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Oranutt Narapruet

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Celebrity Philanthropy: Reassessing Fame For Civil Society



Oranutt Narapruet is the Development Director at the Philanthropy Bridge Foundation. Prior to this, she worked for almost four years as Development Officer at the Charities Aid Foundation's Global Trustees division. Oranutt is currently completing her postgraduate studies in Global Politics and Global Civil Society at the London School of Economics.

Oranutt Narapruet argues for the support and enabling of philanthropy efforts by stars.

Bob Geldoff. Bono. Madonna. Angelina Jolie. All celebrities who have lent their names to fundraising and philanthropy.

Time magazine calls these celebrity philanthropists, "Celanthropists." However, some critics call it a practice within an "uncontested" space that has lost perspective.¹

This is largely true. When A-list stars like Angelina Jolie (who has been in the limelight on numerous occasions for her

philanthropy) travels on missions as a Goodwill Ambassador for the UNHCR, for example, do we question who and what the limelight is truly shining on: The refugees and their plight, or Ms Jolie herself and her acts of "selflessness"?

However noble Ms Jolie's intentions might be, the reality is that we now live in a mediated era,² where this distinction does not actually matter. What matters is how we, the public, perceive it. Mediatization has allowed for the streaming of people's terrible plights around the world on a massive scale,

via television, newspapers and the internet—so much so that we are almost becoming used to seeing and hearing about them.

The media raises awareness while simultaneously desensitising us to the significance of its information. So when Angelina Jolie is pictured talking to women in an Ethiopian village, are we really looking at the women, or at Ms Jolie? How effectively does the image portray the women's struggles as opposed to Ms Jolie's endeavours?

This article is, of course, not about Angelina Jolie or any other celebrity in particular. Rather, it is about our perception of fame and how it should be reassessed to address civil society's needs more effectively.³

Perceptions of Fame and Philanthropy

During a public lecture held at the London School of Economics in 2008, Lillie Chouliaraki argued that the seeming self-promotion of Angelina Jolie's humanitarianism is due to her personal and emotional approach, rather than the more "professional" approach embraced by the likes of Audrey Hepburn.⁴

There has always been a fine line connecting the relationship between fame and philanthropy, and the approach taken by celebrities, past and present, in walking this line, is clearly a critical one—both for their own reputations and for the true representation of the people who are touched by their philanthropy. But keeping the personal and emotional from one's own philanthropy must be difficult, whether or not one is famous. Philanthropy itself is not, and should not be, treated as another job; it is the action spurred on by a personal vision and belief for betterment and change.

The process of translating this vision into action is the tricky part—especially when one is famous.⁵ Not only does each approach need to maximise functional efficiency and social impact, but it also has to harmonise with the public's perceptions of fame and fortune.

The balance we need to strike here is between meaning and branding. We do not want the philanthropy of celebrities to look or feel like an extension of their signature perfume, but we do want their endorsement and involvement to have relevant and impactful meaning.

In many countries such as Thailand, for example, celebrities are not only expected to entertain, but they also have to be prepared to act as their society's role models. The public looks up to them for hope and inspiration, while some politicians leverage off their persona for their own gains. In a nation that is profoundly divided politically, socially and economically, this is a precarious time for Thai celebrities.

Recently, Thongchai McIntyre (nicknamed "Bird"), a hugely popular singer and supporter of numerous charitable organisations, was accused by the "yellow shirts" of giving out water to the "red shirts" (their political rivals) during their demonstrations in Bangkok, and, therefore, of being "disloyal" to the monarchists and their cause. It is sad that the state of Thai politics had to come to this, but whether celebrities like it or not, in countries like Thailand, they are already involved in the debate because their "brands" have become a part of people's lives, and that means something. On the other hand, this can also be a promising time for civil society.

As anthropologist Grant McCracken wrote in 1989, "endorsement gives ... access to a special category of person from the culturally constituted world."⁶ "Bird" Thongchai's accusation came about because he is inextricably linked to Thai culture, politics and its people—and it is precisely this link that civil society organisations can exploit in a more positive way, for a more positive outcome. By working in partnership with Bird—or any other celebrity—to build on his already existing charitable endeavours, organisations can help "professionalise" his support to be more strategic, effective, as well as to give new meaning to how celebrity philanthropy should be perceived on an emotional level.

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The celebrity’s voice is one which is not merely heard, but also listened to by most, if not all, sectors of the community, regardless of class, gender, colour, culture, religion, or profession—a phenomenon which is pivotal for divided societies like Thailand.

Although McCracken’s research was conducted purely for marketing-related purposes, we can still learn from his theory of meaning transfer which concludes that the brand which the celebrity creates for himself through his public roles and actions conveys a certain meaning, which is then transferred onto a product.

The consumer, in turn, buys the product for the meaning first created by the celebrity. Hence, the meaning finally ends up with the consumer. So when Sarah Jessica Parker produced her signature perfume, *Lovely*, the consumer probably would have decided to buy it for the meaning of the perfume rather than for the smell. *Sex AndThe City* fans around the world would have yearned for Parker’s character Carrie’s glamorous lifestyle in New York—the nostalgia (or “meaning”) of which was infused in the product.

Thus, in celebrity philanthropy, we can translate the “product” as being philanthropy; organisations can work with celebrities to galvanise a tangible and integrated meaning behind their work and their philanthropy, and help transfer this meaning via a “professionalised” approach to the people (i.e. the “consumers”). And by “meaning transfer,” I mean to create and underscore new and existing social values, both for the public and the celebrity.

The celebrity’s voice is one which is not merely heard, but also listened to by most, if not all, sectors of the community, regardless of class, gender, colour, culture, religion, or profession—a phenomenon which is pivotal for divided societies like Thailand. A politician’s voice is mistrusted by some; the voice of a corporation is treated with suspicion; a Muslim’s or Buddhist’s voice may be sidelined by one from another religion; the voices of the poor could be overlooked by the elite—but a celebrity’s voice has the potential to unify them all, as long as it is intelligible and relatable.

In our mediatised era, we need to tap into this potential more than ever before. James Deane’s paper, for instance, talks about how the rise of celebrities’ communicative power has led to the media’s lack of interest in including the voices of the poor: “Rather than deriving power from those most affected by particular issues, those leading the current movements

on poverty and the environment are those able to command communicative power. This is power rooted in their access and easy capacity to use media to deliver their message.”⁷

As representatives of CSOs and NGOs, we cannot directly influence media activity, but we can combine our knowledge and expertise with the celebrity’s communicative power, which would still be in the interest of the media to cover. In this way, the celebrity would also be portrayed as a genre of expert.

The “celebrity intellectual” is often referred to by social scientists as a personality at an “intersection between stardom and intellectualism.”⁸ While their representation is becoming increasingly authoritative through media command, celebrities are also perceived to have knowledge of what they are representing. Some even suggest that we are witnessing a shift in intellectual communication: From traditional academia to contemporary celebrity expertise.

Inevitably, this then throws up various questions of legitimacy—not so much about how legitimate it is for a celebrity to speak on behalf of the people, but more about the extent to which the people are listened to. How “expert” could someone be after all, if their subject has not been properly studied? And could the celebrity be a democratising force in civil society? As we move towards an amalgamation of idealism and materialism, we have to realign societal needs with the human need for inspirational and intellectual validation. No longer can we underestimate the growing power of celebrity culture and refute its capacity to engage with social realities.

From Celebrity to Transformative Philanthropy?

Many social sector organisations are hesitant about working with celebrities for very understandable reasons. Some celebrity endorsements can be costly, ineffective or could just backfire—and even if a celebrity is reputable, perhaps those linked to them may not be. As for the celebrity’s status as part of the “elite,” many are quick to assume that their philanthropy “has very little to do with ending poverty or building a global community,”⁹ but rather that it acts as a self-perpetuating cycle of elitism, where philanthropy can only

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be philanthropic because of its very distance from poverty. What critics call for, instead, is not an end to philanthropy, but one that is “transformative” and “repoliticised.”

Besides the social realities that we want celebrities to engage with, we must also consider the realities of operating while being famous. It is often not simply a case of “repoliticising” one’s giving, particularly when one does not live in the United States or Western Europe. A philanthropist in China cannot just set up a Soros-esque Open Society Foundation; there are still tough restrictions in many countries, both politically and legally which impact on the public culturally.

Living in a restrictive environment would naturally make people less inclined to diverge from equally restrictive conventions,

and even if they wish to, they are less aware of how to go about it. That is not to say things should not change, just that we need to think about change more carefully. In the context of Asia, for example, what should “transformative philanthropy” mean, and how could our celebrities play a leading role?

We have looked at different perceptions of fame throughout this article, from the celebrity as a channel of meaning transfer, to the celebrity as an intellectual and expert. Both of these concepts can be seen as transformative—which, in practice, should be about changing hearts and minds; narrowing socio-economic divides; and forging (the currently lacking) trust between donors and CSOs. Along with the communicative power commanded by celebrities, we



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can drive our messages for change across communities, generations and sectors in a relatable and inspiring way.

Of course, this practice is nothing new. Jet Li's One Foundation has already inspired and made a difference across China and Asia, but why should it stop there? Institutionalised philanthropy such as Jet Li's or Jackie Chan's can indeed be effective, but there is certainly potential for more.

"Advertisers are now making a move towards 'engagement marketing'", Pat Ruberto of Mindshare says. "People no longer react to being talked at. New mediatisation means a two-way communication, where consumers become part of the messaging strategy."¹⁰ Any form of celebrity philanthropy, by its very nature, will always be in danger of falling into the "charitainment" category, where inspiration turns into exhibition, and where the spotlight meant for the people shines more brightly on the celebrity.

What we want is to turn inspiration into social transformation. This requires a more proactive approach to horizontal collaboration. In adopting the advertisers' method of engagement marketing, one way to strengthen the impact and credibility of high-profile giving could be to establish a

managed, non-profit network of celebrities. The network would not only convey messages and address the public need as an alliance, but it would also ensure that the celebrities talk to each other about what can be done.

Two-way communication would flow on various levels between the network and CSOs, the public and the media—thereby redistributing the limelight without losing the influence of fame. Celebrities' charitable endeavours are then further "professionalised" and mainstreamed, lessening the concerns of the social sector to work with them.¹¹ This perhaps would enable the discourse and transformative philanthropy that are called for to take shape.

Change From all Around

Within the business of challenging public attitudes and helping to form new social values, we can no longer look at change creation merely from the bottom-up or from the top-down. Rather, we need to keep in mind that status is now mobile (especially through mediatisation), and that change needs to happen both ways and in between.

The world of fame itself is volatile and rife with its own inequalities beneath its shiny surface; so, when celebrities decide to engage in philanthropy, we should be ready and willing to support them in effective and professional giving that is less likely to attract criticism, just as we expect them to recognise and support civil society's needs. Fame is also an attitude-fuelled concept among us within civil society. This needs to be challenged and reassessed so that the seemingly unreachable can become more accessible—and included, for a multilateral discourse that is truly democratic.



1. Mooney Nickel, Patricia & Angela M. Eikenberry, "A Critique of the Discourse of Marketized Philanthropy" *American Behavioural Scientist* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2009).
2. Broadly, "mediatisation" in communication studies refers to the process with which modern political communication is shaped through the media. Mediatisation theory argues that the media frames the processes and discourse of such communication, as well as the society in which this communication takes place. Refer to Freidrich Krotz, "Media Connectivity: Concepts, conditions, and consequences," in A. Hepp, F. Krotz, S. Moores, & C. Winter (eds.) *Network, Connectivity and Flow: Conceptualising contemporary communications*, (Cresskill: Hampton Press, 2008); Darren G. Lilleker, *Key Concepts in Political Communication* (London: SAGE Publications, 2006).
3. Ultimately, I think even critics would agree that it is better for celebrities do something than nothing at all, and increasing criticism— although important for discourse—would only deter their enthusiasm and further engagement in philanthropy. There are, of course, celebrities who less conspicuously support various NGOs, but what we want to focus on specifically here is how we can work with celebrities who wish to "get their hands dirty" in charitable activities—like Bono or Shakira—and who want to harness their fame, power and influence in a way that does not provoke criticism, and that can perhaps inspire other celebrities to do the same without apprehension.
4. LSE Inaugural Public Lecture delivered by Lillie Chouliaraki, an academic with the London School of Economics on 27 February 2008, "Distant Suffering in the Media."
5. A major component of the work by the Philanthropy Bridge Foundation is to help many wealthy, well-known donors with this process and construct their "professional" approaches to giving without having to turn it into a job. The foundation aims to bridge class, cultural and institutional divides, particularly among emerging economy and developing countries, by engaging donors and corporations in proactive and innovative philanthropy, and connecting them to charities and their causes around the world (www.philbridge.org.uk).
6. McCracken, Grant, "Who is the Celebrity Endorser? Cultural Foundations of the Endorsement Process," *The Journal of Consumer Research* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).
7. James Deane, "Democratic Advance or Retreat? Communicative Power and Current Media Developments," in Martin Albrow et al. (eds) *Global Civil Society 2007/08: Communicative Power and Democracy* (London: SAGE Publications, 2007).
8. Tania Lewis, "Embodied Experts: Robert Hughes, cultural studies and the celebrity intellectual," *Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 2001).
9. Mooney Nickel & Eikenberry (2009) – See footnote 1 for full details.
10. Pat Ruberto is Global Business Director for Volvo at Mindshare, part of the media agency conglomerate Group M.
11. There is no denying that a feat such as this would be arduous, but it is a project that the Philanthropy Bridge Foundation and its partners are already developing.