

# Celebrification, Authenticity, Gossip

## *The Celebrity Humanitarian*

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### Abstract

The article discusses the celebrity humanitarian as media construction. Departing from a discussion of celebrification, the article argues that celebrities in public roles outside the field of entertainment are inevitably framed by and structured in accordance with celebrity logic. The article discusses how celebrity humanitarianism is a contested field, which, in order for a particular activity to support the celebrity persona, relies heavily on strategies of authentication. Finally, the article shows how information about a photograph of Angelina Jolie from her trip to the Democratic Republic of Congo in March 2013 is *transformed* and *translated into gossip* about the star's private life when discussed by users on a celebrity site.

**Keywords:** celebrification, celebrity humanitarianism, authenticity, gossip, Angelina Jolie

“[...] offering support for global charities has become both practically part of the contemporary celebrity job description and a hallmark of the established star” (Littler 2008: 238-39).

### Introduction

To an ever-greater extent, humanitarian organizations and movements against injustices are allying themselves with celebrities. Thanks to celebrities' visibility, they can call immediate attention to important global causes and how to help troubled areas and peoples; they can act as intermediaries between publics and political movements; and they may be able to translate and communicate complex global political and economic structures into understandable terms. In their increasingly important and present roles as new global actors, they embody “a visibility/cultural power dynamic that can be transmuted into political currency” (Barron 2009: 215).<sup>1</sup> At the same time, through the very same activity, celebrities are marketing themselves as *humanitarian celebrities*, creating a sellable brand identity and possibly thereby improving their general value in the entertainment business (Turner 2004, Marshall 1997, Kapoor 2013).

Correspondingly, there is a growing body of scholarly literature discussing celebrity “do-gooding” (Littler 2008: 238, Kapoor 2013: 13, Richey and Ponte 2011: 34). Celebrities are studied as global celebrity humanitarians or celebrity philanthropists, doing celebrity charity (Littler 2008), or as aid celebrities doing celebrity activism (Richey and Ponte 2011) or celebrity diplomacy (Goodman & Barnes 2011, Cooper 2008, Wheeler 2011 and 2013, Littler 2011 – hence also the term ‘Bonoization’ of diplomacy (Cooper

2008)); studies deal with celebrity environmentalism (Brockington 2008), transnational celebrity activism (Tsaliki, Frangonikolopoulos and Huliaras 2011, Wheeler 2013), and celebrities making interventions in development causes (Brockington 2011) or embodying the “growing celebritisation of environment and development” (Goodman 2010). What is less discussed, however, is that in these roles celebrities not only address a politically aware public but also create or consolidate *fan communities*, which may not be interested in global politics at all but rather in following whatever a certain star is up to. Hence, whether represented as humanitarians in the news media or debated on a celebrity site, celebrities are formed and transformed through “processes of celebrification” (Gamson 1994, Couldry 2004; Driessens 2012, Rojek 2001).

There is no doubt that celebrities are able to draw the world society’s attention to global injustices. Nonetheless, how much change celebrities’ charity work actually instigates is a contested issue, and Thrall et al. (2008) demonstrate that remarkably little media attention is actually given to what they call celebrity advocacy.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, notwithstanding the funding and attention brought to important causes by celebrities at the top of the A-list, criticism of the celebrity in the role of humanitarian is conducted both loudly and noisily on the Internet. Different kinds of pre-existing knowledge about the celebrity in question are activated in order to assess the image of him or her as goodwill ambassador or fundraiser. On a celebrity site like *JustJared*, discussants seem to position themselves rather dichotomously. In the case of a prominent celebrity humanitarian like Angelina Jolie, they either praise her as authentically using her status to create awareness about injustices, for example raising awareness about rape against women in war zones; or, she is condemned as a self-promoting commodity whose acts of charity, goodwill and political awareness are dismissed as simply serving the star’s self-branding, with visits to war zones or refugee camps just providing another photo opportunity.

Celebrity humanitarianism is, hence, a contested issue. This article focuses on the celebrity humanitarian as media construction. In the last part of the paper I will use Angelina Jolie as my example and show how information about one of her humanitarian trips is *transformed* and *translated into gossip* when discussed by users on a celebrity site. The first part of the paper will also use Angelina Jolie as the case in point, but here I will discuss media constructions of celebrity and goodwill/charity/aid from a more theoretical point of view.

I start by discussing celebrities’ charity/goodwill work as *celebrification*. Next I discuss *authenticity* or *sincerity* – an important issue, not least when it comes to the mediation of celebrity charity. I discuss authenticity or sincerity in relation to the construction of the *celebrity persona*, and how this term fits in with celebrification.

Dan Brockington (2011) claims<sup>3</sup> that authenticity is the single most contested issue in debates about celebrities as goodwill ambassadors, their relationships with NGOs, their intervention in development causes, etc. I address Brockington’s empirically based outline of the way media agencies verbalize the importance of authenticity; how, for the interaction between celebrities and NGOs to work, celebrities must be experienced as authentic. But I also discuss the term authenticity in relation to celebrity and the way it involves, as Paddy Scannell puts it, “a performative paradox” (1996: 58). I argue that authenticity is a relational and discursive endeavor and is therefore always negotiated in specific contexts. I finally turn to gossip communication, analyzing a debate on the celebrity site *JustJared* following the posting (on March 26, 2013) of a picture of Angelina Jolie from

the March 2013 trip she and British Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs William Hague made to the Democratic Republic of Congo to raise awareness of war zone mass rape. As always on *Just Jared*, the photo is accompanied by a short descriptive text. Hereby, I want to illuminate what challenges *celebrity logic* as a media practice poses to the activist or goodwill function. In other words, what I want to argue in this article is that the mediation of celebrity humanitarianism is always framed by and structured within celebrity logic.

## Celebrification

Chris Rojek defines celebrity as “the attribution of glamorous or notorious status to an individual within the public sphere” (2001: 10). Graeme Turner puts it in a similar, albeit more categorical, way:

[w]e can map the precise moment a public figure becomes a celebrity. It occurs at the point at which media interest in their activities is transferred from reporting on their public role (such as their specific achievements in politics or sport) to investigating the details of their private life (2004: 8).

It goes without saying that a celebrity is not a blank page but rather a criss-cross of meaning, an intertextual network of past and present public appearances in primary, secondary and tertiary texts (Fiske 1987), which partake in celebrity discourse and participate in the construction of the celebrity as a popular cultural person; or, rather, a popular cultural *persona*.

The persona designates a “coherent subjectivity” (King 1991), an effort on the part of agents, PR people and the star to construct a distinct and recognizable image of a particular public person. It consists of a dynamic interaction between *the roles* (in films and television series), *the personality* (the star’s appearance as “himself” or “herself”, for example when offering glimpses into his or her private life on talk shows or in interviews), and the *image*. The image is the shared idea of the star as a recognizable individuality built up over a period of time. Hence, the term persona points at the constructedness inherent in celebrity and how agency in celebrity culture is distributed among a range of players. Moreover, we should understand celebrity as *at once a noun and an adjective*. Celebrity is at once a public *person(a)* in popular culture and, as emphasized by Marwick & boyd (2011), a particular continuous process or *practice* through which the meaning of celebrity is produced and negotiated.

Understood as a practice, celebrity is exactly *a doing* in and through the media in a continuous – public or more concealed – negotiation, even struggle, with PR people, the media, fans and the celebrity over the meaning of the persona – or the celebrity subjectivity. Hence, celebrity practice involves struggles over power. In order to conceptualize this practice or process in more depth, I use the term *celebrification*. Celebrification is a process that spreads across culture, and in so doing not only reproduces but also produces celebrity and may transform bloggers, YouTube-video performers and users on social networking sites into celebrities.

According to Couldry (2004) and before him Gamson (1994), celebrification is the process through which the ordinary (that which is outside the media), or that which does not belong to the realm of popular culture in the first place, acquires a media form.<sup>4</sup>

Driessens (2012) claims that two different concepts, *celebrification* and *celebritization*, are used interchangeably in celebrity studies. Consequently, in line with Gamson and Couldry he makes the case that the first term should label the particular process whereby ordinary people or public figures are transformed into celebrities; further, he clarifies that celebrification involves processes of privatization, personalization and commodification. Celebritization, on the other hand, should be reserved for what he, following Krotz (2007), designates as a “metaprocess”; that is, a more thorough and therefore also less demarcated and less linear cultural process influencing society on all levels and over a larger historical span. Accordingly, Driessens regards celebritization to be “on a par with globalization, individualization or mediatization” (2012: 3). Celebritization is thus a long-term process of “the societal and cultural changes implied by celebrity” (ibid.).

It seems to me that the very specific way celebrification is used by especially Couldry is too limiting.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, celebritization is too general to be able to underpin more concrete micro- and meso-level celebrity processes anchored in a specific media cultural context. Hence, in line with Driessens and also Rojek (2000), who understands celebrification exactly as ways celebrity culture molds culture and everyday life as a whole – the ways social encounters seem to be enveloped in what he calls “mediagenic filters”, I propose to use the term celebrification to pinpoint the particular dynamic functioning of celebrity culture. Moreover, I propose to understand celebrification processes as structured in accordance with what I would call *celebrity logic*. Inspired by Altheide and Snow’s classical (1979) term *media logic*, celebrity logic can be understood as the media process wherein the basic discursive parameters famously coined by Richard Dyer (1992 [1979], 2004 [1986]) – the ordinary and the extraordinary in the celebrity appearance and the private and the public part of the celebrity’s life – shape the form and content of celebrity culture. Or, put another way: celebrification processes unfold dynamically along the way of this *particular logic*. Celebrification embraces both quantitative and qualitative cultural transformations. Celebrification should be regarded broadly as covering the continuous cross-media processes whereby the meaning of celebrity is negotiated and maintained through interactions between the media, their users and the celebrity in question. As such, celebrification is unthinkable without the media.

## Celebrity as Practice

The media are increasingly focusing on celebrities’ private lives. More and more, cultural journalism consists of printing or posting stories and images, which may feed the ubiquitous gossip culture – and vice versa. Therefore, increasingly, *doing celebrity is strategic work*. Practicing celebrity is performing a marketable persona, which has to be unique and irreplaceable. Practicing celebrity means the continuous strategic work in order to reproduce the celebrity value. Hence, the celebrity is the epitome of what sociologist Andrew Wernick (1991) called a “culture of universal promotion”. Celebrity is a media cultural practice whereby the celebrity is commodity, commodity producer and ad at one and the same time.

My point is therefore that *the celebrity, in his or her capacity as charity or goodwill ambassador/activist, cannot escape celebrification*. No matter the good work and despite the widespread acknowledgment of it, it is in itself rarely accepted as simply good work. Images of celebrities as goodwill ambassadors or spokespersons for different

good causes are framed within and contribute to what Sue Collins (2008) has called the *celebrity infrastructure*, the dynamic yet hierarchical system of distinction in which the very famous international star is ranked at the top of the list with regard to economic and symbolic capital and the national reality star at the bottom. Which players fill out the positions in the infrastructure is always up for negotiation, and a range of different strategies may be activated in order to maintain a position. From the point of view of celebrity as doing and celebrity logic, *charity and goodwill work may be understood as one such strategy*.

Hence, celebrities' *do-gooding* may be understood as a means for them to gain control of their image and the photographs being taken of them (Foreman 2009). Embodying symbolic and economic capital in celebrity culture is being in a position where one has power over *access*. The higher a celebrity is ranked in the infrastructure, the more limited the access to him or her and the more valuable the actual photographs being taken and stories told. And conversely, the harder it is for journalists and photographers to get access and information, the more extraordinary the celebrity. This logic may have changed with digitization and social networking sites (like Instagram and Twitter), where celebrity practice among some of the very famous has turned towards a seemingly more direct and undisclosed communication with fans and followers. The Twitter discourse, for example, attaches to the celebrity a sense of present-ness and access to private thoughts and life not usually available. Hence, both celebrities' activity on Twitter and celebrities' charity or goodwill work could be regarded as media strategies aiming at *impression management*, to use Goffman's (1990 [1959]) term, or efforts at exerting control over the image in a "vision regime" that, as pointed out by Sean Redmond, "leaves little if any space for them [celebrities] to be off-screen, out of print, switched off" (2006: 34).

This way of thinking is expressed by the director of Los Angeles-based Creative Artist Agency (CAA), Michelle Kydd Lee, in an interview (Foreman 2009) about agencies' work to find the right causes for the right celebrities. Faced with the ever-more aggressive ways the paparazzi operate, Kydd Lee ventured the following proposition:

If all this [the paparazzi stalking] is coming to you anyway, you might as well try to use it in a positive way to help someone. Princess Diana was brilliant at that – you know, 'you're following me anyway, so come with me to the [AIDS] hospice'.

As a particular celebrification process, celebrity *do-gooding* is basically one way of producing and reproducing celebrity, an instrument for distinction, a means of developing symbolic capital, a means of solidifying the fan base, a means for the continuous reproduction of a sellable, likeable persona. However, designating celebrity *do-gooding* as celebrification does not preclude understanding celebrities as engaged and respected humanitarians (Cooper 2008). My aim is not, like Kapoor's (2013), to argue that celebrity humanitarianism is advancing neoliberal capitalism. I am interested in how the term may help us understand how media operate in accordance with a certain logic (celebrity logic) and how it may open to consistent analyses of the workings of celebrity culture. Moreover, as pointed out by people in the entertainment business,<sup>6</sup> celebrity goodwill and charity is in many ways risky business as it challenges one of the core parameters in the construction of the celebrity persona – authenticity. "Sincerity's vice is hypocrisy", Paddy Scannell claims (1996: 69). Accusations of hypocrisy always loom on the horizon whenever a celebrity is attached to a good cause.

## Authenticity and do-gooding

According to Paddy Scannell (1996), who has talked most illuminatingly about authenticity and sincerity (which he discusses in two separate chapters in his book; however, in this article I do not distinguish between the two terms), sincerity is “a form of self-display without concealment [...] To be sincere is to be the genuine article, the real thing” (59). Of course, here Scannell – as he emphasizes himself – is inspired by Goffman’s (1990 [1959]) theory of social communication as performance. We are always audience and players for each other on shifting stages, and depend on each other for the recognition and acceptance of the impression of reality our performance is intended to project. Therefore, to Goffman, authenticity is a *question of acting authentic*.

Goffman’s point – as well as Scannell’s – is that authenticity is a social and relational endeavor; it is not something inherent in a person but rather an impression that is intercommunicatively negotiated. *Authenticity is what an audience accepts as authentic*. Conversely, authenticity can only be pulled off successfully if a person is able to perform as authentic, as Scannell puts it. Authenticity/sincerity is therefore a fragile act. Emotions become true only when they are made so by a performer and accepted to be so by an audience. Herein lies the performative paradox referred to at the beginning of this article. Authenticity is a performance, which is intersubjectively negotiated; however, “if a person’s behavior is perceived by others as a performance it will be judged as insincere, for sincerity presupposes, as its general condition, the absence of performance” (Scannell 1996: 58).

Not least when celebrities appear as new actors on the global charity scene, accusations of hypocrisy are lurking right under the surface. “There is nothing worse than someone who may be well-intentioned but is out of their element”, says the director of United Talent Agency’s (UTA) division of celebrity charity (Foreman 2009; see also Brockington 2011 for similar quotes). Therefore, what agencies and celebrity charity fan websites – for example the website *Look to the Stars. The World of Celebrity Giving* (<http://www.look-tothestars.org>) – are doing is trying to prevent such interpretations from spreading across the Internet. One such way is to be careful that the celebrity charity/goodwill activity is *in accordance with the persona*; that his or her particular way of do-gooding is contributing to the construction of the celebrity as *distinct subjectivity*. This is what is implied in agencies’ talk about *matching clients to causes*, which means either that the client/celebrity can relate personally to the cause (a cancer history, AIDS in the family, etc.) or because a cause fits in otherwise with the star persona: “It is their [the agencies’] job to match their clients – actors, directors, musicians and athletes – with suitable causes in almost the same way that the old studios arranged marriages for stars”, claims Foreman (2009).

Thus, Angelina Jolie’s recent work in dangerous areas, calling attention to horrible war atrocities and aiming to empower women contribute perfectly to her persona (cf. Littler 2008, Cooper 2008): Angelina Jolie’s starring roles have mostly been as the tough action heroine, as in *Tomb Raider* and *Salt* as well as other films, from *The Bone Collector* to *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, but also as the powerful mother figure in historical (adventure) epics (*Alexander* and *Beowulf*) and the everyday heroine under difficult political circumstances (*A Mighty Heart*). She has a history as a person of radical and transgressive actions (Swibel 2006, Barron 2009) (corresponding with her role in *Girl, Interrupted*), but has later become the mother of six – three of whom are adopted – and to a certain extent combining the two strands of her personal life, the radical and the nurturing, in her much-publicized double mastectomy.

Either way, what is performed by different means whenever celebrities do humanitarian work is the *authentication* of being a famous celebrity, who motivated by personal feelings and experiences or simply moral feelings of right and wrong, supports charity, becomes the spokesperson for a good cause, or rises to be an important player on the global scene of development politics. *Witnessing* is a particularly important tool in processes of authentication. “Having been there” confers authenticity and authority on the celebrity, and entitles him or her to talk about what happened.

Dan Brockington’s approach to authenticity is based on an analysis of a large empirical body of interviews with journalists and actors in the NGO and celebrity business about celebrities working with NGOs. Brockington proposes four criteria or strategies for constructing celebrity humanitarians as authentic: *expert or experiential authority* (knowledge and experience), *affinity* (similarity with others), *empathy* (shared emotions with others as a result of similar experiences) and *sympathy* (emotions provoked by the other’s fate).

Expert authority is probably the strongest authentication strategy. Here experience is what authenticates, for example by *having witnessed* and, hence, by *being knowledgeable*.<sup>7</sup> Repetition (having been there several times) enhances authenticity; for example, journalist Cathy Newman from Channel 4, who travelled with Angelina Jolie and William Hague to Congo, carefully constructs the star as expert and hence as trustworthy by emphasizing, “For more than a decade she’s been visiting refugee camps around the world. She’s done so in more than 40 countries” (Newman 2013).

Brockington’s second strategy, *affinity*, is also an often used strategy of authentication, despite the risk that it might backfire, turning the attention away from the cause and sentimentally back on the celebrity, for example authenticating caring for children in areas of natural catastrophe by referring to the celebrity as a mother. The risk here is that what Richey and Ponte call “confessions of caring” (2011: 26) may supersede the power of celebrities as “emotional sovereigns” (op. cit.: 20 et passim). Being constituted as basically ordinary like everyone else is another example of this strategy. Scannell underlines that sincerity is “one defining characteristic of any person appearing in the public realm who lays claim to ordinariness” (1996: 74). As discourses of ordinariness are crucial to the functioning of celebrity logic, connecting authenticity to ordinariness is an obvious strategy. An example is again taken from Cathy Newman’s article, where she assures the reader that Jolie receives no star treatment but will be “sharing the same accommodation and travel arrangements as the rest of us”. Finally, empathy and sympathy act as signifiers of caring when performed by celebrities as restrained emotionality. Here they show that they are affected; through the acting out of emotion and the disclosure of intimacy, they may moreover reveal the private person behind the celebrity appearance and be constructed as ordinary persons who become better, less self-centered individuals by doing charity work.<sup>8</sup>

## Gossip as Celebrification

Celebrification processes are to an ever-greater extent driven by users’ active, and quickly instigated, molding of the celebrity persona. The media coverage of celebrities’ work for good causes may be received by users in ways that have nothing to do with these causes. The Internet is filled with a diversity of babbling, unfocused, aggressive, devoted or enthusiastic voices, and it is completely impossible for PR people to control

what spreads across it. The celebrity as humanitarian seems to work very well. However, this work also produces spillover effects.

In this last section I will discuss celebrity gossip as celebrification, using as my case the posting of comments to the Jolie photograph on *JustJared* under the heading “Angelina Jolie Visits Rescue Camp for Women”<sup>9</sup>. Here, users transpose a public issue of violation, war and geopolitics into gossip about the celebrity. Celebrity logic thus works both through transpositions of the public to the private and through negotiations of the ordinary and the extraordinary. Furthermore, the private, the personal and the emotional are negotiated through gossiping on the one hand, and through exchanges of opinions about the star’s sincerity on the other. Gossiping takes the form of a range of sophisticated testing of hypotheses about whether or not certain events have happened in Jolie’s private life. The discussion about sincerity and Jolie as a moral person echoes the dubious voices elsewhere in media culture about celebrities as brands and humanitarian work as “deeply invested in self-interest and promotion”, as Kapoor would have it (2013: 19).

The key photograph is a medium close-up of an ordinary looking Angelina Jolie. The photograph, the additional suite of pictures of Jolie and Hague and the short, descriptive note were followed by a debate consisting of 309 comments, the vast majority of which posted within six hours after the photographs were uploaded. Many of the writers frame their comment within an implicit fan community rhetoric: either you support Angelina Jolie or the Jolie-Pitt couple, or if you write negative comments, you are immediately nicknamed a “troll”, “hen” or “hag” by their supporters. It is also implied that the latter group is on the side of Brad Pitt’s ex-wife, Jennifer Aniston. So, obviously the debate is structured in accordance with celebrity logic.

*Even though* the text describes an official journey, and despite the fact that the photograph is unglamorous and rather neutral, it occasions a *gossip discourse*, which presupposes – in order for it to work – a shared and seemingly intimate knowledge of the celebrity’s private life. A comment on Brad Pitt’s latest movie, *World War Z* (# 77), suddenly popping up makes sense in this context if one knows of the relationship between the two stars, comments about children makes sense if one knows about the couple’s adopted children, and so on. Besides the gossip communication there are political comments, a few comments about random themes, and aggressive comments regarding other commenters’ likes or dislikes concerning the star and her work in Congo. Finally, some commenters have copy-pasted full-length articles about Jolie and her recent goodwill work from other media outlets. In the following I give examples of the ways authenticity is negotiated, and then follow the gossip thread.

The first two comments outline the antagonism fuelling many contributions: One position underlines the good work and the remarkable woman, while the other questions the actress’ motives:

#1) Frenchy @ 03/26/2013 at 2:11 pm

That’s my girl! Angelina staying committed in her role with the UN. She’s doing very important work. Keep going Angelina!

#2) Gun @ 03/26/2013 at 2:12 pm

Fake

TUE, 26 MARCH 2013  Tweet 37  Synes godt om

## Angelina Jolie Visits Rescue Camp for Women



Angelina Jolie pays a visit to a rescue camp for women on Monday (March 25) in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The 37-year-old actress and UNHCR goodwill ambassador, who was joined at the site by the British Minister for Foreign Affairs **William Hague**, went to raise awareness for war zone rape in the area.

Sexual violence is used frequently as a weapon by rebel groups in the area.

The next day, **Angelina** and **William** payed their respects at the Gisozi genocide memorial during a wreath laying ceremony.

10+ pictures inside of **Angelina Jolie** visiting the Congo...

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Variations on these two comments abound. The positive voices praise the actress and underline the importance and authenticity of her work by, for example, mentioning how many years she has made goodwill trips compared to other Hollywood stars (who are, on their side, only imitating Jolie):

#13) *teri* @ 03/26/2013 at 2:17 pm

Angelina has been doing her humanitarian work for many years, nothing fake about that.

Her braveness, endurance and toughness are emphasized; she is glorified as a role model for women, for example as stated by *UNHCRlovesAJ*:

#216) Beautiful in and out. I'm so proud to be a fan of a very caring person who uses her star power to bring attention to the plight of these oppressed women in war torn countries.

Another writer unites all the different aspects of the celebrity into one persona (#76):

*hopeso* @ 03/26/2013 at 7:00 pm

Glamorous

Mysterious

Celebrity

Humanitarian

Mother

Good will Ambassador

Gorgeous inside and outside.

The negative voices attribute branding motives to her activity, or condemn her for either not knowing enough about politics or supporting the wrong politics (by her mere presence she creates “the impression that Western powers are there to help” (#24)), or for speaking out against weapons at the same time as she has a room full of weapons at home, etc. *Liverwurst* (#243) claims:

It is so disgusting how this woman travels the world with her own personal photographer on the pretense of drawing attention to heart wrenching situations, only to fly back via private jet to one of her many multi-million dollar estates, filled with priceless art, maids, servants and nannies. UGH! How can she sleep at night?

Most pronounced, *Tamsin* recurrently voices his/her aggression, for example in #224:

Jolie's true talent is exploiting people's tragedies for self gain. That has been her main goal, advised by her PR team, as her career was on a downward spiral after the brother-kissing scandal, the drugs, the BBT drug vial-carrying and in-your-face relationship, the mental institution stint, and the cheating scandal and home-wrecking that she caused. She simply needed something to whitewash her sordid, shameful and disgraceful past. That's when she began her child collecting with her first legally-questionable adoption and created this fauxmanitarian character.

After the first two comments, which outline the poles in the debate about Jolie's authenticity, follows a different, rather incomprehensible third comment, which starts by assessing, “this is a shame ; nobody speaks about the secret wedding or of the

humanitarian mission". However, the fourth writer, *Madam*, makes (her own) sense of this mysterious note and proposes, "It's not a wedding ring. I'm fairly sure (having seen alternate photos on other news outlets)". Hereby, *Madam* initiates the single most coherent and persistent discussion on the comment site: *Why does Angelina Jolie not wear her engagement ring but a thin golden band – and does this mean that she has been secretly wed to Brad Pitt?* Moreover, many of the commenters involved in the discussion argue, like *Madam*, on the basis of a comprehensive knowledge of the star's habits, for example on which shoulder she usually carries her bag and the possible meaning of changing this habit:

Madam @ 03/26/2013 at 2:13 pm

#4) It's not a wedding ring. I'm fairly sure (having seen alternate photos on other news outlets) that it is a yellow gold band with a small diamond stone set in it and that she has tried to keep the stone facing inwards so that it looks just like a simple gold band. Also, if it was a simple wedding band, there would have been no need to remove it for her visit to the International Rescue Committee camp. She didn't remove her gold necklaces for this visit, so no need to remove a wedding ring.

I am sure that she would have loved to have worn a proper pretend wedding ring in order to focus attention on her nuptials around the predicted time of Jennifer Aniston's wedding. However, I don't think she dared push Brad that far.

She hasn't worn the 'promise for the future ring' on other UN trips, so there was no need to wear a smaller substitute ring for this trip. This is a deliberate ploy to generate press attention as to whether she is now married. Jolie usually carries her bags on her right shoulder or right arm. When she wanted to show off her 'promise for the future ring' to photographers in LA shortly after the museum reveal, she made sure to carry her bag on her left arm and hold her left hand up so the photogs could all get good shots. At the airport for this trip, she is carrying her bag on her left shoulder and makes sure to put up her left hand to hold onto the strap when the photographers are snapping, so they definitely get a shot of the 'is it or isn't it' ring and the speculation can begin.

So, even though the discussion of the gold band gives rise to the voicing of opinions about raw materials, the gold mining industry, global capitalism and how African nations are entitled to the money they can earn on mining, it mostly takes the form of *gossip* about the private life of Jolie and her fiancé and whether or not they have been secretly married. The fourth comment shows how commenters' detailed knowledge is activated to make valid claims about what has happened in her private life. It also shows how gossipers are meticulously scrutinizing the photographs for any information that might support their claims. The thin ring is, after all, only visible on two of the photographs, and information can only be gained by activating a kind of gossiper's "zoom gaze".

*Madam*'s comment is aggressively dismissed in #14 by *Frenchy*: "Nobody cares about rings or necklaces dammit! Focus on the crisis on hand that's real. Educate yourselves!" But the gossip thread continues throughout the debate: #65, posted by *adilynn*, returns to the marriage issue and asserts:

The new ring is a big improvement over the big gaudy looking one she is wearing. Marriage won't keep Brad from taking up with another woman so good luck to her with that.

Tani in #83 tries to lead the discussion in a new direction. The commenter obviously knows a great deal about Jolie's way of dressing – and seems to be trying to initiate an even more sensational story:

The ring really distracted people from the real suspicious thing in here which is her loose clothes. She always tucks her blouse in her pants. Why doesn't she do that in recent outings.

Except for a late post in which the writer asserts that she or he helped at the wedding (a comment obviously not swallowed by the others), the marriage thread ends with the writer called *let's see* warranting the marriage thesis by inferring:

#270: This is not the first time Angie goes to humanitarian trip since engagement. In previous trips, She took engagement ring off. But this time she wears a gold band on her ring finger. Everything points to they have already been married.

The marriage thread's structure is a clear example of gossip communication according to Bergmann (2003). There is an extensive scholarly discussion around the meanings of gossip, and elsewhere I have provided an overview of the literature on gossip and gossip as mediated communication (Jerslev 2010). For my purpose here, I will briefly go through Bergmann's structural definition of gossip. First, gossip is *informal, private* communication between two or more parties (here: users on a celebrity site). Second, gossip is about an *absent third party* (Jolie, obviously). Third, the gossip content consists of *facts* or possible facts about the absent party's private affairs – often related to embarrassing or scandalous behavior (a possible sensation, not scandal, is the case in this discussion). Fourth, the absent party is an *acquaintance* of all participants (here: what Schickel (2000 [1985]) calls an *intimate stranger*, a *known unknown*, the gossiping parties only know from a mediated, para-social distance). Fifth, gossip is often – but not always – *a means to its own end* (gossip as entertainment); and, finally, gossip is *news*. So, gossip is at once a particular *content*, a particular *relational structure* and a certain *communicative process*.

Gossip is an activity that requires, as we have seen, hermeneutical expertise as well as prior knowledge about the person gossiped about. However, gossip is not just the production, dissemination and debate of information about a mutual acquaintance; it is the exchange of moral opinions about the content and veracity of this information. Gossip is a certain recognizable discourse; the mutual interpretation, evaluation and moral judging of a particular kind of knowledge. At one and the same time it is about and produces intimacy, emotionality and community. The fuel of gossip is narrative desire, the pleasure of filling in empty places and making meaning of the fragments of a plot that might turn into an exciting story. The point of departure is that someone heard or found out something interesting, sensational, possibly even morally dubious, about someone well known. The incentive for gossiping is that one does not know whether or not the new information is true; it might be, but under all circumstances is it a good story – or can be made into a good story with interesting moral implications by the gossiping parties.

When it comes to celebrity gossip, the necessary prior knowledge is collected through celebrity magazines and sites. The American gossip magazine *US Weekly* posted an article on their online edition about Jolie in Africa a few hours *after* the first comment on *JustJared* (the article was also copy-pasted onto the site (#210)).<sup>10</sup>

## Angelina Jolie Wears Gold Band on Ring Finger, Visits Africa on Mission to Fight Rape: Picture

CELEBRITY NEWS MARCH 26, 2013 AT 5:30PM BY ALLISON TAKEDA

Like 20

Tweet 49

50

+1 2

Pin it 2

ZOOM IN! 



An image caption contained information about the trip, but the main story was framed as gossip about the ring and its meaning:

Did Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie manage to pull off *the impossible* -- a secret wedding in Hollywood? During a trip to a rescue camp in the Democratic Republic of Congo this week, Pitt's 37-year-old fiancée was *spotted* with some *mysterious* new bling on her ring finger: a simple gold band where her giant platinum engagement sparkler *used to be* (my emphases).

Again we find the recognizable gossip elements: the sensational news, the prior knowledge, the direct involvement of the reader by means of a question, the riddle – strategies that invite the reader to disseminate the article for further gossiping. One commenter notices that at least the article mentions Jolie's mission in the headline, and besides ruminating about the ring, it authenticates her humanitarian work through Brockington's *affinity* strategy, i.e. writing about her as a mother. For example, it refers to her saying, "I wake up in the morning as a mom, and I turn on the news like everybody else, and I see what's happening". The most remarkable gossip device, though, is *US Weekly's* zoom-in button, which invites the user to scan the celebrity's body in extreme close-up and, for example, focus on the ring for closer scrutiny. The zoom-in device thus func-

tions as a virtual gossipers' zoom gaze, hereby efficiently – and literally – immersing the user in the story and co-constructing her/him as gossipers.

## Concluding Remarks

I have argued in this article that media constructions of celebrities in their public role as humanitarians are inevitably subsumed to celebrity logic and celebrification, the continuous process through which the meaning of celebrity is produced and reproduced. On the one hand, the very *extraordinariness* that made celebrities an asset to humanitarian organizations and politicians in the first place questions their authenticity when they appear as players outside the field of entertainment. Because of their contribution to a powerful Western media industry, their presence on the international stage of political discussions of inequality can hardly avoid being contested.

On the other hand, celebrity logic's conferring of ordinariness upon celebrities provides them with a moral integrity and authenticity. The celebrity persona always conveys certain values; however, their ordinariness and, by extension, the altruism inherent in the ordinary attaches to their humanitarian work an "ethical surplus" (Illouz and Wilf 2008), which adds strongly to their persona.

The questioning of authenticity on the one hand and the good work, the restrained emotional involvement and the simple, human motives apparently guiding their choice on the other provide celebrity humanitarians (to a greater or lesser degree) with a capacity to create strong emotions and, at best, political involvement on the part of their audience. Celebrities are able to call attention to global injustices, and there is no doubt celebrity humanitarianism is an efficient way of creating a strong brand. Even though Angelina Jolie seems to claim a position outside celebrity logic, my point is that this is impossible. Inevitably, celebrity logic molds the perception of her in whatever public role she appears. No matter the cause or content, gossip communities on the Internet enact celebrification through endless debates and judgments about authenticity and the private lives of stars. As shown by the debate on *JustJared*, where the Jolie-Pitt marriage gossip commences without being alluded to at all by the *JustJared* post and hours before it appears on *US Weekly*, one of the results of celebrification is that the cause may completely disappear in the diversified readings and uses of a photograph on the Internet.

## Notes

1. For numbers supporting this view of celebrities engaged in celebrity advocacy, see Thrall (2008).
2. The quantitative study shows that a very high percentage of celebrities do charity work (the A-list more than the B-list); however, it also shows that only the activities of few very famous celebrities receive sustained media attention, and furthermore that even though celebrity advocacy has "become more visible in the mainstream news media, that growth has not made celebrity advocates a visible part of the overall news flow" (Thrall et al. 2008: 375).
3. The working paper "'Getting it'. Working with celebrity involvement in good causes overseas", <http://celebrityanddevelopment.files.wordpress.com/2011/09/getting-it-website-sept-ver-1.pdf>

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4. In his seminal work from 1994, Gamson talks about the process whereby celebrity logic expands from the entertainment world to the world of politics, a discussion later continued by, for example, Corner and Pels (2003) and Marsh, 't Hart and Tindall (2010).
5. Couldry's example is the celebrification of the *Big Brother* contestants the moment they exit the house and reenter the real world.
6. To be found on <http://celebrityanddevelopment.wordpress.com/writings/new-papers-from-this-fellowship/>
7. Along the same lines, Goodman (2010: 109) claims, "We, as the audience, need to be convinced to some degree they, as the celebrity, do indeed know what they are talking about in order to be taken somewhat seriously and, thus, the celebrization of development is not just simply about marketing-driven photo-shoots designed to 'up' the celebrity's exchange value."
8. For example, for an authenticity construction of actress Drew Barrymore see: <http://www.looktothestars.org/news/6879-drew-barrymore-makes-charity-trip-to-kenya>.
9. <http://www.justjared.com/2013/03/26/angelina-jolie-visits-rescue-camp-for-women/>
10. <http://www.usmagazine.com/celebrity-news/news/angelina-jolie-wears-gold-band-on-ring-finger-visits-africa-on-mission-to-fight-rape-picture-2013263#ixzz2OlhglNwV>.

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