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Fourth estate follies

Trawling through the dustbins of the UK media

Are people getting a bit tired of being lectured to by do-gooding celebrities?

March 18, 2016 5.14pm GMT



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Benedict Cumberbatch in full flow. Anthony Devlin / PA Wire/Press Association Images

Veteran foreign correspondent and broadcaster Michael Buerk is getting tired of “bleeding heart” celebrities. In an interview in the latest issue of the *Radio Times*, Buerk said that he was “a little sniffy about celebs prattling around among the world’s victims”. He went on to single out actors Benedict Cumberbatch and Emma Thompson for wearing their hearts a little too regularly on their sleeves:

feather-bedded thespians pay flying visits to the desperate to parade their bleeding hearts and trumpet their infantile ideas on what “must be done”. There’s only so much of the Benedict and Emma worldview you can take.

This caused the Guardian's **Anne Perkins** to (not unreasonably) wonder what Buerk thought of Band Aid's response to his BBC news reports from famine stricken Ethiopia in 1984. Wasn't it the actions of the celebrity partnership of Bob Geldof and Midge Ure, and the resulting publicity, that caused the world to pay a lot more attention to famine and its causes?

Whatever the truth of that, Buerk's antipathy towards the likes of Cumberbatch and Thompson is shared by a vocal hierarchy in politics and journalism. As I've written before, in the case of **Charlotte Church's** political campaigning, many people are transparently suspicious of celebrities having political opinions.

As if being proficient in one area disqualifies involvement in another, anyone not from their protected elite of recognised voices is denied the opportunity to meaningfully contribute. It could be, in **John Street's** words, that criticism of celebrity activism has its roots in a fear that it debases "liberal democratic political representation" and marginalises relevant expertise.

It is certainly not a new phenomenon. Street notes that as far back as the 17th century non-political public figures (such as the poets John Dryden, John Milton and Andrew Marvell) were voicing their opinions on the English civil war. And in the 19th century, the most celebrated and noted critic of governmental social policy and advocate for reform in Britain was Charles Dickens.

But of course modern celebrity is an entirely different entity. As **Meyer and Gamson** highlight, today's celebrities do not generally come not from the arts or literature but from the mass media of film, television, sport or pop music. The distrust or suspicion of a pop star's views on, say, global warming may be because the star's renown is based on public attention and not through institutionalised learning or experience. When you add to the mix the fact that modern performers' careers are transient and often based on relentless self-promotion and the gaining of wealth, it's not difficult to see why audiences may question authenticity and motives.

Pro-Bono?

Perhaps the star who has come in for the most criticism over the years is U2 frontman, Bono. In 2013 the environmentalist and activist **George Monbiot** wrote a scathing attack on the singer and his "ONE" campaign to end poverty and preventable diseases in Africa. Far from working on behalf of the extremely poor, Monbiot asserted that ONE was a collection of multi-millionaires who were a projection of US corporate power.





'As I said to Obama....' 'Do go on, Paul...' EPA/Rodger Bosch

He also referred to **The Frontman: Bono (in the Name of Power)** by Harry Browne which positions Bono as someone who, without any kind of mandate, has become spokesperson for Africa. Bono's approach to Africa, writes Monbiot quoting Browne, is:

a slick mix of traditional missionary and commercial colonialism, in which the poor world exists as a task for the rich world to complete.

But it's hard to argue against the proposition that, in purely commercial terms, these big names with their undeniable star power bring the audience to the product. It's pertinent to note the views of Jane Cooper, UNICEF UK director of communications, who told the *Independent* in 2014 that:

Celebrities have a unique ability to reach millions of people, many of whom may not normally be engaged on the suffering of the world's children.

Celebrity trumps sincerity

We also may ask ourselves whether celebrities have finally superseded politicians in the ability to engage with audiences. So it's apt that, in the US, we now have the ultimate celebrity politician in the shape of Donald Trump.





Of course, we all know how the Duke would have voted. EPA/Tannen Maury

As Gordon Grovitz recently wrote in the Wall Street Journal: “Trump’s campaign has obliterated whatever line remained between politics and entertainment”. And the Donald’s main selling point? That he’s saying the unsayable and representing the disenfranchised who resent the political elites.

For Donald Trump we may one day read Katie Hopkins. It’s not only The Apprentice that they have in common. Could the future be the Reagan–Thatcher style love-in recreated for electorates more interested in sound bites than sincerity? Perhaps that’s Buerk’s real fear.

Of course, a conga-line of celebrities has already formed to decry Trump and all he stands for and some have gone as far as threatening to leave America if he should win the presidency in November. They should be careful – the US electorate can turn on social elites just as easily as political elites and the prospect of waving goodbye to Miley Cyrus or Jon Stewart could be very enticing to some of Trump’s target demographic.

One final thing on Trump from Grovitz’s excellent article: the media that claims to detest Trump needs him to keep going. He sells newspapers. He boosts ratings. And in the end, it’s the money, stupid. As the president of CBS, Les Moonves, told a recent investor conference that the Trump-dominated campaign: “may not be good for America,” but “it is damn good for CBS ... The money’s rolling in and this is fun ... Bring it on, Donald. Keep going.”

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