publicity. Dodson told **5 live breakfast**:

We like to have celebrities at our event who cause a bit of a stir. So having Tony was fantastic. We like to have people who have opinions and are forthright.

It's vital for GQ to generate publicity whenever it can. These are perilous times for the magazine sector of publishing – as the **Press Gazette** reported, the UK's 503 magazines as audited by ABC, lost print sales at an average rate of 6.3% year on year in the second half of 2013. GQ sales were down by 4.4% over the same period. The fact that some may consider the current furore negative publicity for GQ is neither here nor there – the principal aim is brand awareness.

In this sense GQ occupies the same territory as clothing manufacturer American Apparel, rebuked by the Advertising Standards Authority for its "offensive" adverts for its "Back to School" range. The **ASA** ruled that images featured on the retailer's website and Instagram account were "gratuitous", "sexist" and "objectified women".

But it's doubtful whether this will bother American Apparel – this is the sixth time in the past two and a half years that the ASA has banned its ads because of the perceived offensiveness of its imagery. In September 2014, its **Twitter** account has 515,000 followers. In January, that stood at 466,000, which was then a 40% increase from two years ago.

I'm well aware that even brief commentaries such as this help to perpetuate the conversation around GQ. In a way, I'm legitimising its decision to capitalise on the obviously contentious choice of Blair. But let's remember that GQ is a style magazine. It's not The New Statesman or the Spectator. Other award recipients of awards last night were **Kim Kardashian** (woman of the year) and **Ringo Starr** (humanitarian of the year). Even if we are surprised by the concept that anyone should see fit to name Blair as philanthropist of the year, we shouldn't be outraged by the GQ award. Let's see it for what it is – PR – and not conflate Twitter anger with the real thing.



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