

SESSION II: ANGELINA, BONO, AND ME:
NEW VEHICLES TO ENGAGE THE PUBLIC
WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 1, 11:00-12:45 P.M.

ANGELINA, MIA, AND BONO: CELEBRITIES AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Darrell M. West

Brown University

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Celebrity culture is hardly a new phenomenon. There are strong historical antecedents which continue, in some form, to this day. However, more recent changes in the structure and operation of the media have contributed to a celebrity culture that truly blurs the line between politics and entertainment. An electorate that trusts politicians to tell the truth has been replaced by a public that is highly skeptical about rhetoric and intentions, leading to a more prominent role for celebrity advocates. At one level, this celebrity regime is beneficial to our culture and to our political system. Celebrities, unbound by political constraints, bring new perspectives which expand the range of ideas represented in our national dialogue. But in other respects, a system based on “celebrityhood” raises the risk that there will be more superficiality and less substance in our political process. The overall effect of this level of celebrity involvement is a political system where star power is weighted more heavily than traditional political skills and civil discourse is diluted of much of its substance. Citizens must feel engaged in the process, must be able to think about their options, and must feel they have a stake in the important decisions that get made. As politics becomes mere entertainment, the danger is that society loses its ability to solve pressing social problems.

It is the Age of Celebrity in the United States. Glamorous movie stars run for elective office and win. Former politicians play fictional characters on television shows. Rock stars and actresses raise money for a variety of humanitarian causes. Musicians,

athletes, and artists speak out on issues of hunger, stem cell research, international development, and foreign policy.

While the contemporary era is not the first time celebrities have spoken out on questions of public policy, there are a number of factors in the current period that have given celebrities a far greater voice in civic affairs. The culture has changed in ways that glorify fame and fortune.¹ The news industry has become highly competitive. Media reporters need good copy, and few sources provide better copy than actors, athletes, and entertainers. Voters are cynical and do not trust conventional politicians or experts. The fact that political advocacy has become very expensive places a premium on those such as celebrities who can attract attention and raise money.²

In this essay, I look at the history of celebrity activism; how contemporary activism by Angelina Jolie, Mia Farrow, and Bono falls within a long history of celebrity action by Marlon Brando, Jackson Browne, and Bob Geldof; what factors have contributed to this phenomenon of celebrity activism; what the age of celebrity reveals about our time period; and what risks and benefits arise from celebrity involvement in international development.

In important respects, I argue, the contemporary period has undergone crucial changes that have encouraged celebrity activism. Celebrities have done an excellent job highlighting public and media attention, and raising money for specific causes. But there are risks to civil discourse dominated by celebrities. Media fascination with famous spokespersons drains attention from experts with detailed knowledge, and risks the skewing of civil discourse toward solutions which may not represent effective long-term remedies for complex policy problems.

THE EMERGENCE OF CELEBRITY POLITICS

Celebrity politics is not a new phenomenon. Throughout American history, celebrated writers and non-politicos have spoken out on issues of the day. Mark Twain's political satire and quips twitted many a prominent public figure. Ernest Hemingway was involved in a number of foreign and domestic controversies of his era, such as the Spanish Civil War. Charles Lindbergh gained fame as the first pilot to fly solo, nonstop across the Atlantic, and then used his new-found prominence to lead America's isolationist movement in the 1930s and 1940s.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a number of singers and actors became active in civil affairs. Folksinger Arlo Guthrie did political benefits to back Chilean freedom fighters. Phil Ochs organized a tribute to President Salvador Allende, who was assassinated during a military coup. French actress Brigitte Bardot fought against exploitation of baby seals. Actor Marlon Brando raised money in 1966 for the United Nations International Children's Education fund for famine relief. And following the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Brando pledged 12 percent of his earnings to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in support of civil rights.

¹ Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and its History* (New York: Vintage, 1986).

² David Canon, *Actors, Athletes, and Astronauts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990).

In 1971, Beatles star George Harrison co-organized The Concert for Bangladesh to raise money for starving refugees. He persuaded Bob Dylan, Ringo Starr, Billy Preston, and others to play at Madison Square Garden and their joint concert raised \$240,000 for the United Nations Children's Fund for Relief to Refugee Children of Bangladesh. Singer Harry Chapin led efforts to alleviate world hunger. From 1973 to 1981, he raised half a million dollars per year to fight hunger. His lobbying on behalf of this cause led in 1978 to the establishment of a Presidential Commission on Domestic and International Hunger and Malnutrition.

Throughout the Vietnam War, a number of celebrities spoke out against administration policies. In 1968, actor Robert Vaughn worked in the "Dump LBJ" movement, and celebrities such as Paul Newman, Tony Randall, Myrna Loy, and Leonard Nimoy labored on behalf of presidential candidate Eugene McCarthy. Jane Fonda became the darling of anti-war activists (and the object of scorn from many veterans) when she condemned American foreign policy during a visit to Hanoi. In 1972, actor Warren Beatty organized celebrities for Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern, while John Wayne and Sammy Davis, Jr. supported Republican Richard Nixon.

In the 1980s, a series of "No Nukes" concerts organized by Musicians United for Safe Energy raised awareness about the danger of nuclear energy. Following that effort, Jackson Browne helped to build the nuclear freeze movement designed to stop the arms race. In the summer of 1982, he, along with Linda Ronstadt and James Taylor, played benefit concerts in New York City to raise money for a nuclear freeze. Reagan's so-called "secret war" against Nicaragua led Browne to become a strong critic of Reagan's policies. He played concerts, donated money, wrote songs, and gave media interviews protesting Reagan's efforts to undermine the Nicaraguan government.

Meanwhile, Stevie Wonder lent his voice to the battle against apartheid in South Africa and in favor of a Martin Luther King, Jr. national holiday within the United States. In the mid-1980s, Irish rocker Bob Geldof conceived of Live Aid concerts to raise money for starving people in Ethiopia. After seeing a BBC film documenting the starvation and famine in Ethiopia, he organized two giant 1985 concerts called, "Live Aid." The international television broadcast event reached over a billion people and raised over \$140 million for the people of Ethiopia. For his efforts, he became the first rock star nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize and was invited to address the European Parliament, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Mother Teresa and the U.S. Congress.

Seeing the success of this effort, Willie Nelson organized a "Farm Aid" concert for American farmers. Joining with Neil Young, Bob Dylan, and John Cougar Mellencamp, the group raised money and consciousness about the plight of the rural poor. Mellencamp recorded songs about farmers on his Scarecrow and Lonesome Jubilee albums and testified in support of the Family Farm Bill. Singer Bruce Springsteen headlined an Amnesty International Human Rights Now tour along with Sting, Tracy Chapman, and Peter Gabriel. This worldwide effort called attention to the problem of political prisoners in a variety of countries.

More recently, actor Michael J. Fox has given speeches and worked for candidates who supported stem cell research. Hoping to find a cure for Parkinson's disease, Fox

featured prominently in Democratic efforts to regain control of the U.S. Congress. Actress Mia Farrow has campaigned to raise awareness about mass genocides. Actress Angelina Jolie has worked extensively on issues of international development, world hunger, and child adoption. Appearing at a press conference at the Washington headquarters of Global Action for Children, an adoption agency, Jolie said, “this is a happy day because it is not often enough that these children are represented in this town.”³

U2 singer Bono co-founded DATA (Debt, AIDS, Trade, Africa) to fight poverty and has toured Africa with administration officials in an effort to encourage debt relief for poor countries. Ocean’s 13 stars George Clooney, Brad Pitt, and Matt Damon used their Cannes Film Festival release to publicize the Darfur genocide. Human rights activist John Prendergast argued that “celebrities have been crucial in building awareness on a wide range of things that would otherwise be just a distant concern. Clooney is smarter than any politician I’ve dealt with on this issue. Angelina Jolie is as clued in on the policy issues as any politician.”⁴

The Iraq War has drawn a number of artists into celebrity activism. Among those speaking out against the war have been actor Sean Penn, singer Linda Ronstadt, actor Martin Sheen, and comedian Al Franken. Musicians such as Ozzy Osbourne and Merle Haggard penned virulent anti-war songs designed to move public opinion against the war. Haggard even went so far as writing a song saying it was time for a woman president: “This country needs to be honest, changes need to be large. Something like a big switch of gender. Let’s put a woman in charge.” But country singer Toby Keith remained strongly within the GOP camp. Defending the war with patriotic melodies such as “Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue” and “American Soldier”, Keith and Brooks and Dunn became popular performers at Republican rallies.

THE RISE OF CELEBRITY ACTIVISTS

While celebrity activism is not new, several trends over the past few decades have given celebrities new prominence in debates over public policy. Changes in the structure and operation of the media have contributed to a celebrity culture that provides actors, musicians, and athletes a platform from which to speak out.⁵ The line between politics and entertainment has blurred to the point where actors such as Arnold Schwarzenegger have become politicians and former politicians such as Senator Fred Thompson star in prominent television shows.

“Hardball” executive producer Phil Griffin was cognizant of this trend when he booked actress Goldie Hawn for the show after she spoke out at a press conference demanding that Congress vote on a China trade bill. Asked why he invited her to do the show, Griffin replied that “the China trade deal ain’t exactly a big winner on these talk shows, or anywhere, for that matter, so I said, ‘Let’s get her on.’”⁶ It was a way to draw attention to a technical subject that normally did not elicit much public or press interest.

³ Quoted in the *Daily Telegraph*, “Jolie Stars for Orphans,” April 28, 2007, p. 11.

⁴ Dan Glaister, “Sudan: Not on Our Watch,” *The Guardian*, May 19, 2007, p. 29.

⁵ Ronald Brownstein, *The Power and the Glitter: The Hollywood-Washington Connection* (New York: Pantheon, 1990).

⁶ Quoted in Darrell M. West and John Orman, *Celebrity Politics*, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 2003).

The Washington bureau chief for Fox News Channel views the growing trend of celebrity activists appearing on television to lobby for particular causes as mutually advantageous to the celebrity and the news media. “We probably have three or four celebrities appear on Capitol Hill a week,” Kim Hume said. “Granted, I’m sure there are celebrities who have real passion about particular issues and they really do want to make a difference. But most of it is a collusion between the way they wish the public would see them and the way the public relations people use them in order to get attention for their causes.”⁷

With the rise of new technologies such as cable television, talk radio, blogs, and the Internet, the news business has become very competitive and more likely to focus on famous personalities. Tabloid shows such as Access Hollywood attract millions of viewers, glorify celebrities, and provide a “behind-the-scenes” look at the entertainment industry. Reporters stake out “star” parties, and report on who is in attendance. The old “establishment” press that kept rumors of President John F. Kennedy’s marital infidelities out of the newspapers has been replaced by a news media that specializes in reporting on the private lives of politicians and Hollywood stars.

Celebrity activism becomes a way for actors and musicians to stay in the news even when they have no new movie or CD to promote.⁸ In today’s rapidly changing world, celebrities feel pressure to keep their names in the news since it is a long time between movies or concert tours. Promoting a charitable or political cause allows celebrities to remain in the public eye and garners appearances on talk and entertainment shows. While celebrities generally prefer non-controversial causes such as fundraising for children living in poverty or breast cancer research, increasingly, entertainment figures are taking stances on controversial subjects, such as the Iraq War, and are making formal endorsements in election campaigns.

Changes in public opinion have given celebrities stronger credibility to speak out on political matters. From the standpoint of political activists, celebrities are a way to reach voters jaded by political cynicism. In the 1950s, two-thirds of Americans trusted the government in Washington to do what is right.⁹ Presidents had high moral authority, and citizens had confidence in the ethics and morality of their leaders. However, following scandals in Vietnam and Watergate, economic stagflation, and controversies over Iran-Contra and Monica Lewinsky, the public became far less trusting. They no longer are confident about political leaders and are less likely to trust their statements. When asked whether they trust the government in Washington to do what is right, two-thirds of Americans currently express mistrust. Citizens feel that politicians are in it for themselves and that they serve special interests. An electorate that trusts politicians to tell the truth has been replaced by a public that is highly skeptical about rhetoric and intentions.

In this situation, it is difficult for politicians to raise money and build public support because they simply do not have the credibility necessary for political persuasion. Therefore,

⁷ See quote in West and Orman’s *Celebrity Politics*.

⁸ Larry Sabato, Mark Stempel, and Robert Lichter, *Peep Show: Media and Politics in an Age of Scandal* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

⁹ Paul Abramson, *Political Attitudes in America* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1983).

they need to associate with people who have greater public credibility. These are generally individuals from outside the political realm. Non-politicians are considered more trustworthy and less partisan by the electorate, and have high credibility with the general public. For these reasons, celebrities allow political advocates to reach citizens turned off by the political process and unhappy with conventional politicians.

As long as they keep themselves reasonably clean and scandal-free, celebrities are seen as white knights, not tainted by past partisan scandals or political dealings. Citizens trust them to shake up the political establishment and bring new ideas to public policymaking. Their fame attracts press coverage and campaign contributors. Journalists crowd their press conferences and strain to hear what they have to say about foreign and domestic policy. Even though they lack detailed knowledge on these issues, celebrities have a platform that allows them to command attention in civic discourse.

The growing cost of political advocacy in the United States has contributed to the emergence of celebrity politics. Politicians and activists need large amounts of money to promote their causes. This need for cash forces politicians and issue advocates into alliances with athletes, actors, and artists who headline fundraising events. In order to guarantee a large turnout at a fundraising party, it has become common to feature comedians, singers, and other celebrities who can attract a large crowd.

In the 2004 presidential election, for example, Bruce Springsteen gave a series of concerts to raise money to defeat President George W. Bush, and other Hollywood celebrities such as actors Sean Penn, Mike Farrell, and Linda Ronstadt spoke out against the Iraq War. Meanwhile, with their strong support in “red” states, Republicans relied on country singers like Garth Brooks who lent their names to the cause of electing Republicans across the country.

There used to be concern about celebrities’ images getting tangled up in political controversies. Dating back to Jane Fonda’s opposition to the Vietnam War and the resulting political backlash among veterans upset with her visit to Hanoi, celebrities have worried that too much political involvement could damage their careers. However, in recent years, the large number of entertainers taking active political positions suggests that there is far less concern about negative fallout than would have been the case a few decades ago. There is safety in numbers. As long as many celebrities are politically active, there is far less danger that any one of them will suffer a debilitating backlash from his or her political activities. The activism of some encourages activism by other celebrities.

Celebrity culture is not something that is being inflicted on an unwilling public. Rather, it is a development that people watch and willingly participate in. Tabloid newspapers have a large circulation: *The National Enquirer* sells around 2.3 million copies every week, and *Star* magazine has a circulation of 1.7 million. Television shows devoted to gossip about the famous do well. An average of 3.5 million viewers watches the syndicated television show *Inside Edition*, and the E! Entertainment network attracts several million viewers to its shows about Hollywood figures.¹⁰ Celebrities dominate the list of personalities

¹⁰ *Ulrich’s International Periodicals Directory* (New York: Bowker, 2000).

that people would like to meet. A national survey of teenagers found they would like to meet musicians most, followed by athletes and actors—politicians are well down the list.

Not only are people fascinated with famous individuals and their personal lives, they want to be on television themselves. Indeed, their quest for fame is so strong they are willing to eat rats or betray loved ones to achieve stardom. Note the popularity of “reality-based” television shows. The final episode of the first season of *Survivor* earned ratings that were second only to the Super Bowl. The popularity of this genre led pollsters to ask a national sample what they would be willing to allow a reality show to film them doing. The most popular results were 31 percent for being in their pajamas, 29 percent for kissing, 26 percent for crying, 25 percent for having an argument with someone, 16 percent for being drunk, 10 percent for eating a rat or insect, 8 percent for being naked, and 5 percent for having sex.¹¹ This “democratization” of fame, first described by Leo Braudy many years ago, allows people of ordinary talent to become “temporary” celebrities.¹²

It is clear that the celebrity cult of personality resonates with many Americans. Viewers love to hear tidbits about celebrity lives, even what these individuals think about political issues of the day. America is a voyeuristic society that values news and information about prominent people as well as ordinary people who have fleeting moments of fame.

THE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF CELEBRITY POLITICS

America’s celebrity politics makes for an entertaining show. It is fascinating to see a former wrestler such as Jesse Ventura win the governorship of a major state or Arnold Schwarzenegger capture the California gubernatorial election. Hillary Clinton’s campaign for president attracts great interest, as do the campaigns of various “third-generation” Kennedys around the country.¹³ But there is more at stake than merely entertainment in the rise of celebrity culture, particularly in the political arena.

At one level, this celebrity regime is beneficial to our culture and to our political system. Celebrities bring new ideas to the process. Unlike conventional politicians, celebrities do not have to serve a long apprenticeship before they run for major offices. In a world where entangling alliances are the rule, these individuals are as close to free agents as one can find. This freedom allows them to challenge the conventional wisdom, adopt unpopular stances, and expand the range of ideas represented in our national dialogue. Since they are not conventional politicians and are not limited to mainstream coalitions based on Left or Right, they have greater potential to innovate than career politicians. This is one of the reasons why most celebrities who run for public office end up winning. Voters see them as white knights who can shake up a stagnant political system that ignores important issues.

Celebrities have demonstrated ability to raise money and attract media attention. In some cases, it is clear they have shaped public opinion, altered the political agenda, and influenced public policymaking. Michael J. Fox has raised awareness of the potential of stem cell research to help those who suffer from debilitating diseases. Bono helped convince

¹¹ CNN/Time Poll conducted June 14-15, 2000. Reported at www.pollingreport.com.

¹² See Braudy’s *The Frenzy of Renown*.

¹³ Darrell M. West, *Patrick Kennedy: The Rise to Power* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 2000).

leaders at the 2005 G8 meeting to forgive a portion of Africa's International Monetary Fund and World Bank debts. And in the past couple of years, a number of Hollywood actors and actresses have focused public attention on Darfur and other tragic genocides around the world.

Within the United States, national surveys document that more than ten percent of Americans get information about politics from late-night entertainment shows such as *The Tonight Show* or *Letterman*. And for those under the age of thirty years old, that figure rises to nearly half.¹⁴ As the network news has emphasized entertainment features and lifestyle stories at the expense of hard news, more and more Americans are turning to entertainment shows such as *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart for political commentary. This gives celebrities great power to alter citizen awareness of issues neglected by the mainstream press.

But in other respects, a system based on celebrityhood raises problems. Our fascination with celebrities raises the risk that there will be more superficiality and less substance in our political process. Celebrities have contributed to the circus atmosphere that has arisen in American politics. Increasingly, politics has become a matter of public performance. Advocates get judged more by their ability to deliver crisp sound bytes than by their substantive knowledge. With journalists interested in celebrity quotes and good copy, experts with detailed knowledge about public policy are less likely to get taken seriously. It is easier to go to the famous and get their opinion than to seek out voices of less prominent people who may actually know more.

In addition, there is the risk that well-intentioned celebrities will push ill-conceived solutions. Non-profit activist Franklin Cudjoe put it most bluntly when he criticized celebrity activists saying, "They use rock-star economics and it's just plain wrong. They ignore history, they peddle the completely misguided belief that poverty, famine and corruption can be solved with foreign aid, debt relief and other policies that have already failed Africa."¹⁵

Lack of knowledge is a particular problem in the area of international development because it is not clear that popular solutions such as country-specific sanctions or debt relief actually solve the intended problems. For example, calls for economic sanctions against nations that violate human rights or engage in repressive behavior assume sanctions actually work. Yet a 1998 article by Robert Pape entitled "Why Economic Sanctions Still Do Not Work" suggests that unless there are broad international agreements and strong enforcement mechanisms, sanctions do not stop undesirable behavior.¹⁶ He looked at 40 examples of "claimed successes", but found that only five of the 40 cases were successful at achieving their aims. Countries simply find routes around the sanctions.

Proposals to alleviate poverty through debt relief must be combined with measures to reduce corruption and improve public sector capacity. Without effective political reform, putting more foreign aid into corrupt countries is not going to improve the plight of average

¹⁴ Paul Brownfield, "Iowa, New Hampshire... 'Tonight Show'?" *Los Angeles Times* (11 February 2000).

¹⁵ Quoted in Shelley Page, "Star Power, A Cause Celebre," *Ottawa Citizen*, August 13, 2006, p. B12.

¹⁶ Robert Pape, "Why Economic Sanctions Still Do Not Work," *International Security*, Vol. 23, no. 1 (Summer, 1998), pp. 66-77.

people. Rather, it just becomes a way to enrich the ruling class of that country and line the Swiss bank accounts of corrupt leaders.

It would be interesting, for example, to evaluate what happened to the \$140 million raised by Bob Geldof for the people of Ethiopia in 1985. Although there has not been any systematic assessment of the impact of that cash infusion, 20 years later Ethiopia continues to fall at the bottom of virtually every indicator of social and economic well-being. According to 2007 estimates, Ethiopian life expectancy is 49 years, 39 percent of the country's population lies below the poverty line, and 4.4 percent of its citizens suffer from HIV/AIDS.¹⁷ Simply dumping millions of dollars into poor societies does not necessarily improve the plight of ordinary folks.

To be effective at solving problems, the American political system depends on careful deliberation, participation, and engagement. But what we have now is a system where star power is weighted more heavily than traditional political skills, such as bargaining, compromise, and experience. Conventional politicians are being replaced by famous, media-savvy fundraisers. The quality of civic deliberation is becoming trivialized. The gossip quotient has increased, and politics has become a 24-hour entertainment spectacle.

With attention spans for important stories dropping precipitously, the system rewards celebrity politicians with famous names. Unless these individuals provide citizens with proper information, it short-circuits our system of governance. Reporters have become much more likely to focus on human features than detailed policy substance. According to William Winter, who was one of America's first television news broadcasters, modern news broadcasts are "increasingly shallow and trivial."¹⁸ Competition in American politics centers around who can reduce complex messages down to understandable, nine-second (or, more recently, five-second) sound bytes.¹⁹

Without quality information, voters cannot make informed choices about their futures. American politics never has placed a strong emphasis on substance. Compared to other Western democracies, fewer people vote at election time, and many appear not to be very informed about their decisions. As celebrity politics takes root, there is the long-term danger that citizens will become even less knowledgeable about policy choices, and they may become content to watch and be entertained. But elections are a key device by which representative democracy takes place. Citizens must feel engaged in the process, must be able to think about their options, and must feel they have a stake in the important decisions that get made. As politics becomes mere entertainment, the danger is that society loses its ability to solve pressing social problems.

¹⁷ The World Factbook, 2007.

¹⁸ Quoted in Ron Miller, "TV News: Increasingly Shallow, Trivial," *Bridgeport Post* (17 May 1990): D8.

¹⁹ Kiku Adatto, *Picture Perfect: The Art and Artifice of Public Image Making* (New York: Basic, 1993).