

WORKSHOP SUMMARY

Communicating Environmental Change in the 21st Century: Celebrities Voices and Public Engagement



ENVIRONMENTAL
CHANGE INSTITUTE

AFRICAN STUDIES CENTRE
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

KING'S
College
LONDON

Date

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Organisers and Funders

Environmental
Change Institute,
University of Oxford

Kings College London

African Studies
Centre, University of
Oxford

Workshop Background

This workshop aimed to share research and working theories around the role of celebrities in environmental politics and culture. The workshop was structured around three themes, each of which aimed to theorise a particular element of the role of celebrities – representing nature, creating glamour, and creating spectacles. The day concluded with a session identifying commonalities between participants' research and possible collaboration in the future. Fifteen people attended from various academic establishments worldwide.

THEME 1: Wildlife and Nature

William Beinart, University of Oxford,

spoke about the role of documentary makers in bringing particular images of African nature to mass audiences. Documentary makers—such as the Adamsons and Joan and Alan Root—brought seemingly wild nature to audiences in increasingly urbanized societies in which the natural environment had been removed. The documentary maker can be thought of as an 'interlocker', 'bringing nature home'. William suggested that technological innovation has been a major driver behind the rise of these documentary celebrities, notably the television, bringing pictures to mass audience, and aviation, making previously remote locations accessible to celebrities. A question posed by William's presentation was whether the celebrity documentary maker is in fact creating a new vision of African environments for Western audiences, and so re-colonising perceptions of nature?

Malcolm Draper, University of KwaZulu Natal, gave a presentation on his work on Monty Roberts and *The Horse Whisperer* book and film. Echoing William Beinart, Malcolm suggested that much of Roberts' success was due to Western society's desire to experience wilderness following the widespread loss of nature in society in the 20th century. The horse is in many ways the epitome of this wild nature, as an unpredictable, quickly moving 'beast'; it represents an idea of wilderness as both untouched and also un-tethered. Malcolm argued that in this example much of the success of Roberts as a celebrity was due to the compatibility of his skills and presentation with the ideological needs of the audience he was presenting to.

Graham Huggan, University of Leeds, outlined a new project he is developing on the role of present-day environmental documentary makers. The project—'Threatened Worlds; Famous Faces'—comes from the angle of post-colonial criticism to examine how particular sets of ideas are produced, reproduced, and consumed in environmental documentaries by their presenters. The case study individuals are celebrity conservationists, such as David Attenborough, Steve Irwin, and David Suzuki, all of whom are conservationists who have become recognized in popular culture, rather than vice versa. Methodologically, Graham's work is taking three approaches:

1. The lives and writing of the celebrities to examine their own writings against portrayals of them and their experiences.
2. Changing practices in TV broadcasting and the personification of the knowledgeable TV host.
3. The overlap between the conservation threads presented by each celebrity and embedded colonial issues, such as indigenous people, to investigate how these celebrities present and re-present these colonial issues.

Theme 1 Discussion

Following the three presentations, there was a discussion about common themes between topic areas. Key points were:

1. The value of the post-colonial academic tradition in identifying the importance of representation by celebrities as well as how representation can suppress various interests and groups. Much of the discussion in this theme also dealt with former colonial spaces and topics, which was identified as an area that celebrity representations of nature are often focused.

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2. The identity of the celebrity over scales as influencing what they represent. David Suzuki, for example, is represented as a Canadian at the national level within Canada but as part of the Japanese environmental tradition at the international scale.
3. The issue of authority. Where does celebrity authority originate? Danger was identified as a key way in which celebrity presenters established their authenticity; for Steve Irwin his death in the field generated a swell of public admiration for this legitimacy as a documentary maker.
4. The importance of audience perception.

THEME 2: Environmental Glamour

Jo Littler, University of Sussex, presented a discussion of celebrities in the context of political consumption and corporate and civil society environmental action. Jo suggested that deregulation of the media and rise of reality television has increased the role of celebrity, as well as celebrity-orientated programming and publications. In this way, advertising, business, and politics are all framed in the context of celebrities in these media. This is coupled with the rise of individualism in society and the atomized individual within the neo-liberal paradigm. Jo then went on to speak about the 'ecologies of celebrities'—that is, how do celebrities impact on and interact with ecology. She suggested that celebrities are one of the major proponents of ethical consumption through celebrity-endorsed products. While it has been argued that this involvement of celebrities simply hijacks a sense of citizenship for accumulation, Jo suggested that political consumerism does create a window of opportunity in which citizens can influence environmental degradation through purchase.

Mike Goodman, King's College London, spoke about some of the ideas explored in a recent paper he and Max Boykoff published in *GeoForum* on the construction of the environmental celebrity in society. Mike suggested that the celebrity is co-constructed, both by themselves but also by the public, which ascribes particular views and frames of the environment on to them. This second 'ascribed' identity is created through texts, images, and magazines, which represent the celebrity. This gives significant control to those creating these 'filter' artefacts. Particular objects and brands can be ascribed—voluntarily or not—to celebrities; this can take the form of a product endorsement, as outlined by Jo Littler, or through an experience in their lives that creates an image of their views and values. The private lives of celebrities are particularly important here; the public use private lives to validate and so re-shape the identity of the celebrity. Mike also spoke about the climate change celebrity and their particularly powerful role in translating values in policy.

Theme 2 Discussion

After Mike and Jo's presentations there was a discussion about the questions arising from the theorizing of celebrity as a glamorous and action-changing agent. Key points that emerged were:

1. The celebrity as representing a kind of 'social offsetting' in which people believe that if they follow celebrity-endorsed actions they are fulfilling their social and environmental responsibilities. There was a discussion about how this social offsetting relates to absolute environmental change.
2. Legitimacy was once again discussed; however, here the discussion focused on the implications of celebrity

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legitimacy and power. Participants explored Gramsci's assertion that those who occupy omniscient positions in society have significant power, and whether celebrities could be described as being in such a position. There was also a discussion of whether celebrities democratize science or do not.

THEME 3: Media, Imagery & Spectacle

Libby Lester, University of Tasmania, presented the results of a recent sample of 10,000 climate change news items from global mass media from September 2004, and how these presented celebrity discourses. Libby linked the study to questions about the framing of stories in a way that increase their resonance to readers' lives, and the importance of work by U. Beck. Some of the key findings from the study were:

- Many images were of maps, satellites, and globes, but were juxtaposed with very local images of villages, linking the global and local dimensions in a simple way
- Impacts of climate change were a major theme in the sample
- There was a degree of positioning of different individuals in the stories, with NGOs being photographed outside negotiations rather than involved in discussions. Scientists were often pictured conducting field experiments or in the lab.

Jim Igoe, Dartmouth University, spoke about the fetishisation of the environment and the embedded nature of celebrities within this process. Jim suggested that the appeal of the environment is the threat to it, and that celebrity environmentalism paradoxically creates a commodity of the dying environment. This links to cultural geography literature

on the contradictions in the fetishisation of nature, where the environment is represented as both far off and local, but the connections between these two scales are not made apparent. The dying environment is made a commodity by celebrity environmentalists; however, the direct role of the consumer in creating and maintaining degradation is not evident. Jim spoke about how celebrities maintain the degradation of the environment under late capitalism.

Katja Neves, Concordia University, presented a paper on the importance of the spectacle—a type of celebrity—in environmental politics. Katja used the case study of Greenpeace's Paul Watson and his campaign of the *Whale Wars*; she described how Watson used the media and its focus on short-term events and conflicts to generate public pressure on Japanese whaling. Using the media, Watson created a court of public opinion that was stronger than legal courts, which had little jurisdiction over whaling. However, Katja also described how the use of a spectacle on which all attention is focused can act as an unintentional decoy from other issues that do not have comparable 'newsworthiness'. Indeed, the *Whale Wars* detracted much attention from Japanese base trawling—making whaling something of a 'convenient truth'. Katja suggested that the spectacle is not a monolithic phenomenon; like Jim, she suggested that there are many hidden hierarchies and processes acting behind the celebrity, linking back to the discussions of post-colonial approaches in Session 1.

Discussion and further questions

In the final session of the workshop, Dan Brockington, Max Boykoff, and Mike Goodman presented a synthesis of their

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conclusions from the day. Each outlined some key themes for future discussion:

1. **Dan Brockington, University of Manchester**, suggested that a number of elements of work on celebrities is in many ways not new. In particular, Dan noted the relationships between conservation, capital and social inequality. However, he suggested that the plethora of new media dealing with or influenced by celebrity is novel, with the abundance of public outlets growing. As media houses look for new sources of wealth creation within the late capitalism paradigm, it seems clear that the importance of the celebrity is increasing.
2. **Max Boykoff, University of Oxford**, noted three main points. Firstly, he suggested that a major research area is the issue of legitimacy and authority of celebrities—including their production and implications. Max linked this to discussions of the democratization of environmental issues through the media. Secondly, Max highlighted the issue of public understanding and emotional response. And thirdly, he suggested that it may be interesting to explore how celebrities conceive of themselves.
3. **Mike Goodman, Kings College London**, followed on from Max by also highlighting questions about public responses and understanding. Mike suggested that an important research task is to connect public responses with questions around 'social offsetting', and so how corporations are in turn benefiting from celebrity suggestions. Secondly, Mike talked about the broader question of what the implications of the mainstreaming of environmentalism in popular culture

might be—both socially and economically.

All workshop participants then discussed other issues they felt had arisen from the day. The major points here were:

- The importance of the media as a gatekeeper and constructor of celebrities.
- The possible histories of the rise of the environmental celebrity.
- What celebrities the day's presentations and discussions may have excluded, linking again to the questions about North and South divisions in environmentalism.

The workshop closed with a discussion of potential funding possibilities for future meetings and the establishment of a research group. Possible funding sources were identified as:

- The Mellon Foundation for projects on conservation and environmental communication
- AHRC International Network Programme to fund discussion group meetings
- A possible AHRC grant application to facilitate significant research.