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Celebrities should stick to their day jobs

Financial Times (European, North American and Asian editions)

1 February 2006

Last week was a champagne moment for celebrities with an interest in good causes and high politics. Bono, front man of the rock band U2 — one of Time magazine's "Persons of the Year" and a popular nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize — launched a suite of must-have consumer products and services intended to raise funds to fight HIV/Aids in Africa, including American Express credit cards, Gap T-shirts, Emporio Armani wraparound sunglasses and Converse sneakers.

And in a speech in Davos last week, Kofi Annan, the United Nations secretary-general, spoke of his organisation's determination to engage with the "new actors on the international scene", including not only the private sector, the media and non-governmental organisations but "celebrities from the worlds of sport and entertainment".

Famous people have always dabbled in good deeds. But the trend seems to be accelerating in tandem with our galloping fetishisation of celebrity. First-class airport lounges are now crowded with rock-star diplomats, spokesmodels and "actors without borders".

Angelina Jolie, "it" girl and goodwill ambassador for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, recently toured camps in Pakistan with her boyfriend, Brad Pitt. In December, Bob Geldof was appointed a consultant to the British Conservative party's policy review on global poverty. Unicef's celebrity supporters include David Beckham, Ricky Martin and Robbie Williams, while the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation has Ronan Keating, the boy band idol. Fashion designers have not been forgotten: Giorgio Armani is associated with UNHCR and Pierre Cardin with Unesco. The UN Population Fund has no less than five former Miss Universes in its stable of goodwill ambassadors.

Michael Douglas is a UN "Messenger for Peace", speaking publicly about the proliferation of small arms, a topic on which he is presumably expert given the number of films in which he has wielded them. Supermodels, Spice Girls, James Bonds and Charlie's Angels have all appeared on the books of international organisations.

This all may appear pretty unseemly, even if we take a generous view and assume these celebrities are acting with the best of intentions and it is only their agents who see the career angles.

The argument for celebrity activism is that it provides exposure for important issues that would otherwise be overlooked by the media in favour of more trivial stories — such as, say, celebrity romances. That was probably true a few decades ago, before we became inured to the phenomenon, and for the most effective celebrity diplomats it remains the case today. Mr Geldof and Bono have helped pressure world leaders to act on the issue of African poverty — and all credit to them. For the most part, however, the media lights fall more on the celebrities themselves than the people whose condition demands urgent illumination. In fact, the profusion of celebrity activists is starting to damage the causes and institutions they seek to promote, for four main reasons.

First, their lack of expertise opens up the movements they represent to ridicule by association. With some honourable exceptions, most of these celebrities know little about the questions on which they hold forth except what appears in the talking points put before them. Second, the awkward lifestyle gap that yawns between the rescuers and the rescued undercuts the moral seriousness of the enterprise and occasionally gives it an exploitative feel.

A case in point was Madonna's appearance on stage during the London Live8 concert with Birham Woldu, the Ethiopian woman who was last seen on television screens in the 1984-85 famine as a severely malnourished child. The sight of Ms Woldu as a healthy, smiling adult was profoundly moving; the spectacle of Madonna joining her to croon the dance tune "Like A Prayer" was less so.

Third, attaching your organisation's brand to a celebrity's fortunes can be hazardous, because celebrities' lives tend to be unpredictable. Chanel and Burberry had to scurry away from their clothes horse Kate Moss when she was pictured in UK tabloids allegedly snorting cocaine. Similar risks face non-profit organisations, as Unicef found out recently when Harry Belafonte, its goodwill ambassador, declared President George W. Bush "the greatest terrorist in the world".

Finally, these institutions inevitably shed a little of their gravitas when they borrow the clothes of the jet set. The UN and its agencies have genuine heroes in their ranks — men and women who devote their lives to peace and development. Why not make stars of them?

The most important casting call in the world this year will be for Mr Annan's successor as secretary-general. We should focus our energies on ensuring that someone with the necessary political stature and personal qualities gets that role. There is an unanswerable moral case for doing more to ease desperate poverty and suffering around the globe. We should not need false idols to make it for us.

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