

NEW ENGLAND LAW | BOSTON LEGAL STUDIES RESEARCH PAPER SERIES
RESEARCH PAPER NO. 13-09



THE CELEBRITIZATION OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Dina Francesca Haynes

(April 10, 2013)

Dina Francesca Haynes, Professor of Law
New England Law | Boston
154 Stuart Street, Boston, MA 02116
(617) 422-7269, dhaynes@nesl.edu

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Abstract: Celebrities now regularly engage with human trafficking policy and practice. A “sexy” topic, human trafficking is not only susceptible to alluring, fetishistic and voyeuristic narratives, but plays into the celebrity-as-rescuer-of-the-victim ideal that receives excessive attention from media, policymakers and the public. While some celebrities may become knowledgeable enough to give responsible advice to law and policy makers, others engaging in anti-trafficking activism are neither knowledgeable enough nor using good judgment when interacting with those who make the laws and create anti-trafficking programs. But the responsibility must lie primarily with those same law and policy makers who are so slavishly devoted to using celebrity witnesses in order to satisfy their own desire to interact with celebrities. The extent to which law and policy makers are abdicating their duties to constituents and donors by allowing celebrity activists to provide them with legal and policy advice is emblematic of the larger and more general problems with funding, narratives and the shallow level of discourse in current anti-trafficking initiatives.

¹ The author is Professor of Law at New England Law|Boston, who has worked for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the US Department of Justice on human trafficking and other human rights and legal matters. I would like to thank Sarah Hawkins, my exceedingly able research assistant, for her efforts with this article.

Keywords: human trafficking, anti-trafficking, human rights, celebrity activism, human rights activism, human trafficking activism_____

Celebrities now regularly engage with human trafficking policy and practice. A “sexy” topic, human trafficking is not only susceptible to alluring, fetishistic, and voyeuristic narratives, but plays into the celebrity-as-rescuer-of-the-victim ideal that receives a huge amount of attention from media and the public. As a result, many celebrities now characterize themselves as anti-trafficking activists, with their admiring public viewing their claims as expertise.

This article looks at ways in which celebrities, people “known for [their] well-knownness” (Boorstin 1992, 57), and celebrity culture influence legal and policy responses to human trafficking, critiquing simplified, appeal-to-the-masses (and -funders) approaches to human trafficking employed by those who pander to the public’s current obsession with celebrities.

Methodology

Media accounts of celebrity involvement in human rights campaigns abound. This article focuses on prominent or noteworthy celebrity involvement in human trafficking, placing it the broader context of celebrity involvement in human rights activism more generally. Celebrities were identified through a broad survey of news media, electronic databases, government documents, and promotional materials of various international and non-governmental

organizations (NGOs). Quantitative and qualitative evaluations of celebrity activism were made by examining transcripts of congressional witness testimony from 2000-2011 and a survey of commendations awarded by the United Nations (UN). Where applicable, the promotional materials of foundations and charitable organizations created and run by the celebrities themselves were also reviewed for the claims made therein. Throughout, empirical analysis from business, marketing, and psychology experts is utilized to assess the impact of celebrity endorsements on the public and policy makers.

What Is the General Impact of Celebrity Involvement on a Human Rights Issue?

Some have argued that there are real advantages to celebrity activism, that celebrities have the potential to be more neutral than politicians or politically motivated NGOs (Hart and Tindall 2009), help activists gain access to policy makers and the public that they would otherwise never attain, and allow unpopular causes and marginalized groups to attract funding that would otherwise not be forthcoming (Meyer and Gamson 1995).

More ubiquitous are critiques, especially when celebrities veer from mere endorsement into diplomacy and policy recommendation. The article shows that the primary drawbacks to this type of celebrity involvement are lack of accountability and the unrefined, reductive, and sometimes uninformed narratives that even the most well-intentioned celebrities present (Kamons 2007), the side effects of which can be diluting the public’s willingness to intellectually engage and earnestly attend to the issues and people who are suffering (Hart and Tindall 2009), and diverting attention away from solutions that those afflicted might propose for themselves (Moyo 2009). In shifting the focus away from those most impacted, celebrity human rights activism risks stripping them of their agency and rendering them one-dimensional

“victims” (Cooper 2007). Reductive narratives also shift realistic depictions of human rights issues away from the truly gruesome, complex, or boring, toward the more palatable, tangible, or exciting.

Unintended Consequences

Despite the understanding commonly held by entertainers and politicians—that one must have an “elevator pitch”² or short and catchy description of the issue—it is very difficult to distill complex human rights problems into sound bites. Because so many celebrities speak in pithy, arousing and brief narratives, experts less willing to do so can come off as unappealing or overly intellectual by comparison. It is virtually impossible for the words of a bona fide expert to go viral, experts often being reluctant to distill their viewpoints for the press.

Celebrities, on the other hand, are often very skilled at making short, charming, and persuasive pitches. Furthermore, there exists a symbiotic relationship between the press, IOs, NGOs, politicians, and celebrities. Journalists want a story; politicians, IOs, and NGOs want to publicize their causes or policy positions; and celebrities want to propel their celebrity, so celebrity narratives are delivered with great frequency to wide audiences. But because celebrities are a magnet for attention, the story heard is often one *about* the celebrity—their account of how a trip they took to see a human rights crisis affected them emotionally—a focus which comes at the expense of the actual problem (Augustin 2011). Furthermore, celebrities tend to suggest “bandaid approaches” rather than sustainable solutions (Dieter and Kumar 2008). Finally, audiences grown accustomed to hearing celebrities entreating them to “do something,” and

² I was told by a celebrity moderating the panel on which I was speaking that I should work on my “elevator pitch,” meaning that I should condense my message into the amount of time it takes to ride in an elevator with the “pitchee.”

providing an immediate outlet through which to do it, are impatient with experts who advise them to slow down and understand the complexities of the issue before proceeding.

But in their rush to react to human rights crises to which they have recently become attuned, celebrities, well-intentioned though they may be, can simply get it wrong. Take, for example, Sharon Stone effectively bullying Davos attendees into promising substantial donations to save children’s lives by providing mosquito nets to “end malaria” in Africa, even though malaria is not the biggest risk to children’s lives in Africa, mosquito nets are not the most effective way to prevent malaria, and the nets are often already provided locally. (Sala-i-Martin 2006). Or celebrity journalist Nicholas Kristof who purchased a girl for \$203 to “save her” from human trafficking (Kristof 2004), and was then shocked when she chose to return to sex work (Kristof 2005) failing to consider the structural issues in play. Celebrity actions intended as altruistic may do more harm than good by diverting attention from effective responses already underway, peddling false stories that skew the public’s ability to identify actual victims and causes, or by allowing audiences to feel that there is an easy solution or that someone else is already adequately addressing the problem.

Why celebrity involvement troubles experts

Experts from political science, public health, and advertising have looked at the ways in which celebrities impact their fields. Many, but not all, advertising experts find celebrity endorsements to be beneficial with regard to consumer goods, and in the U.S., around 25 percent of all television advertisements contain celebrities (Biswas, Biswas and Daas 2006). Behavioral psychologists and marketing experts note that consumers’ feelings toward a celebrity transfer to the goods they endorse (Agrawal and Kamakura 1995), and consumers come to subconsciously

feel that they belong to the celebrity’s “in-group” through shared appreciation for a particular consumer good (Biswas, Hussain and O’Donnell 2009). Because consumers want to feel the celebrity is in their in-group, they respond more to celebrity endorsements than expert endorsements (Frizzell 2011).

This increased use of celebrity endorsements for goods has transferred to issues, with the effect that issues are now also marketed by celebrities. Some celebrity activists, and the NGOs and international organizations (IOs) that engage them, claim that they are “merely” raising awareness about a human rights issue, a claim that, on its face, sounds innocuous; yet potential problems accrue even with this practice. First, awareness-raising often casts the celebrity him or herself in the central and dominant role of hero, thus detracting from the real needs of the victims. (Bhatia 2013). Second, celebrities expect to be well compensated when endorsing goods (GeekAbout.com 2009), and so celebrities endorsing issues may feel that the endorsement, presumably performed gratis, is good altruistic “service.” Yet, in failing to pay for their own travel,³ while also failing to donate funds to the causes they endorse (Colapinto 2012), celebrities siphon off donations the donors undoubtedly intended for victims.

The use of celebrity endorsers is increasing, even though experts report that the return on that investment is modest, and can even backfire when employed across cultures (Biswas, Hussain and O’Donnell 2009). Some important research also suggests that celebrities have less impact than they think they do. One experiment presented subjects with opinions about whether or not to intervene militarily in response to a humanitarian crisis (Frizzell 2011). The designated celebrity opinion was assigned to Bono, with the other purportedly held by “a State Department Representative.” Not only did the test subjects agreed with the latter’s opinion, not Bono’s, but

³ The fact that Angelina Jolie claims to pay for her own travel and makes an effort to publicize this, suggests that others do not (Look to the Stars 2013).

the subjects claimed to have formed their opinion *because* it was the *opposite* of Bono’s. The study organizers concluded that even though Bono was a generally deemed a “high credibility celebrity,” widely known to be involved in humanitarian activities, the test subjects did not view him as a “respected source” on this matter (Frizzell 2011, 318-320). This outcome—in which test subjects not only failed to be swayed by celebrity “opinion” but were in fact repelled by it—has come to be known as “the Bono effect” (Frizzell 2011, 322).

While celebrity involvement may produce negative results, even legislators utilize them. In fact, these legislators, discussed below, seem utterly transfixed by the celebrities they invite to testify, asking them to endorse and offer legal and policy recommendations. This suggests that regardless of whether celebrities offer specific substantive influence, they still have a large impact on the prioritization of their issue or proposed solution against others.

The United Nations, too, seems preoccupied with using celebrity ambassadors who are now attached to virtually every U.N. agency, with several agencies appointing more than 30 Goodwill Ambassadors each in order to represent a cross section of religious, geographic, demographic, and name-recognition diversity and achieve broad appeal (United Nations Goodwill Ambassadors 2012). Some agencies have even begun upgrading celebrities. Angelina Jolie, who had been a Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR), was recently promoted to Special Envoy, allowing her to “undertake advocacy and represent UNHCR . . . at the diplomatic level.” (United Nations News Centre 2012). Other celebrities are given the more general but equally grand title “Messenger of Peace,” conferred directly by the Secretary General, the responsibilities of which include helping to “raise public awareness and support for United Nations peacekeeping efforts around the world” (United Nations Messengers of Peace 2012). Other international organizations and outlets, too,

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subscribe to the notion that celebrity and humanitarianism go hand in hand. For example, Angelina Jolie, Richard Gere, Sharon Stone, Bono, and Mick Jagger have all been invited to the World Economic Forum at Davos (Cooper 2007). Some experts observe that it is painful to watch celebrities so slavishly attended to, even while they “dumb down” the issues, causes, consequences, and solutions for an audience not necessarily interested in understanding their complexities, but rather in knowing more about their favorite celebrity (Frizzell 2011).

Celebrities creating and funding their own NGO’s

Some celebrities, including many of those listed above, have taken the additional step of creating their own NGOs or foundations through which they organize and fund humanitarian enterprises. Angelina Jolie, for example, runs multiple projects and has employed multiple advisors, not always with success. Her first advisor, Trevor Nielson, was allegedly behind some of the more ill-advised celebrity anti-trafficking initiatives, discussed further below (Colapinto 2012). While receiving advice from credible advisors would likely improve the activism of some celebrities, some celebrity “advisors” operate much more as publicists, advising philanthropy as a PR tactic, rather than offering substantive expertise (Colapinto 2012).

There is also much inter-funding and circular support among celebrities. Bono’s philanthropic (RED)TM campaign, described as rescuing “international aid from its dour predictive graphs and disappointing ‘lessons learnt,’” spinning it “as young and chic as possible,” was launched on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (Richey and Ponte 2008, 725). And when George Clooney and Brad Pitt wanted guidance on how to enter the humanitarian celebrity enterprise, they looked to Bono for advice (Cooper 2007). Nielson, Jolie’s past advisor, also worked with Bono’s Foundation, DATA (Debt, AIDS, Trade, Africa), and as the director of

public affairs for the Gates Foundation. More recently Nielson was an advisor to Ashton Kutcher and Demi Moore in the creation of their anti-trafficking foundation and Kutcher’s new girlfriend, Mila Kunis, is now one of the faces of the International Labour Organization’s “End Slavery Now” campaign (International Labour Organization 2013). Bono’s advisor and DATA co-founder also trained Brad Pitt, who is Jolie’s husband (Cooper 2009). This inside circle of funding and support includes “the celebrity wealthy”—people who have become famous for being wealthy and philanthropic. Bono’s DATA Foundation has received millions in grants from the Gates Foundation (Cooper 2007), and Bono claims that he was the first person Warren Buffett phoned when Buffet gave over \$31 billion to the Gates Foundation (Cooper 2007). The circular nature of advice and funding virtually guarantees that responses to human rights issues will be limited in nuance for lack of wide-ranging expertise and advice.

Who Subscribes to the Notion of Celebrities As Human Rights Activists, and Why?

Many appear to buy into the notion of celebrities as human rights activists. Celebrities are no longer invited to merely raise awareness about human rights issues: in many instances they spearhead the discussion and the response. As evolutionary anthropologists explain, this happens because we now place celebrities at the top of “prestige hierarchies,” where we formerly placed those with the most valuable skills (Choi and Berger 2010). Furthermore, proximity to celebrities brings prestige and notoriety, which many reinterpret as credibility (Lindenberg, Joly and Stapel 2011). In fact, some experts now turn to celebrities not only to carry a message to a larger audience, but to teach the public about the nuances of those issues (Dieter and Kumar 2008).

Celebrities

Celebrities themselves buy into the concept of celebrity as human rights expert, albeit not all celebrities, not all to the same degree, and not all with the same motivations. Celebrity depends on recognition, which depends on being known, feted and discussed. Some celebrities recognize that humanitarianism can parlay 15 minutes of fame into 16 minutes, and use it as a “second act,” a way to burnish a fallen star, (Hyde 2009) or as a publicist’s prescription for rehabilitation. Other celebrities seem to prefer their activist image, and identify themselves this way—at least in front of some audiences.⁴ There is also the notion that social activism makes the best of a difficult personal life. As actress Susan Sarandon said of her own activism, “If my privacy is going to be invaded and I’m going to be treated as a commodity, I might as well take advantage of it” (Meyer and Gamson 1995, 185).

Although celebrities’ motivations differ, some commonalities apply. First, celebrities believe that they help to shine a light on issues that the media and politicians ignore” (Waisbord 2011). Second, many celebrities earn more from their endorsements than from acting or other endeavors (Agrawal and Kamakura 1995). Once celebrities become skilled at and accustomed to thinking of themselves as endorsers, they may apply an endorsement mentality to all projects they are “selling,” including their humanitarian activities. Third, agents and publicists encourage actors to “engage in social advocacy” for the “career benefits it can bestow” (Demaine 2009, 12). Fourth, many actors have begun to think of themselves as having an obligation to put their fame to good use, and to encourage other actors to do the same. Fifth and finally, law and policymakers seem to expect activism from celebrities, and many celebrities comply. For

⁴ For example, Ricky Martin introduced himself before Congress not as a pop star, but as a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador and President of the Ricky Martin Foundation (Martin 2006).

example, at a congressional hearing on human trafficking before the House Committee on International Relations, Representative Tom Lantos asked Ricky Martin,

I wonder if you could comment on the reason why so few people who have attained your celebrity and status have chosen to become engaged in good causes. And what can be done by people like you or Bono or others to involve the scores of people who have attained in this media driven globe an opportunity to become engaged in your cause, in the issue of trafficking What happens when you talk to your colleagues of similar positions and celebrity and you urge them to pick a cause, any cause and become engaged (Martin 2006, 12)?

Martin declined to speculate and indicated that he could only speak for himself, yet the Representative pressed him further, asking him to explain why his “fellow celebrities” did not also work to “transform” the “ugly aspects of this globe into positive realities,” his comments providing evidence that members of Congress believe both that celebrities have such transformative power and a duty to wield it. (Martin 2006, 12).

Celebrities have different styles and make different claims, which render some celebrities more prominent and more readily heeded than others. Undoubtedly, “there is a publicly perceived and politically consequential distinction between ‘activist leadership’ and ‘jumping on the bandwagon’ Some are hailed as ‘serious’ and ‘dedicated’, others are dismissed as lightweights and opportunists” (Hart and Tindall 2009, 260). Some claim to be speaking for the

entire world;⁵ some on behalf of those without a stage of their own, and some speak for themselves, citing their own personal interest and altruistic drive. These impulses, of course, are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Finally, some celebrity activists recognize the bizarre position they have put themselves in, and tread cautiously (Travers 2007). Others do not.

The Media and Press

Celebrities do not become celebrities in a vacuum, nor does the public become aware of celebrity activism without the press. Journalists and the media have their professional obligations, lenses, and biases. They can sell the “sexy” story and maximize readership, or they can exercise journalistic integrity and fact check. Celebrities have the same considerations: they can use their cultural cache to tackle human rights or social issues with full knowledge, awareness and respect for the complexity of the issues, or they can wield their influence on a whim, without adequate information or without properly considering the consequences of their actions.

Much of the time, the objectives of celebrities and the press align, but sometimes they do not. Actor Ashton Kutcher, for example, started his own NGO—DNA Foundation—with his (then) actress–wife, Demi Moore, who also won a significant grant from Pepsi to carry out human trafficking work (Look to the Stars 2010). When *The Village Voice* confronted Kutcher for citing bad statistics from a flawed report (Cizmar, Conklin and Hinman 2011) and proposing an un-nuanced “end demand” solution to underage prostitution, Kutcher accused the paper of having a “financial interest in trafficking” (Cizmar, Conklin, and Hinman 2011). Kutcher’s then

⁵ Choi and Berger (2010, 313) point to Richard Gere, who, in a television broadcast to voters in the region during Palestinian presidential elections stated, “Hi, I’m Richard Gere, and I’m speaking for the entire world.”

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“advisor,” Trevor Neilson, was allegedly responsible for steering him both to the report that had been debunked years earlier, and to the “end demand” solution Kutcher was touting (Colapinto 2012). Even though the report that produced the spurious statistics has been criticized by no less than twenty-seven university researchers (Weitzer 2010), both the media and celebrities continued to cite it because the figures were fodder for compelling headlines and publicity (Daily Mail Reporter 2008; BBC News 2008). The message seems to be that accuracy is less relevant than the shocking headlines and admiring fans they yield.

Despite its ubiquity, some observe that there is no proof that attaching a celebrity to a cause increases public attention to that cause (Waisbord 2011). Of course, not everyone in the press rushes to cover celebrity activism without querying its impact and validity. In his book, *Flat Earth News*, journalist Nick Davies specifically takes issue with the way the press covers human trafficking, describing what he calls systemic problems with self-referential reporting, whereby media outlets quote one another without assessing the validity of the original source (Davies 2008). Many new outlets blatantly engage in fear mongering to increase their audience (Davies 2008), and human trafficking fits neatly into this fear formula. Journalist Noy Thrupkaew also acknowledges the drawbacks in the common journalistic practice of using the story of one victim to stand in for an entire social cause (Thrupkaew 2013). As a result of these common media practices, human trafficking stories attract audiences; when a celebrity delivers the message, the audience increases dramatically.

The UN

As introduced above, the United Nations has a history of partnering with celebrities.

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These partnerships are clearly beneficial for celebrities who gain more attention; less clear is the net gain for the U.N. Several U.N. agencies receive funding through private donations and some are entirely donor supported (UNHCR Donors). It may therefore be understandable that they employ celebrities to promote their work in much the same way companies employ celebrities to endorse products. Nevertheless, the UN has stumbled more than once in its devotion to celebrity partnerships. For example, when allowing Madonna to launch her Raising Malawi Foundation—now much maligned and, since 2010, run by Trevor Neilson (Colapinto 2012)—as a “cross promotion” with Gucci for the launch of its 5th Avenue store, on the lawn of the U.N. Secretariat in New York City during Fashion Week (Hyde 2009). A second misstep involved inviting Ashley Judd to deliver a talk about human trafficking at the Secretariat as a cross promotion for her new book, a personal memoir (UNODC 2010). Even if UN agencies can be understood to operate as quasi-businesses, employing celebrity cache to secure the requisite funding that fuels their good works, it is harder to see the justification for Secretary General allowing the UN name and image to be used to increase the profile of celebrities and their personal and sometimes for-profit agendas.

Politicians and government officials

Perhaps the most frightening evidence of celebrity power is the willingness of legislators to take counsel from celebrities. Congressional testimony decidedly influences the direction and shape of federal legislation in the United States (Demaine 2009, 6) and federal legislators in the United States have invited hundreds of celebrity entertainers to testify at congressional hearings on issues unrelated to their occupations. The practice endured and is increasing in frequency

“without careful reflection on the role that these persons should play in the legislative process”

(Demaine 2009, 1).

Particular congressional committees invite celebrity “witnesses” to testify while committee members deliberate on draft bills and issues related to their work, and the Appropriations Committees of the House and Senate, responsible for funding programs, have invited the majority of celebrity witnesses to testify (Demaine 2009, 14). Of the more than five hundred celebrities who testified before Congress between 1980 and 2004, next to none had any expertise on the issues about which they spoke (Demaine 2009), yet legislators state that celebrity opinions are crucial to their ability to make and pass laws.⁶ Mutually reinforcing benefits are at work here. Celebrities have their intellectual and activist credentials validated, rather than (or in addition to) their looks or entertainment value (Martin 2006, 6).⁷ Politicians get increased media exposure with their constituencies (Soriano and Lee 2002), and consider meeting celebrities a job “perk” (Lieve 2012).⁸ Legislators take frequent advantage of opportunities to meet celebrities (Hart and Tindall 2009). Far more legislators attend congressional hearings when celebrities testify than when mere experts do (Demaine 2009;

⁶ Representative Lantos stated: “we have had a whole series of celebrities, and every time we welcome them because we need them to achieve our work” (Martin 2006, 3-4).

⁷ Representative Fortuno, introducing Ricky Martin, who was present to testify as an expert witness stated:

Mr. Ricky Martin . . . is not only our Ambassador, he is a constituent of the world. Mr. Martin needs no introduction. A Grammy Award winning recording artist and President of the Ricky Martin Foundation, his fame precedes him not only in the entertainment business but also in the international community as a whole. His tireless work both at home and abroad on behalf of our most vulnerable population has been acknowledged and praised by numerous world leaders (Martin 2006, 14).

⁸ Representative Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Wash, encouraging more women to run for office, explained, “As a member of Congress, I work with amazing people. To sit down with Bono to hear about his work in Africa . . . that’s exciting!” (Lieve 2012).

Neilson 1999), and many seem to fawn over celebrity witnesses to a truly sycophantic degree (Neilson 1999). Legislators are not immune to modern culture: much like the public at large, they crave celebrity membership in their “in-group” (Demaine 2009).

While not all legislators are equally enamored of celebrity testimony, at least not by just any celebrity, and some lawmakers seem more clear than others on the role celebrity experts might reasonably be asked to play (Martin 2006, 18),⁹ many federal lawmakers have substantially acquiesced to the notion that celebrities are just as, if not more qualified than experts to advise lawmakers on federal law and policy (Demaine 2009). This support of and fixation on celebrity experts is not limited to Congress; other branches of government too can be equally deferential to celebrities.¹⁰ Nor is the US alone in its devotion to celebrity opinions (Dieter and Kumar 2008). While some argue that celebrities are now so powerful that politicians cannot dare to ignore them (Hyde 2009), it is the politicians’ acceptance of this dynamic that drives it.

The growing frequency with which celebrities are invited to hold forth to law and policymakers is troubling for a number of reasons. First, there is little evidence to show that their presence, opinions, or advice achieve anything concrete for the victims of human rights abuses (Waisbord 2011). Second, in most countries, the legislative and political branches of government are supposed to adhere to the democratic notion of consulting “the people” when devising society’s rules. Instead of a democracy, we now have a “celebocracy” in which celebrity

⁹ Representative Watson stated to Ricky Martin: “We understand our role as policymakers; you are the briefer. You brief us on your experiences around the world, and that gives us further indication of the kinds of policies we need to adopt here” (Martin 2006, 18).

¹⁰ For example, in 2005, the U.S. State Department named Ricky Martin one of its ‘Heroes Ending Modern Day Slavery’ (U.S. Department of State 2010), and regularly funds and interacts with Somaly Mam, despite increasingly frequent reports that her NGO is neither using the funds in a manner in which it claims, nor stating accurate information.

opinions are considered more valuable than those of the people and, as a result, the people are represented by celebrity opinion (Hyde 2009). Third, the celebrities in question are not accountable for the opinions they expound; in fact, they gain little by spending more time, money and energy ascertaining that their positions and recommendations are helpful. They receive excellent press coverage regardless of whether their proposals are implemented or result in unintended consequences. In spite of these pitfalls, legislators solicit not just testimony, but actual recommendations and solutions from celebrity witnesses (Martin 2006).¹¹ In so doing, the legislators abdicate their electoral roles—and democratic accountability—to celebrities (Demaine 2009). Even when some celebrities attempt to acknowledge the limitations of their expertise, members of Congress reinforce the message that celebrities are well suited to offer policy advice. Testifying before the House Committee on International Relations, Ricky Wilson stated: “I don’t have all the solutions.” To which Representative Joe Wilson replied, “[Y]ou say you don’t have all the solutions, but you have got wonderful commonsense proposals . . .” (Martin 2006, 18). While lawmakers and celebrities act as if calling celebrities to testify is a winning proposition for all, legislators look foolish inviting Muppets to testify, asking the actor who plays a doctor on TV to lecture them on HIV/AIDs (Demaine 2009), or the actor who plays a trafficking victim in a movie to advise them on how to eradicate it. More importantly, they undermine democracy and the citizenry’s faith in government.

A review of congressional transcripts of hearings at which celebrities were invited to testify points to one, inescapable conclusion: the problem lies less with the celebrities, some of whom seem cognizant of their own limitations and skeptical of lawmakers’ assumptions regarding celebrity expertise, and more with the legislators themselves. The legislators are

¹¹ Representative Ros-Lehtinen asked Ricky Martin, “Were you a legislator, how would you be declaring war on the tourists who exploit these young children”? (Martin 2006, 14).

elected on a promise to represent their constituents on important issues of the day and pass laws on those matters. Despite this promise, many seem to know so little about the topic at hand that they are willing to take their information from celebrity witnesses. This sycophantic arrangement, whereby members of congress use their political power to indulge their celebrity fantasies while celebrities gain public relations credibility and more press, is problematic. That legislators take legal and policy advice from celebrities without researching the issues or seeking adequate counsel from actual experts is indicative of a broken, illegitimate legislative machine.

The public

People formerly interacted with others face-to-face, generating “in-groups” through regular interaction. It was from these in-group interactions that people formerly developed their beliefs and behaviors (Demaine 2009). With the advent and expansion of radio, movies, television, and electronic and social media, people began to think of celebrities as social intimates and, as a result, started to take cues from them about how to act and what to care about (Demaine 2009).

Social scientists studying the celebrity phenomenon assert that “people who are considered special can activate the oughtness of norms more than people in general” (Lindenberg, Joly and Stapel 2011, 101). Because people attribute to celebrities something special that differentiates them from ordinary persons (Lindenberg, Joly and Stapel 2011), celebrities exert more influence over decisions about what actions we ought to take and what causes we ought to follow. In this day and age, across many cultures, celebrities top the list of elites who signal the existence of problems to which the public should pay attention and the way in which that public should respond (Kamons 2007). Crucially, advertising scholars note that the more a consumer (or by

extension a voter or member of the viewing/listening/reading public) knows, the less likely he or she is to be influenced by a celebrity (Frizzell 2011). The converse is also true: the less the consumer, voter, or member of the viewing/listening/reading public knows, the more likely he or she will be influenced by a celebrity (Biswas, Biswas and Daas 2006).

While celebrities, their publicists, the press, and policy makers are guilty of overly relying on celebrities to market “products,” a large part of the responsibility rests with a lazy public, content to learn only the bare minimum about an issue—the elevator pitch—when seeking “awareness.” The public too readily assumes that hearing a celebrity recount his or her meeting with a victim of human trafficking, for example, is tantamount to actual awareness of what to do about the issue.¹² To be “aware” means to be conscious, mindful, cognizant, and sentient. Shallow, one-sided narratives taken in from a single source ought not to suffice.

IO’s and NGO’s

Advertising experts have determined that companies generally view celebrity endorsements as useful (Agrawal and Kamakura 1995). NGOs seem to have made the same determination. Though they are technically not for-profit entities, NGOs and IOs rely on funding to make their projects “go” and their altruistic intentions a reality.¹³ Perhaps for this reason, more and more of these non-profit organizations have begun using celebrities to endorse or represent their causes

¹² Dana Vachon, described the audience at Judd’s UN address, as coming “for the slow-dripping sweet stuff of First World stardom meeting Third World woe. They listened like unwitting adherents of a new religion . . . [letting out] very faint sighs, imagining themselves on this very river in darkest Congo, fighting greatest evil with pure sentiment” (2012).

¹³ For example, the in 2007, when the Polaris Project was new, their reported revenue was \$177,818. By 2010, their Internal Revenue Service Form 990 indicated that it received \$1,048,470 in government grants and \$2,221,441 in non-government grants, contributions, and gifts. Invisible Children, the NGO behind Kony 2012, received a staggering \$10,334,060 in private grants, contributions, and gifts according to its 2010 Internal Revenue Service Form 990.

(Tanabe 2011), sometimes grasping for the merest connection to even the most minor celebrity to propel their message.¹⁴ Some NGOs even have staff exclusively devoted to celebrity outreach (Hyde 2009). People who otherwise would pay no attention to an NGO addressing aspects of human trafficking might if a celebrity were attached (Hart and Tindall 2009). Celebrity–endorsers yield publicity, which likely translates to increased funding and donations, increased willingness to learn about the NGO’s agenda, and enhanced access to persons and places the NGOs would not otherwise have. Some NGO’s take a slightly different approach, securing status and, crucially, funding by turning one of their own into a quasi-celebrity. One such NGO head, Somaly Mam, who heads Afesip, has recently been accused of fabricating stories about traffickers abducting her daughter) (Cain 2012) and peddling tales shocking enough to receive attention from celebrities, the US government, and the media. . For example, while Somaly Mam regularly features a “survivor: narrative of a girl whom she claims had her eye gouged out by traffickers, the girl’s parents and doctor recently went on the record to state that in fact she lost the eye as a child to a benign tumor, and was, to their knowledge, never trafficked (Marks and Sovuthy 2012). Despite questions regarding the legitimacy of her claims, donors continue to fund her organization, the media continues to feature it prominently (Half the Sky 2012),¹⁵ and IO’s like the International Labour Organization still clamor to include Somaly Mam among its “Hollywood artists” and “activists,” when preparing and announcing their own activities.

(International Labour Organization 2013). Being able to secure more attention by having

¹⁴ For example, Norma Ramos, the Executive Director of Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (“CATW”), brought with her to one talk at which I was also a speaker, ten to fifteen followers of her group. She repeatedly introduced one of those followers as “*Actress* Kim Sykes,” emphasizing *actress* each time. Sykes has played small roles on television shows such as *Law and Order*. Sykes’ sole function at the event seemed to be implying to the audience that CATW’s message had more credibility due to Sykes’ endorsement of it.

¹⁵ The website for her foundation, where she solicits donations from the public, highlights her awards (Glamor Woman of the Year 2006, Time’s Most Influential People 2009, CNN Hero 2011), media appearances (Tyra Banks show, Fox and Friends, Oprah) and international appearances (Davos) (Somaly Mam.org 2013).

celebrities and celebrity activists attached to the organization appears more important to NGOs and IO’s than either the credibility or expertise of those individuals.

It is clear that celebrity has tremendous currency in today’s society. People want to become famous themselves, but short of that remote possibility, young people today admit that they would prioritize proximity to a famous person over learning a craft or becoming an expert themselves (Choi and Berger 2010). The press, politicians, the public, NGOs, IOs, and the United Nations all look to celebrity “experts” to market their work and—even when better educated, more experienced people experts are available. The only explanation for this phenomenon is that celebrity sells.

Issues that Catch Celebrities’ Attention: Victims, Rescuers, and Sex

Celebrities do not engage with the full gamut of humanitarian issues. And among the issues that celebrities adopt, some receive far more attention than others. The boring, unsexy issues and solutions are rarely discussed, while exciting issues are oversubscribed. For example, while Sharon Stone professed a passionate interest in high childhood mortality rates in Africa when she spoke at Davos, she ignored the solution of diarrhea prevention, the leading cause of infant mortality, in favor of something more appealing and easier to discuss and fund (Sala-i-Martin 2006). When celebrities are involved, the framing of the both problem and its solutions are often manipulated to suit the narrative most palatable for a celebrity attempting to reach her audience.

When human trafficking is framed as a problem primarily impacting exploited migrant laborers, it receives little celebrity attention. But when interested NGOs reframed the issue as “sex trafficking,” “modern day slavery,” and “child sex exploitation,” celebrity involvement

burgeoned, media flocked to the issue, and larger segments of the public claimed an interest in becoming “aware.”

Celebrities take up issues that are simultaneously sexy and tangible—meaning enticing, simple and fundable—and that feed into “the rescue myth” (Chuang 2010; Haynes 2007). A sexy issue may literally involve sex, sexuality, or sex abuse, or it may simply be more exciting, more horrifying, more voyeuristically appealing, and more suitable for casting the narrator in the role of hero, than other issues. For example, human trafficking for sexual exploitation is a “sexy” topic, but for domestic servitude is not, until or unless the master tries to have sex with the servant or otherwise horribly abuses her.

In addition to sexy issues that feed the image of celebrity and, by proxy, the public as rescuer, issues that permit fetishism of human rights victims and allow for “trauma tourism”¹⁶ also enthrall celebrities and the media. Issues that attract greater celebrity attention generally also allow for the “othering” of victims, wherein the “rescuer” is able to indulge in the notion that there exists a great distance between him or herself and the plighted victim, creating a clear “us and them” dynamic, further enabling the celebrity to play the hero (Haynes 2006).

Conveniently, human rights issues that feed into the celebrity-as-rescuer-of-the-victim-ideal also tend to receive more attention from the media and the public, and therefore more funding, than those requiring longer, more complex (and possibly boring) narratives that acknowledge agency, context, and intersectionality. The celebrity who focuses on the sexy, pithy, fetishistic, and over-simplified human rights narrative generates more publicity (Waisbord 2011).

¹⁶ A phrase applied to those who would travel in order to see the charnel or visit victims with their own eyes.

Human Trafficking As a Celebrity Issue of Choice

While human trafficking is not unique in having attracted celebrity attention, it neatly fits the celebrity-attraction criterion set forth above. Human trafficking is a sexy issue with visceral appeal; it is “of the moment” (Clark-Flory 2011); it can be reduced to a simplistic victim–rescuer narrative for those inclined to view it that way; and its victims are often foreign and therein easily essentialized and othered (Haynes 2007, 2010). The recent focus by Congress and celebrities on child victims of human trafficking furthers this victim/savior dynamic.

Multiple and conflicting viewpoints exist on many aspects of human trafficking. There are disagreements as to the extent of the problem, the precise definition of the problem, who is victimized, how best to support victims, and how to combat it. In addition, much statistical data on human trafficking is wildly inconsistent and lacks rigorous empirical support. When celebrities lend their confident voices and elevator pitches to this morass of disagreement and inconsistent data, they cannot help but sway an interested public. Celebrities can be very desirable spokespersons for those who would venture forth with a prescription even where data is lacking. Martin, for example, testifying before Congress, stated “each year 2 million people are victims of human trafficking. Of those, 1 million children are forced into the sex trade each year.” Asked by Representative Smith about how Congress should respond, Martin stated that he “created PSA’s [public service announcements] Call and Live. Well, it says it all. You call and you live. . . . People will call when they are being trafficked, when they believe they are being trafficked or when they witness a case, and that moment you will be safe” (Martin 2006, 11). Whereas experts are inclined to qualify and question discrepant data (Chuang 2010) and acknowledge the both the complexities of the problem and the structural root causes, celebrities

appear more comfortable using unverified statistics, and suggesting untested or reductionist “solutions” so as not to muddle the visceral and emotional appeal of the issue.

In sum, celebrity voices, conflicting expert opinions, and inconsistent data together induce susceptibility in audiences to a reductionist message about human trafficking. Choosing the path of least resistance, audiences accept that the reductionist narrative has made them “aware” of the problem, and seek additional celebrity input to determine what should be done to combat human trafficking.

The Tone Deaf v. Savvy Celebrity

Celebrity missteps are ubiquitous and easy targets for derision, but some celebrities get higher marks than others, for instance, for focusing on people, places, and issues they know well (Easterly 2010), or for having received formal education. It is regularly noted, for example, that Mira Sorvino and Ashley Judd, both actresses and human trafficking activists, have degrees from Harvard University, implying their enhanced credibility to hold forth on issues of concern to them. This section provides a brief overview of some of the work done by some of the celebrities focused on the human trafficking, to greater or lesser positive effect.

One of the most striking facets of celebrity involvement in human trafficking is how quickly they come to claim expertise. For example, Jada Pinkett Smith stated that she learned about trafficking through her pre-teen daughter in early 2012 (Pinkett Smith 2012). Eight months later Pinkett Smith accepted an invitation to address the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the topic (Parkinson 2012; Pinkett Smith 2012).

Several celebrities then take their interest a step further, establishing their own organizations devoted to “tackling the topic.” Some of these celebrities have used their foundations to identify

a need gap and work to fill it—Jolie, for example, partnered with Microsoft to create Kids in Need of Defense (KIND), an NGO working to find and teach pro bono attorneys (though not actually providing or funding the attorneys) to assist unaccompanied immigrant children in the United States -- while others only claim to be raising awareness of the issue through their foundations by bringing their celebrity presence to bear.

Multiple celebrities have been invited to serve as Goodwill Ambassadors to various UN agencies in roles directly or indirectly related to human trafficking. The designation of a title bears little correlation to the level of expertise held by the recipient. For example, Mira Sorvino is Goodwill Ambassador to the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC 2010), the “guardian” agency for the U.N. Protocol on Trafficking in Persons. Ricky Martin is a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador, and addresses child sexual exploitation (though not, it appears, child exploitation more broadly) (UNICEF 2013). Other celebrities are attached to IO’s. Ashley Judd, for example, was previously an ambassador for YouthAIDS, a project of Population Services International (PSI), focused on empowering the most vulnerable populations (PSI 2013). Still others claim a working relationship with US government entities. Ashton Kutcher and Demi Moore, for example, claim to be “partnering with” the Department of Homeland Security to produce videos educating travelers about human trafficking (Kutcher and Moore 2012). It is unclear whether celebrities attached to the UN or other IO’s regularly cover their own travel and related expenses when doing their humanitarian work. The fact that Jolie makes a point of publicly stating both that she pays for her own travel and that she

makes substantial donations to causes of interest to her¹⁷ (whether this is personal money or money taken from her foundations and charities is not clear), suggests that other celebrities do not (Cooper 2009).

Some celebrities have attempted to bolster the quality and credibility of their work and reputation by hiring advisors. Unfortunately, as previously noted, some of these advisors appear to view their role as something closer to publicist than advisor on substance (Colapinto 2012). It is unclear whether celebrities are encouraged to contribute their own time or net worth to their causes, but many appear to do little of either, viewing their primary role as drawing star power to the foundation rather than funding or working for it outright (Colapinto 2012). In fact, it seems that some advisors, in conjunction with publicists, recommend that their celebrity clients establish foundations to “express their philanthropy” (Colapinto 2012). Advisors like Neilson then exorbitantly charge those foundations they help establish; for example, Kutcher and Moore paid Neilson \$240,000 of their foundation money for his advice that resulted in a firestorm of criticism, as earlier discussed (Colapinto 2012).

As for how these celebrities became attached to the issue of human trafficking, most claim to have learned of its existence in conjunction with their careers as entertainers: Jolie after filming *Tomb Raider* in Cambodia (Hart and Tindall 2009); Sorvino after acting in a Lifetime television miniseries about human trafficking (UNODC 2010); and Martin after meeting “three little girls that were living on the streets [in Calcutta], maybe days away from being sold into prostitution, trembling beneath plastic bags” (Martin 2006, 7).

Because of their general lack of expertise, many celebrities working on human trafficking tend to proffer stereotypes, provide generalizations, and rely on emotional pleas. Speaking at the

¹⁷ Jolie donated \$100,000 to UNHCR to assist Syrian refugees on World Refugee Day. (Look to the Stars 2013).

UN, Judd, for example, made several emotional pleas, even while acknowledging, though quickly dismissing, the potential for skepticism about her expertise:

I would understand if you might be wondering right now, How dare she imagine she has something to contribute to the urgent, charged debate about the scourge of modern slavery, of human trafficking? Actually, I believe wholeheartedly the real question is, How dare I not? How dare I not stand before you with all the earnestness at my command . . . I have made one keening vow: I will never forget you, and I will tell your stories (Judd 2008).

Martin’s Congressional testimony to Congress also relied on superficial emotional appeals: “if we have a soul, we have to feel the pain but sometimes we also feel the hopelessness. But in face of hopelessness [sic] action can bring hope” (Martin 2006, 8). He also provided grossly oversimplified “solutions” to the problem, essentially parroting back to Congress a condensed version of Congress’ own plan set forth in the Trafficking Victim Protection Act. His advice to Congress on how to end human trafficking:

First of all, we must prevent exploitation by educating children and families about the dangers of human trafficking. Step two, we must protect the victims by providing resources to reintegrate and rehabilitate. And number three, we must prosecute and punish those who make a living out of this illegal activity from traffickers to consumers (Martin 2006, 8).

Other celebrities make wild errors in judgment about the tastefulness and validity of their contributions to ending human trafficking: Moore with her jewelry line—gold and diamond-encrusted handcuff charm necklaces intended to depict both the bonds of love and the plight of human trafficking victims trapped in slavery (World Entertainment News Network 2011); Kutcher’s “Real Men Don’t Buy Sex” PSAs (Delahaye 2011); and Pinkett Smith with the launch of her human trafficking campaign called “Don’t Sell Bodies,” the centerpiece of which involved a video of the scantily clad celebrity singing about human trafficking (Nada 2012).

Reviewing celebrity contributions to the fight against human trafficking, the data strongly suggests that although a great deal of money and attention is directed to their “awareness raising” efforts, celebrity engagement is not advancing the work of eradicating human trafficking. Unless celebrities have actual expertise to lend to the cause, those who want to work on the problem should use the money won through their fame to hire bona fide experts, not glorified publicists, to advise them about how or whether to engage with this issue. And they should tread very carefully when pronouncing appropriate courses of action, levels of involvement, solutions, and funding.

Conclusion

There are no easy solutions to human trafficking. Experts often recommend structural changes to address underlying causes, which can be expensive and politically challenging approaches (Haynes 2009). Celebrities, on the other hand, can be more willing to abridge experts’ detailed, ambitious, and costly proposals which is enticing to NGO’s, policy makers and the public, all of whom are interested in “doing something,” especially if the “something” proposed is neither too complicated nor expensive.

The drastic increase in celebrity involvement in the cause to address human trafficking is troubling, as many appear to receive considerable funding, time and attention from the government, the public and the United Nations, without having much to contribute to addressing the problem. Many reduce the complexity of both the problem and its potential solutions to sound bites, leading the consumer/public to believe that “doing something”—anything at all—is better than doing nothing when the opposite may well be true. Ill-conceived, uninformed advocacy can be very harmful both to the cause of ending human trafficking and to the people suffering from it.

Too many celebrities speak in sound bites, which leads to oversimplification of the issues. As a result, the short and pithy explanation of the problem becomes *the* explanation of the problem, and the simple and sexy solution becomes *the* solution. When it comes to human trafficking, celebrities play to their audience, providing incomplete information and proposing untested, oversimplified solutions at the expense of the very cause they purport to endorse.

In the advertising context, where lives and health typically are not on the line, scholars have determined that celebrity product endorsement can sometimes be less effective than expert product endorsement. When the product is highly complex and the consumer associates “risk” with the product, the utility of celebrity endorsement wanes (Biswas, Biswas and Daas 2006). The same is should be true for human rights issues: the more complicated the problem, and the more risk associated with the implementation of partial or ill-founded solutions, the less useful celebrity activism is. Celebrities should not be permitted to oversimplify complex human rights issues or suggest underdeveloped, high-risk solutions to ameliorate them, when in the process real risk accrues to the victims.

While some blame celebrities for the frequency with which their oversimplified narratives and proposed solutions come before law and policymakers (Hyde 2009), law and policymakers must also accept blame for granting ill-informed celebrities such clout. Equally, the public must be assigned blame, for we have allowed ourselves to be so easily swayed by celebrity and to ask so little of those we elevate to expert/celebrity status. We have placed celebrities not only at the top of the entertainment hierarchy, but atop social, cultural, economic, political, and human rights policy hierarchies.

In inviting celebrity experts to testify, policy and law makers themselves become content to consume and peddle the reductive version of the problem. This, after all, is far less time consuming, cheaper and less likely to alienate voters than grappling with complex, intractable, unsexy solutions against partisan opposition (Haynes 2007; Haynes 2009). To dip their toes into the proverbial pool without actually jumping in, policy and lawmakers now regularly invite “culturemakers” (Kony 2012 2012) to provide them with sexy, reductive human trafficking narratives. This permits them to avoid grappling with the complexity of the issue and its potential solutions, even while rubbing elbows with celebrities and increasing their own visibility on the issues now deemed “important” by their constituents who have themselves been seduced by the allure of the celebrity sound bite.

That celebrities can propose human trafficking solutions with no accountability for their recommendations is problematic (Sala-i-Martin 2006). Before a celebrity, even one with the requisite intelligence and expertise, is invited to weigh in on human trafficking, the following criteria, at minimum, should be met: 1) the celebrity should engage in the effort entirely at her own expense; 2) she should refrain from selling any other agenda in conjunction with that work;

3) she should only start a foundation for which she seeks external funding if she contributes a significant portion of her own wealth to it.

Some celebrities may study enough or genuinely gain sufficient expertise to intelligently participate in efforts to devise a response to a human trafficking. Some may give portions of their considerable wealth to support their causes, cover their own travel costs and expenses, and put a great deal of thought into which causes to join and which to eschew. But others seem to commingle human trafficking activism with their personal agendas. The practice of using one’s notoriety to bring intelligent attention to human trafficking can be a good thing and certainly celebrities, as people too, of course have the right become activists. However, with their notoriety comes additional responsibility—to know their topic, and to make recommendations only after becoming fully informed on the issues, ideally by working with uninterested parties, and to not make suggestions without fully understanding how they might negatively impact the people and causes they aim to assist. Celebrities who still wish to work on the issue should engage responsible, intelligent, expert advisors who themselves do not have a financial stake in the outcome. This means celebrities should be independently advised, and not by an IO or NGO with a financial stake in the matter or an advisor who acts as more of a publicist than a substantive expert.

Non-expert celebrities need to either back away from engaging in policy recommendations altogether, even when prompted by NGOs, IOs, and lawmakers to do so, or fully inform their audiences about the risks and consequences to their proposals and even the limitations to their “awareness raising”. This, of course, would require celebrities to put much more time, money, thought, and effort into understanding the possible drawbacks and unintended consequences of their recommendations.

Efforts to address human trafficking must be carefully thought out, selfless, reflective, smart, and just. It requires a bottom-up approach, and should be led and executed by as many victim–constituents as possible, ensuring that the agency of the persons impacted is solicited and respected, which in turn ensures the sustainability of the measures undertaken (Haynes, Cahn and Aolain 2013). Doing so also somewhat mitigates the negative impact of the “helicopter involvement” of some celebrities who fly in to view the chanel but quickly lose interest thereafter.¹⁸ This also requires a person nuanced and intelligent enough to ensure that soliciting the views of those impacted does not result in a barrage of “trauma tourism,” in which victims are harassed by those wishing to see or consult with or interview them time and again.

The bottom line is that for multiple reasons, celebrities have little incentive to learn about or tell complex and nuanced stories about a complex and nuanced problem like human trafficking. Unlike elected and appointed officials, they are not accountable for their points of view, so law and policymakers must stop putting celebrities in this position, and abdicating their legislative roles in the process. Although there may be outliers who effectively straddle both worlds—as celebrity *and* human rights policy expert—in general, celebrities should never be in the position of recommending policy and programming decisions, at least not without extremely knowledgeable and financially unbiased advisors guiding their hands, their purses, and their recommendations.

¹⁸ The phrase “helicopter involvement” was much used by this authors local colleagues in Bosnia and Herzegovina who were reluctant to become involved with an international or her project until or unless they saw that the individual was committed for the long term.

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