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# The ‘public inquisitor’ as media celebrity

Michael Higgins

## Abstract

This article looks at the development and utility of celebrity among high-profile political interviewers. Offering the revised description “public inquisitor”, the article presents an overview of the rise of the political interviewer as a celebrity form of the “tribune of the people” (Clayman 2002). It focuses on the UK-based journalists and broadcasters Jeremy Paxman and John Humphrys, and looks at the expansion of their professional activities and their attendant construction as media personalities. It argues that the forms of celebrity presented by Paxman and Humphrys draw upon discourses of integrity and authenticity associated with practices of advocacy, and suggests that their extension beyond the formal political realm into media genres traditionally excluded from the established political domain might work to consolidate the public inquisitor as a discursive figure. Therefore, while acknowledging that this depends on the effective management of individual media profiles, the article proposes a critical reappraisal of the place of the celebrity personae in political communication in order to account for the possibility of constructive modes of media performance.

**Key words:** celebrity journalists, political communications, political interviews.

## Introduction

When UK broadcast journalist and BBC *Newsnight* presenter Jeremy Paxman interviewed Charles Kennedy on the event of Kennedy’s election as leader of political party the Liberal Democrats, there unfolded a telling exchange. It began as Paxman set out to goad Kennedy on the number of appearances the politician had made in the popular entertainment media. Having excused him at least the indulgence of the long-running BBC satirical quiz show *Have I Got News For You*, Paxman turned with less charity to Kennedy’s appearance on the game-show *Through The Keyhole*, going so

far as to interrupt Kennedy's faltering response to exclaim that he had appeared "twice!" This was a light-hearted spat; some gentle chiding at a reputation Kennedy had gathered as something of a "chat show Charlie". Yet for all that, Paxman is also playing on a popular suspicion highlighted by Street (2004: 436) of those that presume to straddle formal politics and entertainment media. However, the concern of this article is whether Kennedy might have highlighted something significant in his response, by pointing out that Paxman had a number of media sidelines of his own.

Focussing on Paxman and fellow BBC interviewer John Humphrys, the intention of this article is to look at how discussions of "celebrity" might contribute to our understanding of how the media perform their democratic function. Concerns around this have been ably expressed in Blumler and Gurevitch's (1995) series of essays on how the contemporary political realm may be experiencing a "crisis of public communication". A central allegation of Blumler and Gurevitch (1995: 203) is that the media offer an "impoverishing" means of address that "tends to strain against, rather than with the grain of citizenship", with the result that the dominant forms of public communication are detrimental to the maintenance of a democratic polity. Barnett and Gaber (2001: 2) argue that much of this predicament stems from the way in which political journalism is conducted, such that it fuels "the diminution of an informed, coherent and critical approach to reporting politics". The aim of this article is to contribute to an on-going and critical watch on the relationship between media and the political establishment through a consideration of the legitimacy of the celebrity political interviewer.

### **Summary of issues**

In the field of media and politics, the last few decades have seen a number of critics accuse those in the political realm of internalising a media-inspired desire to be palatable and entertaining (Postman 1987; Franklin 2004), while others have explored the contrary notion that the reconfiguration of political discourse to meet the needs of the media might be broadly beneficial in widening participation and encouraging clarity (Norris 2000; Jones 2005; Temple 2008). A number of recent studies have chosen to examine the terms of this debate through the issues of celebrity and personalization. While their conclusions have differed, Corner (2003), Savigny (2004), Street (2004), Drake and Higgins (2006) and Smith (2008) have all explored the idea that the correspondence between politics and personalization, in legitimizing forms of breach between the public and private, might offer the possibility of a more predictive insight into the motives and credibility of politicians.

In offering my own response to the argument over the rendering of political actors as media personalities, I want to shift the focus away from those charged with the implementation of political policy, to look instead at those elite interviewers, or “celebrity journalists” (Marshall 2005: 27), given the task of questioning politicians on the public’s behalf. Discussion will be confined to the context of the United Kingdom and the BBC<sup>1</sup>, and will also focus on the above-mentioned Jeremy Paxman of BBC 2’s news and current events programme *Newsnight* (from 1989) as well as John Humphrys of BBC Radio 4’s *Today* programme (from 1987). Both of these are flagship programmes, noted for scrutinising politicians and setting journalistic and political agendas. Within this context, I will be concerned with how the two interviewers have become constructed as celebrities (see Cockerell 2003; Franklin

1997: 13). I will assess the extent to which the celebrity of Paxman and Humphrys is consistent with the performative and professional practices attending their discursive position as presenters, and will conclude by situating my findings within the broader debate on the place of celebrity in political communication.

### **Celebrity and the public inquisitor**

Since the latter half of the twentieth century, discussion of celebrity has been a key concern in the politics of culture. In his book *The Power Elite*, C. Wright Mills (1956: 71-2) describes “celebrity names [as] the ones that require no further definition” and are dedicated to the generation of forms of public pleasure.

Celebrities are those figures that are immediately recognisable, and that produce widespread and predicable “excitement and awe” (Mills 1956: 72). However, while Mills contemplates “the celebrities” as the vacuous occupants of a self-justifying “café society”, a series of recent accounts have been interested in the cultural and political nuances of celebrity, and its straddling of cultural divisions (see Turner 2004: 4-9). Foremost amongst this recent work is that of P. David Marshall (1997), who highlights both the spread of celebrity across media forms and its importance for understanding the operation of political and economic power. Amongst much else, Marshall (1997: 204) points out that the construction and maintenance of a celebrity image is central to the marketing of contemporary politicians, such that their role accords them an “affective function” in which they claim characteristic linguistic and visual codes to consolidate their place within a system of governance. This would be more of a surprise to the realm of politics than it would be to the entertainment industry, and Tolson (2001) shows how conventional forms of show business

celebrity are obliged to present a marketable “personality” for the purposes of their development as media professionals.

Clayman (2002) has described the relatively exclusive, politically significant journalists that provide the focus for this article as “tribunes of the people”. These are the prominent, “star” interviewers (McNair 2000: 96) that are routinely entrusted with the set-piece interviews with senior politicians and important public figures for the broadcast media. McNair (2000: 84) describes such an interviewer as “a licensed interrogator of the powerful, trusted by the public and respected by the politician”. In engaging the politician, McNair continues, this “interviewer’s role is like that of a courtroom lawyer questioning a witness”: an analogy carried further by Gnisci and Bonaiuto (2003). In the course of their work, these journalists inquire on behalf of the public, and are empowered by their civil responsibility to engage their quarry in an interrogative mode<sup>2</sup>.

However, I intend to take account of the broader activities of these journalists. While seeing the interview arrangement as a central component of any process, I am interested in how a number of interviewers cultivate a form of media personality best described as the “public inquisitor” (Higgins 2008: 36). This is meant to convey the spirit, if not the lexical choice, of the title of Robin Day’s (1989) memoirs *Grand Inquisitor*. While the expression “public inquisitor” is not in common use, it was used by *Life* magazine in 1968 in discussion of another prominent British interviewer David Frost, as well as by the *Daily Mail* in 1992 to refer to those broadcasters with “a precious licence to heckle” (Paterson 1992: 9). Overall, the notion of the public inquisitor is intended to convey that these interviewers draw upon and construct a

form of representation, and that this is central to understanding their professional conduct throughout the media.

While Robin Day is mentioned frequently in Asa Briggs's (1995) *History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, accounts of the development of this form of journalism vary. Montgomery (2007: 206), for instance, highlights the likely influence of the aggressive style of the US journalist Ed Murrow. What is clearer is that the emergence of this form of journalistic practice as a supposed matter of public concern is partly a development of longer-standing anxieties around factual broadcasters becoming "personalities" in their own right, and the impact this might have on the integrity of the news. For example, the BBC are said to have provoked "considerable comment" by introducing named announcers at the outbreak of World War II (Curran and Seaton 1997: 144). Among many politicians, the public inquisitor is thought to represent a particularly malign form of personality journalism. Ex-government minister Kenneth Clark is quoted as saying that in the decades following Robin Day "the whole thing has been taken to a quite different level by the hostile, bantering, sneering, cynical performing celebrity interviewers" (Cockerell 2003). From academic circles as well, Franklin (1997: 13) suggests that the use of such well-known media performers as Jeremy Paxman to serve the political public contributes to the dominance of what he calls "newszak" over news; a process of disintegration that Louw (2005: 173) argues is exacerbated by the dominance of "celebrity" across politics and news more generally.

In common with the various assessments of their utility and influence, the processes that recruit this select band of star performers are complex. From one direction, they



are chosen by members of the management of media organisations, who have deemed these journalists to be those who are the most clearly spoken, intellectually able, sharp-witted and reliable for the opportunities afforded by interviews with major political figures. Accordingly, both Paxman and Humphrys had already established their professional abilities in long careers as journalists and presenters. From the other direction and less overtly, interviewers may be selected by the politicians they interview. As Franklin (2004: 136) points out, major figures in the political establishment, helped by their advisors, are relatively free to grant an interview with whomsoever they please. Government information officers and their equivalents act as “primary definers”, influencing not just the release of political information, but also to which journalists and news organisations it is distributed (Barnett and Gaber 2001: 4; Hall *et al* 1978). Indeed, many politicians use this power to choose not to submit to the rigors of the formal interview at all (McNair 2000: 96) and opt, as UK Prime Minister Tony Blair did in February 2005 on the daytime magazine programme *Richard and Judy*, to discharge their duty for disclosure in the softer chat-show formats. Furthermore, even within this interrogative elite there exists a hierarchy, with only the most established public inquisitors granted a set-piece interview with such figures as the Prime Minister of the day. By dint of the informal selection processes through which they rise to prominence, public inquisitors are therefore few in number at any given time.

### **The interview form and the discursive position of the interviewer**

Having set out the basis of this professional position, this section of the article will first describe the forms of interview associated with these public inquisitors, before

going on to discuss the extent to which these depend upon a series of important discursive positions. In his account of the set piece political interview, Schudson (1995: 74-6) points out that the conventional interpersonal function of “the question” either as a tool of social intercourse or as a call for hitherto unknown intelligence is suspended. Instead, the interviewer is free to engage on the basis of “known information”, in a manner more readily identifiable with such relationships as that between a teacher and a pupil. Moreover, it is often concealed from the respondent whether the question is on the basis of known information or not, thereby introducing an element of “tension” or “deceit” to the exchange (Schudson 1995: 74-5; Corner 2003: 78). Secondly, Schudson argues that the exchange includes a silent “third party” – the overhearing audience or “public” – for whose benefit the exchange takes place and on whose behalf the interviewer acts (Schudson 1995: 75).

As Ekstrom (2001: 566) points out, however, the news interview is also a “meeting of institutions”, where conflicting organisations and interest groups are represented by the interviewer and respondent (see also Heritage and Roth 1995). The interviewer acts on behalf of the media, together with its material concerns and desire for disclosure, while the respondent represents the concerns of the government or those seeking political power. The terms of this division of representation is informed by what Schudson (1995: 75) described as “the relative power of the reporter and the source”, which at the same time demands appropriate codes of behaviour in which the participants consolidate one another’s professional standing and retain the basis for further encounters in the future. As a consequence, any government respondent is restrained from stating a personal opinion that contradicts the policy of the administration of which he or she is a member<sup>3</sup>, while the interviewer is equally

obliged to avoid expressing their own view (Tolson 2006: 45). In the case of the interviewer, their status as interrogator in the encounter therefore derives from their speaking on behalf of the media institution at one level (Lerman 1983: 100), while representing a constructed “public” at another level (Clayman 2002).

Against the background of these institutional demands, this mode of representation requires a type of performance that differs from other conversations. In a series of studies looking at the conduct of political interviews as social exchanges, Clayman (1992; 2002) explores how interviewers manage the delivery of hostile or accusatory questions by shifting their “footing”<sup>4</sup>, so that they are merely seen to express the concerns such absent others as political opponents or the above mentioned overhearing public. This capacity, to switch from the recitation of one argument to another, demands the construction of a particular form of interviewer-performance; one that also facilitates such shifts as that from the hostile accuser to the bearer of hearty farewells and thanks. To illustrate the importance of performance towards understanding this type of broadcast journalism, we can also look to Campbell’s (1991) study of the CBS news programme *60 Minutes* in which he outlines a selection of the roles the journalist are called upon to occupy at different points of the programme, including the performance of detective in some segments and analyst in other segments.

All in all, therefore, it is not enough to look at the sometimes confrontational character of the inquisitorial interview without looking as well at how the performances involved are enabled by the discursive positioning of the participants. Here, the later work of Foucault is useful in conceptualizing how these roles present

forms of subjectivity that emerge out of and represent relations of power. According to Foucault (1990: 6), forms of institution are complemented by forms of self: “the manifold relations, the open strategies, and the rational techniques that articulate the exercise of powers” alongside the “forms and modalities of the relation to the self by which the individual constitutes and recognizes himself qua subject”. While, as Foucault (2006: 206) points out, an art of the self is a necessary component of political activity, it is the limits and expectations of selfhood that come to prominence here. The discussion is forthright and outwardly impolite because those involved answer to constructions of the self that represent particular regimes of interest and power. From a charitable perspective, negative charges that these encounters produce little other than restatements of officially approved scripts (Harris 1991), techniques of equivocation (Bull 2000) or well-rehearsed avoidance strategies (Ekstrom 2001) may be seen as a natural consequence of the demands placed upon the participants to submit to particular discursive regimes of truth. However, while those involved are not entitled to speak outside the parameters to which they are surrendered, it remains that these discursive regimes generate a controlled form of power, in that they enable confrontational modes of conduct on the basis of a professionalized subject position.

### **The public inquisitor and the practice of celebrity**

While only briefly, the article has therefore offered a description of what these interviews entail, towards highlighting how the encounters depend upon the discursive position of the participants. This section and those that follow will show that these mediated personas are articulated from various constructions of public persona, and according to the terms of other media appearances (see Tolson 2001).

This section of the article will now explore wider discursive elements that may influence the role of the journalist by looking to the crucial element of the public inquisitor crossing over into the traditional genres of media entertainment; that is to say, how these journalists engage in the activities of “celebrity”.

The practice of prominent political interviewers carrying on broad-based careers in the UK media is nothing new. In a chapter published in 1977, Kumar uses a copy of the *Radio Times* to chart the movements of Robin Day over the course of seven days:

In a given week we can see [...] Robin Day presenting the BBC’s principle current affairs programme, *Panorama*, on the Monday evening, on television; on Tuesday evening, on Radio 4 he is in his regular position as chairman of the phone-in programme, *It’s Your Line* (if it happens to be election time he will be chairing an election special phone-in every morning of the week); on Thursday evening on Radio 3 he is chairing a discussion between two speakers on political censorship of the media; on Friday he is chairman – for the occasion – of the regular Radio 4 current affairs programme, *Analysis*; on Sunday evening he is back on television chairing the first of a three-part debate on contemporary morality in *The Sunday Debate*. And in other weeks there will be additional or alternative ad hoc appearances (Kumar 1977: 243)

An examination of the current UK television and radio schedules will not reveal such a quantity of appearances as that demonstrated in this week in the life of Robin Day.

Almost certainly, this is partly the result of a decrease in the sheer number of programmes and discussion shows on formal party politics now available on terrestrial television (see Franklin 1997: 252-3). However, it is apparent from the current schedules that we now see a number of prominent political journalists beginning to cross television genres. While Jeremy Paxman’s regular appearances on BBC 2’s *Newsnight* may not be supplemented by regularly scheduled opportunities for him to further discuss issues of the day and hold the powerful to public account, other than at election time, he has been a regular host of discussion programmes on

BBC Radio 4 and is well established as quizmaster on the BBC 2 televised inter-university quiz tournament *University Challenge*. Similarly, while not asked to re-perform his inquisitorial role on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme, John Humphrys has taken the position previously held by Magnus Magnusson on BBC 1's determinedly highbrow quiz show *Mastermind*<sup>5</sup>.

Granted, there have been past examples of the public inquisitor of the day crossing between genres. For example, Robin Day appeared on the popular variety show *Morecambe and Wise* Christmas Special in 1975 to engage in banter and do a jig with the show's main performers. There are similar elements of what Bakhtin (1984) sees as the "carnavalesque" reversals of conventional roles in the current annual BBC charity telethon *Comic Relief*, where celebrities including well-known journalists are routinely invited to suspend their conventional modes of professional performance for the duration of the programme, normally by participating in comedy sketches. But what may be significant in our contemporary examples is that the form of engagement and mediated persona developed in political programming is the very one that is used in the quiz programmes *University Challenge* and *Mastermind*. So in terms of the development of the media persona, our examples are not, as with Robin Day on *Morecambe and Wise*, offered as a chance to see another gentler side of Jeremy Paxman or an opportunity to behold the repressed urge for fun and jollity within John Humphrys. Rather, we see a direct transference of that discursive figure crafted and maintained in a political context into a more explicitly entertainment based genre.

This consistency of public face is borne out by the dominant modes of performance exhibited in these programmes, and it is significant that they not are only quizzes, but

are represented as highbrow, intellectual quizzes. The direct questioning of *Mastermind* employs elements of the *Today* persona of Humphrys, shifting between modes of interrogation, brief periods of chat, and the offering of thanks. However, the most interesting example is Paxman, whose acerbic interviewing style has been transferred, often humorously, to his professional conduct on *University Challenge*. In his role, Paxman continually acts out mild disgust at the ignorance and response time of the contestants, and will typically pepper his management of the programme with physical expressions of exasperation and impatience coupled with such pleas as “oh, *come on* Durham” and declarations of the type “good grief, you’re two hundred years out”. Yet, just as with Humphrys, even these exchanges are driven by the imperatives of what Heritage and Roth (1995: 28) call “speaker management”, such that Paxman’s curmudgeonly performance whilst asking questions is framed within and set against a broader easy courtesy and bonhomie that might be associated with idealized notions of the debating society, as well as with constructed forms of personalisation more generally<sup>5</sup> (Fairclough 2001: 52).

The suggestion here is that these performances are significant in constructing Paxman and Humphrys as media personalities that generate a particular form of celebrity. What is significant is that the cross media appearance of Paxman and Humphrys might be consistent with the consolidation of the discursive power they are required to wield in their inquisitorial roles. That is, the type of celebrity we have been examining has become associated with particular forms of dialogic engagement and intellectual authenticity, and these properties appear to be transferred across different media terrains, so that the construction of the public inquisitor as a form of celebrity

operates in a way that is consistent with their performance in their various professional roles.

### **The public inquisitor and celebrity: objections and opportunities**

We will now look more broadly to the issues around the public inquisitor and the celebrity, both in professional practice and within the analysis and criticism of political broadcasting. Arguably, the notion of the soundly-established political interviewer is to the disadvantage of any politician seeking to dissemble, conceal or tell outright lies. Although the concern here is with the construction and conduct of the interviewers rather than the politicians, I have already alluded to a propensity amongst politicians to hone various skills of question avoidance and equivocation (Harris 1991; Bull 2000; Ekstrom 2001) or to refuse to participate in these forms of interview altogether (McNair 2000: 96). This has given rise to an emphasis among many adversarial interviewers on “pressing for the truth” over the more supportive strategy of “letting the interviewee get their point across” (Hutchby 2006: 136). We find further support for the discomfort of politicians with this arrangement in Atkinson (1984: 174), who alludes to occasions on which interviewees challenge the seriousness of the encounter rather than the matter at hand, such as when former Prime Minister Harold Wilson sought to “neutralise, albeit temporarily, the forceful interviewing style of Robin Day [by] calling him ‘Robin’ in front of his viewers”. Overall, particular modes of celebrity performance may be beneficial for demanding truth from power, and disadvantageous to those of the political establishment wishing to avoid sustained questioning.



On the other hand, a repeated criticism of this form of interviewing is that it fosters too much of an emphasis on a confrontational mode of engagement, and provides more a competition of wit and obstinacy than a search for political meaning and consistency (Barnett and Gaber 2001: 144). Indeed, Robin Day himself expresses regret at the confrontational turn that political interviews have taken (Cockerell 2003), with fellow broadcaster Jon Snow also suggesting that there is an undue emphasis placed upon “cynicism” over “rigour” (quoted in Thorpe 2005), albeit that both Paxman (2005: 20) and Humphrys<sup>6</sup> responded that they preferred to be thought of as “sceptical”. Others, however, concentrate on Day’s other regret at the circumstances that gave rise to this style of interviewing, such as the increasing skill amongst politicians to avoid answering those questions that are put to them. Developing this latter view, McNair (2000: 99) argues that the negative consequences for the successful passage of a productive and meaningful interview are rooted less in the necessary belligerence of Paxman or Humphrys, and more in the multi-tactical evasiveness of those obliged by their position within a mass democracy to submit to interview.

Yet, if there is a debate to be joined concerning the professional aspects of this integration of celebrity into political broadcasting, it may be around the appropriateness of turning such a politically necessary construction as the public inquisitor towards other commercial, political and cultural imperatives. Both Paxman and Humphrys are prolific writers of books, for example. In so doing, it may be argued that they use the public renown established through the coverage of politics to position themselves as social, cultural and political commentators. To offer a non-exhaustive list, Paxman has written books exposing the self-serving systems of power

in the British establishment (1990); the construction of Englishness (1998); what it entails to be, or wish to be, a politician (2002); and a history and assessment of the role of British Royalty (2006). For his part, Humphrys has written a general cultural manifesto (1999); an exposure on the practices of food production (2002); and, most recently, one book castigating what he sees as the common degradation and misuse of the English language (2004) and another outlining the consequences of the unreflective use of words (2006). Therefore, just as we see in Street's (2004) and Drake and Higgins's (2006) accounts of the activism of a number of entertainment professionals, these prominent public inquisitors deploy their celebrity to represent themselves as political actors in their own right.

What this certainly betrays is an inequality of access to the instruments of communication, favoring the arguments of those already in a powerful position. This raises the need to remain watchful of the tensions between these practices of celebrity and the liberal ideal of a relatively equal and unfettered means of conveying political arguments. Discussing his notion of "the public sphere", Habermas concedes the necessary form of one-step-removed "representative publicness" implied in this article as the de facto basis of contemporary public communication (Habermas 1992: 426), but warns too that this form of representation involves a surrender of control over the selection of topic and transfers enunciative power to those sanctioned by major media organisations (Habermas 1992: 437). Thus, uneven access to the apparatus of celebrity may mean that particular individuals and attendant modes of political discussion are given undue prominence within the political public sphere. As well as this, there is the related institutional concern that relatively exclusive access to the main broadcast channels gives the media and political establishments the means to

actively collude in the generation of this form of celebrity (Franklin 1997). Croteau and Hoynes (1994: 57), for example, read major political interviews in the United States as knowing rituals that see politicians and their interviewers “share a good chuckle about their disagreements when the cameras go off”.

However, even though the implications for representative democracy are complex and need constant appraisal, the descriptions of the American Presidencies of Washington and Lincoln given in Braudy’s (1997) history of fame testify to a long-standing emphasis on personality in politics. Moreover, while Fairclough (2000) and Corner (2003) outline the contemporary importance of the political personae, Kleinnijenhuis *et al* (2001) and Hansen (2005) explain its integration into practices of autobiography and marketing. From what were given as the conservative market ethic of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, through John Major’s self-effacing decency, to the mood of renewal made possible by Tony Blair’s initial “youth and vitality”, the descriptive fields that have gathered around British Prime Ministers are often generated by what is taken to be their “personality” (Stanyer and Wring 2004). As Street (2001) points out, political communication has come to operate on the assumption that personal qualities feed public conduct, and comprehending the person at play is an important part of understanding the person at work. For our purposes, this point is not made as a judgement on whether it is in order to consider the private alongside the public, but is merely a conceptual observation that the discourses of the political figure – whether in the media or in public office – are influenced by the construction of a “real” person behind the public personae.

However, it is important that these essential critical endeavors should not be encumbered by needless forms of cultural distinction. Overall, the concerns this article has outlined over the public inquisitor suggest that celebrity is more complex than a number of the dominant arguments over decline of political culture allow. Indeed, having established the importance that should be attached to the construction of these interviewers as a particular form of media persona, it is worth questioning the necessity of surrendering the terms of media personality to a negatively charged vocabulary of celebrity (cf. Postman 1987; Franklin 2004; Louw 2005). Aside from the historical contingency of this condemnatory approach to the term<sup>7</sup>, Street (2004) and Drake and Higgins (2006) argue that the analysis of political communication ought to disentangle suspicion of a loosely defined notion of celebrity as a provider of distraction and entertainment from the balanced criticism of those forms of personality to necessarily emerge in the context of a media democracy. Otherwise, a combination of the pejorative language of celebrity and its unrelenting use in discussing the mediated persona in politics means that any mobilisation of the personality into the mediation of politics becomes subject to forms of social critique based on a questionable assumption of malaise and decline.

## **Conclusion**

This article has tried to argue that the “tribune of the people” (Clayman 2002) has, in the UK case at least, extended beyond the role of the interviewer towards a form of celebrity that can be usefully described as the “public inquisitor”. While accepting a critical watch should be kept on the maintenance of these forms of media personality, I have suggested that interviewers such as Paxman and Humphrys present a type of

personae associable with interrogative forms of engagement, as well as with the construction and performance of truth-seeking. Whether deliberately or not, the mode of celebrity that Paxman and Humphrys deploy in officiating on *University Challenge* or *Mastermind* and in authoring such political interventions as *Friends in High Places* (Paxman 1990) or *The Great Food Gamble* (Humphrys 2002) presents them as defenders of scholarly and political integrity, which appears broadly consistent with their role as public inquisitors.

There is also, however, the style of interviewing that the public inquisitor represents, and which may be seen either as a gratuitous spectacle or as a stimulus for political discussion. Whereas Richards (2007: 73) contends that these interviews are designed to foster conflict over discussion, Lewis *et al* (2005: 4) suggest that dispute and argument is the very essence of politics, and is routinely smothered in the embrace between political image-makers and media producers. While acknowledging that Paxman and Humphrys are themselves a part of this media establishment, there is an extent to which these forms of celebrity performance embody what McNair (2000) describes as “the interrogative moment” of journalism, and so contribute to the reinvigoration of political culture. Although it is interesting that Paxman and Humphrys resituate political style within the realm of entertainment rather than refashion conventional entertainment to cover issues of politics (cf. Temple 2008), there remains the need to rethink this tangled relationship between the political and the popular. Certainly, discussion of the role of the media personality in politics should avoid falling prey to judgements over cultural hierarchies that are discursively constituted from the outset.

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## Notes

1. The concentration on the BBC is partly the result of circumstances. As well as Humphrys and Paxman, the BBC employed Robin Day during the most immediately relevant period of his career. Even though Robin Day stresses the influence of Independent Television News in the development of news and current affairs broadcasting (Day 1989: 82; Briggs 1995: 67), it remains that the BBC is integral to debates around the constitution and representation of the British public and is funded through indirect taxation.
2. In a study of the BBC Radio special programme *Election Call 2001*, Ross (2004: 796) identifies a frustration amongst respondents at those interviewers seen to engage in “gentle probing” rather than hard questioning, with one interviewee saying, “who’s that chap on *Newsnight*? Jeremy Paxman. [...] They all do it very well, they don’t let them [politicians] off the hook but give them an uncomfortable time”.

3. This draws upon what Bull (2000: 232) describes as the professional obligation to maintain “party face”.
4. “Footing” is taken from the work of Erving Goffman (1981: 128), who uses it to describe the practice of shifting “participant alignment” to facilitate switches in conversational code or tone.
5. Andrew Tolson points out that these performances are also informed by connotations of social class, where Paxman’s urbane manner and cultivated assuredness often contrasts with Humphry’s “man of the people” no-nonsense, directness (personal correspondence).
6. Humphrys directly responded to Snow on the BBC Radio 4 *Today* programme of 18 April 2005, repeating a formulation he had earlier given in the BBC MacTaggart lecture of 2004 (Humphrys 2005: 272).
7. What is meant here is that “celebrity” has not always suffered negative connotations. For example, Richard Hooker (1975: 377) uses the term positively, writing in his 1600 volume on *Ecclesiastical Polity* that “the dignity and celebrity of major cities should be celebrated”. It was by the middle of the nineteenth century that celebrity has undergone a significant change to the extent that it could be legitimately offered as synonymous with trivia and artifice, laying the ground for Matthew Arnold (1863: 246) to dismiss those philosophers after Spinoza with the put-down “they had celebrity, Spinoza had fame”.

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