Transnational Celebrity Activism in Global Politics

Changing the World?

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Introduction

U2 singer and social activist Bono has described his celebrity status as valuable 'currency' that can be used productively in the fight against Third World poverty. Furthermore, he is unapologetic about the deliberate exploitation of his celebrity status, affording him and Bob Geldof unprecedented access to world leaders to champion their cause to 'make poverty history', and thus casting them in the role of 'celebrity diplomats' (Cooper 2007). In short, it is precisely their celebrity status that draws attention to the cause they champion, via blanket media coverage, and it is their celebrity status that puts pressure on current political leaders to be seen to engage with them: popularity by association.

In July 2007, rock singer Peter Gabriel and 'celebrity' business tycoon Richard Branson, who has made effective use of his own carefully cultivated celebrity status, introduced a new initiative that aims to take celebrity diplomacy to a new level: the establishment of a group of 'Elders' that includes Desmond Tutu, Jimmy Carter, Kofi Annan, Mary Robinson, and the ultimate beacon of global wisdom, Nelson Mandela. Their brief goes beyond fighting global poverty and includes conflict resolution through diplomacy. However, this is not diplomacy in its traditional guise, but rather aims to take the traditional elements that often block effective solutions out of the equation: political ambition and conflicting interests. The initiative aims to resurrect the function of elders in traditional societies, and is specifically modelled on the role and status of elders in African village societies. Central to the initiative is the fact that none of the Elders holds public office, which allows them to work for the common good, rather than external political interests. It thus aims to overcome the considerable limitations of the current context of political diplomacy. Similarly, it avoids some of the connotations of 'celebrity activism', as something that celebrities do as an image-building exercise, since the Elders are well past the need for image building.

While the self-conscious exploitation of celebrity status within this initiative has the potential to make a positive impact on both the levels of fund-raising and of awareness in a western context, the 'traditional' role of celebrity in this process is at the same time fraught with profound contradictions. 'Goodwill ambassadors', in the form of pop singers and movie stars, have long been employed for a variety of political causes. However, similar to politicians, the effectiveness of celebrities from the entertainment world is limited to some extent, as they can easily be 'accused' of exploiting these political causes to enhance their own celebrity status and provide them with an 'aura' of credibility. In other words, these celebrities can easily be perceived to have vested interests, in a similar way that politicians

do, which potentially affects their effectiveness. Again, the Elders initiative appears to cut through such perceptions.

This chapter will explore the role of 'celebrity diplomacy' (as a specific form of 'celebrity activism') in the Elders' attempts to effect change and engage with politics and poverty at a global level. The central question is whether their celebrity status, as well as the celebrity status of their founders, will limit them to awareness-raising alone, or whether they can effect meaningful change and a shift in the way diplomacy operates on a global level. This chapter will argue that while 'celebrity' has the potential to create awareness, raise much-needed funds, and drive 'political action', this potential is at the same time firmly wedded to contemporary politics of entertainment and media consumption, thus potentially limiting its ability to effect structural change.

Defining Celebrity

An analysis of the role and status of the Elders in relation to their status as celebrities requires a working definition of the concept of celebrity. In other words, there are different ways of approaching celebrity, and the concept of celebrity has undergone a series of important changes, particularly under the influence of the explosive growth of the global media. As Bonner et al. have noted, 'the concept of celebrity is itself a little slippery, partly because its constitutive discourses have leaked into such a wide range of media formats and practices' (1999: 56). If visibility is the oxygen of celebrity, then the opportunities to achieve such visibility are becoming ever more widespread. Conversely, however, visibility alone is not enough, and *attention*, or rather the ability to attract attention, is increasingly becoming the main currency that drives celebrity status. As Marshall has noted, celebrity status itself 'confers on the person a certain discursive power within society, and the celebrity is a voice above others, a voice that is channelled into the media system as being legitimately significant' (1997: 10). This suggests that celebrity is seen as 'significant' in itself, and therefore deserving of attention. Holmes and Redmond (2006) cite Couldry (2004) who talks in this respect about the 'myth of the media centre' [...] in which mediated space is constructed as 'special' and significant, and to enter it, or even pass through it, is to receive a form of symbolic capital' (2006: 10). However, we would argue that there are divergent degrees of such symbolic capital, which in turn command divergent degrees of attention, and some celebrity currencies offer better exchange rates than others. Within the global media context, there are thus different degrees of celebrity, and it is no coincidence that the most 'celebrated' of all are those celebrities that cut across different media spheres, and thereby achieve a kind of blanket visibility.

For example, there is little doubt that Robert De Niro is a celebrity, but he is first and foremost a Hollywood movie actor and his visibility is largely restricted to the films in which he appears, and perhaps the odd appearance on the *Oprah Winfrey* show. His celebrity status is nevertheless global, unlike many localized celebrities, especially those whose status is derived from localized reality television shows such as *Big Brother*. If we continue to follow this logic, it becomes clear why someone like Angelina Jolie has now achieved the status of 'super celebrity', for not only is she hyper-visible across all media spheres, but she also commands attention for a number of different reasons, and thus from different media audiences and publics. Within this context, her celebrity status in itself can be seen as a product or commodity and it serves as valuable currency, which is subsequently being appropriated for different political causes. However, to keep this currency as valuable as it is requires her to maintain her celebrity status on all fronts (e.g. Hollywood movies, television talk shows, fashion and gossip magazines), as they reinforce each other. As Junod puts it, 'she became the most famous in the world because despite her willingness to take on the world's suffering – no, precisely on *account* of her willingness to take on the world's suffering – people suspected that she was still crazy' (2007). Thus, it is the suspicion of 'craziness', derived from her carefully constructed media persona that keeps commanding attention, and this attention can then be diverted into other directions; for example, political causes. If, as Rojek argues, 'celebrity = impact on public consciousness' (2001: 10), then Angelina Jolie is indeed a 'super celebrity'. Of course, Angelina Jolie is only one example here, and it works in similar ways for others, although arguably not to the same extent.

The different types and degrees of celebrity outlined above are usefully reflected in Turner, Bonner and Marshall's extensive definition (2000: 13):

> Celebrities are brand names as well as cultural icons or identities; they operate as marketing tools as well as sites where the agency of the audience is clearly evident; and they represent the achievement of individualism – the triumph of the human and the familiar – as well as its commodification and commercialisation. Like all commodities, however, their trade needs to be organised and controlled and, as a result, the production and commercialisation of celebrities has become an industry too.

Graeme Turner's definition of celebrity refines the concept further (2004: 9):

> Celebrity is a genre of representation and a discursive effect; it is a commodity traded by the promotions, publicity, and media industries that produce these representations and their effects; and it is a cultural formation that has a social function we can better understand.

Both these definitions stress the constructedness of celebrity, which is echoed in Rojek's much shorter conceptualization of celebrity as 'the attribution of glamorous or notorious status to an individual within the public sphere' (2001: 10). In short, in all these accounts celebrity is seen as something that is 'done to someone', as something that is constructed by the media industry. Indeed, Rojek goes as far as to say that 'celebrities are cultural fabrications' (2001: 10), who are stage managed by a faceless media machine. This is then tempered somewhat by his distinction between three different categories of celebrity: *ascribed*

(following bloodlines, e.g. royal families); *achieved* (due to perceived accomplishments, e.g. sports people); and *attributed* (result of representation of an individual as noteworthy by cultural intermediaries) (Rojek 2001). Despite allowing for 'achievement' as the basis of a particular form of celebrity, the maintenance of that celebrity status is still largely seen as dependent on mediated stage management. Although we acknowledge that mediated (and therefore constructed) elements are central to celebrity culture, these definitions do have a tendency to deny specific celebrities any form of agency. This becomes problematic when we begin to think about how all of this applies to the Elders under investigation here. In other words, to what extent is their status based on 'stage management' by the media? This in turn becomes an important question if one tries to evaluate their potential effectiveness. While the Elders were brought together for explicitly *political* reasons, their status (and thus their 'currency') is intimately linked to the celebrity status of their founders. Aung San Suu Kyi, for example, is the latest inclusion to the Elders, despite, or perhaps *because* being under continued house arrest in Burma,[1] she demands considerable attention. Her participation is therefore more of a symbolic gesture of support, as is the fact that the other Elders leave an empty chair for her during their meetings. To explore these subtle (or perhaps not so subtle) gestures in more depth, we will now turn to the relationship between celebrity and politics.

Celebrity and Politics

The relationship between celebrity and politics has received considerable academic attention, and this attention is usually focused on two main variants that John Street (2004: 435) identifies as: the elected politician or candidate who uses elements of 'celebrityhood' to establish their claim to represent a group or cause. The second is the celebrity – the star of popular culture – who uses their popularity to speak for public opinion. Both are often seen as leading to a phenomenon called 'celebrity politics', which is, in turn, often seen as something to be profoundly concerned about, primarily because it is considered to undermine the democratic process (West and Orman 2002; Meyer 2002). 'The assumption is that the political use of popular culture is a cynical expression of a desperate populism, one in which presentation and appearance substitute for policy and principle. What is being signified is a crisis of representation, not a realisation of it' (Street 2004: 436). This crisis in representation is symbolized by the apparent rise in importance of public relations firms and spin doctors in the political process, or what Gamson (2000) has called the 'celebrification process' in politics. In short, critics of celebrity politics are concerned about this development, because they believe that 'representatives should be judged in terms of the quality of their policy proposals, the ideological coherence of their manifesto, the sophistication of their political skills or the legitimacy of their selection procedures' (Street 2004: 443), rather than on their appearance or their skill in front of the cameras. This is a common critique and one with a very long history (Drake and Higgins 2006). However, it has gathered pace under the influence of a fast-changing mediascape.

In *Media Democracy*, Thomas Meyer focuses on this changing mediascape and the ways in which it affects democratic politics. The central question he asks is: 'in what sense and to what degree, (if at all) are democratic procedures jeopardised when the rules of the media system displace those of the political system?' (2002: xvi). The rules of the media are manifold in Meyer's opinion, and they include factors of time (emphasis on the present; difference between media time and political time), news values, the rules of 'media stage management', personification (read *celebrification*), and parasitic publicity. All of this creates a situation that places major constraints on traditional politics. It leads Meyer to conclude that, 'in so far as the elite actors in the political system put their faith in the basic equation of media democracy – publicity equals success – they yield to the time-constraints of media production, because they suppose that is the price they have to pay to win public support' (2002: 45). The reason for singling out Meyer here is that his study rightly takes the changing mediascape seriously, but that it is at the same time fairly typical of many critiques of the media's influence on contemporary politics. Within such critiques, celebrity politics exemplifies everything that is wrong with contemporary politics, and is thus customarily dismissed outright. However, we agree with Street that it is rather more useful to see celebrity politics in a much wider context, as that would allow us to specifically identify characteristics of celebrity politics that can be appropriated to effect social or political change. Street (2004: 445) sums it up like this:

> In analysing forms of political representation in modern democracies, we need to be aware of the ways in which this relationship is constituted and experienced aesthetically. From this perspective, the phenomenon of the celebrity politician takes on a different aspect. It is not to be dismissed as a betrayal of the proper principles of democratic representation, but as an extension of them. Celebrity politics is a code for the performance of representations through the gestures and media available to those who wish to claim 'representativeness'.

The attraction of this formulation is that it widens the possibilities of what counts as 'political', and therefore allows for the crossing of boundaries between 'politicians' and 'celebrities', or indeed, 'celebrity politicians'.

Drake and Higgins identify two main positions with regard to celebrity politics, which are important for our purposes here: one is pessimistic and the other more optimistic. The pessimistic position is outlined above and is based on the view that 'politics proper' has come to rely too much on image and spin and not enough on 'rational argumentation' (2006: 89). Underlying this view is a sense of nostalgia and longing for a time when politics was characterized by 'rigorous debate' rather than 'trivial celebrity gossip'. McKee (2005) has debunked these myths to some extent, but in doing so, it is important to incorporate the changes in the wider media sphere.

The other more optimistic position does precisely that. Corner and Pels draw on performance theory to argue that a 'performative restyling of politics does not have to be viewed in a negative manner but might be fashioned to the service of a more *inclusive*

political culture' (2003: 16). The inclusiveness they refer to suggests a more democratic political environment with wider public participation.

The role of politicians in this mediated political environment has changed in the sense that they have much less time to get their political ideas across, and that they compete for attention (for example, with celebrities) in a cluttered and largely commercialized media environment. This has an enormous impact on the role of politicians, and it changes the ways in which they communicate and perform. Jessica Evans argues that the 'function of celebrities is to convert very complex economic and political arguments [...] into digestible and easily understandable chunks of information that will fit into the contexts of media viewing' (2005: 42); the same role can be ascribed to politicians in the contemporary media scape, and the distinction between 'celebrity' and 'politician' is thus very blurred in this view.

The question, according to Drake and Higgins, becomes: 'to what extent do celebrities, and politicians endorsed by celebrities, engage a public disengaged from formal politics: that is, do they enable political issues to be aired to a wider audience?' (2006: 99).

In relation to the case of the Elders, we can then ask the question of whether there are any shades of grey in these descriptions. In other words, the categories of 'politician' and 'celebrity' are both applicable to the relationships between the Elders themselves and their founders. Hence, they function partly as celebrities that attract attention and therefore have the potential to 'engage a disengaged public', and they function partly as people with enormous political prestige and status (many of them are Nobel Peace Prize winners).

In the former case, their function is to create public awareness and support for specific causes, through their knowledge of the requirements of contemporary media communication, while in the latter case, their status itself demands respect on a political level, and thus potentially allows them to be very effective diplomatically. Indeed, the fact that they are recognized as 'Elders', who have already earned their stripes, and have therefore nothing left to prove, nor have any pressure from being elected representatives, may make them much *more* effective than traditional diplomats.

Turner notes that 'these days, public relations touches most facets of commercial and public life: managing corporate relations with the public, providing advice to politicians about how to build their public image, or designing a government public information campaign' (2004: 44). But what if politicians are relieved of the need to manage their public image, by virtue of their status and 'retirement' stage of their 'proper' political careers? This applies to the Elders, and again, it may make them potentially much more effective, because it allows them to navigate with ease around media-imposed constraints that affect 'normal' politicians. In addition, Turner argues about celebrities that they 'may have achieved things that suggest they 'deserve' their eminence, but that is not going to protect that individual from the celebrity process, nor affect how it actually operates over time' (2004: 19). Again, the status of the Elders may mean that they are 'relieved' from the pressure to 'prove' that they deserve their political status and their celebrity status respectively, which in a sense contrasts with other 'political celebrities' like Bob Geldof or Richard Branson – who have been integral to the organizing of The Elders but have discreetly stayed on the side lines, leaving the diplomatic work to those who have demonstrated expertise in the international arena.

Celebrity Diplomats: Celebrities or Diplomats?

Given the calibre and standing of this group we surmise that the question is not whether the term 'celebrities' is applicable to this group, but *how* it is applicable and enacted in a changing global mediascape, in which the roles and performance of diplomats and political figures may be better understood through the prism of 'celebrity'. In order to further this argument, we specifically look at who the Elders are and examine their profiles to gain an understanding of how the framework of celebrity is enacted in this context.

Nelson Mandela	First elected black President of South Africa, international symbol of freedom after 27 years as political prisoner, Nobel Peace Prize winner.
Graça Machel	International advocate for women and children's rights, President of the Foundation for Community Development, Mozambique.
Desmond Tutu	First black Archbishop of Cape Town, Chairman of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission; pursues conflict resolution by advocating forgiveness and reconciliation.
Kofi Annan	The 7th Secretary-General of the United Nations, reformer of UN global policy aims to focus more on national civil societies and grass roots formation, Nobel Peace Prize winner.
Ela Bhatt	Entrepreneur in grassroots development, founder and chair of the Self-Employed Women's Association and the All India Association of Micro Finance Institutions in India.
Lakhdar Brahimi	Pursuer of liberation and peace keeping role in Algeria and Indonesia, Ambassador for Algeria, lectures internationally and is based in the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton.
Gro Brundtland	Physician, public health administrator and former Prime Minister of Norway, Chair of the World Commission of Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission).
Fernando H Cardoso	Former Senator, Minister of Foreign Relations, Minister of Finance and President of Brazil for two successive terms, currently Professor across several international universities.
Jimmy Carter	Former President of the United States of America, he founded the Carter Center dedicated to advance global health and peaceful resolutions, Nobel Peace Prize winner.
Mary Robinson	First female President of Ireland, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Founder and President of 'Realizing Rights: The Ethical Globalisation' initiative.
Muhammad Yunus	Established 'micro banking': the Grameen Bank Project (Bangladesh), Nobel Peace Prize winner for establishing grassroots economic and social development.

Aung San Suu Kyi   Freedom fighter for a democratic Burma (Myanmar) and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, the Sakharov Prize from the European Parliament, the United States Presidential Medal of Freedom, and the Jawaharlal Nehru Award from India.

* www.theelders.org

It is clear from this list that the group of individuals that make up the Elders are not exactly average diplomatic figures but most of them are larger-than-life personalities that have wrought political, social and cultural change in their countries and institutions. They are more than just famous; they are celebrities because they are leaders who represent a kind of global conscience, which the public can identify with.

They are famous for what they have achieved (*actions*) as well as for how they *appear* and for the attention they command; the consequences of their contributions are experienced *en masse* by the very poor or the politically disenfranchised. They are classic examples of figures that 'deserve' to be famous and to be celebrities, before celebrity became what it is today. Yet, in our everyday use and understanding of celebrities now, the term sits uneasily with these leaders precisely because celebrity has been popularized and tabloidized.

However, as we have pointed out through John Street's work, taking the celebrity approach (as opposed to, say, the political marketing one) is expressive of the cultural and stylistic changes that have marked political change in recent times and that are characteristic of contemporary political culture, which further allows us to examine their 'value [...] in their meaning as texts' (2004: 444). In other words, this allows us to understand and negotiate their role and performance as cultural hegemonic figures in their world rather than what they can offer as commodities or products. This is important because as political diplomats and Elders, and to some extent as activists, it is not just *what* they 'do', but *how* they do it; their performance is their role and that approach is instrumental to the process of diplomatic negotiation. What they can offer is themselves, and their personification as symbols of the possibility of a peaceful resolution. Indeed, because they are able to attract attention due to their historical track record (including their historical mediated record), their comment on a given situation is valuable. Evidently, the represented figure, its fame and capacity to perform in a context of urgency, attracts media interest and this is far removed from the cynical understanding of politicians/diplomats as merely offering a bag of 'political lollies'.

Umbrella organizations usually serve to create and foster a larger identity for the individuals they represent. Yet in this case, it is the other way around as each Elder's reputation exceeds the group. While we may not have heard of all the Elders in the group, each of them is nonetheless 'world famous' in the context in which their work is relevant, while some of them have far outgrown that context and are therefore truly 'world famous'. The question then becomes whether being brought together allows them to function more effectively.

The Elders' website has a strong articulation of its own identity. The logo and banner consist of a constellation of stars (reflecting the gathering of the Elders, and with strong religious connotations of 'wise men') anchored to an inscription of 'The Elders' (in Sans Serif). This then opens up to a larger editorial layout with a picture of Nelson Mandela attached to his speech at the launch of The Elders. Desmond Tutu is the chair of the group, which originally started with eleven Elders but has since recruited Burmese freedom fighter Aung Sung Suu Kyi to its ranks. Under 'Global Village' on the website, 'netizens' are asked to e-mail suggestions of other celebrity diplomats they think could be part of The Elders, demonstrating the openness of the initiative to grow but also 'who' the public thinks would have the right calibre to join these luminaries. In a sense, this could be interpreted as a kind of democratization of celebrity status; in other words, the public vote ensures celebrity status for the next recruit. In his speech at the launch of The Elders, Mandela pointed out the qualities that would make them different from other activists or diplomatic groups:

This group derives its strength not from political, economic or military power, but from the independence and integrity of those who are here. They do not have careers to build, elections to win, constituencies to please. They can talk to anyone they please, and are free to follow paths they deem right, even if hugely unpopular (< http://dl.groovygecko.net/ anon.groovy/clients/akqa/projectamber/press/The_Elders-Speech.pdf>).

These Elders have won their personal battles, and it is their accumulated expertise and international success that they bring to the group; more importantly, as Nobel Prize winners and symbols of nurturers and humanitarians, their involvement guarantees a certain amount of global media coverage and worldwide interest. Since the launch of the group in 2007, they have worked on four projects: Cyprus, Zimbabwe, Human Rights and Sudan. A case in point is a visit to Cyprus in October 2008 where Desmond Tutu, Jimmy Carter and Lakhdah Brahimi went to support the on-going negotiations between Greek and Turkish Cypriots to reunify their island in a peaceful manner. The website hosts the 'summary of their report' and news of the latest developments of the island, along with pictures detailing their involvement and meetings with the community. They instigated conversations across the diverse sections of the community; from the political leaders of the two sides to young people, civil groups, and ambassadors. As a demonstration of the political impasse, they heard from students who reported that they had to carry their passports across the border twice a day in order to attend school, due to the border regulations. Archibishop Tutu made it clear that their role in Cyprus was purely in a support capacity (listening, providing examples, talking) within the process rather than as negotiators (in this case), because the Cypriots were making the resolutions themselves. This is an important aspect of the form of diplomacy (rather than direct activism) the Elders practice, as it removes the pressure of having a direct stake in the process, while at the same time allowing the main protagonists to keep a sense of ownership (read agency) over the process. The Cyprus trip represents a short, succinct project whereby the Elders attracted global press coverage about the peace process in Cyprus; simply being there guarantees such coverage, based on the celebrity status of Jimmy Carter and Desmond Tutu alone. Their story of political progress was thus widely reported by news agencies around the world.

In a sense, this visit resembles others made by political attachés and celebrity Goodwill Ambassadors such as Geri Halliwell or UNICEF's Mia Farrow, where their primary role is similarly to raise attention to a cause as a means of raising funds and awareness of a particular political or humanitarian crisis. However, political lobbying, a particularly important aspect of effecting change is not something Goodwill Ambassadors are capable of doing effectively, despite having the ability to attract media attention. It is precisely the proven capacity to exploit this media attention, through their political nous, which makes The Elders potentially much more effective. A central criticism levelled at the Goodwill Ambassadors, is the suggestion that they have only a superficial understanding of the political situations they find themselves in without the required depth of knowledge, and this may inadvertently produce more damage than good (Huliaras and Tzifakis 2008). It is clear that The Elders bring with them diplomatic knowledge (*the commodity*), plus the celebrity goodwill (*representation*) that will draw in global media interest. If we look at Mandela, his individual status and widely known personal and political (as with all celebrities, a combination of public and private) history juxtaposes the representational figure (survivor, leader) and the values he stands for (strong ethics, strength, freedom, justice) depicting him as an authentic and affective figure in world politics, yet allowing the public to identify with him because of his suffering and triumph, and because his public persona is not restricted to the label 'politician'. As an embodiment of the values outlined above, we are drawn to Mandela as a saviour of sorts, a Christ-like figure who has suffered and survived a form of racial politics that the global public is eager to view as history, and who has emerged victorious with humility and forgiveness for his captors. Thus, Mandela represents what is possible without resorting to violence, which is doubly symbolic if we consider that The Elders were founded during the latter part of a hawkish Bush era.

To return to Mandela's speech, he also points to another critical aspect of their participation: networks – the integral lifeblood of modern-day relations. As he notes, 'through [the other Elders'] friends in business, they can mobilise up to date technology, and raise not only awareness of forgotten issues, but also help locate the resources to address them' (Mandela 2007). The connexion to people, ideas, technology and knowledge is at the forefront of the global developmental agenda and not only are the influential Elders able to access it – they have the financial backing through their supporters such as United Nations Foundations, Richard Branson, Humanity United, the Bridgeway Foundation, Peter Gabriel, Shashi Ruia and others, to fulfil these needs. This even gives them the added advantage of being able to offer or promise financial backing for some projects, and the ability to deliver on such a promise. Overall then, as achieved and attributed celebrities, these Elders defy the typically easy arguments about the lack of agency that are often targeted at entertainment celebrities – the fact is that they are known for their ability to overcome adversity, deliver outcomes, operate outside the box and they are at the same time without the burden of the explicit political agenda of any contemporary national or intra-national agency.

On closer inspection, The Elders are represented as a unique organization and one that is worthy and deserving because it brings together such valuable attributes (embodied in these individual leaders) and unites them as a global problem-solving taskforce. However, the question of why now is perhaps not amiss here – for, historically, there have always been great humanitarians (Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa would surely need to be part of The Elders if they were still alive). However, it seems that the factors that make the coming together of this group of people possible at this particular juncture in history, is not only the calibre of leadership and humanitarianism, but a particular constellation of mediating factors and a huge exercise in global philanthropy: from Peter Gabriel and Richard Branson who initiated the idea, to the tremendous financial injection required to bankroll such a global project. The Elders' newly launched website lists this financial support from not-for-profit foundations such as Virgin, the United Nations, the Peter Gabriel Foundation, the Skoll Foundation, and individual philanthropists such as Shashi Ruia and Richard Tarlow. The other key features that make it possible for an international collaborative institution such as The Elders to exist are the current context of global media, direct public participation/engagement, and access to a global audience. More importantly, we argue that these are precisely the same factors that have enabled the rise of the 'celebrity age' (Turner 2004), which is characterized by a proliferation of media channels and outlets, as well as a proliferation of social networking media that allow for easy public participation (or at least the perception thereof). The paradox in this context is that the '15 minutes of fame' form of celebrity is relatively easy to achieve, but sustainable celebrity status (and the advantages that accompany its currency) is much harder to establish; The Elders clearly possess the latter form of celebrity in spades. As mentioned above, the same attributes that allow globalized public identification with Nelson Mandela (and some of the other Elders to a lesser degree), are evident here, and these are the same attributes (ability to overcome adversity, deliver outcomes, operate outside the box, and lack of explicit political agenda) that allow us to identify with their achievements, and thus their leadership.

Celebrity Politics and Celebrity Diplomacy: How Effective can the Elders be?

Basing the roles of the Elders on the idea of African village elders, immediately raises certain connotations and questions. One assumes that the traditional elder serves as a guide and moral compass, so how should 'global village' elders act in these scenarios? Do they assist only in an advisory capacity? Or, can they intercede, negotiate, officiate, or, indeed, force certain outcomes? What are the boundaries of their humanitarian endeavours? Of course, some of the Elders like Mary Robinson, Nelson Mandela, Jimmy Carter, Gro Brundtland and Fernando Cardoso, who are experienced Prime Ministers and Presidents, carry the required expertise and status to assist in policy advice. But how effective are they? Beyond their media status, the celebrity connections and their individual strength – how do they work as a group? This depends on how effectiveness is measured, and while it is probably too early in the process to come to any firm conclusions in this respect, we have to note that firstly, the political hotspots they focus on have been unresolved diplomatic black holes for a long time. Second, the continued sustainability of The Elders as a stable, diplomatic project

would in itself indicate a degree of success. For most Chinese knots do not lend themselves to immediate resolution, but rather require slow ongoing negotiations within different social and cultural milieux and political contexts. Apart from that, not all the projects that the Elders are involved with are specific *political* problems; some are ravages of war that require the diverse international support that media coverage and public awareness would bring. For now, it is too early to tell whether The Elders will primarily be successful in ensuring the establishment of humanitarian interventions *after* political meltdowns, or whether they will be able to prevent such political meltdowns in the future.

For example, *Every Human Has Rights* (EHHR) is another Elders project based around the UN's universal declaration of human rights, rather than dealing directly with a specific political context. Unlike the rest of the projects, this is a portal to a substantive website – www.everyhumanhasrights.org – that asks 'netizens' to participate by pledging to uphold the declaration of human rights through signing the petition. At present count (November 2009), there are 52,591 signatures. The site also provides links to civil rights groups in different countries, where local action and more participation could be achieved. Furthermore, organizations such as the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), founded by Ela Bhatt, are profiled, stories and reports from Nigeria are available, a book by National Geographic on human rights is discussed and the EHHR Media Awards are reported on. On one level, this site simply provides information, but may also increase levels of participation (schools, individuals, youth centres, civil society groups) through association with these celebrity Elders. When one signs the declaration, the site provides you with Internet-savvy promotions such as widgets, badges and links that one can display on personalized social networking sites to promote and demonstrate one's affiliation with this campaign; this is a form of political action by association.

In the Media Awards section, Elders such as Kofi Annan are at hand to promote the event and mingle with attendees (blogpost by Colours of Bohemia). The video portal is a huge archive of detailed field work by various Elders, and the short video clips provide in-depth coverage of how some of the Elders are carrying out their work 'in the field'. For example, Mary Robinson on her road trip around Liberia trying to create decent work in Africa; Archbishop Desmond Tutu's partnering with UNICEF to campaign for children's rights; and the opening and report of the Poverty Hearings of the Millennium Development Goals. Each project portal carries detailed descriptions through individual blogs, videos and reports of the kinds of work that is being carried out in the 'fields' and opportunities for participation. What is unclear, however, is how each 'project' gets selected, and whether or not the supporters, as the financial providers, have a say in where they choose to direct their finances.

What is clear from an analysis of the Elders' site is that effectiveness, in the sense of 'key performance indicators' is perhaps the wrong yardstick to account for global developmental projects. While projects such as 'the Cyprus project' have a clear political outcome within a relatively short period of time, many of the other projects are long-standing complex political deadlocks such as political freedom and starvation in Zimbabwe or the Human Rights campaign. Indeed, in the current global climate of political and ideological inconsistency and uncertainty, perhaps the outcomes that can be asked of the Elders are a combination of what they have claimed for themselves and what non-governmental organizations set out to achieve: social transparency, financial accountability, the installation of long-term sustainable processes, engagement with the public, creating public awareness and education, and promoting and representing universal values such as freedom, democracy and human rights. In each of these instances, the Elders lead by example, and the fact that many of them have celebrity status (visibility and access to the media) only serves to stimulate identification.

Straddling the divide between politics and celebrity, The Elders, as a group, demonstrate an embodiment of celebrity diplomacy. It is perhaps fitting in today's global media age, that while many may enter the world of advocacy and developmental agencies, doing the slow grassroots groundwork of education and volunteerism, it is these celebrity diplomats who may carry the strongest impact on public consciousness (Rojek 2001).

Conclusion

In the ever-growing kingdom of celebrities, the celebrity diplomat, as embodied in the Elders, represents a new breed and somewhat of a different take on global celebrity culture, with potentially very wide and convergent access to media attention and global funding. While many of these Elders have charities and foundations of their own, their extra role of being an Elder perhaps gives them, and their celebrity founders, the hard currency in a media sphere characterized by celebrity inflation. Alongside the many NGOs and competing international agencies, the Elders stand out as a unique organization of 'super diplomats' with celebrity status. Perhaps most tellingly, one is not able to join the Elders (the organization), but rather one is chosen based on strict but unspoken criteria. One of these criteria is celebrity status built on past endeavours, 'good deeds' or strong leadership, while another is political experience and clout. At the same time, however, being an Elder means that on a personal level, the political stakes are not as high as they would be for politicians who are still relying on the popular vote for their career advancement. In other words, the Elders have already achieved everything they possibly can in terms of their personal careers, which ostensibly frees them up to pursue clear agendas for positive change, rather than agendas that may be partly clouded by the ambiguity of necessary political compromise. Overall then, the combination of their celebrity status and their political credentials is perhaps the most powerful combination for change in a contemporary global context. Time will tell.

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Note

1. Aung San Suu Kyi is a human rights advocate, Nobel laureate and symbol of freedom for Burma. She was placed under house arrest by the military junta in 1989 when her political party, The National League for Democracy won the general elections. She has been offered freedom if she were to leave the country but she has refused; instead she practices Mahatma Ghandi's philosophy of non-violence. She is also the daughter of General Aung San, widely believed to be responsible for the birth of modern Burma.