

The Celebrization of Human Trafficking

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Human trafficking, and especially sex trafficking, is not only susceptible to alluring and sensational narratives, it also plays into the celebrity-as-rescuer ideal that receives considerable attention from the media, the public, and policy-makers. While some celebrities develop enough expertise to speak with authority on the topic, many others are neither knowledgeable nor accurate in their efforts to champion antitrafficking causes. Prominent policy-makers allow celebrity activists to influence their opinions and even consult with them for advice regarding public policies. Emblematic of larger, fundamental problems with the dominant discourse, funding allocations, and legislation in current antitrafficking initiatives in the United States and elsewhere, celebrity activism is not significantly advancing the eradication of human trafficking and may even be doing harm by diverting attention from aspects of the problem and solution that sorely require attention.

Keywords: human trafficking; human rights; celebrity activism

Celebrities now regularly engage as activists with human trafficking policy. A “sexy” topic, human trafficking is not only susceptible to alluring, fetishistic, and voyeuristic narratives, it plays into the celebrity-as-rescuer-of-victim ideal that receives a huge amount of attention from the media and the public. As a result, several top celebrities now characterize themselves as antitrafficking activists, with an admiring public viewing their claims as expertise.

This article examines the ways in which celebrities and celebrity culture influence legal and policy responses to human trafficking with a critical analysis of celebrities’ typically

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NOTE: I thank Sarah Hawkins for help with this article.

DOI: 10.1177/0002716213515837

simplistic approaches to human trafficking. A “celebrity” is defined here as a person who attracts a large audience or following through his or her artistic endeavors, or sometimes political, journalistic, and humanitarian work. The celebrities examined in this article also appeal to that audience through regular public-relations activities.

Methodology

Media accounts of celebrity involvement in human rights campaigns abound. This article focuses on celebrity involvement in human trafficking, placing it in the broader context of celebrity activism more generally. In this study, celebrities were identified through a broad survey of news media, electronic databases, government documents, and promotional materials of various international organizations (IOs) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Assessments of celebrity activism in the human trafficking sphere over the past decade were made by examining transcripts of congressional witness testimony from 2000 to 2011, surveying the commendations awarded by the relevant United Nations (UN) agencies, reviewing transcripts of celebrity talks and public statements on human trafficking; examining the operation of celebrity advisors where available; examining the tax returns of nonprofit NGO’s where accessible; and considering the publicity for books, movies, films, and music that are publicized as raising awareness of human trafficking. Where applicable, the promotional materials and tax returns of foundations and charitable organizations created and run by celebrities themselves were also reviewed for the claims made therein. To the extent possible, I attempt to assess the impact of celebrity endorsements on policy-makers’ framing of trafficking issues by comparing laws and draft bills with celebrity statements and recommendations.

Why Celebrity Involvement Is Problematic

There are arguably some advantages to celebrity activism; celebrities have the potential to be more neutral than politicians or politically motivated NGOs (Hart and Tindall 2009) and to help activists to gain access to policy-makers and donors that they would otherwise never attain (Meyer and Gamson 1995). Those potential advantages, I argue, are outweighed by the potential drawbacks, particularly when celebrities enter the activism arena and veer from “mere awareness raising” into giving policy recommendations, as they most often do¹ (Demaine 2009, 105–6). The primary drawbacks to celebrity activism in the arena of human trafficking are (1) the superficial or uninformed trafficking narratives that celebrities often present and (2) celebrities’ lack of accountability for the solutions they propose to ameliorate trafficking, policies that may have adverse unintended consequences if implemented.

Public relations–motivated celebrity activism, even that touted as “mere awareness raising,” is problematic for multiple reasons. It risks diverting attention away from victims and the solutions they might desire for themselves (Hart and Tindall 2009; Moyo 2009), stripping them of their agency and rendering them one-dimensional “victims” (Cooper 2007). Reductive narratives shift depictions of human rights issues away from the complex and frequently boring, toward the more dramatic, or worst-case scenarios. This skewed focus risks solutions being developed—and funding being allocated—that are tangential to the problem. In the trafficking context, for example, an inordinate focus on children abducted for sex trafficking—a very visceral and frightening but infrequent type of trafficking—diverts donors and law enforcement away from other types of trafficked persons (Haynes 2007).

Growth and expansion of celebrity activism

Around one-quarter of all American television advertisements feature celebrities (Biswas, Biswas, and Daas 2006). Celebrities are used so ubiquitously because advertisers understand that consumers want to feel close to celebrities; in many instances, they respond more to celebrity endorsements than to experts (Frizzell 2011).

Some celebrity activists claim that they are merely raising awareness of the issues, rather than endorsing any outcome. While this sounds innocuous, potential problems accrue even with this practice. First, awareness-raising campaigns often cast the celebrity him- or herself in the central role of hero, detracting from the victims and their needs (Bhatia 2013). Second, very few celebrities indicate whether they pay for their own travel expenses when bringing attention to human rights problems, while at least some celebrities fail to donate funds to the causes they endorse, and some even to their own foundations (Colapinto 2012).² The result is that celebrity “awareness-raising” can siphon off donations the donors undoubtedly intended for victims.

The use of celebrity human rights endorsers is increasing, even though experts report that the return on that investment can be modest or even backfire (Biswas, Hussain, and O’Donnell 2009). To test the efficacy of celebrity activism, one experiment presented subjects with opinions about whether to intervene in a humanitarian crisis, ascribing a celebrity opinion to Bono, and a contradictory opinion to “a State Department representative” (Frizzell 2011). Not only did the test subjects select the State Department’s position, but they claimed to have formed their opinion because it was the opposite of Bono’s. This outcome, in which subjects not only fail to be swayed by a celebrity position but are in fact repelled by it, has come to be known as “the Bono effect” (Frizzell 2011, 322). The designers of this experiment concluded that to sway an audience, the celebrity in question must be perceived as highly credible in the given context.

Unintended consequences

Despite the understanding commonly held by entertainers and politicians that one must have an “elevator pitch”³—a short and catchy description of an issue to promote it publicly in the time it takes to ride an elevator—it is very difficult to distill complex human rights problems into sound bites. Experts less willing to employ brief and pithy narratives can come off as unappealing or overly intellectual by comparison. It is rare for the words of a bona fide expert to go viral, experts often being reluctant to distill their viewpoints into the few minutes allocated to them by the press.

Celebrities are skilled at making short, charming, and persuasive pitches, and benefit from the symbiotic relationship among the press, NGOs, IOs, politicians, and celebrities. Journalists want a story; politicians, IOs, and NGOs want to publicize their causes or policy positions; and celebrities want to maximize their celebrity, so celebrity narratives are delivered with great frequency to wide audiences. But because celebrities attract a great deal of attention, the story heard is often one about the celebrity—e.g., their account of how a trip they took to see a human rights crisis affected them emotionally—a personalized focus that comes at the expense of the actual problem (Agustin 2011). Furthermore, celebrities tend to suggest quick fixes rather than sustainable solutions (Dieter and Kumar 2008). Audiences accustomed to hearing celebrities entreating them to “do something,” and providing an immediate outlet through which to do it, can be impatient with experts who advise them to take the time to understand the complexities of the issue before proceeding.

In their rush to react to human rights crises to which they have often only recently become attuned, celebrities—well-intentioned though they may be—can simply distract from finding the right solutions for the real problems. Take, for example, Sharon Stone effectively bullying attendees of the World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland, into promising substantial donations to save children’s lives by providing mosquito nets to end malaria in Africa. Although effective in terms of drawing attention to Stone and rallying promises for funds (the funds themselves were not ultimately delivered), it is problematic from the perspective of solving the stated problem. The attendees were not told that malaria is not the biggest threat to children’s lives in Africa, or that nets are often already made and provided locally, potentially undermining developing markets and local NGOs (Sala-i-Martin 2006). Or consider celebrity journalist Nicholas Kristof, who purchased a girl in Thailand for \$203 to “save her” from human trafficking. He was able to publish multiple editorials about how moved he was by her plight (Kristof 2004), and how shocked he was when she chose to return to sex work (Kristof 2005). His continuing involvement in rescuing victims resulted in a book and a documentary film (Kristof and WuDunn 2010; PBS 2012), all the while failing to fully articulate the structural issues in play and explore the causes of why this and other “rescued” women have returned to their previous lives. He continues to use his celebrity journalist position to promote other activists, such as Somaly Mam, even after questions arise as to their legitimacy or rate of success (Cain 2012; Marks and Sovuthy 2012).

Issues That Catch Celebrities' Attention: Victims, Sex, and Rescuers

Celebrities do not engage with the full gamut of human rights issues, and among the issues that celebrities adopt, some receive far more attention than others. Mundane and complex issues are rarely discussed, while “exciting” issues with apparently simple solutions are embraced. When celebrities are involved, the framing of both the problem and its solutions are often manipulated to suit the narrative most palatable for a celebrity attempting to reach donors or a broad audience, seemingly without regard to reliable data or research already underway. The most striking example of how lucrative some of the reductive human rights narratives can be is found in the incredibly fast ascension of Invisible Children, the NGO behind the film *Kony 2012*. In the year following the release of its video challenging celebrity “culture makers” to support the cause and exhorting viewers to help secure the capture of Joseph Kony by purchasing posters and bracelets to “raise awareness” of human rights abuses Kony had perpetrated, Invisible Children received a staggering \$11,583,954 in private grants and contributions (Invisible Children 2011).

In the human trafficking context, when the issue is framed as a problem primarily impacting exploited migrant laborers or as an outcome of globalization and weak labor protections, it receives little celebrity attention or funding. But when interested NGOs reframe the issue as “sex trafficking,” “modern day slavery,” and “child sex exploitation,” celebrity involvement burgeons, media flock to the issue, and financial contributions to fight the problem increase dramatically. For example, in response to lobbying by interest groups, some of which would receive the federal funding for which they agitated, to use the growing interest in human trafficking as a vehicle to abolish commercial sexual exploitation, Congress authorized \$25 million in grants per year toward state prosecutions of prostitutes’ customers (U.S. Congress 2006). Human trafficking NGOs that shifted their focus accordingly saw dramatically increased funding. For example, as Polaris Project shifted focus to match the budget increase (for which they had lobbied), their revenue increased from \$177,818 in 2007 to a reported \$1,048,470 in government grants and \$2,221,441 in nongovernment grants, contributions, and gifts in 2010 (Polaris Project 2010). In 2013, Google awarded Polaris and two other organizations a total of \$3 million (*Huffington Post* 2013).

Celebrities take up issues that are enticing, simple, and fundable and that feed into “the rescue myth” (Chuang 2010; Haynes 2007). A “sexy” issue may literally involve sex, sexuality, or sexual abuse, or it may simply be more exciting, more horrifying, more voyeuristically appealing, and more suitable for casting the activist in the role of hero, than other issues. Human trafficking for sexual exploitation is such an eroticized topic, but trafficking for domestic servitude or agricultural work is boring in comparison.

In addition to sexy issues that feed the image of celebrity and, by proxy, the public as rescuer, celebrities and the media are also enthralled by issues that permit fetishism of victims and allow for “trauma tourism”—the practice of

traveling to see or visit with victims of humanitarian disasters or human rights abuses, ostensibly to see the people to whom one's money has been allocated. Conveniently, human rights issues that feed into the celebrity-as-rescuer ideal also tend to receive more attention from the media and the public, and more funding, than issues requiring deeper and more complex understandings. The celebrity who focuses on the sexy, pithy, and simplistic human rights narrative generates more publicity (Waisbord 2011).

Trafficking as a celebrity cause

Although human trafficking is not unique in having attracted celebrity attention, it clearly fits the celebrity-attraction criterion set forth above. Human trafficking is an issue with visceral appeal (Clark-Flory 2011); it can be reduced to a narrow victim-rescuer narrative for those inclined to view it that way; and its victims are often foreign and therein easily essentialized (Haynes 2006, 2007). The recent focus by the U.S. Congress and celebrities on child victims of sex trafficking amplifies this victim-savior dynamic.

There are also a large number of conflicting viewpoints about many aspects of human trafficking. There are disagreements as to the extent of the problem, the definition of trafficking, who the victims are, how best to support them, and how to combat trafficking more generally. Statistical data on human trafficking are wildly inconsistent and lack rigorous empirical support. When celebrities lend their confident voices and elevator pitches to this morass of disagreement and inconsistencies, they cannot help but sway an interested public. Celebrities can be very desirable spokespersons for those who would venture forth with a prescription when data are lacking. Ricky Martin, for example, testifying before Congress as a celebrity witness on human trafficking, stated that "each year 2 million people are victims of human trafficking. Of those, 1 million children are forced into the sex trade each year" (Martin 2006, 11). These figures do not correspond to any verified data, nor did Martin cite any source to support his figures. When asked by Rep. Smith how Congress should respond to human trafficking, Martin stated that he had created a PSA (public service announcement) named Call and Live: "You call and you live. . . . People will call when they are being trafficked, when they believe they are being trafficked or when they witness a case, and that moment you [sic] will be safe" (Martin 2006, 11). Whereas experts are inclined to qualify and question discrepant data and acknowledge both the structural causes propelling the problem and the consequent complexity of any solutions proposed to end it (Chuang 2010; Weitzer 2010), celebrities appear more comfortable using unverified numbers and suggesting untested or reductionist "solutions" so as not to dampen the visceral and emotional appeal of their message. Amid conflicting expert opinions and inconsistent data about human trafficking, the public does not know which information to trust. In this environment, a confident reductionist narrative offered by a celebrity, whom the public in any case wants to feel close to and share values with, can easily hold sway.

Celebrities' Human Trafficking Initiatives

This section provides an overview of some of the more prominent activism undertaken by celebrities focused on human trafficking, to greater or lesser positive effect. While celebrity missteps are ubiquitous and easy targets for derision, some celebrities get higher marks than others by focusing on people, places, and issues they know well (Easterly 2010). Others are perceived as credible for having received higher education. It is regularly noted, for example, that Mira Sorvino and Ashley Judd, both actresses and human trafficking activists, have degrees from Ivy League universities, implying their enhanced credibility to hold forth on issues of concern to them.

Hundreds of celebrities have been invited to serve as Goodwill Ambassadors to various UN agencies, some in roles directly or indirectly related to human trafficking (UN 2013a). The designation of a UN title bears little correlation to the level of expertise held by the recipient. For example, Mira Sorvino is Goodwill Ambassador to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the “guardian” agency for the UN Protocol on Trafficking in Persons. Nicholas Cage was appointed Goodwill Ambassador for Global Justice for UNODC, and Julia Ormond, formerly a UNODC Ambassador, stepped down to form her own NGO and work with Bill Clinton’s Global Initiative (UNODC 2010; UN Gift 2013; ASSET 2013). Ricky Martin and Lucy Liu are UNICEF Goodwill Ambassadors, their work intersecting with human trafficking through their interest in addressing child sexual exploitation (UNICEF 2013), and Emma Thompson “joined forces” with UN Gift to raise awareness on human trafficking (UN Gift 2013). Some celebrities are involved with IOs whose work intersects in some way with human trafficking. Ashley Judd, for example, was previously an ambassador for YouthAIDS, a project of Population Services International (PSI), an organization “focused on empowering the most vulnerable populations” (PSI 2013). Still other celebrity human trafficking activists claim a working relationship with U.S. government entities (Kutcher and Moore 2012).

Some of these celebrities initially became attached to the issue of human trafficking after learning of its existence in conjunction with their careers as entertainers: Angelina Jolie after filming *Tomb Raider* in Cambodia (Hart and Tindall 2009); Sorvino after acting in a Lifetime television miniseries about human trafficking (UNODC 2010); and Martin after meeting “three little girls that were living on the streets [in Calcutta], maybe days away from being sold into prostitution, trembling beneath plastic bags” (Martin 2006, 7).

Many of the celebrities introduced above have established their own NGOs or foundations devoted to “tackling” the problem. Some of these celebrities have used their foundations effectively to identify a specific problem and work to address it or to innovate new approaches. Jolie, for example, partnered with Microsoft to create Kids in Need of Defense, an NGO that identifies attorneys willing to work pro bono (though not actually hiring staff attorneys or funding direct legal assistance) to help unaccompanied immigrant children in the United States, some of whom have been trafficked or are at risk of trafficking.⁴ And

Ormond's Alliance to Stop Slavery and End Trafficking (ASSET) created a tool that allows consumers to contact companies to ask questions about their supply chain and labor practices (ASSET 2013). However, other celebrities have created programs and responses that are ill-advised, distasteful, or even at risk of backfiring. Ashton Kutcher and his ex-wife Demi Moore, for example, established a foundation called DNA. Kutcher then created PSA's aimed at "ending demand" by appealing to men not to pay for sex, which were widely criticized as voyeuristic and distasteful (Delahaye 2011). Moore partnered with Tiffany's to create and sell diamond handcuff pendants depicting both the bonds of love and the plight of human trafficking victims trapped in slavery (World Entertainment News Network 2011). Jada Pinkett Smith launched her antitrafficking campaign, called "Don't Sell Bodies" with a video of herself nude and singing about human trafficking (Nada 2012). And Emma Thompson's contribution to her alliance with UN Gift was an art installation called Journey, a one-woman show in which she enacts "the harrowing experience of a trafficked victim" (UN Gift 2013).

Within celebrity-run NGOs and foundations, there is a considerable amount of interfunding and circular support from other celebrities. Bono's philanthropic RED campaign—described as rescuing "international aid from its dour predictive graphs and disappointing 'lessons learnt,'" spinning it "as young and chic as possible"—was launched on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (Richey and Ponte 2008, 725). And when George Clooney and Brad Pitt wanted guidance on how to enter the humanitarian-celebrity enterprise, they sought Bono's advice (Cooper 2007).

An obvious query would be how celebrities are accessing expert advice in creating their NGOs and projects. Although celebrities do not regularly discuss whether they receive advice and from whom, some do. Angelina Jolie, for example, runs many projects and has employed several advisors, not always successfully. Her first advisor, Trevor Nielson, was allegedly behind several antitrafficking debacles (Colapinto 2012). While consulting credible experts would likely improve the activism, some celebrity "advisors" specialize in using philanthropy as a PR tactic rather than offering substantive expertise (Colapinto 2012). Compounding the problem of bad advice is the circularity and closed loop nature of that advice and involvement. Nielson, Jolie's former advisor, also worked with Bono's foundation, and as the director of public affairs for the Gates Foundation. Kutcher's girlfriend, Mila Kunis, is now one of the faces of the International Labour Organization's (ILO) "End Slavery Now" campaign (ILO 2013), and Bono's advisor also trained Brad Pitt (Cooper 2009).

Since this inside circle of funding and support includes "the celebrity wealthy"—people who have become famous for being wealthy and philanthropic—there is substantial money in play. Bono's DATA Foundation, for example, has received millions of dollars in grants from the Gates Foundation (Cooper 2007), and Bono claims that he was the first person Warren Buffett phoned when Buffet gave more than \$31 billion to the Gates Foundation (Cooper 2007). Although one could argue that the tightly circular nature of this advice and funding creates a certain expertise among those within the circle, such a circular nature also arguably increases the risk that organizational responses to human rights issues will be limited in nuance for lack of wide-ranging expertise and advice.

It is unclear whether celebrities are encouraged to contribute their own net worth to their causes. Some do not, presumably viewing their primary role as drawing star power to the foundation rather than funding the project or working for it outright (Colapinto 2012). Some advisors also seem financially quite invested in the creation of celebrity foundations and NGOs, recommending that their celebrity clients establish foundations to “express their philanthropy,” and then exorbitantly charging them for that advice and assistance. Kutcher and Moore, for example, paid Neilson \$240,000 of their foundation’s money—the foundation that he helped them create—for his advice, some of which resulted in a firestorm of criticism aimed at their distasteful attempts at advocacy and their inaccurate public statements (Colapinto 2012; Cizmar, Conklin, and Hinman 2011).

One of the most striking facets of celebrity involvement in human trafficking is how quickly celebrities come to claim expertise. For example, Jada Pinkett Smith stated that she learned about the issue through her preteen daughter in early 2012 (Pinkett Smith 2012). A mere eight months later she accepted an invitation to address the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the topic (Parkinson 2012; Pinkett Smith 2012). Perhaps due to this general lack of experience, or possibly as a consequence of their professional skill at playing to an audience and emoting, many celebrities working on human trafficking tend to proffer stereotypes, provide generalizations, and rely on emotional pleas. Speaking to the UN General Assembly, for example, Judd made numerous emotional pleas, even while acknowledging, though quickly dismissing, potential skepticism about her expertise:

I would understand if you might be wondering right now, “How dare she imagine she has something to contribute to the urgent, charged debate about the scourge of modern slavery, of human trafficking?” Actually, I believe wholeheartedly the real question is, “How dare I not? How dare I not stand before you with all the earnestness at my command.... I have made one keening vow: I will never forget you and I will tell your stories. (Judd 2008)

Martin’s testimony to Congress also relied on superficial emotional appeals: “If we have a soul, we have to feel the pain but sometimes we also feel the hopelessness. But in face of hopelessness [sic] action can bring hope” (Martin 2006, 8). He also provided oversimplified “solutions” to the problem, essentially recapitulating to Congress a condensed version of Congress’ own approach in the Trafficking Victim Protection Act:

First of all, we must prevent exploitation by educating children and families about the dangers of human trafficking. Step two, we must protect the victims by providing resources to reintegrate and rehabilitate. And number three, we must prosecute and punish those who make a living out of this illegal activity from traffickers to consumers. (Martin 2006, 8)

Some celebrities engaged in “combating human trafficking,” eager to arouse the audience, offer false or distorted statistics, oversimplifying the causes

and solutions, relying on emotional pleas and offering “horror stories” as typical scenarios. They are able to do so because they are not held accountable for their erroneous claims.

The Audiences for Celebrity Activism

Celebrities would not be given the platform to make recommendations about human trafficking without the acceptance and complicity of an audience. This section of the article discusses the main audiences that grant celebrities “expert” status regarding social causes such as human trafficking.

Celebrities

Celebrities themselves buy into the concept of celebrity as human rights expert, albeit not all celebrities, not all to the same degree, and not all with the same motivations. Celebrity depends on recognition, which depends on being known, feted, and discussed. Some celebrities recognize that humanitarianism can enhance their fame or use it as a “second act,” a way to burnish a fallen star or as a publicist’s prescription for rehabilitation (Hyde 2009). Other celebrities seem to prefer their activist image, and identify themselves this way—at least in front of some audiences.⁵ There is also the notion that social activism makes the best use of the commodification of their person that comes with fame (Meyer and Gamson 1995, 185).

Although celebrities’ motivations differ, some commonalities apply. First, celebrities believe that they help to shine a light on issues that the media and politicians ignore (Waisbord 2011). Second, many celebrities earn more from their endorsements than from acting or other endeavors (Agrawal and Kamakura 1995) and have learned how to solicit these opportunities. Third, agents and publicists encourage actors to engage in social advocacy for the career benefits it can bestow (Demaine 2009, 108). Fourth, many actors have begun to think of themselves as having an obligation to put their fame to good use, and to encourage other actors to do the same (Meyer and Gamson 1995, 185). Fifth, law and policy-makers seem to expect activism from celebrities, and many celebrities comply. For example, at a congressional hearing on human trafficking before the House Committee on International Relations, Rep. Tom Lantos asked Ricky Martin,

I wonder if you could comment on the reason why so few people who have attained your celebrity and status have chosen to become engaged in good causes. And what can be done by people like you or Bono or others to involve the scores of people who have attained ... an opportunity to become engaged in your cause, in the issue of trafficking? What happens when you talk to your colleagues of similar positions and celebrity and you urge them to pick a cause, any cause, and become engaged? (Lantos, quoted in Martin 2006, 12)

Martin declined to speculate, indicating that he could only speak for himself. Yet Lantos pressed him further, asking Martin to explain why his “fellow celebrities” did not also work to “transform” the “ugly aspects of this globe into positive realities” (Martin 2006, 12). Lantos’s comments suggest that members of Congress believe both that celebrities have such transformative power and a duty to wield it.

Celebrities have different activist styles and make different claims, which render some celebrities more prominent and more readily heeded by their audience than others. “Some are hailed as ‘serious’ and ‘dedicated,’ others are dismissed as lightweights and opportunists” (Hart and Tindall 2009, 260). Some make sweeping statements or claim to be speaking for the entire world,⁶ while others appear to recognize the position they have put themselves in and tread more cautiously (Travers 2007).

The media

Celebrities do not become celebrities in a vacuum, nor does the public become aware of celebrity activism without the media. Journalists and the media have their professional obligations, lenses, and biases. They can sell the “sexy” story and maximize readership, or they can exercise journalistic integrity, fact check, and convey complexity. Much of the time, the objectives of celebrities and the press align, but sometimes they do not. Kutcher, for example, was confronted by the *Village Voice* for citing bad statistics from a flawed report that had been debunked by no less than twenty-seven scholars (Weitzer 2010) and for proposing a simplistic “end demand” solution to underage prostitution. Kutcher could have used the opportunity to admit his mistake or even indicate that it was his advisor, Trevor Neilson, who was allegedly responsible for steering him awry (Colapinto 2012). Instead, Kutcher retaliated by accusing the paper of having a “financial interest in trafficking” (Cizmar, Conklin, and Hinman 2011). While the *Village Voice* challenged the flawed report, other media outlets relentlessly referenced it for the racy headlines it yielded (Daily Mail Reporter 2008; BBC News 2008). To many media outlets, the message seems to be that accuracy is less relevant than shocking headlines, and that when a celebrity is involved, the story yields a greater readership.

While attaching a celebrity to a cause may increase attention for the celebrity, there is no proof that it increases attention to the cause (Waisbord 2011). And not everyone in the press rushes to cover celebrity activism without querying its impact and validity. In his book, *Flat Earth News*, journalist Nick Davies specifically takes issue with the way the press covers human trafficking, describing what he calls systemic problems with self-referential reporting, whereby media outlets quote one another without assessing the validity of the original source (Davies 2008). Many new outlets blatantly engage in fear-mongering to increase their audience, and human trafficking fits neatly into this fear formula (Davies 2008). Journalist Noy Thrupkaew also acknowledges the drawbacks in the common journalistic practice of using the story of one victim to stand in for or “represent”

an entire social problem (Thrupkaew 2012). And some critique the advent of “celebrity journalism,” wherein the journalists’ feelings are the subject of the article (Agustin 2011). As a result of these common media practices, human trafficking stories attract audiences. When a celebrity delivers the message the audience increases dramatically, but not necessarily to the benefit of the cause.

The UN

Celebrity ambassadors are now attached to every UN agency, with several agencies appointing more than thirty Goodwill Ambassadors each (UN 2013a). Some agencies have even begun upgrading celebrities. Angelina Jolie, who had been a mere Goodwill Ambassador for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), was recently promoted to Special Envoy, allowing her to “undertake advocacy and represent UNHCR ... at the diplomatic level” (UN News Center 2012). The UN Secretary General now has the authority to bestow the title “Messenger of Peace” on celebrities, the responsibilities of which include helping to “raise public awareness and support for United Nations peacekeeping efforts around the world” (UN 2013b). Other international organizations and outlets such as the World Economic Forum at Davos similarly subscribe to the notion that celebrity and humanitarianism go hand in hand, (Cooper 2007).

Although the UN has a history of partnering with celebrities, it has nevertheless stumbled more than once in its use of celebrity partnerships. For example, the Secretary General allowed Madonna to launch her Raising Malawi Foundation as a “cross promotion” with Gucci for the launch of its 5th Avenue store, on the lawn of the UN Secretariat in New York City during Fashion Week (Hyde 2009). The Raising Malawi Foundation is now much maligned and has been run by Trevor Neilson since 2010 (Colapinto 2012). A second misstep involved inviting Ashley Judd to deliver a talk about human trafficking at the Secretariat as a cross promotion for her new book, a personal memoir (UNODC 2010). Even if UN agencies can be understood as dependent on donors, employing celebrity cache to secure the requisite funding that fuels some of their programs, it is harder to see the justification for the Secretary General allowing the UN name and image to be used to increase the profile of celebrities and their personal and for-profit agendas.

Politicians and government officials

Perhaps the most striking example of the growing prominence of celebrity influence is the willingness of legislators to take counsel from celebrities. Congressional testimony often shapes the direction of federal legislation (Demaine 2009, 88), and federal legislators in the United States have invited hundreds of celebrity entertainers to testify at congressional hearings on issues totally unrelated to their occupations. Congressional appropriations committees, charged with funding programs, are responsible for the majority of the invitations extended to celebrity witnesses (Demaine 2009, 96). Of the more than 500 celebrities who testified before Congress between 1980 and 2004, almost none had any

expertise on the issues about which they spoke (Demaine 2009). Nevertheless, legislators believe that celebrity opinions are crucial to their ability to make and pass laws.⁷

Mutually reinforcing interests are involved here. Celebrities have their intellectual and activist credentials validated, rather than (or in addition to) their entertainment value. Politicians get media exposure that may help with their constituencies and consider meeting celebrities a job “perk.”⁸ Legislators take frequent advantage of opportunities to meet celebrities (Hart and Tindall 2009), and far more legislators attend congressional hearings when celebrities testify than when mere experts do (Demaine 2009; Neilson 1999). Legislators are not immune to modern culture. Much like the public at large, they crave celebrity membership in their “in-groups,” and many seem to fawn over celebrity witnesses to a truly sycophantic degree. For example, during Ricky Martin’s appearance before Congress, Rep. Lantos told him “while my wife of 56 years considers you devastatingly handsome, I think your true beauty lies inside” (Martin 2006, 14); and staffers reported seeing legislators literally pushing one another out of the way to get close to John Travolta (Neilson 1999). Not all legislators are equally enamored of celebrity testimony, and some lawmakers seem clearer than others on the role celebrity experts might reasonably be asked to play.⁹ But many federal lawmakers have acquiesced to the notion that celebrities are well qualified to advise lawmakers (Demaine 2009). And some wonder whether celebrities are now so influential that politicians cannot ignore them (Hyde 2009).

This support of and fixation on celebrity experts is not limited to Congress, as other branches of government have been equally deferential to celebrities. For example, in 2005 the State Department named Ricky Martin one of its “Heroes Ending Modern Day Slavery” (U.S. Department of State 2006). The United States is not alone in its devotion to celebrity opinions (Dieter and Kumar 2008).

The growing frequency with which celebrities are invited to advise or testify before legislators is troubling for a number of reasons. First, there is little evidence to show that their presence, opinions, or advice achieve anything concrete for the victims of human trafficking (Waisbord 2011). Second, in democratic countries, the legislative and political branches of government are supposed to adhere to the notion of consulting “the people” when devising society’s rules. We now have a “celebocracy” in which the opinions of celebrities, some of whom are not even citizens of the countries before whose legislatures they testify (Bono, Ormond), are considered more valuable than those of constituents and the wider population (Hyde 2009). Third, the celebrities in question are not accountable for the opinions they expound. In fact, they gain little by spending more time, money, and energy ascertaining that their positions and recommendations are helpful. They receive press coverage regardless of whether their proposals are implemented or result in unintended consequences.

Despite these pitfalls, legislators solicit not just testimony, but actual recommendations and solutions from celebrity witnesses, asking, for example, what a celebrity witness would do to eradicate the problem were he a legislator himself (Martin 2006). In so doing, the legislators abdicate their electoral roles—and democratic accountability—to celebrities (Demaine 2009). Even when some

celebrities attempt to acknowledge the limitations of their expertise, members of Congress reinforce the message that celebrities are well suited to offer policy advice. Testifying before the House Committee on International Relations, Ricky Martin acknowledged, for example: “I don’t have all the solutions.” Rep. Joe Wilson replied, “[Y]ou say you don’t have all the solutions, but you have got wonderful commonsense proposals . . .” (Martin 2006, 18). While lawmakers and celebrities act as if calling celebrities to testify is a winning proposition for all, legislators looked foolish when they invited a Muppet (Elmo) to testify, asked the actor who plays a doctor on TV (Jack Klugman) to lecture them on medical issues, and invited the actress who played a police agent fighting human trafficking (Mira Sorvino) to advise them on how to eradicate it (Demaine 2009; UNODC 2010). Both parties benefit, however, with members of Congress indulging their desire to interact with celebrities and celebrities gaining PR capital and enhanced public exposure.

The public

Social scientists studying the celebrity phenomenon assert that people attribute special qualities to celebrities, allowing them to exert influence over their admirers’ decisions regarding what causes they ought to follow (Lindenberg, Joly, and Stapel 2011). Although there is no data to directly establish how much of the public is swayed by celebrity activism, there are some facts to indicate how many people elect to follow the thought stream and commentary of certain celebrities. For example, Ashton Kutcher, who tweets about human trafficking, among other topics, was the first person in the world to amass 1 million Twitter followers (Goldman 2013). The fact that the veracity of the information in his tweets on human trafficking has been challenged (Cizmar, Conklin, and Hinman 2011) has not deterred people from seeking out his thoughts; as of 2013, he has 14.5 million people following his tweets (Goldman 2013). People desire proximity to celebrities, and because they cannot attain physical proximity, they use electronic and print media access as a proxy. They then justify their attentiveness to celebrities as confidence in the celebrities’ credibility on issues of importance to them (Lindenberg, Joly, and Stapel 2011). By watching celebrities endorse an issue, the public comes to subconsciously feel that they belong to the celebrity’s “in-group” through their shared appreciation for the object of the endorsement (Biswas, Hussain, and O’Donnell 2009).

Internationally, celebrities top the list of elites who signal the existence of problems to which the public should pay attention and the way in which that public should respond (Kamons 2007). Yet advertising scholars note that the more a person knows about an issue, the less likely he or she is to be influenced by a celebrity (Frizzell 2011). The converse is also true: the less a member of the public knows, the more likely he or she will be influenced by a celebrity (Biswas, Biswas, and Daas 2006). While publicists, the media, and policy-makers are guilty of over-relying on celebrities to market their products and raise awareness about their issues, a large part of the responsibility rests with a public content to learn only a minimum about an issue—the elevator pitch—when seeking “awareness.”

The public too readily assumes that hearing a celebrity recount his or her meeting with a victim of human trafficking, for example, is tantamount to awareness of what to do about the issue. One journalist described audience members, who had come to listen to Ashley Judd discuss human trafficking at the UN, as “coming for the slow-dripping sweet stuff of First World stardom meeting Third World woe. They listened like unwitting adherents of a new religion ... [letting out] very faint sighs, imagining themselves on this very river in darkest Congo, fighting greatest evil with pure sentiment” (Vachon 2012). They were less interested in the issue than in the drama of the story and the person who delivered it. To be “aware” means to be conscious, mindful, cognizant, and sentient. Adopting a position based on shallow, one-sided narratives taken in from a single source ought not to suffice.

IOs and NGOs

Though they are technically not-for-profit entities, NGOs and IOs rely on funding to advance their projects and goals and are aware that association with celebrity often yields increased funding. For example, in the year following the creation of the Polaris Project’s “National Leadership Council,” when they appointed Ashley Judd, Mira Sorvino, and other notables to the council, their reported revenue increased by 1 million dollars (Polaris Project 2009, 2010, 2013). More nonprofit organizations have begun using celebrities to endorse or represent their causes, sometimes attempting to leverage even the most minor celebrity to propel their message.¹⁰ Some NGOs have even appointed staff exclusively devoted to seeking celebrity ties, with titles like “Celebrity Outreach Coordinator” (Hyde 2009). Other NGOs take a different approach, turning one of their own into a quasi-celebrity to secure funding. The head of one such NGO, Somaly Mam, for example, is more well-known than AFESIP, the NGO she runs. The organizational website for her eponymous foundation announces that she has been named one of *Time Magazine*’s 100 Most Influential People of 2009, one of *Fortune Magazine*’s Most Powerful Women in 2011, named a CNN Hero, awarded *Glamour Magazine*’s 2006 Woman of the Year Award, and won accolades from the Departments of State and Homeland Security (Somaly Mam Foundation 2013). She has been described as “a favorite” of Jolie, Judd, Kristof, and the State Department’s trafficking office. This all despite the following recent questions raised about her legitimacy and truthfulness. She has long told the story of a gruesome raid by traffickers on one of her victim centers, and of the retaliatory kidnapping and rape of her own daughter; the truthfulness of both these claims has recently been called into question (Cain 2012). She has also long featured the survivor narrative of a girl whom she claims she rescued after the girl’s eye was gouged out by traffickers. Yet the girl’s parents and doctor recently went on the record to state that the girl lost her eye as a child to a benign tumor, providing the medical records to prove their version of the story, and was, to their knowledge, never trafficked (Marks and Sovuthy 2012). Despite questions regarding the legitimacy of Somaly Mam’s claims, donors continue to fund her organization, media outlets continue to feature it prominently (Kristof and

WuDunn 2010),¹¹ and IOs such as the ILO still clamor to include Somaly Mam among its “Hollywood artists and activists” list when preparing and announcing their own activities (ILO 2013).

Celebrity endorsers clearly attract publicity, which may translate to increased funding and donations, individuals’ interest in the NGO’s agenda, and an organization’s enhanced access to persons and places it would not have otherwise. Being able to secure more attention by having celebrities attached to the organization appears more important to NGOs and IOs than does either the credibility or expertise of those celebrities. Each of the entities listed in this section has something to gain through its proximity to celebrity, be it increased ability to solicit funds, increased attention, or merely the elation that comes from that proximity to fame. Yet because it is the victims of human trafficking who are at risk when inaccurate data are used and programming is ill advised, celebrities should tread very carefully when pronouncing appropriate courses of action, levels of involvement, solutions, and funding, particularly when they do so on behalf of organizations with a financial or publicity stake in the matter.

Conclusion

It is clear that celebrity has tremendous currency in today’s society. The press, politicians, the public, NGOs, and IOs all look to celebrities to market their work—even when experts are available (Choi and Berger 2010). The only explanation for this phenomenon is that celebrity sells.

Reviewing celebrity contributions to the fight against human trafficking, the data strongly suggest that although a great deal of money and attention are directed to their “awareness raising” efforts, celebrity engagement is not significantly advancing the work of eradicating human trafficking. Instead, most celebrity activists reduce the complexity of both the problem and its potential solutions to sound bites, leading the public to believe that “doing something”—anything at all—is better than doing nothing, when the opposite may well be true. While experts on human trafficking often recommend structural changes to address underlying causes, which can be expensive and politically challenging (Haynes 2009), celebrities often ignore experts’ detailed, ambitious, and costly proposals.

While some blame celebrities for their oversimplified narratives and proposed solutions (Hyde 2009), the media and policy-makers are also responsible for granting ill-informed celebrities publicity and influence on policy debates. And the public is implicated as well: for being so easily swayed by celebrity and for asking so little of those we elevate to celebrity-expert status. The public not only places celebrities at the top of the entertainment hierarchy but also elevates them as human rights champions because the public wants celebrities in their in-group with whom they share values and ideals.

In the advertising context, scholars have determined that celebrity product endorsement can be less effective than expert endorsement when the product is

considered highly complex or the consumer associates risk with it (Biswas, Biswas, and Daas 2006). Espousing human trafficking facts and endorsing solutions should be treated as a “high risk” endeavor. An informed public would not accept celebrities’ oversimplified narratives and often undeveloped or unwise solutions, especially when these “solutions” present real risks to the victims. That celebrities can erroneously describe human trafficking causes that will instantly be heard by millions of people or propose human trafficking solutions with no accountability for their recommendations is problematic. When inviting celebrity experts to testify before legislative bodies and international organizations, policy and law makers themselves become complicit in perpetuating a simplistic rendering of the trafficking problem and its solutions. Political elites may have a genuine interest in the problem, but they also may benefit by associating with celebrities, by increasing their own visibility on the issue with their constituents.

Before a celebrity, even one with the requisite intelligence and expertise, is invited to weigh in on human trafficking, the following criteria, at minimum, should be met: (1) the celebrity should engage in the effort at his or her own expense; (2) he or she should refrain from selling any other agenda in conjunction with that work; (3) he or she should only start a foundation for which he/she seeks external funding if he/she contributes a significant portion of his/her own wealth to it; and (4) he or she should seek advice from bona fide substantive experts who do not have a financial or political stake in the outcome.

Efforts to address human trafficking must be well researched and supported by empirical evidence that assesses both the magnitude of the problem as well as the impact of alternative interventions (Weitzer, this volume). Although most efforts to combat human trafficking focus on crime prevention (Haynes 2007), victim protection requires a bottom-up approach and should be spearheaded and implemented by proper service providers, ensuring that the persons impacted are consulted and respected, which in turn ensures the sustainability of the measures undertaken (Haynes, Cahn, and Aolain 2012). Doing so also somewhat mitigates the negative impact of the “helicopter involvement” of some celebrities who fly in to view disaster victims but leave quickly and may lose interest thereafter. This further requires that activists avoid “trauma tourism,” in which victims are effectively harassed by those wishing to see or consult with or interview them time and again.

Some celebrities seem genuinely interested in understanding the complexities of the social problems for which they advocate. Others either are not, or fail to convey the complexity to the public, and instead favor the shorter and more exciting narratives. Legislators and policy-makers continue to use celebrities in pursuit of their own causes. Although there may be a few individuals who effectively straddle both worlds—both celebrity and human trafficking expert—most celebrities should not be in the position of recommending policy and programming decisions, at least not without knowledgeable and unbiased advisors guiding their recommendations.

Notes

1. Psychology Professor Linda Demaine surveyed the Congressional testimony of celebrity witnesses appearing before Congress over a twenty-four-year period. Of the 507 celebrity entertainers who testified before Congress, she found that only two merely raised awareness, and only eight stopped at merely expressing their general position on the issue. Fully 497 either proposed a solution to the issue on which they were testifying, or endorsed or opposed one Congress was considering (Demaine 2009, 105–6).

2. The fact that Angelina Jolie publicly announces that she pays for her own travel and contributes to many of the causes she supports at least suggests that some of the others, who are not so publicizing, do not (Look to the Stars 2012).

3. One celebrity speaking on a panel on which I was also speaking told me that I should work on my elevator pitch.

4. See www.supportkind.org.

5. For example, Ricky Martin introduced himself before Congress not as a pop star, but as a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador and president of the Ricky Martin Foundation (Martin 2006).

6. Choi and Berger (2010, 313) point to Richard Gere, who, in a television broadcast to voters in the region during Palestinian presidential elections stated, “Hi, I’m Richard Gere, and I’m speaking for the entire world.”

7. Rep. Tom Lantos stated: “We have had a whole series of celebrities, and every time we welcome them because we need them to achieve our work” (quoted in Martin 2006, 3–4).

8. Encouraging more women to run for office, Rep. Cathy Rodgers stated, “As a member of Congress, I work with amazing people. To sit down with Bono to hear about his work in Africa . . . that’s exciting!” (quoted in Leive 2012).

9. Rep. Watson stated to Ricky Martin: “We understand our role as policymakers; you are the briefer. You brief us on your experiences around the world, and that gives us further indication of the kinds of policies we need to adopt here” (quoted in Martin 2006, 18).

10. For example, at a talk that I attended, the executive director of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women repeatedly introduced one of the followers she brought to the talk as “Actress Kim Sykes,” emphasizing “actress” each time. Sykes has played small roles on television shows such as *Law and Order*. Sykes’s function at the event seemed to be implying to the audience that CATW’s message had more credibility due to Sykes’s endorsement of it.

11. In addition to the awards previously mentioned, the website for her foundation lists her media appearances (*Tyra Banks*, *Fox and Friends*, *Oprah*), international appearances (World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland), and the influential people who praise her (Hillary Clinton), next to which donors can click to give money (Somaly Mam Foundation 2013).

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