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“Hollywood” Hulk Hogan: Stardom, Synergy and Field Migration

Authors’ Profile

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Abstract

During the late 1980s, World Wrestling Federation star Hulk Hogan embarked on a career as a Hollywood movie star, through roles in several modestly-budgeted films produced by New Line Cinema. Building on recent examinations of “celebrity migration” between fields and studies of “promotional culture”, we explore how Hogan’s celebrity persona adapted to various economies and structures of fame in a changing media marketplace. This article explores how Hogan negotiated codes and conventions of different popular cultural fields and media sub-fields. By doing so, we identify key tensions in the wrestler’s celebrity image during the late 1980s and early 1990s and reflect on the difficulties celebrities face when trying to become film stars.

Keywords

wrestling, celebrity, stardom, Hollywood, field migration

Article

A consistently funny, bizarre element of Hogan's testimony was his constantly trying to differentiate between Terry Bollea, human being, and Hulk Hogan, wrestler and entertainer. He's trying to say that they're separate entities, with Bollea being owed a level of privacy, particularly in his home, that Hogan is not. A video of him having sex, Hogan argues, firmly falls on the Terry-end of the spectrum, but the line is blurry. It came up several times, and it was all fairly confusing.¹

In the spring of 2016, Terry Bollea, more widely known as wrestler Hulk Hogan, successfully sued the celebrity gossip blog *Gawker* for publishing an excerpt from a sex tape in which he allegedly had intercourse with a friend's wife. Prior to the trial, the judge informed the wrestler that he would be referred to as "Terry Gene Bollea" and cautioned, "This is not going to be a carnival."² However, the lawsuit became a remarkable demonstration of the curious relationship between private and public personas created by kayfabe, wrestling's complex promotional system. While this was not the first time that the limits of kayfabe had been tested in the American legal system, it was the most prominent and certainly most bizarre case to date. At the core of Bollea's legal claim was the argument that he was not the same person as Hulk Hogan, the wrestler he had portrayed both inside and outside of the ring since the late 1970s. This tension figured prominently in one of the most widely discussed exchanges from the trial, an extraordinary debate about the differences in penis size between Terry Bollea and Hulk Hogan, despite these two figures ostensibly being the same person. The confusion that reigned in the courtroom and press coverage laid bare the difficulties created by Hogan's status as a wrestler and celebrity who had moved between different cultural fields over several decades. Put simply, this was not the first time that the American media and its audiences struggled to come to terms with the question "Who is Hulk Hogan?"

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Hulk Hogan was the most famous professional wrestler in the world. A global icon of American popular culture, his distinctive appearance made him recognisable to millions of people worldwide who had never watched a professional wrestling match.³ Hogan was a vital figure of 1980s media culture and such was his popularity with fans that his image was used to sell numerous consumer products, as well as millions of dollars' worth of live event tickets, pay-per-view buys, and video cassettes. As sports scholar Robert E. Rhinehart argues, "The initial and continuing success of Hulk Hogan was unprecedented, even for the hyperbole that has become professional wrestling."⁴ Despite his global fame, however, scholars have paid little attention to Hulk Hogan as a star wrestler, media celebrity and film performer. This is all the more surprising given the richness of his celebrity image, and what his career can reveal about industrial changes and the nature of celebrity and stardom in the 1980s and 1990s.

A series of low-budget, family-oriented movies – *No Holds Barred* (Thomas J. Wright, 1989), *Suburban Commando* (Burt Kennedy, 1991) and *Mr. Nanny* (Michael Gottlieb, 1993) – were probably the most significant attempt to capitalise on Hogan's, increasingly global, fame during the World Wrestling Federation's heyday. Produced and distributed by New Line, one of the leading independent studios in this period, these movies are the product of the confluence of various economic and cultural transformations, which shaped the media industries in the 1980s and 1990s. Between Hogan's debut match in 1977 and his first starring film role in 1989, the North American media landscape changed dramatically. As Jennifer Holt argues, "A new faith in the concept of synergy brought on most of the shifts that shook the media's industrial foundations during this time."⁵ From the late 1970s onwards, the growth of new and increasingly interdependent media markets in the United States, particularly home video and cable television, led producers to develop certain media texts as "brands" that were sold in a range of markets worldwide. Celebrities, including Hogan, were increasingly viewed

by corporations as sources of “banked and transferable store[s] of promotional capital” which could straddle different industries and products.⁶ They could therefore play a crucial role in cross-promoting brands and extending their cultural reach.

From the mid-1980s onwards, the WWF built an audience through “circuits of promotion”, in which “there are not obvious starting points or endpoints, but rather recursive and mutually reinforcing public texts that generate more visibility and more business for all concerned.”⁷ As one of America’s most famous wrestlers, Hogan was a significant agent in this process of brand-building and cross-promotional activity. In fact, the wrestler became an indispensable part of WWF’s attempts to maximise profitability and expand its cultural influence. By scrutinizing Hogan’s attempts at “cross-field expansion” it is possible to gain insight into “one way in which the operations of celebrity start to become *a culture*: that is, a taken-for-granted web of connections that can be drawn upon by all sorts of actors within promotional culture.”⁸ By examining his attempts to transition from wrestling to movies, we therefore aim to develop understanding of the relationship between celebrity culture and an increasingly pervasive “promotional culture”, both of which exist at the crossover between “material” and “symbolic” economies.⁹

Understanding the “symbolic commerce of stardom”, as Paul McDonald notes, necessitates consideration of stardom as “a product of industrialized cultural production, the outcome of multiple, highly organized inputs and actions.”¹⁰ These inputs and actions might include the work of directors, fashion designers, make-up artists, journalists, agents, and many others, and these inputs may account for the semiotic richness of many stars. Such activities, moreover, are not isolated to a single cultural field. Rather, as Landon Palmer observes:

The conditions that produce stardom across media platforms reveal historically specific intersections across media industries and practices, as the creation of such texts are demonstrably shaped by the priorities

and interests of multiple parties including – to varying degrees – the stars themselves.¹¹

As a professional wrestler, TV star and film actor, as well as tabloid celebrity, Hogan's image was shaped by a variety of commercial and cultural agendas. John Fiske, referring to Mr. T, a performer sharing many characteristics with Hulk Hogan, claims that a celebrity or star "does not reside in any one of his screen appearances but in the intertextuality which is the aggregate of all and an essential part of the reading."¹² Although he appeared in several movies in the early 1990s, Hogan's film performances were not central to his celebrity image, which was spread across numerous media texts. These include the frequent television and pay-per-view wrestling events, but also the supporting intertextual and paratextual materials that support any star or celebrity image. Until recently, however, such a study would have been difficult to embark on due to a lack of relevant and accessible primary materials. Fortunately, the digitisation of a growing number of texts has enabled historians of film and popular culture to track celebrity images across local, national and international texts far more easily than in the past. Producing a detailed account of Hogan's celebrity and career has thus been made possible by the creation of online archives of both industry and popular publications, analysis of which has opened up new and significant lines of enquiry. In addition, digital streaming services, such as the WWE network and youtube, have helped to enrich this study by providing access to a wide variety of broadcast events. By using these online archives, our work demonstrates how scrutiny of these digitized texts enables historians to develop more nuanced analyses of historical and structural changes in the media and popular cultural industries.

Examining how a transmedia celebrity like Hogan attempted and failed to establish himself as a Hollywood star can tell us a great deal about the economic and cultural contexts in which he performed. The study of failures is important precisely because both Hollywood and the professional wrestling industry have developed and improved their models, enabling

performers like Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson to pursue successful film careers since the early 2000s. Analysis of Hulk Hogan’s career can not only elucidate key developments within the American media industries, it can also offer insights into how “celebrity capital” functions across different media. This article therefore makes a contribution to recent debates on how Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of fields can help us to understand celebrity, particularly the “migration” of celebrity across fields. Olivier Driessens describes migration as:

[T]he process through which celebrities use both their relative autonomy as public personality and their celebrity status to develop other professional activities either within their original field or to penetrate other social fields. Migration is thus a twofold process that captures the mobility and convertibility of celebrity.¹³

To date, much of the scholarly discussion of celebrity migration has focused on celebrities’ attempts to move from the media sub-fields of acting and popular music to the field of politics or “high” culture fields.¹⁴ We are keen, however, to develop this approach in relation to migration between sub-fields *within* the wider media field, in addition to related fields like sport, in order to explore how elements of Bourdieu’s field theory can be used to develop economic and cultural histories of mainstream American media.

Hulk Hogan had acquired certain skills that had the potential to ease his transition from professional wrestling to movies, thanks to his experience of performing for various media outlets. His entry into movies appears to confirm Nick Couldry’s and Olivier Driessens’ proposal that the possession of “media-related capital”, which is “the subset of cultural capital that relates to the media”, can enable media personnel to gain access to other fields.¹⁵ Generic media skills, however, do not assure successful migration between fields or, as we demonstrate, between sub-fields within the media and entertainment industries. Similarly, celebrity can encompass various social fields, but the possession of “celebrity capital” when moving between

fields and sub-fields “does not automatically imply its recognition, when other forms of capital are more important in that particular field.”¹⁶ In effect, each field has its own “exchange rate” for celebrity capital and the celebrity may face “costs” in order to enter a particular field successfully.¹⁷ The same is true, we argue, of migration between sub-fields within the field of popular culture. As we will demonstrate, Hogan did not possess all of the attributes required to meet the demands of film stardom and lacked certain forms of capital that help performers to secure star status within Hollywood. At the same time, he risked degrading his status within his original sub-field of professional wrestling.

Although the terms “star” and “celebrity” are frequently used interchangeably in both popular and academic discourse, the concept of the “film star” has retained a certain cultural cachet. A thread running through many academic accounts of Hollywood’s star system is a recognition of film stardom as a highly distinctive form of celebrity, one based on a codified set of criteria. In the early 1990s, noting the different attributes required in each media field, both John Ellis and Andy Medhurst separated television personalities from film stars, for example.¹⁸ Film stardom may be achieved in various ways, as Christine Geraghy’s delineation of different forms of stardom indicates. Geraghy distinguishes between “star-as-celebrity” (a star whose private life is just as, if not more, important than their screen performances), “star-as-professional” (a star often associated with a specific genre), and “star-as-performer” (a star deemed to have superior acting ability), while recognising “two modes of stardom can run in parallel with each other without being productively contradictory...”¹⁹ Of course, a star may span multiple definitions, or shift between definitions in their career. The placement of film actors into these categories is not based on purely objective criteria, however. In particular, the valorization of certain performance styles, based on “realistic” approaches to acting, has created a hierarchy in which “impersonation”, the modification of body and voice to portray a character, is frequently deemed to be superior to “personification”, the subordination of

character to the star's persona.²⁰ As will be discussed, Hogan sat uncomfortably within these established frameworks of film stardom, reflecting his lack of certain forms of capital.

The biggest barrier to Hulk Hogan's migration to Hollywood stardom was the fact that his fame was the product of professional wrestling's own, highly-codified criteria for stardom, positioned within the world of kayfabe. At its most basic, kayfabe refers to the manner in which professional wrestling is exhibited – a fictional text presented as a legitimate sport – and has long interested academic and non-academic audiences alike.²¹ The edited collection *Steel Chair to the Head* refers to kayfabe as “maintaining a fictional storyline, or the illusion that professional wrestling is a genuine contest.”²² Kayfabe, however, is a tricky concept to define in absolute terms, steeped in untraceable histories of the fairground and the deliberately elusive subcultures of professional wrestling. In general terms, kayfabe is the practice of sustaining the in-diegesis performance into paratexts and intertexts surrounding the wrestling performance.²³ A wrestler performing in the WWF, such as Hogan, would develop a “kayfabe persona”, generated through their performances both inside and outside the ring. This practice stands in stark counterpoint to a model of film stardom based on the “star-as-celebrity”, which relies on a “duality of image”, fueled by the promotion of a screen actor's public persona and the circulation of information about their “private” life.²⁴

Rock ‘N’ Wrestling

During the 1980s, under the leadership of promoter Vince McMahon Jr. (hereafter Vince McMahon), the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) became a heavily branded national, and then international, entertainment company. During this period, importantly, McMahon decidedly repositioned professional wrestling as a sub-field in the field of popular culture, rather than a sub-field in the field of sport.²⁵ Taking advantage of the expansion of cable television in America, thanks to deregulation of pricing, ownership and content, McMahon

seized opportunities to build a national following for his WWF shows, producing a variety of weekly cable television programmes.²⁶ These included *Tuesday Night Titans* (USA, 1984–1986), *WWF All American Wrestling* (USA, 1983–1994), and *WWF Prime Time Wrestling* (USA, 1985–1993); syndicated shows, *Superstars of Wrestling* (1986–1996), *Wrestling Challenge* (1986–1995); and network specials, most famously *Saturday Night's Main Event* (NBC, 1985–1992). This approach was in stark contrast to how American professional wrestling had been promoted for much of the twentieth century. Prior to the 1980s, a collective of wrestling promotions grouped under the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA) had broadcast to regional areas, and this cartel relationship suited the localized manner of promoting professional wrestling. Much to chagrin of the NWA, McMahon broke with this model and pursued an expansionist strategy. As Kenneth Phillips observes, “With an aggressive business strategy and the ability to appeal to non-wrestling fans, the World Wrestling Federation redefined an entire industry.”²⁷

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1. Hulk Hogan flexes his muscles on the sleeve for the first VHS release in Coliseum Video's *Hulkamania* series (Coliseum Video, 1985)

Hulk Hogan was the marquee name through which the WWF built, first, a national and, then, an international wrestling brand. From a marketing perspective, Hogan was “a wrestling promoter's dream.”²⁸ His muscular six-foot-five frame, handlebar moustache, long blonde hair, signature bandana, and red and yellow wrestling attire were immediately recognizable to a range of audiences, even those who had no interest in wrestling. His image appeared on a range of WWF promotional items, including magazines, print advertisements, posters and life-size cardboard cutouts. Coliseum Video, producer of WWF videos in the mid-1980s, used Hogan's

striking appearance extensively to promote VHS cassettes in stores and in print publications, helping their titles to stand out in an increasingly crowded marketplace (e.g., Figure 1). Not unlike cartoon characters that captured the merchandising zeitgeist of the period, his highly distinctive physical features, particularly the bandanna and moustache, also meant that his likeness could be easily transferred from one property to another. WWF licensed Hogan's image and the "Hulkamania" slogan for use on numerous products, including clothing, stationery, foodstuffs, board games, and, most notably, action figures. This "multilevel, intertextual advertising barrage", as Robert E. Rhinehart describes it, not only generated revenues for the WWF and their commercial partners, it also turned Hogan into a brand in his own right.²⁹

In addition to celebrity and economic capital, Hogan also accrued symbolic capital within the sub-field of professional wrestling during the mid-1980s. As a sporting entertainment, professional wrestling offers a 'spectacle of excess',³⁰ pitting villains and heroes against one another in dramatized sporting contests in a type of 'masculine melodrama'.³¹ Hogan, as Henry Jenkins observes, "perfected the image of the martyred hero who somehow captures victory from the closing jaws of defeat."³² The character was the ultimate hero: as his theme music blasted out into arenas before his entrance, he was a "real American", fighting for the rights of every man; he waved the American flag, and wore a crucifix pendant round his neck. Indeed, Hogan's unshakeable morality and overt patriotism were central to his elevation to "celebrator" status. The celebrator, argues Rojek, is often "either momentarily ubiquitous or becomes an institutionalized feature of popular culture ... [that] caters to the public appetite for a character type that sums up the times."³³ In this respect, there were clear comparisons between Hogan and the muscular action movie heroes of the 1980s, such as John Rambo, whose hard bodies "[came] to stand as the emblem of the Reagan philosophies, politics and economies."³⁴ When Hogan defeated the Iranian Iron Sheik to win the WWF World

Heavyweight Championship in January 1984, the crowd at Madison Square Garden erupted into cheers of “USA! USA!” By September 1984, according to the *New York Times*, the World Wrestling Federation had made the sport “more popular than ever” and “Hulkamania” was sweeping America, setting the scene for McMahon’s next business move.³⁵

Slick and aggressively commercial, *Wrestlemania* represented the fruition of McMahon’s efforts to transform professional wrestling from a mostly regional, working class entertainment to a young, hip, national showbiz spectacle. On March 31 1985, audiences across America filled theatre auditoriums to watch a live broadcast of a star-studded WWF event in Madison Square Garden, New York. In many ways, the first *Wrestlemania* perfectly encapsulated WWF’s synergistic, cyclical approach to promotion during the “Rock ‘n’ Wrestling Connection” of the mid-1980s. *Wrestlemania* marked the culmination of several WWF television narratives, most notably an ongoing “feud” between pop star Cyndi Lauper and WWF wrestler Captain Lou Albano, who appeared in the music video for *Girls Just Want to Have Fun* (Edd Griles, 1983). In terms of billing, the undisputed star of the show was Hulk Hogan, who appeared in the main-event tag-teaming with Mr. T against “Rowdy” Roddy Piper and “Mr Wonderful” Paul Orndorff. Like the “vortex of publicity” recognized by Andrew Wernick, *Wrestlemania* featured pop stars, television actors and professional wrestlers all promoting numerous media texts and consumer products, making it difficult, if not impossible, to identify a “primary” text.³⁶ Nonetheless, Hogan played a crucial role in the circuits of promotion that encompassed and exceeded the event, consolidating his celebrity power.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Figure 2. Hulk Hogan appears alongside fellow celeactor Mr. T on the poster for the first *Wrestlemania* (World Wrestling Federation, 1985)

No Holds Barred

After *Wrestlemania*'s success, Hulk Hogan continued to be a regular fixture in WWF programming and headlined the event's many sequels, *Wrestlemania II, III, IV, V, VI, VII, VIII* and *IX*, as well many other lucrative pay-per-view events. As the 1980s drew to a close, McMahon and Bollea sought to further capitalise on the wrestler's widespread fame and set their sights on Hollywood. WWF's promotional strategies bore significant similarities to Hollywood's "high concept" approach to producing youth-oriented movies. This marketing-driven strategy relied on visual and aural "excess" within films to help create marketing campaigns and merchandising opportunities.³⁷ Despite this shared ethos and the proven marketability of WWF, McMahon struggled to find a distributor for a movie starring Hogan. Wrestling's historical association with youth and working-class audiences meant that it had little cultural capital and was therefore marginalized by Hollywood. According to one report, "[E]very major studio had turned the project down, thinking wrestling movies were box office poison, and perhaps also believing that the brawny buffoonery offered by the Hulkster and his ilk were beneath the studio's standards."³⁸ The independent sector was more forthcoming and, eventually, McMahon secured a deal with New Line Cinema to distribute *No Holds Barred*.

The decision to build a star vehicle around Hulk Hogan was consistent with New Line's business strategy in this period. Since its foundation in 1967, New Line had sought to distance its product offering from that of the major studios and to exploit markets that were underserved by the bigger companies.³⁹ The philosophy continued during the 1980s, with New Line's production arm focusing on concept-led projects that could be marketed in a relatively inexpensive manner to niche audiences and sold through multiple distribution channels. The company's biggest hit of the decade, the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise (1984–2010), demonstrated the potential benefits of this commercial strategy. By late 1989, the series had grossed an estimated \$300 million worldwide through theatrical and video

releases.⁴⁰ Avoiding traditional “star” performers, New Line built the series around Freddie Krueger, whose iconic and distinctive appearance enabled his image to be exploited across a range of markets. Merchandise based upon the franchise, including child-oriented products such as bubble gum, key chains and pyjamas, generated \$3.7 million in licensing fees by the end of the decade.⁴¹ New Line’s successful exploitation of Krueger demonstrated how, as Robert C. Allen suggests, “...preserving a coextensive identity between the licensable character in a film and its extra-filmic representation” is a major asset when developing merchandising opportunities.⁴² Viewed in this context, the studio’s decision to co-produce and distribute a vehicle for Hulk Hogan, a celector with proven marketability, made sound commercial sense.

Although Hulk Hogan and the WWF lacked the cultural capital to attract the interest of a major studio, New Line had sufficient confidence in Hogan’s transferable celebrity capital and marketability to commence production of *No Holds Barred* during the summer of 1988, with a reported production budget of \$10 million. Under the terms of the deal, New Line acted primarily as distributor, while marketing costs were met by the film’s producers, who were keen to cross-promote both Hulk Hogan and the WWF brand.⁴³ On a textual level, *No Holds Barred* successfully married Hollywood narrative tropes and elements of kayfabe, no doubt due to WWF’s involvement. In the movie, Hogan plays a thinly-veiled version of his WWF persona and various aspects of the film reference Hogan’s backstory in kayfabe. For instance, throughout the movie and in promotional images, the crucifix around Hogan’s neck is highly visible, connoting his wrestling persona’s affiliation with Christian values and referencing his feud with André the Giant in the build-up to 1988’s *Wrestlemania III*. The consistencies between the film’s narrative and kayfabe were reinforced when the movie was released on pay-per-view later that year. *No Holds Barred*’s antagonist, Zeus, played by Tom Lister Jr., made his debut in the film but the character was folded into WWF programming – as Zeus. As part

of a wider promotional strategy, a match between the pair, tying on-going kayfabe narratives, was pre-recorded and screened alongside the film in select theaters, billed as *No Holds Barred The Match/The Movie*.

Executive producer Vince McMahon and WWF's promotion team, who ploughed \$18 million into the project, also exerted significant influence over *No Holds Barred*'s marketing.⁴⁴ Much like the film itself, the campaign relied on audiences' awareness of Hogan's established celector persona and kayfabe backstory. The name "Hulk Hogan" and the wrestler's image dominated publicity materials, including the movie's poster, which included Hogan's signature muscle-flexing pose, handlebar moustache and bandana. Tellingly, however, the name "Terry Bollea" did not appear any official publicity. In a report on Hogan's appearance at the 1989 Cannes Film Festival, one journalist observed, "other than insider gossip, little is known about Hogan's life outside of the ring", noting that this lack of knowledge could be attributed to Vince McMahon's attempts to sustain the "mystique" of wrestling.⁴⁵ Although McMahon had disrupted the foundations of kayfabe earlier in 1989, by announcing publicly that professional wrestling was a "sport's entertainment", the "real" individuals performing were rarely acknowledged within the diegesis of wrestling or in any of WWF's promotional materials.⁴⁶ As one article astutely observed, "McMahon would be perfectly happy if every fan really believed that WWF wrestlers were the same offstage as on."⁴⁷

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

Figure 3. Hulk Hogan's name and distinctive image dominate the American theatrical release poster for *No Holds Barred* (New Line Cinema, 1989)

On the publicity trail for *No Holds Barred*, Hogan performed as his fictional, kayfabe persona and wore his costume from the film, in an apparent attempt to coopt traditional

promotional techniques to support his on-screen performance. When discussing the movie on *The Arsenio Hall Show* (syndicated, 1989–1994), for example, he rehashed his usual spiel about his demandments – “the training, the prayers and the vitamins” – and his duty to provide “action, adventure, entertainment” while keeping the movie “real squeaky clean for the little hulksters.”⁴⁸ While New Line and WWF created promotional materials that sustained Hogan’s kayfabe persona, Hollywood’s traditional promotional circuits struggled with Hogan. Although some minor biographical details were released during promotional campaign for *No Holds Barred*, publications did not, and indeed could not, discuss Hulk Hogan’s “real” life in any sustained detail, a problem for a form of reporting that presents stars as “actors with biographies.”⁴⁹ Reporters were skeptical about the claim that Hulk Hogan and Terry Bollea were one and the same, but were reliant on publicity materials which tried to sustain his kayfabe persona.

A success in its own terms, *No Holds Barred* was a niche movie based on a recognisable character, which its producers successfully targeted to a specific demographic. Released across 1,318 screens in North America in June 1989, the film performed well in its opening weekend and ranked second in the box office chart, beaten to the top spot by the Spielberg-Lucas franchise blockbuster, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (Steven Spielberg, 1989). By July 4th 1989, the Hogan vehicle grossed between \$15 and \$16 million at the domestic box office.⁵⁰ Publicly, at least, New Line focused on the film’s achievements in harnessing Hogan’s celebrity power. Michael Harpster, the marketing president for New Line, claimed of the Hogan movie:

Nobody thought that *No Holds Barred* was going to do any business, because wrestling pictures have never been successful. But when I started looking at the numbers from the [market research] testing that we did, I saw that Hulk Hogan has incredible recognition. He possibly

even exceeds Freddy Krueger in recognition, but it is a very narrow audience.⁵¹

Although *No Holds Barred* was not a huge moneymaker for New Line and WWF, the movie demonstrated that Hulk Hogan's image could attract a sizeable audience, albeit largely of devoted wrestling fans.

While *No Holds Barred's* promotional strategy, which was designed to sell the Hogan character and wider WWF brand, may have been acceptable for a wrestling film, using this type of promotion to launch a fully-fledged Hollywood acting career for Hogan was going to be trickier, if not impossible. Film audiences are well aware that, as Richard Dyer notes, "stars do not only exist in media texts" and "are carried in the person of people who go on living away from their appearances in the media."⁵² The press's desire to provide authentic insights into Bollea's off-screen life and the wrestler's insistence on maintaining his Hulk Hogan persona in the media looked likely to create some intriguing tensions. More importantly, growing media interest in the man behind the wrestling persona risked destabilizing the Hogan celeactor that McMahon and Bollea had carefully built since the mid-1980s. While Bollea had risked little of the capital he had accrued within the sub-field of wrestling thus far, it was clear that, in order to broaden his appeal, the transition to Hollywood stardom was going to require him to gamble with his established reputation.

"Muscles into Movies"⁵³

By the winter of 1989 and 1990, rumors were circulating that Terry Bollea hoped to turn his film performances into a more permanent affair, leaving professional wrestling altogether. The reasons for this, *Variety* mused, were that Bollea was "in his late 30s, his second child is on the way, and he wrestles 15 times per month and is on the road most of the year."⁵⁴ This claim was revisited later in the year when the wrestler stated in another interview, "I'm 37 years old; I

can't keep getting body-slammed for the rest of my life.”⁵⁵ Reports suggested that he had been approached by Warner Bros to make “kids movies”⁵⁶ and was in early talks with Disney “for screen and personal appearance work.”⁵⁷ The main attractions for Warner Bros and Disney were Hogan’s family-friendly image and ability, as a distinctive celector, to create a plethora of product licensing opportunities.⁵⁸ Products based on Hogan’s image certainly made a significant contribution to the WWF’s average of \$200 million in annual merchandising sales, alongside videocassette sales of over 2 million during the period 1985–1990.⁵⁹ Although the Warner Bros and Disney deals never came to pass, Bollea’s growing desire to move away from wrestling and into the movies was common knowledge within the film industry.

No Holds Barred had performed adequately using a very specific promotion and distribution strategy, but translating that success to films that were not about professional wrestling, or other professional sports, would be challenging. Not only did Hogan have to extend his celebrity image beyond his kayfabe persona, he also had to accrue sufficient cultural capital as a performer to convince Hollywood’s producers, directors and casting agents that he was worthy of star status. Although he remained untested as a bona fide Hollywood star, New Line, confident in their own keen sense of production and marketing, were willing to back a two-picture deal with Hogan, with other studios apparently paying close attention to how the films fared commercially. Industry sources claimed that Disney, Tri-Star and New Line were “dangling projects within his reach” depending on the success of his next feature, *Suburban Commando*.⁶⁰

To some degree, New Line’s continued interest in Hogan was an extension of the marketing and production formulas that had proved so bountiful during the 1980s. There were also other factors at play: the production of *Suburban Commando* took place during an assertive period of increased spending by the studio on production and distribution. The unexpected box office triumph of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Steve Barron, 1990) had shored-up New

Line's finances and reinforced the benefits of the studio's continued investment in less obviously "mainstream" concepts. Made with a modest production budget of \$13.5 million, the movie had no major star names and was sold purely on its concept, summed up in the title and its highly marketable celeactor characters. Released in March 1990, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* achieved genuine crossover appeal and grossed over \$200 million at the international box office, making it the most successful independent film of all time.⁶¹ In spite of the movie's success, New Line's founder and Chairman Robert Shaye was keen to point out that the studio would continue on "the narrow path of niche marketing and films budgeted under \$10 million."⁶² In fact, New Line was one of the few large independent film companies that remained in business during the 1990s, as other indies saw their profit margins eroded by increased costs, including star salaries, and shrinking revenues from theatrical, cable and video markets.⁶³

Suburban Commando was New Line's attempt to build on the studio's prior association with Hogan and to capitalize on a wider industry trend, the "family film", albeit in a somewhat idiosyncratic way. Although he does not play a wrestler, the overall concept for *Suburban Commando* is built around the celeactor Hulk Hogan, rather than the actor Terry Bollea. Using his kayfabe persona as an intertextual reference, the film's narrative plays with existing ideas about who Hulk Hogan is and what he represents. Much of the humor in *Suburban Commando* is derived from the premise that Hogan, a self-consciously and ironically constructed "real American," is, in his role as space warrior Shep Ramsey, unable to comprehend the pastiche of suburban America presented in the movie. The narrative of *Suburban Commando* also creates numerous opportunities for Hogan to display his muscles and to demonstrate his wrestling moves, including various body pump slams. The inclusion of such sequences of comedic, cartoon violence is consistent with the textual strategies of family-action films of this period, while exploiting the physical attributes that made Hogan such a unique performer. Such

displays in *Suburban Commando* were unlikely, however, to broaden the wrestler's appeal beyond his established fan base.

Eating Your "Vitamins"

New Line's release strategy for *Suburban Commando* was significantly disrupted by a high-profile scandal which swept the WWF and which threatened to end Hogan's wrestling career. In June 1991, Dr George Zahorian III faced criminal prosecution for distributing drugs to WWF wrestlers and Vince McMahon. As the scandal broke, vice president of the WWF, Basil V. DeVito, attempted to limit damage to the company's reputation by claiming, "Neither the WWF, not any of its wrestlers or associates, has been charged with any illegality... We stand by our philosophy of wholesome family entertainment and the positive example we set for the youth of America."⁶⁴ Five wrestlers were subpoenaed and accused of being supplied by Zahorian and, though the Attorney General waived Hogan's testimony, documents revealed that various packages had been supplied to Bollea. The other four wrestlers, Dan Spivey, Rick Martel, Brian Blair and Roddy Piper, all admitted to steroid use.⁶⁵ Myriad newspaper reports detailed the wrestlers' involvement and, as face of the company, many of the reports focused on Hogan. One *New York Times* article described how "steroids [had] helped turn wrestlers like Hogan from pseudo-athletes into freakishly muscular cartoon action figures."⁶⁶ For the WWF, a company which had built itself on being family-friendly and which relied heavily on licensed products, such reports were potentially destructive. Under the headline "A Steroid Message in Toys?", the president for Action for Children's Television, Peggy Charren, suggested that Hasbro, the contracted toy maker for the WWF, should "consider who [these heroes] are and how they got to be the way they are."⁶⁷

For the first time, the constructed nature of Hogan's wrestling persona was laid open to public scrutiny and it became clear the Real American caricature was not all he seemed. With

his WWF career and prospects in Hollywood hanging in the balance, Bollea stridently denied any wrongdoing. On July 16, 1991 he appeared on *The Arsenio Hall Show* and admitted that he took steroids in 1983, but denied reports that he was a regular drug user. He attempted to suggest that the media had misrepresented the facts and claimed, “sometimes you read the paper and get misinformed.”⁶⁸ In contrast to his performance on the same show two years earlier, aside from his signature bandanna and handlebar moustache, there was little hint of the larger-than-life Hogan character that audiences had come to expect. His tone was sombre throughout, at one point describing how the accusations had placed a “dark cloud over everything that I believe in.” Many commentators were not convinced by Hogan’s testimony, however. Bruno Sammartino, another wrestler, was happy to be quoted on record: “eating your vitamins. We all know what kind of vitamins he has been on.”⁶⁹

In the light of the furore surrounding Hogan, New Line chose to delay the release of *Suburban Commando*, but experienced a further setback when William Ball, who played the movie’s villain, died from a drug overdose at the end of July.⁷⁰ The movie was eventually released in October rather than August 1991, with the implication that the on-going WWF drug scandal was partly to blame.⁷¹ Freed from the WWF’s close involvement and perhaps sensing wrestling’s dwindling popularity, New Line sought to sell *Suburban Commando* to a wider audience than *No Holds Barred*, with promotional materials focusing on the movie’s stars and use of a range of genre tropes. As *The Washington Times* wryly commented, this was a “science-fiction-action-comedy (get all that?), it stresses family, friendship and personal integrity.”⁷² This mixture of elements led to a somewhat confused promotional campaign, which relied primarily on Hogan’s presence to motivate and unify the disparate elements in the movie. Although Hogan received equal billing with Christopher Lloyd and Shelley Duvall, *Suburban Commando*’s publicity materials, particularly the movie’s comedy-action trailer,

made it clear that the “package” had been built around Hogan. Thus, despite his off-screen transgressions, Hogan remained the film’s primary selling point.

New Line’s decision to foreground Hogan, while targeting a wider audience, intensified the press’ scrutiny of the “real” man behind the wrestling persona. Bollea, however, remained guarded about allowing the press insights into his private life. As the Florida’s *St. Petersburg Times* reported, “throughout his career, he has steadfastly refused in-depth interviews. What little he had done has been in the Hulkmeister character.”⁷³ Although Bollea allowed interviewers into his house in the summer of 1991, observed the newspaper, “the access coincided with the release of his second movie.”⁷⁴ This reticence and unwillingness to shed his kayfabe persona arguably created one the major obstacles between Bollea and success as a movie star. As one reporter suggested at the time of *Suburban Commando*’s release, “even with an actual human peeking out from behind the Hulk image, Hogan still faces a tough battle in converting his wrestling heroism to broad-based stardom.”⁷⁵ Major film studios were unlikely to gamble on a lead who failed to utilize press exposure to promote himself as a star actor or to sell a production to audiences who were not wrestling fans.

[Insert Figure 4 about here]

Figure 4. Hulk Hogan poses with some of his young fans for a feature in *People* magazine (Time Inc., 1991)

Operating within established paradigms of star reporting, an article in the glossy magazine *People* attempted to make links between the Hogan’s persona and the “real” man behind the scenes, something that journalists had struggled with since his movie debut. The reporters quoted the wrestler’s claim that: “Hulk Hogan is just like Terry Bollea... When I get in front of people, I turn up the volume.”⁷⁶ “Turning up the volume” is a refrain that runs

throughout many professional wrestlers' descriptions of themselves in biographies and WWF licensed documentaries – Hogan's claim, though, became increasingly untenable. The steroid accusations, as one article suggested, were "at odds with that of the loving family man ... whose name is licensed to sell a popular brand of kids' vitamins."⁷⁷ Despite the difficulties of writing about Hogan in this way, the 1991 *People* article, stuck in its own celebrity reporting and framing conventions, did all it could to sustain this narrative, noting Bollea's charity work and claiming, "he takes seriously his position as role model for the preteen set and visits with at least 20 sick and dying children a week."⁷⁸ For the most part, though, Hogan's attempts to convert his celebrity capital into Hollywood stardom looked likely to meet "resistance", because his persona's disruption of a central tenet of stardom – the star as "both ordinary and extraordinary"⁷⁹ – caused particular difficulties for the press.

Tellingly, in their promotional campaign for *Suburban Commando's* home video release in early 1992, New Line decided to play it safe and focused on Hogan's larger-than-life wrestling persona. Building on the studio's strategy of targeting niche audiences, New Line Home Video focused primarily on wrestling fans, who were voracious consumers of home video.⁸⁰ Working with their sales partners, Columbia-Tristar, New Line developed a \$250,000 promotional campaign for the North American video release of *Suburban Commando*, which was built entirely around Hogan.⁸¹ In order to generate interest amongst retailers, they ran a "going Hollywood with Hulk" contest, using a preview tape featuring Hogan to promote prizes that included "a Hollywood VIP vacation, Oscar tickets, and a role in an upcoming New Line Cinema film."⁸² A premium rate telephone line also gave viewers a chance to enter a contest after listening to taped messages from Hogan.⁸³ Squaring in on their target audience, New Line Home Video secured a cross-promotional deal with WWF, which publicized the film in its magazine and during televised matches. While devising a much more precise release strategy for *Suburban Commando's* video release made business sense, this reversion to Hogan's

wrestling persona and decision to partner with the potentially toxic WWF brand reinforced the perception that “Hulk Hogan” was little more than a two-dimensional figure, a gimmick, in both the wrestling and non-wrestling sense of the word, created to sell video cassettes and merchandise.

[Insert Figure 5 about here]

Figure 5. Hulk Hogan is the major selling point in a print advertisement for the home video release of *Suburban Commando* (New Line Home Video, 1992)

“No More Mr. Tough Guy”⁸⁴

Hogan would reflect in his autobiography that *Suburban Commando* “made money – not a ton of it, but enough that I didn’t get branded as somebody who couldn’t push a film.”⁸⁵ Despite a relatively wide theatrical release, *Suburban Commando* posted an underwhelming performance at the box office, generating just under \$7 million during its three-month run.⁸⁶ While *No Holds Barred* had been a modest but fruitful achievement for New Line, the studio was disappointed with its follow-up. Robert Shaye suggested that the movie had deviated from the company’s normal formula. “We may have cast our nets too broadly,” he stated, “If we’d made it for less money and targeted it more narrowly, it might have worked better.”⁸⁷ In contrast, Hogan’s next New Line film, *Mr. Nanny* was a return to small budgets and sharp focus, with roughly \$10 million set aside for production costs. Filmed during the summer of 1992, with Hogan lying low while the steroid accusations were rife, the wrestler had more at stake than New Line, who were happy to return to low cost, low yield productions that had set them aside from other indies in the 1980s. Talking to the *Los Angeles Times*, Hogan seemed to realise that his final New Line picture was an important moment in his career, suggesting that if *Mr. Nanny* was a hit, “then maybe the big studios will take a chance on me.”⁸⁸ Nonetheless,

he also acknowledged that he needed to focus on extending his abilities as a screen performer. “Since Hulkamania isn’t running wild in the film industry,” he told one reporter, “I want to improve myself and become so good that I get the big scripts, big budgets and have total control of my destiny.”⁸⁹

Hogan’s ability to breakout as a mainstream film star on par with the other hard-bodied action heroes was far from clear-cut. As one report put it, “Arnold’s ... grabbed the big tough guy sector of the market, Hulk has been handed the leftovers.”⁹⁰ New Line’s *raison d’être* was taking leftovers and pinpointing target audiences with laser accuracy, but that did not bode well for Hogan’s fledgling career as a Hollywood leading man. As with *No Holds Barred* and *Suburban Commando*, the role did not stray far from Hogan’s established persona, but the movie did attempt to showcase his more sensitive, child-friendly side, not dissimilar to other hard-bodied action hero’s dalliances with family films in this period.⁹¹ In *Mr. Nanny*, Hogan plays a retired professional wrestler, Sean Armstrong, who acts as a bodyguard for two wealthy children. The premise of bachelor turned care-giver and heavy reliance on slapstick comedy drew comparisons with previous family-oriented hits. “Cross *Uncle Buck* with *Home Alone*, stir in the Hulkster, and you’ve got *Mr. Nanny*,” proclaimed *Daily Variety*’s Derek Elley.⁹² Although its high concept premise undoubtedly capitalized on successful narrative formulas, *Mr. Nanny*’s commercial success was almost exclusively reliant on Hogan’s notoriety and pre-existing fan base. Whereas *Suburban Commando*’s publicity campaign had tried to stimulate interest amongst a broader range of groups, including science fiction fans, *Mr. Nanny*, observed *Daily Variety*, was “targeted squarely at the 8-12 audience.”⁹³

Advance publicity for *Mr. Nanny* began to circulate during early 1993 amid rumors of Hogan’s return to the WWF.⁹⁴ On 22 February 1993, after taking ten months off while the accusations of steroid abuse were at their height, he made a triumphant return to the WWF’s flagship cable show, *Raw*, before winning the belt in an impromptu main event at *Wrestlemania*

IX. The U.K. release of the movie was scheduled to coincide with *Wrestlemania IX*, benefiting from the hype surrounding Hogan and Beefcake's bid for the WWF Tag Team Championship and, during the event, Hogan's reinstatement as WWF World Heavyweight Champion.⁹⁵ Unsurprisingly, drugs were not mentioned in this kayfabe environment, but the sense that Hogan's career was not what it had been in the 1980s was palpable.⁹⁶ According to his autobiography, these on-screen problems were exacerbated by disagreements with Vince McMahon and other wrestlers backstage.⁹⁷ In June 1993, Hogan wrestled what would be his last match in a WWF ring until February 2002.

The publicity released in the lead up to *Mr. Nanny* claimed that Hogan was "working on a new image."⁹⁸ This was partly true. Bollea saw *Mr. Nanny* as offering a further opportunity to get closer to fully-fledged film stardom. One interview piece made this explicit when it suggested:

Even though Hogan's character doesn't stray far from the wrestler's image, he sees the picture as moving him a little beyond his previous starring vehicles, *No Holds Barred* and *Suburban Commando*... "I'm pretty much Terry...I mean, that's me."⁹⁹

Based on his interviews, it is clear that Bollea understood that he needed to acknowledge the steroids scandal in order to move beyond the allegations and to reclaim the family-friendly position that he had occupied in the 1980s. In another interview, he claimed:

The message I'm giving to all these kids is: Train, work hard, say your prayers and eat your vitamins... What I learned about steroids reinforces the positive message I'm telling kids. Listen to me, man, you don't need [them].¹⁰⁰

Even when Bollea addressed the steroids scandal more directly, he blamed "peer pressure" and referred to himself in the third person as his wrestling persona, for instance arguing that, "they

picked Hulk out.”¹⁰¹ The ultimate awkwardness of his position between the celeactor of Hogan and the more “real” persona of Bollea and rumors of steroid abuse was reflected in the billing he received in *Mr. Nanny*: Terry “Hulk” Hogan.

[Insert Figure 6 about here]

Figure 6. Hulk Hogan shows his child-friendly side in a publicity still for *Mr. Nanny* (New Line Cinema, 1993)

Reviews of *Mr. Nanny* indicate that film critics remained unconvinced of Hogan’s ability to successfully distance himself from his larger-than-life wrestling persona that had been cultivated since the 1970s. *Daily Variety*’s suggestion that the movie “wisely doesn’t try to extend [Hogan] as a character actor” hinted at his perceived limitations as performer.¹⁰² The *Los Angeles Times*’ Kevin Thomas stated, “Hogan, who is 6 foot, 6 inches and weighs in at 293 pounds, comes across as a genial giant with a sense of humor and a pleasing personality, but he’s no actor.”¹⁰³ Evidently, Hogan’s physicality and expressive performance style were unlikely to impress critics who participate in a discourse that prizes the “realism” and “authenticity” suggested by actors’ restrained gestures and subtle facial expressions accentuated in cinematic close-up.¹⁰⁴ Bollea, meanwhile, was becoming aware that his movie career might actively harm his wrestling career. New Line’s poster and print publicity campaign, which featured the image of Hogan in a purple tutu, he believed, risked alienating adult wrestling fans. “I wasn’t sure at first that that was the right marketing strategy,” acknowledged Hogan in a publicity interview, “I think it insulted the heck out of those hard-core fans. Their reaction is ‘How could you do this?’ Like: ‘You gave up wrestling for this?’”¹⁰⁵ The risks of migration between fields were increasingly laid bare for Bollea, who became cautious about turning his back on his wrestling fans.

In fact, it soon became apparent the Hogan would not be able to give up professional wrestling for a full-time career in movies. The major Hollywood studios were not forthcoming with any mainstream, big-budget films as a star vehicle for Hogan after *Mr Nanny*. After leaving the WWF in the summer of 1993, he started work on a CBS television series, *Thunder in Paradise* (1994), a stepdown in a hierarchy that still positioned film stardom as the gold standard in screen performance. The show was by no means Hogan's last acting role, but it was his last serious attempt to become an actor in his own right. Filming for the series took place at MGM/Disney Studios, where he met Eric Bischoff, Executive Vice President for World Championship Wrestling (WCW), who persuaded him to join the wrestling brand. Shortly after Hogan joined WCW, in July 1994, he was called to testify against Vince McMahon when the latter was charged with distributing illegal steroids.¹⁰⁶ During the trial, in which he received immunity, Hogan admitted to having regularly taken the drug during the 1980s, but denied having been encouraged or supplied by McMahon.

When covering the steroids trial, the *New York Times* were eager to point out the differences between Bollea and Hogan:

Gone were the screaming yellow muscle T-shirt and the manic persona of the charismatic Hulkster. Mr. Bollea, his long blond hair spilling over the collar of a dark business suit, answered questions somberly as the Government tried to show that Mr. McMahon's Titan Sports Corporation had illicitly provided him with anabolic steroids.¹⁰⁷

The shadow cast by these events loomed over Hogan's subsequent wrestling career and was the final nail in the coffin for his faltering Hollywood career. His return to wrestling in WCW did not yield the same reactions that he received during height of his WWF fame and, in 1996, Hogan and WCW's Eric Bischoff decided to shake up the kayfabe character. Hulk Hogan became a villain, dressed in black, and used WCW to denounce the audience and decry the

“demandments” he had previously stood for. In so doing, the new version of the celector sought to acknowledge, within kayfabe, the impact that Hogan’s brief movie career and the WWF steroid trials had on his image. This major shift in the character was also accompanied by a new ring name: Hollywood Hulk Hogan.

Conclusion

Hulk Hogan’s attempts to launch a Hollywood career provide some revealing insights into the nature of transmedia celebrity and the challenges celebrities face when migrating between fields or sub-fields. The main driver for Hogan’s transition into movies was Vince McMahon’s and WWF’s expansionist agenda, which sought to use Hollywood movies as a way to promote the wrestling brand. Hogan’s media skills, highly distinctive image and proven pedigree in the burgeoning home video market certainly helped the wrestler to secure various deals with New Line, which specialized in high-concept, “exploitation” marketing and recognized the commercial potential of video.

Hogan’s greatest strengths as a professional wrestler – his larger-than-life persona and cartoon-like physical appearance – were perhaps the most significant barrier to his transition into “serious” film acting and to the ranks of Hollywood stardom. Although his celebrity and proven commercial appeal gave Hogan the opportunity to star in independent Hollywood movies, film critics and journalists, who saw wrestling as a lower form of performance, rejected his attempts to become a professional actor. In this respect, Hogan’s movement between the media sub-fields of wrestling and Hollywood cinema was restricted by social hierarchies and contingent of his possession of certain forms of capital. A successful transition between fields, as David C. Giles observes, “may depend on the hierarchical nature of the migration and in which direction the celebrity is attempting to move.”¹⁰⁸ This said, while studio executives and critics denied Hogan the symbolic and social capital awarded to “legitimate” actors, his

migration to Hollywood star may have succeeded had his ability to generate box office returns (i.e. his “capital” value in monetary terms) and promotional power compensated for a lack of other forms of social and cultural capital. Media producers, as Barry Gunter suggests, rely on various “celebrity performance indicators” in order to gauge the “ongoing value” of a celebrity, in order to secure investment in projects.¹⁰⁹

While, in theory, it is possible for a television “personality” or “professional” to transition across to fully fledged stardom, in practice this process is complex and unpredictable. Hogan struggled to use his celebrity to migrate from the sub-field of wrestling to the sub-field of cinema, in part because his celector persona was not readily translatable to the frameworks of big screen stardom. The conventions of kayfabe blurred the line between Hogan the in-ring performer and his off-stage identity, with circulation of his image mostly limited to the celector persona developed by McMahon. Writing about Chris Benoit and the nature of professional wrestling stardom, Tom Phillips has argued the “constant interplay between reality and fakery means that constructing a celebrity image for a professional wrestler with separate professional, official private, and ‘real’ personas is decidedly complex.”¹¹⁰ As we have shown, tensions created by varying portrayals of Hogan in the ring, on screen and in print publications reveal the difficulties of maintaining a coherent and plausible star image which could reap financial rewards for Hogan and various commercial entities.

The obvious problem Hulk Hogan presents is that the extent of his fictionality was, and remains, difficult to define, raising questions about the authenticity and coherence of his celebrity image. As Richard Dyer observes, “authenticity is both a quality necessary to the star phenomenon to make it work, and also the quality that guarantees the authenticity of the other particular values a star embodies.”¹¹¹ While it may have been commercially prudent for WWF to maintain the conceit that “Hulk Hogan” was more than a fictional construct, journalists and audiences yearned to see the “real” Terry Bollea. Arguably, the WWF steroids scandal of the

early 1990s garnered so much press attention because seemed to offer first real glimpse at the man behind the handlebar moustache and bandana. In the intervening years, Hogan's appearances in a range of media, including his own "reality" show *Hogan Knows Best* (VH1, 2005-2007), have complicated rather than simplified his celebrity image, further blurring the distinction between Terry Gene Bollea and his wrestling alter ego. In fact, as the 2016 *Bollea v. Gawker* lawsuit demonstrated so acutely, the "real" Hulk Hogan remains as elusive as ever.

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