



Fourth estate follies

Trawling through the dustbins of the UK media

How Charlotte Church kept cool in the eye of a tabloid and Twitter storm

October 12, 2015 4.36pm BST



Author



John Jewell

Director of Undergraduate Studies, School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University

Bloodied but unbowed: Charlotte Church at a press conference for the People's Assembly Against Austerity. Reuters/Phil Noble

I've written elsewhere about the effortlessness with which the BBC's Question Time programme seems to habitually generate controversy. Regular guests, such as George Galloway, David Starkey, Russell Brand and Germaine Greer apparently guarantee higher viewing figures, if not nuanced political repartee.

And perhaps this is the point. Question Time in the 21st century is not only about allowing the political elites to pontificate and obfuscate – these days comedians, movie actors, reality TV stars and

pop singers are afforded the opportunity to air their views before a studio audience and millions watching at home.



Question Time October 1.

Which brings us to Charlotte Church's appearance on October 1. While it would surely be premature to suggest that Church's entertainment career is behind her, her energies do now seem to be focused upon championing the rights of the disenfranchised and under-privileged. As **Wales Online** reported in June, she has emerged as a leading activist in the People's Assembly – the national campaign against austerity, cuts and privatisation in workplaces, community and welfare services.

This month's appearance on Question Time was **not her first**. In 2012, Church had an exchange of views with an audience member when she told of her family's torment at the hands of the News of the World. The episode attracted the attention of **The Sun** who referred to Church as the "shocked singer" who had been "slapped down" by an "elderly woman".

On the October 1 show Church had this to say about war in Syria and climate change:

Lots of people don't know about this, but there is evidence to suggest that climate change was a big factor in how the Syrian conflict came about ... From 2006 until 2011, they experienced one of the worst droughts in its history, which of course meant that there were water shortages and crops weren't growing, so there was mass migration from rural areas of Syria into the urban centres, which put on more strain, and made resources scarce etc ... which apparently contributed to the conflict there today.

Almost as soon as these words were spoken, some Twitter users – depressingly, predictably – began to articulate their disapproval and heap ridicule. **The Independent** printed a choice few:





andyatheyy
@andy_athey



@charlottechurch please tell my wife the warm milk on her frosties was because of climate change and not the fridge door being left open

2:51 PM · Oct 2, 2015



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See andyatheyy's other Tweets



George Reeves
@GeorgeReeves94



Never mind terrorism, Islamism & tyranny, Syria crisis all due to climate change says international relations expert Charlotte Church #bbcqt

11:24 PM · Oct 1, 2015



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19 people are Tweeting about this

In the Sun, Kelvin Mackenzie questioned Church's intelligence.

Then on, October 6 The Sun carried a feature which was trumpeted on its front page with the headline: "Voice of an angel ... Brain of Angel Delight" which referenced her "bizarre Syrian conflict theory" and stated that her "heavenly strains have become the hectoring rant of a political activist striving to reinvent herself as a mouthpiece of the poor – and risking simply sounding like an idiot".



That the Sun should go after Charlotte Church is entirely to be expected, of course – her statement to the Leveson inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the press in November 2011 was highly critical of her treatment at the hands of the News of the World and in 2012 she received £600,000 in settlement damages and costs from News International over phone-hacking claims.

But it wasn't only the Sun. The Daily Telegraph's Alison Pearson wrote dismissively of "La Church" and of the fact that her colleague Charles Moore "struggled just a teeny bit to keep a straight face during some of the Welsh chanteuse's interesting views".

Author provided

I'm always inclined to dismiss journalists' opinions on such matters – puffed as they are with an inflated sense of their own importance, glibly shouting "dumbing

down” when anyone not from their protected elite of recognised voices is granted the opportunity to contribute. Mackenzie, Pearson, et al are transparently suspicious of celebrities having political opinions. As if being proficient in one area disqualifies involvement in another.

Getting it wrong. Again.

But what’s really interesting about these commentaries (both online and in the mainstream press) is not simply the casual and hackneyed sexism with which they were expressed – it’s also in the probably wilful misinterpretation of what Church actually had to say on Syria and climate change. She explicitly said that climate change apparently contributed to the war. She did not suggest, as Mackenzie wrote, that the Syrian conflict was caused by climate change.

It is an important distinction to highlight, particularly in a journalistic atmosphere where the (reported) words of the leader of the opposition on the death of Bin Laden in 2011 are used by the **prime minister** to scathingly attack Jeremy Corbyn for representing a “security-threatening, terrorist-sympathising, Britain-hating” ideology.

What Corbyn actually said was that the tragedy was in the fact that Bin Laden **did not face trial**. But that was intentionally ignored in order to better portray him as a danger to the status quo. And of course, Jeremy Corbyn is a danger – to the mainstream press; he **supports media reform**. During the leadership contest he said: “A society in which 70% of UK newspaper circulation is controlled by three wealthy families is clearly unfair and undemocratic. The work being done by the Media Reform Coalition and others is vital in pushing for media plurality which this country is so desperately in need of.”

But back to Charlotte Church. The brain of Angel Delight? Maybe not – there does appear to be evidence to support her assertions about climate change and conflict. Among other reputable **scientific sources**, Columbia University climate scientist **Richard Seager** suggests a drought that affected Syria between 2006 and 2010 was likely caused by man-made climate change. He said:

We’re not saying the drought caused the war ... We’re saying that added to all the other stressors, it helped kick things over the threshold into open conflict. And a drought of that severity was made much more likely by the ongoing human-driven drying of that region.

So I say thank you, Charlotte – for challenging accepted views and for having the tenacity to carry on in the face of such sexism and ridicule. Keep kicking against the pricks.

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