

Leadership by the famous: Celebrity as political capital

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‘When a celebrity talks, people listen; there is no better messenger.’

(Ford and Goodale, cited in Cooper, 2008: 114)

‘In a market where years of experience can be outbid by a squirt of hairspray, it is not learning but looks, not the cerebral but celebrity that mark the winners.’

(Hartley, 1996: 36)

1. Star power

Countless millions around the globe like to watch Angelina Jolie’s movies. She has captivated mass audiences with diverse roles ranging from the eponymous athletic superhero in *Tomb Raider: Lara Croft* to her Oscar-winning supporting role in *Girl, Interrupted*, to the political drama of *A Mighty Heart*. Because of this, perhaps even more people are keen consumers of stories about the ups and downs of her private life: her relationship with fellow megastar Brad Pitt, her ex’s, her children (natural and adopted), her houses, her shopping sprees, her dresses and apparel, and her hairstyles. Nothing escapes the attention paid to her by the providers of this sort of information: tabloids, gossip magazines, television shows and websites. The fascination encompasses even her very skin (any new tattoos?) and body shape (the big lips, the body curves - enhanced or not? - and is that a ‘baby belly’ shining through the gala dress?).

At the same time, those millions routinely witness Angelina Jolie in an entirely different range of capacities. Starting in 2001 after filming in Cambodia, she became an ardent, persistent and well-briefed humanitarian activist. Her dozens of missions to

countries such as Sri Lanka, Ecuador, Chad and Pakistan have been as intensely covered as her other exploits. She works closely with UNHCR and became one of its Goodwill Ambassadors. She meets world political elites regularly to draw their attention to the plight of refugees and displaced children. She spoke at the Davos World Economic Forum in 2005 and 2006, and she became a member of the Council on Foreign Relations in 2007.

Many of us care about refugees and displaced children. Tens of thousands of us spend considerable amounts of time and money improving their lot. But probably none of us has been as effective in bringing and keeping these issues on the agenda of political elites and institutions around the world as Angelina Jolie. She has evolved into a formidable agenda-setter, a tenacious lobbyist, a grand benefactor, and even a hands-on civil-war mediator (in Sierra Leone in 2005). A regular fixture in the last few instalments of the Time 100 list, Angelina Jolie is no longer just an actress and a celebrity figure. She has come to be seen as a public leader.

In fact, she is a public leader *because* she is a hot Hollywood commodity. She deftly uses her famous name, physique and performative qualities to gain clout into the world beyond Hollywood to advance the causes she has come to embrace ever since filming in Cambodia. She understands that a celebrity is not just someone hounded by tabloid journalists but also ‘an individual whose name has attention-getting, interest-riveting and profit-generating value’ (Rein et al, 1987: 15). Possibly inspired by Audrey Hepburn, who pioneered humanitarian activism in Hollywood, but succeeding on a much bigger scale than Hepburn ever contemplated, Jolie represents a paradigmatic example of ‘star power’ at work in the world of international politics

(Cooper, 2008: 32-35). She and other 'celebrity diplomats' like Bono, Bob Geldof and George Clooney know that 'celebrity sells' (Pringle, 2004), but instead of selling watches, cars, deodorants and beers they have chosen to 'sell' humanitarian and other political messages.

Star power defies conventional accounts of democratic leadership. It enables a form of leadership driven by fame, admiration and dramaturgy, rather than by election, representation, and accountability. It is leadership by the well-known, not necessarily leadership by the well-qualified. In an era of boundless mass communication worldwide and 'entertainment culture' merging seamlessly with 'high culture' star power feels a lot more potent and 'in tune' than electoral power. Unless of course, the two are aligned, with the one reinforcing the other and vice versa.

Many on both sides of the divide have seen this potential, and many have tried to exploit it. Rock stars rub shoulders with presidents and bankers to eradicate poverty. Politicians keenly seek endorsements of talk show hosts to get (re-)elected. NGO's lobby rappers and soccer stars to become their public faces. A former politician teams up with film makers to produce an Oscar-winning documentary and helps stage the world's biggest-ever rock concert to push for action to curb global warming. A wrestler and a body-builder-turned-actor both get themselves elected as state governors in the US. A poet becomes prime minister in the largest democracy in the world. A TV presenter unseats a four-term prime minister at the ballot box.'

There is no dearth of opinions about celebrity leadership, perhaps because it is clearly an emergent phenomenon that straddles 'democracy's edges' (cf. Shapiro and

Carsiano Hacker-Cordon, 1999). But among the clamour of opinions on offer, there is surprisingly little in the way of empirical analysis. Where, how and why do the worlds of celebrity and politics merge to produce forms of celebrity political leadership? These elementary questions have been given almost no coverage in the celebrity literature, which is scattered across disciplines such as cultural studies, media and communications, sociology and social psychology, with political science contributions modest in number and scope. In the remainder of this chapter we shall try to lay some much-needed groundwork for a comparative analysis of celebrity leadership in established democracies. We analyse the emerging ‘celebrity regime’ in contemporary democracies, where ‘politicians are subjected to Hollywood-style tabloid coverage and celebrities are treated as political actors’ (West and Orman, 2003: x). How does it work? Why are some celebrities successful in playing their self-selected political roles and others not? What, in effect, are key preconditions for celebrity leadership?

2. Celebrity leadership: cui bono?

Some emphasize the good news. Celebrity involvement in politics offers an unorthodox but potentially effective way of breaking the hold of established elites on political agendas and public discourse about policy. Celebrity activists in particular offer examples of an empowering form of public leadership. They have the capacity to reach out to and mobilize otherwise apathetic publics. They sometimes give powerful voices to the disenfranchised in society and at the world stage. Where

legislatures and other institutional watchdogs are sometimes fully co-opted by executive dominance, celebrity-led initiatives can help 'keep the bastards honest.'

Others are deeply critical. Who or what can the Jolie's and Bono's of this world legitimately claim to represent? Their fame is as boundless as the scope of their political causes, but it would be a stretch to argue their leadership is embedded in some form of cosmopolitan democracy (Held, 1995). Some have gone much further in their critique, not just of celebrity activists but of the entire entertainment culture and celebrity politics of which they are but one manifestation. Public intellectuals such as Daniel Boorstin and Neil Postman dismiss all of these as a despicable trend that epitomizes the banal and the mindless in public life, empowering image over substance and producing pseudo-charismatic leadership (cf. Weiskel, 2005).

Whether we like it or not, there can be little doubt that celebrity entails potential political capital for people seeking to exercise public leadership. Two long-time students of celebrity politics note: 'Even though Americans tend not to trust politicians, they have great respect for and confidence in celebrities who enter the world of politics... These individuals have a fame that transcends public service and a reputation for personal integrity. This allows them to succeed politically in ways that are unavailable to more conventional kinds of politicians' (West and Orman, 2003).

That may not necessarily be a good thing. As the critics point out, celebrity politics thrives by virtue of the public behaving as admiring fans rather than discriminating citizens. The undiluted admiration of fandom comes dangerously close to the blind followership characteristic of charismatic leadership (cf. Marshall, 1997: 20-26;

Hughes-Freeland, 2007), and frequently gives rise to psycho-pathological phenomena among both the famous and their fans (Giles, 2000; Ferris, 2007). Still, being widely known and admired can be a great asset for a leader who wants to get things done - noble causes such as those pursued by Jolie and fellow celebrity advocates. But what if the causes pursued by charismatic celebrity-leaders are not so noble? Who or what checks the power of celebrity leadership?

We are not to worry, according to economist Tyler Cowen. In *What Price Fame* (2000: 170) he has argued that ‘the burdens of fame provide a new means of limiting political leaders, a means overlooked by Hobbes and subsequent classical liberal commentators. The separation of fame and merit is part of the price we pay for modern democracy, which relies heavily on media to monitor our leaders.’ In so far as they seek to utilise their own ‘star power’ or exploit that of others, political leaders of both the conventional and celebrity kind will have to submit to relentless public scrutiny of their lives that goes far beyond the accountability regime of parliamentary scrutiny and political journalism. Far from empowering the famous to lead without restraint, celebrity instead provides a relatively fickle and fleeting form of leadership capital, Cowen argues. This is because the media-entertainment complex’s insatiable appetite for not only building up certain people as celebrities but also bringing them down and replacing them by other, fresher faces. Albeit unwittingly, it provides a strong mechanism for cutting rascals down to size and throwing them out when their ‘sell-by’ date has elapsed. Perhaps then, democrats should welcome and not condemn celebrity leadership?

Since celebrity politics can take very different forms (Monaco, 1978; Rojek, 2001; Mukherjee, 2004; Street, 2004), no one-size-fits-all story can do the job. We have to drill down into the specific contingencies and challenges of different manifestations of celebrity politics: the celebrity activist, the celebrity endorser, the celebrity politician, and the politician-turned-celebrity. Each taps into the overall trend towards democratisation of fame as described by Cowen and others, but each has its own distinctive contingencies, challenges and implications for political leadership. Table 1 provides a thumbnail sketch of each of these types, and its political leadership potential. For reasons of space we need to concentrate our efforts at a more systematic analysis on the most conspicuous types: the celebrity activist and the celebrity politician.

TABLE 1 HERE

3. Celebrity activists: leadership by mobilization

While many celebrities today are associated with a charity, some put in a greater effort for their chosen cause and seek to display public leadership on selected issues and causes. Celebrity activists possess the potential resources to have a significant impact in the political process. These resources (both intangible and material) allow them easier access to the many echelons of democratic society (the leaders, the policy makers, the public). They have time and money that they can devote to a limited number of causes. They are not constrained, as politicians are, by the need to cater to various segments of voters and keep interest groups on side.

Celebrity activists face the same constraints that have hindered effective action on their chosen causes in the past (bureaucracy, congress/parliament, organized interests, geopolitics). The difference between them and professional politicians lies in the methods celebrities may employ to bypass or overcome these constraints. Celebrities do not have institutional power, but do tend to have money, or easy access to it. They can use that to make large, publicity-generating donations. It also enables them to ‘buy in’ issue expertise that they themselves (initially) lack (e.g. Jeffrey Sachs working with Jolie and Bono). More importantly they can use their fame to orchestrate intense media coverage, evoke public emotion, and thus mobilize large numbers of people. Their ability to sell products to the public, which is keenly sought by many firms, can be used to sell public ideas and political campaigns. Others’ or their own activist writings can be turned into bestseller books (Cheadle and Prendergast’s *Not On Our Watch: The Mission to End Genocide in Darfur and Beyond*; Jolie’s *Notes From My Travels*), and they can not only produce but also effectively market humanitarian/political documentaries (Clooney’s *Darfur Now*; Jolie’s *The Diary of Angelina Jolie and Dr Jeffrey Sachs in Africa*; DiCaprio’s *11th Hour*) that would otherwise easily be overlooked.

Persona: The importance of seeming earnest

Celebrity activism is an exercise in leadership by mobilisation. Speaking out on a cause or donating money to it are necessary but not sufficient conditions for effective leadership of this kind. Like all activists they need to captivate and energize their target audiences (whether it is the public, or a political leader and his staff). In order

to do so they need to be seen to ‘know their business’ and ‘to be in it for the right reasons’ (i.e. not to polish their own brand names, or to revive fledgling careers).

These claims are easier to make for some celebrities than for others. Is their persona associated with intelligence, seriousness, and social responsibility, or does it epitomize quite the opposite? It takes no Platonic elitist to argue that on the required brain power alone celebrities like Spice Girls Gerri Halliwell or tabloid princess Lady Sarah Ferguson were out of their league when taking on ill-fated UN ambassadorial roles on the world political stage (cf Cooper, 2008). And it does not take a cynic to discern the hand of spin doctors and image consultants in ‘socialite’ Paris Hilton’s sudden (and short-lived) interest in the plight of African children following her brief prison sojourn. Clearly, there is a publicly perceived and politically consequential distinction between ‘activist leadership’ and ‘jumping on the bandwagon’ by celebrities. Some are hailed as ‘serious’ and ‘dedicated’ others are dismissed as lightweights and opportunists.

Like all political actors, celebrity activists need to negotiate the world of facts as well as that of appearances in their quest for the authority they need to be able to persuade and mobilise. The difference among celebrities in doing so is that some among them are famous because of evident merit (even in ‘non high-brow’ sectors such as sports) whereas others, well, only because they are well-known (cf Boorstin, 1961), in however fleeting a fashion. One would expect these different starting points to affect the political capital they enjoy when turning their attention to public causes. Some examples make the point. The polished public persona of 1970s German soccer star Franz Beckenbauer required very little adjustment for him to become ‘Salonfähig’ in

German and global sports leadership roles. To elevate Mike Tyson to a similar sort of stature is surely impossible. Earnest, never too wild rock stars like Bono and Peter Gabriel who both had penned fame-generating political anthems (*Sunday Bloody Sunday* and *Biko* respectively) early in their careers had impeccable celebrity activist credentials. For a Marilyn Manson (shock-rock ‘weirdo’), Michael Jackson (‘wacko jacko’) or Britney Spears (derailed teenage idol) to take the same route would require a serious ‘image makeover.’

There is, however, an alternative interpretation. Perhaps power is simply in numbers and not so much in cultural capital. This is sometimes referred to as the difference between ‘A-list’ and ‘minor’ celebrities, depending on how pervasive their fame is. Michael Jackson and David Beckham are known in all corners of the world, whereas Peter Gabriel’s or cyclist Lance Armstrong’s fame is more limited but equally enduring, whereas at the other extreme there are the ‘celetoids’ (Rojek, 2001) whose fame is artificially created by the entertainment industry (reality soap ‘starlets’ for example) and usually mainly local as well as short-lived. Hence the former should enjoy a competitive advantage over the latter in the market of celebrity activism.

Hence a first set of propositions can be offered:

Proposition 1. The more merit-based the source of a celebrity’s initial fame, the more likely that this celebrity’s charitable and political activism will be seen as significant and successful.

Proposition 2a. The higher the social prestige of the cultural sphere in which a celebrity gained fame, the more likely that this celebrity’s charitable and political activism will be seen as significant and successful.

Proposition 2b. The broader (geographical, numerical) and wider (across social strata and cultural groups) a celebrity's fame, the more likely that this celebrity's charitable and political activism will be seen as significant and successful

Proposition 2c. The more enduring a celebrity's fame, the more likely that this celebrity's charitable and political activism will be seen as significant and successful.

The impact of a celebrity's activism can also be dependent on what happens in their 'regular' careers and their private lives. If they are out of the spotlight professionally they may lose their power to gain interest for a cause. If they become embroiled in personal scandals or controversies this can tarnish their cause. But, paradoxically, it may also benefit it. After all, tabloid coverage of their personal travails does raise the profile of celebrities, and this in turn consolidates their main political resource – their attention-getting potential. It depends on the kind of publicity involved: the odd marital breakdown will probably not hurt a celebrity's 'market value'; personal tragedies in fact enhance it and may give celebrities personal credibility in specific areas (former US first lady Betty Ford and stricken actors Christopher Reeve and Michael J. Fox are prime examples of this). But when publicity is consistently negative, a celebrity's standing with the public suffers, and so to the potential for effective activism. The spectacular disintegration of Michael Jackson's or O.J. Simpson's public persona surrounding their alleged involvement in major crimes made them completely unsuitable to promote any product, let alone pursue good causes. Although under some circumstances celebrities that are mainly notorieties have the potential to be political marketing assets (the 'reformed criminal', the 'former junkie'), originally meritorious celebrities that become notorieties because of

personal aberrations (or worse) are clearly non-starters in the world of celebrity activism.

Tactics: Penetrating the public mind and the corridors of power

As stated, by at least one respect celebrity activists come from behind when trying to lead: they cannot make a simple claim to be a people's representative, as any elected politician can. Although Street (2004) has rightly criticised the narrow notion of representation that lies behind such claims, the argument continues to be raised. In fact, segments of the public seem to have become more critical of celebrity activism for that reason: A September 2007 CBS/NY Times News Poll showed that 49% of Americans think celebrities should stay out of politics (up from 38% in 2003).

Lacking formal authority, celebrities find numerous other ways to influence policy makers. Some are simply variants on traditional diplomacy. For example, politicians are willing to meet with celebrities to raise their profile (or they may genuinely want to meet them), and in turn celebrities can use this opportunity to have access to powerful policy makers. U2 singer Bono is the undisputed master at this game (Tyranziel, 2005). Celebrities play on their own popularity and target top politicians who are fans, or have family members who are fans. Celebrities can also gain access to high-level meetings, such as Davos, as they are thought to inject colour into otherwise bland, arcane events.

Another strategy is for celebrities to formally affiliate with established organizations, such as the UN (as Goodwill Ambassadors' or 'Messengers of Peace'). Former UN

Secretary-General Kofi Annan supported this development. His successor Ban Ki-Moon continued the policy. He named actor George Clooney a ‘UN Messenger of Peace’ in January 2008, showcasing a man who clearly felt the ambiguity on his past as a non-anointed activist (‘I’m not a policymaker, but I’m an advocate – maybe a little more than an advocate. I’m a diplomat in some scary, fucked-up way’, *Rolling Stone*, 2008, 61).

Legitimacy is also conferred on some celebrity activist by other institutions. Bill Gates has been awarded numerous honorary doctorates. Bono and Bill and Melinda Gates were named Time’s ‘People of the Year’ in 2005 (billed as ‘The Good Samaritans’). Furthermore, celebrities also have the resources to create their own organizations to consolidate and ‘corporatize’ their activism, such as Bono’s (PRODUCT)^{RED} and DATA (Debt AIDS Trade Africa), or the Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson’s Research. Some use their ‘home ground’ - the stage on which they perform, the television show they present, award ceremonies – as an institutionalised platform for their activism. The most conspicuous example of this is Oprah Winfrey. Not only does she financially support her own causes (e.g. ‘The Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls’ in South Africa) and publicly endorses those of others. She also uses her show – a global institution of sorts in its own right given its durability and audience size – to provide an effective vehicle for other celebrity activists (Clooney got precious airtime to draw attention to the crisis in Darfur; actress Lucy Liu did the same for the 2005 Kashmir earthquake). Actress Drew Barrymore and rock star Jon Bon Jovi announced personal mega-donations to charities while appearing on her show.

Some celebrities choose different tactics and deliberately eschew institutional affiliations. Actor Sean Penn, for example, pursues a more radical form of activism, visiting Iraq in 2003, reporting on the Iranian elections for the San Francisco Chronicle in 2005, and meeting with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. Penn was also photographed ‘rescuing’ Hurricane Katrina victims and their pets in a small motorboat (rather than just donating to the relief effort). Back in 2002, Penn spent US\$56,000 to take out a full-page advertisement in the *Washington Post* that berated Bush and his Iraq policy. Bob Geldof provides another good example of the rougher edges of ‘rock star diplomacy’ when during the 1985 Live Aid concert he stood on stage and demanded ‘just give us the fucking money!’ Whereas Bono plays the ‘good cop’, Geldof relishes the ‘bad cop’ part in his meetings with politicians and businessmen, sometimes creating scenes that embarrass the VIPs in question. Penn and Geldof receive a lot of criticism for their ‘antics’, but this of course, is publicity too, and may serve to keep the public engaged with the underlying issues.

Which of these two tactical stances works best (or under which conditions)? We simply don’t know. Hence we offer two competing propositions:

Proposition 3a. The more strongly affiliated a celebrity is with well-entrenched socio-political and cultural institutions, the more likely his/her activism will be seen as legitimate, consequential and successful.

Proposition 3b. The more explicitly a celebrity activist eschews being (portrayed as) aligned to well-entrenched socio-political and cultural institutions, the more likely his/her activism will be seen as authentic, independent and successful.

Celebrity activism can take many forms, but roughly one can distinguish between those that stage symbolic dramas (trips to war zones, organizing rock concerts; visiting politicians; running awareness campaigns); entail face-to-face lobbying of political and business elites; and involve direct action (donate money; adopt children; do volunteer work). Again, different celebrities make different tactical choices. Bono self-consciously only engages in the former two. George Soros and Warren Buffet mainly donate money and so do countless Hollywood stars. And people like Gates, Clooney, Winfrey and Jolie cover the entire spectrum.

What works best? The more the better, or does ‘specialization’ have its advantages? Some people are not colourful personae but have enormous financial clout. Lindblom (1977) and many others may rightly lament the disproportionate power of business in many contemporary democracies, but would they also object to the influence wielded by wealthy businessmen who choose to become do-gooders? People who own billions in personal fortune can advance political causes in a dramatic fashion. Much has been made of Soros’ role in furthering democracy in former-Soviet states. It has been said that Soros has furthered democracy in Central and Eastern Europe more than any other individual. Yet eyebrows were raised when Soros then used his money and his access to media to forcefully oppose George W. Bush’s 2004 re-election campaign.

Celebrity activism and democracy

Celebrity activism has the potential to contribute to the intelligence and deliberative quality of democracy by educating segments of society about public issues they would

otherwise remain ignorant about. At the same time, celebrity-focused publicity tends to gloss over crucial facts and complexities. And the strong amplification that celebrity voices receive in the public discourse may crowd out the perspectives provided by other, less famous interlocutors. Top celebrity activist Bono, for example, is advised on economic policy by Jeffrey Sachs – the man whose ardent belief ‘shock therapy’ has brought various ‘new democracies’ economic chaos and political turmoil, and who has since revised his theories (see Klein, 2007). Policies on debt relief masterminded by Sachs and amplified by Bono are the ones that get beamed to the public through mega-spectacles such as the Live 8 concert. Other theories and policy formulas hardly compete on a level-playing field.

Celebrity activism can also reinvigorate democratic politics. Some of it is actively aimed at stimulating public involvement and demanding greater transparency from policymakers. It forces politicians and bureaucrats to take into account the demands and opinions of a wider societal – indeed sometimes global – demographic. On the down side, it can exacerbate the pathology of politics as a popularity contest, which greatly disfavours social problems and groups that celebrities choose not to pay attention to or shy away from (unpopular or controversial causes). In-depth analysis and careful deliberation may give way to star power, clever marketing, rock concerts and cleverly made docu-pics.

Celebrity activism hinges on the importance of front-stage politics. But when push comes to shove, back-room negotiations are at least as crucial in shaping public policy choices. Doors may open easily for celebrities, but after the photo-op when the doors close, stars power may quickly dissipate. From this perspective on where power really

lies, celebrity activists are not political decision makers; they are no more than highly visible lobbyists.

4. Celebrity politicians: leadership through election

Perhaps for that reason some celebrities go beyond staying at the political sidelines and embark on full-time political careers. Quite a few of them succeed in getting elected to legislative or executive office. In India alone, the total number of celebrities and socialites that have become political office-holders runs into the hundreds (Mukherjee, 2004: 80). In the United States, the cases of actors Ronald Reagan (president), Clint Eastwood (mayor), Jesse Ventura (governor), Fred Thompson (senator), John Glenn (astronaut) and Arnold Schwarzenegger (governor) have been widely publicised, applauded, condemned and analysed (West and Orman, 2003; Indiana, 2005; Drake and Higgins, 2006). In the Philippines, Mexico and many other developing nations numerous showbiz figures have likewise made it into politics.¹ Electoral success is, however, by no means guaranteed. For example, global stars such as chess champion Gary Kasparov and soccer wizard George Weah both lost in their high-profile bids to achieve public office in Russia and Liberia: popularity does not necessarily translate into local electability, since ‘political success requires qualities beyond a famous name and celebrity background’ (West, 2003).

The distinctive feature of celebrity politicians is that they go all the way: they generally abandon the world in which they gained fame – movies, music, sports, entertainment – and enter that of politics on a full-time basis. In doing so, they subject

themselves to the laws of electoral politics and public office-holding, unlike celebrity activists and endorsers who tend to combine their original careers with part-time political advocacy. Once elected, celebrity politicians gain one important advantage over their counterparts: they can shrug off many of the questions about the legitimacy of their leadership that dog celebrity activists and endorsers. They are now formally representatives of the people.

Getting there: the road to election

To get there, celebrity politicians tend to capitalise on their position as popular public figures, combining it with self-conscious posturing as ‘political outsiders’, not ‘tainted’ with the awkward compromises, linguistic obfuscation and endemic opportunism that, they claim, professional politics imposes upon its practitioners. They are known, they are liked, and quite often they are rich – all attributes any ordinary newcomer to political campaigning craves. They are new, they are exciting, they are unpredictable – all attributes an incumbent politician they may run against has often long since lost.

Celebrities running for office face challenges that are different from other newcomers to electoral politics. They don’t have to gain a public profile by courting publicity. Instead they need to find a way of exploiting and at the same time subtly refashioning their existing personae to suit their new professional ambitions. It is not always easy to get the balance right. Being well-known and admired by segments of the public does not make celebrities immune from attacks by opponents and criticism by observers. Implicitly or explicitly, celebrities taking the road into professional politics

are open to charges of being not serious, ill-informed, political lightweights, dreamers etc.

As is the case with celebrity advocates, running for political office may require quite considerable restyling of celebrities' public behaviour and public image to make them into credible candidates. The image makeover required is partly a function of the nature of a celebrity's pre-political profession and reputation. One could speculate that, *ceteris paribus*, the more meritorious the basis of a celebrity's fame, and the higher the social esteem accrued to the profession at which the celebrity excelled, the easier it is to credibly portray that celebrity as a future political leader. This proposition can predict the electoral success of high-culture celebrities such as poets (A.B. Vajpayee) and erstwhile literary 'dissidents' (Vaclav Havel). But it does not really account for the political ascent of 'low-culture' celebrities like Joseph Estrada (Philippine schmalz actor turned president), Jesse Ventura (TV wrestler turned state governor). Arnold Schwarzenegger would be a borderline case: his celebrity status derived not from one but two sources: his status as a Hollywood success (but on the wings of violent or corny films frowned upon by the educated classes), and a marriage to a Kennedy clan celebrity (hardly an asset in the Republican circles which he sought to penetrate).

And so we need to turn to other factors to help explain cases of success and failure of celebrity politicians, as well as the differential incidence of celebrities-turned-officeholders across countries. One set of factors is widely discussed in the literature: the political *culture* in which celebrities seek office. To what degree have politics and entertainment been merged already in the public consciousness and in the reporting

practices of both political and entertainment journalists (cf. Gamson, 1994; Marshall, 2003-240; Meyer, 2002; Schudson, 2003)? How much does the voting public respect and trust its current office-holders as compared to other famous people? Hence proposition 4: *the more endemic public disaffection with 'politics as usual', the bigger the political space for even the most unlikely types of celebrities to run for office successfully.*

Perhaps it is no coincidence that the case of the first ever porn star to be elected into parliament occurred in Italy, where trust in politics is persistently low. And perhaps it was no coincidence that erstwhile 'B-movie' actor Ronald Reagan was elected president at a time of a deep crisis in American public life: the economy was in crisis, the Soviets were seen to be gaining the upper hand in the Cold War, America was humiliated by the Iranians, and most of all the country had been through a sequence of three bad presidents: one (Nixon) leaving office in disgrace, another pardoning him before having built up any personal political capital (Ford), and a third widely thought of as politically ineffectual at home and 'weak' abroad (Carter). Reagan's actor persona, undoubted performance skills and impeccable anti-Soviet credentials enabled him to portray himself, like Carter, as a 'Washington outsider' but one with more steel, more rapport with ordinary people, and a greater sense of optimism about America's ability to reinvent itself.

Clearly, media culture is a key force at work here. Celebrity politics presupposes an institutionalised blurring of the boundaries between politics and sports, showbiz and the arts. This blurring occurs through patterns of media coverage (Street, 2004). Thus, proposition 5 reads: *the stronger the market share of tabloids and entertainment*

media, and the more their news-making styles have pervaded the reporting of politics in a polity, the bigger the political opportunity structure for aspiring celebrity politicians in that polity. West and Orman (2003) coined the term 'celebrity regime' for such a state of affairs, and argue the US is a prime case of it. Mukharjee (2004) does the same for India. In contrast, in a media landscape where broadsheets stand firm, the state operates or controls the key television stations, and/or there is living norm among journalists of all kinds that politicians' private lives are off limits, the more difficult it is for celebrities to capitalize on their fame (Stanyer and Wring, 2004: 5-7).

Overlooked by almost all scholars on the subject, political *structure* comes into play too. Are celebrities running for president or for parliament? Are they in a single-winner (e.g. single-member constituency) or multiple-winner (e.g. party list) system, and in a majority-voting or proportional representation environment? The rules of the electoral game affect the scope for celebrity power via the ballot box. In countries with multiple-winner constituencies and proportional representation, and a robust party system, celebrities can often only gain office through an existing political party. To be pre-selected, they must be 'team players' and abide by the requirements of party discipline imposed by its leaders. Once elected they may end up in opposition, or on the backbenches along with the party's other novice parliamentarians.

In many polities therefore, celebrities cannot run their own (electoral) show. This may put off many of them who have become used to doing precisely that. So we are more likely to see celebrity politicians seeking and achieving office in countries with single-member constituencies (where the ultimate battles is between individual

candidates), majority voting (where they are not so dependent upon arcane vote aggregation rules) and/or relatively weak political parties (which are more prone to co-opt political outsiders). Celebrities – with high profiles but quite often big egos to match them – might not be prepared to submit to a political apprenticeship before they can exercise a significant leadership role. Used to the limelight, and having that limelight as their main asset in politics, they may be ill-prepared for instructions from above to shun it for the greater good of the party. Party hierarchy, party programs, party discipline: not a good habitat for the celebrity politician. Hence proposition 6: *the more aspirants to political office are dependent for their election on existing political parties, the less widespread the incidence of celebrities running for office.*

The United Kingdom provides a good example of this. Even though it is a single member, majority-voting system, its party organisations are well entrenched and for the most part deeply conservative in their recruitment practices. Other than Vanessa Redgrave (currently a Labour MP), Glenda Jackson (currently a Labour MP) and Sebastian Coe (Conservative MP 1992-1997, currently in the House of Lords) almost no celebrity from the world of entertainment, the arts and sports has successfully attempted a VIP-entry into politics. This applies in even stronger degree to the smaller West-European countries, where multi-member constituencies and proportional representation make celebrities entirely dependent on party hierarchies for an electable spot on the party list. In the Netherlands, for example, the number of celebrity politicians in parliament has always been zero or close to it; at the same time, since members of the government can be recruited from outside politics, (minor) celebrity academics and business leaders have sometimes entered politics in this way, but they tend to disappear quickly when their terms as ministers are up.

There are two ways for celebrities to overcome the barriers created by party gatekeeping practices. One is to ‘take over’ an existing party and enter it right at the top, as Silvio Berlusconi did in Italy. The celebrity can then sidestep the conservers in the party machine, and make the party hierarchy work for him (or reform it to consolidate his leadership). So, proposition 7: *the more a party has been starved of electoral success and/or political influence in the recent past and the more its traditional cadres have been weakened, the bigger the chances of a celebrity take-over attempt*. When a party is lying on its back, it starts looking around for potential saviours to pull it out of oblivion. In these circumstances, criteria such as ideological purity, appropriate gravitas and grass roots experience quickly lose relevance. Outsiders with money or fame (but preferably both) are well placed to pose as saviours and be believed.

The other option is to simply by-pass existing parties and form one’s own. The personalist party has been around for a long time in for example Latin America (Vargas in Brazil, Peron in Argentina, see Lewis, 1973), but it is a relatively new and rare phenomenon in many Western European countries, whose PR-systems offer potentially good prospects for it. The sagas that do exist are revealing though. Sweden had its New Democracy party founded by and built around two celebrities (an aristocrat-industrialist and a record company owner) in the early 1990s. The Netherlands saw the rise and fall of the List-Pim Fortuyn in the early 2000s. It was formed by the eponymous public intellectual cum extravagantly gay socialite Pim Fortuyn, after he repeatedly failed to gain a prominent position in virtually all of the main existing political parties. Both parties took radical right-wing positions on issues

like immigration and Islam, both were highly successful at first in capitalizing upon the charisma of their celebrity founders. Both, however, proved short-lived. New Democracy's two figureheads had a very intense and very public falling out, and the party disintegrated after just one term in parliament (one of the founding duo ironically went on to develop a successful TV show called *Fame Factory*). Fortuyn was assassinated a few days before he contested his first election; the party nevertheless received almost 20% of the seats in the 2002 parliament and found itself a member of the new coalition government. An intense and widely reported power struggle between Fortuyn's hitherto anonymous lieutenants helped decimate its popular support within four years. Although often meteoric in their rise, charisma-based personalist parties are latently unstable, and tend not to last, although exceptions (Peronism in Argentina and Gaullism in France) do exist. In a climate of de-aligned and disaffected voters celebrity politicians may successfully create their own electoral vehicles, but to keep them going over time presupposes political skills and organizational talent that they do not often appear to possess. Money alone is not enough: even billionaire Ross Perot's once so bright political star faded relatively quickly.

In whichever form celebrities choose to make the run to office, they all face the same key dilemma: how to position their past life (the extra-political source of their celebrity) in the frame of their new, political life. Before entering politics the celebrity may have lived in ways that can be a source of political embarrassment for her. Shadows from their past have a way of catching up with celebrities in general, and even more so with those who now have to get elected by large numbers of ordinary, God-fearing, law-abiding heartland citizens. Pictures and stories of sexual adventures,

drug habits, 'bad' company, personal profligacy, past partners, and neglected children may pop up. Such 'revelations' (often old stories known among insiders but now dramatized through fresh evidence or ruthless journalistic framing) can turn the celebrity's past life from a great asset into a potential liability virtually overnight? Did Arnold take drugs on his road to become body-building champion? And was he 'rough' in sexual encounters? What casualties did he make on his road to body-building and acting glory?

The embarrassment may also be more explicitly political. Were Arnie's parents Nazis? And what exactly were young Arnold's political beliefs? Had he rubbed shoulders with his native Karinthian extremist right-wing political son, Jörg Haider? Moreover, celebrity politicians who first were celebrity activists may be haunted by the very purity and radicalism of their early political stances. Midnight Oil singer turned Labor MP and then Environment minister Peter Garrett is a case in point (Daily Telegraph, 2007; Sydney Morning Herald, 2007).

Schwarzenegger overcame all that with apparent ease. Perhaps he simply has more political savvy than Garrett. Perhaps he has better spin doctors to advise him how to cope with these shadows of the past. But perhaps the two cases are illustrative of a larger pattern, captured in proposition 8: *the larger the discrepancy between a celebrity politician's past and current life styles, espoused political values and policy preferences, the greater the likelihood that this celebrity will suffer credibility damage from selective media exposure of his past.* The challenge for celebrity politicians is to draw political capital from the idiosyncrasy credit (Hollander, 1978) they enjoy because of their star status, and avoid being dragged down by it. Covering up or lying

about aspects of their past that may reduce their electability, as ambitious political newcomers sometimes do, is hardly an option for celebrity-newcomers: the details of their lives are a matter of public knowledge. Their job is to frame the story of their past life, so as to make it work for, and not against their current political aspirations.

Some resolve this potential tension by perfectly matching a rather outrageous pre-political life with an equally outrageous political persona. This will only work in a parliamentary system where niche popularity (local or sectional) is enough to ensure election; this strategy would be impossible for those running for executive office. Surely the most powerful example of self-conscious non-conformist stardom both before and in politics is Italian porn star turned parliamentarian Cicciolina, who among other things offered to have sex with Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden in exchange for peace.

Being there: celebrity leaders in office

To achieve high political office is one thing; to hold on to it over time and to utilize it to display effective leadership are quite different challenges. There is no systematic research available that compares the length of tenure of celebrity politicians to the average in their respective jurisdictions, but our hunch is that particularly in established democracies, celebrities on average don't last very long. None of the previous Dutch, Swedish and Italian examples lasted longer than five years; although counterexamples (Vanessa Redgrave, John Glenn among them) are not difficult to find either. One could argue that for the reasons set out above, celebrity politicians in parliamentary systems with strong cadre parties are likely to find their time in politics

frustrating rather than uplifting. They may fare better in presidential systems, where legislators can build up much more of an individual profile; and even better when elected to executive office, where they can – within limits – actually call the shots. Hence the logic of proposition 9: *In established democracies, the average tenure of celebrity politicians is shorter than that of professional ones; and it is shorter in presidential than in parliamentary systems.*

The art of executive leadership is markedly different from that of campaigning or legislating, although perhaps in a fully developed celebrity regime' that distinction becomes increasingly obsolete (the 'permanent campaign' syndrome). Are celebrities good at governing? Again, systematic research is lacking and the total number of cases in the Western world is still too limited, so no empirically founded generalizations are possible. Talking about the US context, West (2003) argues that the record of celebrity leadership in government is mixed: 'To win office, celebrities often assemble unconventional coalitions that transcend normal party alignments. Unlike established politicians who most appeal to conventional political constituencies, celebrities can build coalitions that are more broad-based... [T]his same quality harms them in the governing process. The presence of broad voter support often is based on an allegiance that is not very deep.' Likewise, 'the very qualities (independence and unconventionality) that voters find appealing often alienate the media and legislators. When these individuals start complaining, voters sometimes see the celebrity as an amateur and a novice who is not up the governing job. If that perception becomes widespread, it is hard for celebrity politicians to govern very effectively.'

Still, Ronald Reagan consistently pops up in the upper ranks of almost every ‘presidential greatness’ poll taken since the end of his presidency. In office, he displayed a remarkable capacity to overcome gaffes, setbacks and outright fiascos (such as the Iran-Contra affair) and retain personal popularity (see Schwartz, 1990). A celebrity war hero who turned president, Dwight Eisenhower is up there as well, ever since historians discovered that behind the veneer of the disengaged, golf-playing president lies a man whose ‘hidden-hand’ leadership style was far more pervasive and effective than generally assumed during his time in office (Greenstein, 1982). Both these celebrity presidents achieved relatively high popularity scores whilst in office; both had no problems getting re-elected. But their enduring esteem as effective policy-makers owed perhaps less to their celebrity status as to relevant experience of governing (Eisenhower as supreme allied commander during World War II and Reagan as governor of California). At the state level, Jesse Ventura’s initially sky-high popularity did not last more than a year or two, and he retired as governor of Minnesota after one term. Arnold Schwarzenegger on the other hand proved comfortable with leading America’s most populous state, got re-elected in 2006, and seems well-entrenched at the helm of Californian politics.

In all, although the record is mixed and broad cross-national variation is as yet lacking, we might offer a final, tenth proposition: *Celebrity politicians are more likely to exercise effective leadership in executive rather than legislative roles.*

5. Conclusions

There is much to be learned about celebrity politics in general, and about celebrity leadership in particular. The ten propositions offered here hopefully provide a viable starting point for the kind of systematic empirical analysis that the literature is so sorely lacking (Duvall, 2007), which should also include the two forms of celebrity leadership not covered here (cf table 1). We need to know more about the similarities and differences between various national systems of political celebrity production, as well as the degree to which transnational celebrity power affects national political processes. We need to acquire a more fine-grained picture of celebrity politics, and compare different types of celebrities, different celebrity leadership tactics, and different electoral and executive settings. Only when we have a more firm empirical footing can we fully address the normative question raised by Cowen and others: is the emergence of a celebrity regime at the intersection of entertainment and politics a bad or a good thing for democracy? If we deplore the power of money in election campaigns and seek to curtail monetary donations to parties and candidates, how do we view the increasing number and scope of political endorsements by celebrities? Which forms and extent of celebrity activism do we regard as democratically desirable, and which not? And when do the celebrity antics of incumbent politicians (like Bill Clinton or Nicolas Sarkozy) begin to erode the institutional legitimacy of the offices they hold?

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Table 1 Celebrity leadership: A comparative overview

	Celebrity advocate	Celebrity endorser	Celebrity politician	Politician-celebrity
<i>Foundations</i>	Issue-focused: agenda-setting and/or policy-seeking behaviour by high-visibility figures from traditionally non-political spheres (entertainment, arts, sports, civil society, journalism, science)	Office-focused: high-visibility figures from traditionally non-political spheres offering financial and/or public support for a political candidate and/or party	Office-seeking: legislative or executive offices sought by high-visibility figures from traditionally non-political spheres	Office-transforming: office-holder whose public behaviour, purposeful association with celebrities, and/or private life alter his public persona beyond the traditional political sphere into the celebrity sphere Subtypes: P-C1: active (by intent); P-C2: passive (by accident/scandal)
<i>Nature of leadership exercised</i>	Political mobilization: Watch dog Agenda-setter Educator Energizer	Electoral momentum-building:	Achieving formal legislative or executive leadership positions	Not applicable. (P-C1: power consolidation or expansion) (P-C2: political survival)
<i>Relation to institutional politics</i>	Informal; not embedded; System-confirming: refocusing public and political agendas; supporting existing NGO's/IGO's System-eroding: vocal criticism of incumbent elites and institutions	Informal; partially embedded System-confirming: mobilizing support for candidates in electoral contests	Formal; embedded System-confirming: celebrity chooses the path of conventional, electoral politics to exercise leadership	Informal; embedded System-expanding: P-C1 seeks to widen his/her (and her policies') appeal by reaching 'beyond politics' P-C2's private life is propelled into the public limelight, and becomes a political issue
<i>Leadership capital</i>	'Concentrated star power' Has easy access to (free) publicity, is a known and liked public figure. Enjoys personal wealth and/or easy access to funds as well as advocacy professionals. Few constraints on ability to pursue 'unorthodox', 'direct', 'controversial' advocacy methods in the service of one	'Selective star power' Has easy access to (free) publicity, is a known and liked public figure. Enjoys personal wealth and easy access to other high-profile donors and/or endorsers	'Constrained star power' Has easy access to (free) publicity, is a known and often liked public figure, and not (yet) 'tainted' by politics as usual. Enjoys personal wealth and easy access to high-profile endorsers and donors Has 'outsider' status, and can draw on	'Borrowed star power' P-C1 uses privileged access to celebrity circles/events that comes with office-holding, and is in fact key target for celebrity activists' political lobbying activities The smell of 'something big' in P-C2's personal life attracts entertainment, gossip, tabloid journalism that would otherwise not cover politicians

	cause		references to 'former life' to garner support and/or avoid punishment for unorthodox political behaviour	
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Notes

¹ Other countries, particularly those of Western Europe as well as Australia and New Zealand seem remarkably impervious to such celebrity inroads into electoral politics - although the Australian Labour Party successfully launched first former rock star Peter Garrett (of *Midnight Oil* fame) and then high-profile television journalist Maxine McKew in the national elections of 2004 and 2007. The cross-national differences between high and low incidences of celebrity politicians are an interesting phenomenon worth studying in its own right, particularly since standard explanations of the phenomenon tend to emphasize universal trends in the media technology, ownership and culture as the chief causes. Obviously, these cannot account for such differences, which suggests that elements of political structure (e.g. electoral systems and party systems) and political culture (e.g. attitudes towards 'traditional' politics and politicians) should be factored into the explanation.