

# **The X-factor of charity: A critical analysis of celebrities' involvement in the 2010 Flemish and Dutch Haiti relief shows**

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Over the last decades, media and celebrities have become major supporters of (inter)national philanthropic endeavours. On numerous occasions, they demonstrate compassion towards the suffering, draw our attention to social issues, and lead fundraising campaigns for good causes. Media's and celebrities' (conspicuous) engagement is part of the current 'culture of compassion' (Moore, 2008: 6) or even 'compassion inflation' (West, 2004: 20), which also comprises the ribbon craze, numerous empathy wristbands, cause-related marketing, the Make Poverty History-campaign, celebrity foundations, and benefit dinners or concerts. Still, many humanitarian crises and disasters are neglected or downplayed by the (news) media as their news value is mainly determined by the factors of proximity and impact. If selected by the media, distant suffering is mostly briefly represented in a simplified or stereotypical way with a dominant focus on the sensational and the negative, articulating the socio-cultural binary of 'Self' and 'Other' (Joye, 2010). Each year, only a few instances of distant suffering attain massive media attention following their magnitude, the presence of Westerners among the victims, and/or the combination of unexpectedness and spectacular footage. Such disaster events can dominate the (global) media for a certain period of time and may culminate in the organization of a mediatized fundraising event. Well-known examples include telethons conducted around different parts of the world in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami in Southeast Asia, the 2005 Hurricane Katrina that hit the area of New Orleans, and more recently the 2010 Haitian earthquake.

Although celebrities are increasingly playing a key role in these mediated charity shows as presenters, performers and/or cheque-writers, the consequences of their involvement are rarely debated. Even though celebrity involvement in charity shows appears to be very central and inherent to the format, it concurrently tends to overshadow the cause or the victims and it eventually may turn compassion into charitainment, i.e., an (overly) entertaining and light version of charity. Therefore, it is necessary to systematically analyse the possible ways in which celebrities participate in telethons and what implications this involvement has for the nature of these events and their relationship with the audience.

This article addresses such questions by critically analysing two television charity shows that were broadcast in the Netherlands and in Flanders<sup>1</sup> after the 2010 Haitian earthquake. We first review the literature on telethons and charity events, including some of the main criticisms uttered, after which we examine the role of celebrities—charity's X-factor—in these events. A comparative analysis of the two shows under study provides a comprehensive overview of the varying roles that celebrities can play in charity media events and further offers insights into the discursive and ideological consequences of their involvement. In the light of this discussion, we conclude with a critical assessment of the celebrity-endorsed discourse of charitainment and its possible articulations.

## **Telethons and charity media events**

The telethon is an established but hybrid genre that refers to a large array of mediated charity events. These events include: (bi)annual television shows (e.g. BBC's Comic Relief) (Devereux, 1996), rallies on radio stations (e.g. Serious Request) (Claessens et al., 2010), televised mega rock concerts (e.g. Live Aid) (Westley, 1991), and charity shows following

(natural) disasters (e.g. Hurricane Katrina) (Kish, 2009). What all these events have in common is the fact that they raise money donated by individuals, organizations, businesses and/or governments for one or more good causes before, during or following a mediated event. As Tester (2001: 116) explains, a televised charity event 'is not a passing affair, but, instead, lasts a long time and requires commitment and dedication' on the part of producers, presenters and viewing audiences. Therefore, the charity show is perhaps better understood as the starting point or finale of a long-running fundraising and media campaign. In consequence, we argue that mediated charity shows are more usefully understood as a media event (Dayan and Katz, 1992) rather than as a television genre, as has been suggested by Devereux (1996). Both media events and mediated charity shows are pre-planned and broadcast live. Moreover, they involve the suspension or interruption of normal television programming and social routine (Dayan and Katz, 1992; Devereux, 1996). They are special events that ask for our attention and it is difficult not to know about them, as different and otherwise competing media companies often cooperate in producing and broadcasting the event. The mediated charity event 'Hope for Haiti Now' offers an example of this pax media, being broadcast live by MTV, CNN, Fox, ABC and a long list of American and other broadcasters worldwide. Through its simultaneous broadcasting, it has the potential to create, at least for a moment, a global community (Dayan and Katz, 1992) or a cosmopolitan audience.<sup>2</sup>

An important difference between mediated charity events and media events as conceptualized by Dayan and Katz (1992) is that the former do not always take place outside broadcasting organizations (except for the live interventions from the field), but, by contrast, can be initiated and performed by broadcasters. Nonetheless, by restricting their definition of media events to historic turning points such as the Kennedy funeral or a royal marriage, Dayan and Katz unnecessarily limit the validity of the concept of media events. According to Hepp and Couldry (2009) we should also include 'popular media events' (e.g. Big Brother). This becomes plausible if we reject Dayan and Katz' conception of media events as forces of social integration (through their restricted notion of rituals), but extend it to 'forms of communication that articulate the power-related, hegemonic imagination of the media as the center of present societies, as the expression of the important incidents within that society' (Hepp and Couldry, 2009: 5). Mediated charity events are thus media events that focus through a particular lens on compassion and philanthropy, reaching out to a large-scale audience through (possibly different) media (products).

### **Criticism on charity media events**

Charity media events are a focus of praise and trenchant criticism by academic and other concerned commentators. They are praised for raising public awareness of social problems and increasing fundraising, and thus for stirring atomized individuals into moral action (Tester, 2001). They are further appreciated for creating, albeit if only for a short period of time, a sense of local and even global community (Dayan and Katz, 1992). In other words, charity media events are lauded for demonstrating that 'however great the suffering and misery, 'something can be done'' (Tester, 2001: 118) by individuals in local contexts to alleviate the suffering of distant others (Devereux, 1996).

Conversely, the charity media event has been criticized for being apolitical and turning philanthropy into charitainment. According to critics, these Hollywood style spectacles depoliticize philanthropy by suggesting that philanthropy is about cyclic acts of consumption (buying products) and leisure (going to music concerts) (Tester, 2001), and about 'pictures

that move us, not arguments that persuade us' (Chouliaraki, 2008: 843). By reducing charity to individualized acts of consumption, such events separate social problems from their spatial dimension and structural causes. Moreover, they minimize individual and governmental responsibilities for resolving the broader political, social and cultural inequalities associated with globalization (Devereux, 1996; Tester, 2001; Nickel and Eikenberry, 2009). Studies by Brown and Minty (2008) and Grønbjerg (1993) further point to the uncertain impact of charity shows on individual citizens' moral consciousness. Especially the marketization of philanthropy has depoliticized its project and reduced it to a matter of consumption (Nickel and Eikenberry, 2009). This criticism extends to the different television networks that produce charity media events because they clearly compete to present and hence profit from producing such shows (Devereux, 1996). Viewed from this perspective, charity media events are hegemonic projects that work to support rather than to question the capitalist system by asking audiences to consume for good causes and suggesting that (exploitative) multinationals and corporate businesses are actually contributing to the eradication of inequality and poverty by giving money and help. Devereux (1996: 65) argues that '[n]o reference is made to poor pay, working conditions or tax avoidance for example, all of which either directly or indirectly can be responsible for inequality and poverty.' In most cases, charity media events thus simply fail to impact politics (van Zoonen, 2005) while suggesting that capitalism is not troublesome, but even part of the answer.

Charity shows have not only been criticized for subordinating the moral cause of suffering to the bank cheque, but also to entertainment (Chouliaraki, 2006). Negative appraisals of charity events concentrate on the spectacular nature and their trivializing effects. 'Live Aid', for instance, 'turned morality into a leisure time entertainment' (Tester, 2001: 117). Distress is packaged in amusing formats that motivate the audiences to give. Charity is turned into charitainment, compassion into a spectacle, thus reducing reality to a mediated abstraction: 'if an event originates in a particular location, that location is turned into a Hollywood set' (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 17). Indeed, strict production rules and a detailed script are followed during these events. Some of the key characters in that script who we have not discussed yet are, obviously, celebrities.

### **Starring celebrities: charity's X-factor**

The style of praise and criticism on charity media events is similarly levelled at the individual celebrities who either present or perform during charity media events. For them, charity events are only one aspect of a general inclination to social involvement. As Littler (2008: 237) puts it: '[o]ffering support for global charities has become practically part of the contemporary celebrity job description and a hallmark of the established star.' The combination of mediated charity events and celebrities appears to be a very satisfying and successful one as philanthropy has become part of the ontology of the modern-day celebrity, while the celebrity has become an indispensable component of the charity business. In our contemporary mediatized cultures, the struggle of the third sector for media attention has intensified, resulting in an increased professionalization of their communication strategies and use of marketing techniques, with celebrities being an important element of this overall change (Cottle and Nolan, 2007; Littler, 2008). On the one hand, celebrities are believed to increase the visibility of the campaign, foster media attention for the organizations, and also to advance the public's generosity, commitment and engagement (Meyer and Gamson, 1995). On the other hand, the involvement of celebrities can have potential drawbacks. The first is what Littler (2008: 244) calls the 'double standard' of celebrity charity: while being constructed as altruistic behaviour, at the same time it is used as a promotional tool to enhance

the celebrity's career. In her view, celebrity charity is both selfless and selfish. Second, it can distort the hierarchy of social issues and as such influence policy priorities and funding. Causes that lack celebrity support, for instance, may suffer reduced perceived importance, whereas others are catapulted to the top (Huddart, 2005). Third, celebrity engagement in charity shows and philanthropic campaigns can result in an oversimplification of political and developmental issues (Dieter and Kumar, 2008). As Nederveen Pieterse (2009: 221) puts it: '[b]y following Bob Geldof and Bono, Angelina Jolie and Madonna as tour guides to world problems, media offer comic book versions of world problems and relief and adopt tabloid views of globalization.'

Chouliaraki (2011) identifies such tendencies as being part of a new style of celebrity humanitarianism that is enrolled in the current transition from a politics of pity to a politics of irony. The latter is a market-driven response to pity and is essentially self-oriented. This implies new and subtler forms of dehumanization of the distant other as the spectator's experience of the distant suffering is increasingly articulated through his/her own emotional register or through his/her favourite celebrity's testimony. Celebrity advocacy or humanitarianism is predominantly focused on the personal emotions and/or confessions of the celebrity than it is on the cause and the distant other, henceforth resulting in what Chouliaraki defines as hypercelebritization. This representational shift within the field of philanthropy involves a different foregrounding of the other and a central focus on the emotional celebrity. Referring to celebrities' paradoxical nature as being both ordinary and extraordinary (Dyer, 2007), the argument could be raised that through the focus on emotions, the ordinary or everyday aspect of the celebrity is addressed while the extraordinary aspect is used to attract the audience's attention.

Although there is a growing body of literature on how to interpret celebrity engagement with the philanthropic sector, there is a lack of discussion about the specific nature of the involvement and roles played by celebrities in mediated charity shows. As demonstrated above, the debate is generally narrowed down to broad categories of criticism and/or appraisal of celebrity involvement. Hence, it is to a detailed and case-based discussion of these issues that we now turn.

## **Methodology and data**

Our analysis of the involvement of celebrities in charity media events draws on a case study of the Dutch and Flemish fundraising shows in the aftermath of the 2010 Haitian earthquake. On January 12, 2010 one of the poorest countries in the world was struck by an earthquake of catastrophic magnitude. Initial reports suggested a death toll of more than 250 000, with around 1.5 million homeless. The high toll of human suffering and the widespread devastation rapidly resulted in an international wave of charity and relief efforts, including charity media events. The Haitian earthquake is an intriguing case to examine celebrity involvement in charity events as Balaji (2011) points to the media's dominant focus on the spectacle of donating to Haiti and its status as a celebrity cause. According to Balaji (2011: 50), the latter is best illustrated by the fact that 'former American presidents and other prominent figures appeared in numerous public service announcements urging Americans to donate to the rebuilding efforts.' In addition, we refer to the wave of celebrity-supported mediated charity shows being organized around the world. For instance, the benefit concert 'Hope for Haiti Now', with figureheads actor George Clooney and Haitian musician Wyclef Jean, was a true global media event through its worldwide broadcasting and as such took a leading role for other (inter)national charity events.

In this article, we focus on two telethons produced and broadcast in the Netherlands ('Nederland Helpt Haïti'—The Netherlands Help Haiti) and Flanders ('Help Haïti') on Thursday 21 January 2010, nine days after the disaster. The two television shows lasted for about one and a half hour and attracted estimated audiences of respectively 3 433 000 (share of 49.4%) and 1 430 198 (share of 56%). The Dutch telethon, 'Nederland helpt Haïti', followed a radio charity event ('Radio 555') and closed the fundraising campaign 'Actie 555' that in total has raised 83 million euro. The Flemish telethon on the other hand launched the 'Haïti Lavi 12-12' fundraising campaign and was followed by a radio event ('Radio 1212') the following day. The Flemish campaign raised around 23 million euro.

We have included both television shows in our analysis as they are characterized by different formats and designs which enable us to attain a more comprehensive overview of the possible roles of celebrities in the format of a charity media event. Next to their different role within a broader philanthropic campaign, the Dutch television show mainly focused on entertainment, the presenters being an actor/television presenter (Beau van Erven Dorens), a host of a late night talk show (Jeroen Pauw), and a presenter of television shows (Linda de Mol). In contrast, the Flemish broadcasters explicitly promoted a more information-oriented program, the show being presented by two respected news anchors: Martine Tanghe from the public channel één (VRT) and Stef Wauters from the commercial channel VTM (VMMa). The different objectives were also reflected by the production design of both shows as the Dutch scenery was colourful and featured some typical show business elements whereas the Flemish set-up was very sober in terms of colour and lightning. These differences notwithstanding, both events mixed information and entertainment and were a joint production of public and commercial channels supported by a unique consortium of NGOs. Serious talks with ministers, experts or aid suppliers and live interventions from Haiti were alternated with musical performances and entertaining reports on fundraising activities by celebrities (cf. *infra*). In both countries, public and commercial channels worked in conjunction with some major NGOs such as Oxfam, Unicef and the Red Cross. The perceived exceptional nature of this cooperation was often referred to during both of these shows as a means to underline their exclusive nature (cf. *infra*). On a more abstract level, we can further refer to some contextual similarities. The Dutch and Flemish media are both exponents of what Hallin and Mancini (2004) have labelled to be the 'Democratic Corporatist Model'. Both media systems are historically interwoven due to their shared language. Our case studies thus provide enough common ground for a comparative analysis.

On a methodological level, we follow Hepp and Couldry (2009) in their suggestion to analyze media events as a (social) construction rather than focusing on their integrative role as media rituals (cf. *supra*). In such a perspective, media events are expressions of the power-related and hegemonic position of the media. Chouliaraki (2010: 104) further refers to media texts or mediated representations as symbolic power that 'coexists with and reproduces, but may also change, dominant relationships of power (economic, political, and cultural).' Therefore, a critical approach to both charity media events under study should move these processes of construction into the foreground of the analysis. In this article we apply a critically informed qualitative content analysis (see Fields, 1988; Hijmans, 1996) to investigate the possible roles that celebrities are ascribed to in charity media events, the implications of celebrities' involvement for the nature of these events, and their relationship with the audience. Acknowledging the need for closer empirical engagement with and a basic understanding of celebrities' roles in charity media events (cf. *supra*), we have opted for an inductive or 'conventional' qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). More specifically, we followed Fields' (1988) methodology for the study of television news and, where necessary,

adapted it to media charity events. Fields discerned eight stages: unitizing content; transcription; developing and applying categories; verbal analysis; vocal and expressive analysis; scene composition analysis; describing interplay of components; and finally explanation. The basic unit of our analysis was a program item, for instance a live intervention from a journalist in Haiti, a song performed in the studio, or an interview with an expert, politician or celebrity. Both the Dutch and the Flemish television show were transcribed in detail. Although the textual level was our main empirical focus, we also paid close attention to non-verbal behaviour and production values (e.g. the set-up, the scenery, etc.). Subsequently, two researchers coded in vivo the broadcasts, focusing on those program units in which celebrities were speaking, performing, being mentioned or shown. After this initial coding stage, the data were compared and integrated into one dataset. For those few instances where the coders had a different interpretation, the program unit was watched again and further discussed. Next, we analysed the dataset in several cycles, abstracting the data into four distinct categories of celebrity involvement in the Dutch and Flemish charity media events. Finally, these roles were framed in their wider political, economic, social and cultural context which enabled us to critically assess them.

## **Results and discussion**

While the literature provides us with some general clues regarding the role(s) that celebrities can play in a charity media event, four key categories about celebrity involvement emerged from our qualitative content analysis of the Dutch and Flemish ‘Help Haiti’ shows. First, celebrities grant the charity media event an aura of exclusivity and glamorous momentum. Second, they increase the relevance of distant suffering for local audiences. Third, they act as a principal motivator for the audience. Finally, celebrities contribute to the commodification of charity.

### 1) Exclusivity-based role

A first role refers to the sense of glamour and exclusiveness that celebrities add to the charity event, both by appearing in person and often by performing in a unique way. Looking at the data, exemplary of this category were the various musical interludes which basically served as both shows’ structural anchor points. The Dutch show featured five songs and the Flemish four. These musical performances by local celebrities were consistently announced by the presenters as ‘exclusive song duets’ or ‘never before seen performances’. Statements that highlighted the unique cooperation (‘unseen and remarkable pairs’, ‘surprising combinations’) and its exceptional nature (‘just for this one time’, ‘normally unthinkable’) were abundantly expressed in both shows.

An additional finding that underwrites the element of glamour was the overall prominent presence of (elite) celebrities. This was especially the case for the Dutch show which featured Hollywood actress Carice Van Houten, prime minister Jan Peter Balkenende, internationally known football managers as Guus Hiddink and Ronald Koeman, and members of the Royal Family alongside popular national artists such as singer Marco Borsato and comedian André Van Duin. They were either performing on stage, participating in a telephone panel or figuring in a testimonial (cf. *infra*). Elite celebrities in the Flemish show included the prime minister Yves Leterme and popular artists such as Toots Thielemans, Helmut Lotti and Daan. Next to the musical acts and studio interviews, celebrities in the Flemish charity event were mainly shown in reports on fundraising activities and, remarkably, as ‘ordinary’ members of

the studio audience (cf. *supra* and celebrities' paradoxical nature as being both ordinary and extraordinary).

In general, the countless references in both shows to the celebrities' status as 'top artists' or as belonging to the upper classes of society not only grant the show an aura of exclusivity and momentum, but also establishes the status of the charity show as a media event and underwrites the exceptional nature of the disaster as well as of the relief response. The commitment of celebrities and elite people like members of the Royal Family and the prime minister signals to the audience that the Haitian cause is relevant and worthy of their attention and response. However, celebrity-endorsed and celebrity-inspired compassion is perhaps a scarce asset and should be applied in a limited number of situations. According to the somewhat nebulous and still understudied notion of compassion fatigue, an overexposure of audiences to (mediated images of) human suffering in media philanthropy events could result in a 'diminishing capacity to mobilize sentiments, sympathy and humanitarian forms of response' (Cottle, 2009: 348). The overexposure of audiences to celebrity involvement in 'exclusive' charity media events could then lead to diminished public concern over certain causes by creating compassion fatigue and/or, more accurately, celebrity charity fatigue. This first role of celebrities and its impact are hence potentially limited in time and effect.

## 2) Relevance-based role

A second role that we were able to abstract from the data deals with the significance of distant suffering for local audiences. Both charity events localized the relevance of the otherwise distant earthquake through common practices of domestication (see Gurevitch et al., 1991). We can refer to, among others, studio interviews with compatriots working for NGOs in Haiti, live interventions of correspondents in the capital Port-au-Prince, intercutting shots of celebrities in the studio audience, several items on Belgian and Dutch relief workers, testimonials by local celebrities, and more human-interest driven coverage of concrete cases such as adopted Haitian children living in Belgium and local orphanages. By referring to children and also by portraying a large number of close-ups of children's faces during the overtly tender-hearted musical performances, the emotional appeal of the charity shows was intensified. This personally invites the spectator to take on the moral position of 'the philanthropist who cares for and, potentially, acts to relieve distant misfortune' (Chouliaraki, 2006: 146), for instance by donating money or organizing an fundraising event.

Returning to our principal object of study, the celebrities' involvement injects the distant suffering of others with a substantial amount of local relevance that is believed to be essential in the process of raising compassion and inciting relief response (Tester, 2001; Höijer, 2004). In this respect, scholars such as Harcup and O'Neill (2001) have acknowledged celebrities' major news value. They are commonly used as a narrative focus in media reporting on foreign disasters in order to increase the relevance of the distant event and thus provide audiences with possibilities to identify with the plight of people in other countries. For the average Flemish or Dutch person, there was no direct sense of connection or a priori feelings of identification and compassion with people in Haiti. These feelings were hence constructed by the producers of the charity media events through their representation of the disaster and the participation of celebrities.

Such celebrity-endorsed relevance clearly plays at a more individual level as well. For the spectators of charity media events, the potential opportunity to interact on a personal level with a celebrity offers them some kind of personal satisfaction or reciprocity. We have

already mentioned the panel of Dutch celebrities who answered phone calls from viewers in person as a central element of this telethon. With regard to the Flemish show, several celebrities such as television cook Piet Huysentruyt, radio host Siska Schoeters and actress Veerle Baetens accepted donations from individual people in their (mediated) presence or assisted in a number of volunteer actions such as collecting money or baking cakes. While charity media events function by creating a sense of reciprocity, the relationship between the celebrity and the viewing audience is hierarchical rather than equal. Celebrities are thus attributed a central role vis-à-vis the audience and other volunteers. The Dutch television show provides a remarkable illustration of this hierarchical relationship. The following extract was taken from an interview between one of the anchors, Beau van Erven Dorens (ED), and Bert Van Marwijk (VM), coach of the national soccer team, who was answering a phone call from a donator at the time:

ED [advancing towards VM]: ‘Let’s go to our national coach, Mister Van Marwijk... Hang up. Throw him out of the selection!’  
[VM keeps on listening and responding to the caller]  
ED [bending over VM and slightly irritated]: ‘Yes...’  
ED [seemingly addressing the donator]: ‘Bert Van Marwijk, thé real one, that is who you are talking to.’  
[VM quickly mumbles ‘thank you and good night madam’ and removes his headset]  
ED: ‘Mister Van Marwijk, good evening and what a honour of having you here. What is the most beautiful story that you have received?’

This was not a stand-alone case as it occurred several times during the show that the celebrity was urged by the anchor to hang up as if postponing the proposed short interview would seriously disrupt the proper running order and outcomes of the show. In addition and as illustrated by the extract, these brief interviews were dominantly centred around the most sensational or odd actions that the callers had organized. Celebrities were consistently inquired on these extraordinary or most spectacular fundraising events by ordinary people.

### 3) Motivational role

Third, we examined the role of celebrities in establishing a relationship with the audience. According to our data, this occurs on different levels. First of all, producers of the Flemish show seated many celebrities in the audience, as if they were one of us, ordinary people—voiceless, but nonetheless recognizable and frequently portrayed in the intercutting shots of the public. This again hints at celebrities’ paradoxical nature as being both ordinary and extraordinary. In this particular case, the element of the ordinary expresses a strong sense of unity among citizens and celebrities. Second, and dwelling on the extraordinary dimension of celebrities, the Dutch and Flemish charity shows present several examples of celebrity activism and celebrity-inspired philanthropy. In the Flemish show, television personality Tom Waes for instance ran several kilometres to collect money along the way and was quickly joined in his effort by a large group of people. Other celebrities were shown apparently acting unselfishly to alleviate the suffering of distant others not only by handing over cheques, but also by performing acts such as cooking, singing on request, being present at a party, and selling products and services featuring the logo and/or name of the relief campaign. Such ‘merchandising’ enables people to publicly express themselves as participating in the charity event, but is also related to a possible fourth role of celebrities: the commodification of charity (cf. infra). A third way of establishing a relationship with the audience are

testimonials. Dutch celebrities such as Paul van Vliet, Giel Beelen and Nicolette van Dam figured in the following direct look-to-camera testimonial:

Intro and accompanying soundtrack [footage of mass graves, grieving relatives and close-ups of children; a banner stating 'Call now 0800-1112 (free of charge)'; piano music]

Celebrity 1 (male): 'I am asking you to let your heart speak and to donate whatever you can so that the children of Haiti can receive the safety, protection and caring that they need.'

Celebrity 2 (female): 'Your help, my help, our help is urgently needed.'

Celebrity 3 (male): 'So, call 0800-1112.'

Celebrity 4 (male): 'Even when you can help only very little, call 0800-1112.'

Celebrity 5 (female): 'I am asking everyone to look beyond your own world and call.'

Celebrity 6 (male): '0800-1112.'

Celebrity 7 (male): 'We can help these people. We must help these people.'

Celebrity 8 (female): 'They need your help. So, call 0800-1112 and donate.'

Celebrity 1 again: 'I am asking you, call now 0800-1112.'

Outro [footage showing a young child being rescued by Western relief workers]

These repeatedly shown testimonials addressed the audience straightforwardly to donate money and are a strong case of what Scannell (2000) refers to as the 'for-anyone-as-someone' communicative structure of television. Their message and discourse is personal and individual ('I am asking you'), yet at the same time heard by millions.

Although often being condemned as conspicuous charity<sup>3</sup> (Littler, 2008; cf. supra), celebrities have the potential to act as a principal motivator for other people to either engage in charity activities and/or offer donations by setting a personal example, attracting public attention to their efforts and thus acting as a social role model. As demonstrated above, their philanthropic efforts may be expressed in different ways, such as publicly stepping up for the good cause, helping volunteers with a relief campaign and/or donating money. In most cases, celebrities act as a teaser or catalyst and their contributions ideally result in a copycat effect and/or a strong sense of solidarity. For fundraising purposes, celebrities are an essential tool in establishing a relationship with the audience.

#### 4) Commodification-based role

Finally, our data hint at a significant contribution of celebrities to the commodification of charity through merchandising and by reframing compassion into a competitive game of giving. The latter was especially true for the Flemish show which was predominantly constructed around a competition between the five provinces of Flanders. Each province was represented by an 'unusual and exclusive' pair of celebrities who engaged in an interprovincial race to collect the greatest amount of money in just one day. The celebrities regularly strengthened the element of contest with statements such as 'we go for the biggest amount of money' (singer Stijn Meuris, representing the province of Limburg) and 'we will win this, we will win this!' (celebrity cook Piet Huysentruyt, representing the province of West Flanders). After each report, the anchors provided the spectator with a ranking of the provinces that was also shown on screen. In contrast, the Dutch show stressed the idea of (national) unity, as demonstrated in its collective title: The Netherlands help Haiti. Another strong manifestation of these feelings of unity and communion was the presence of members of rival political parties sitting together on panels waiting for telephone calls and donations

from viewers. For example, Geert Wilders, a controversial politician known for his extreme right-wing position on issues of integration, migration and religion, sitting right next to Wouter Bos and Mark Rutte, his main political rivals at the time. Several references to the joint production of the show also supported this idea of unity. Furthermore, a testimonial by television personality Henkjan Smits stressed that ‘even when you can help only very little, call us [to donate].’ In this way, every Dutch citizen, from the very poor to the very rich, was addressed to give money. National unity is thus affected and celebrated at various stages, down to the level of the individual. In the Flemish show, unity and communal solidarity were articulated through the exceptional cooperation of celebrities and otherwise competing broadcasters as well as through the representation of the celebrity as ‘ordinary’ member of the audience (cf. supra).

Regarding the process of commodification, we can refer to the recurrent announcement of the running total of donations that have been received. This implicitly also stimulates competition as it is considered to be a failure when less money is raised than in previous charity shows (Tester, 2001). Visually underwriting this philanthropic rat race were the high paced edited carrousel of brief interviews with donators who were often just allowed a few words to describe their fundraising initiative before kindly being suggested to skip to the amount of money they have raised. Other elements that point to the commodification of charity are the eye-catching banner with an account number that was displayed during all performances and the charity song that was recorded for this special occasion. Two Flemish singers, Natalia and Gabriel Rios, covered ‘Hallelujah’ by Leonard Cohen—a song that has no substantive link with the disaster—and all profits were later donated to the relief campaign. Relating this process of commodification to the prominent goal of the shows to ‘give Haitians a message of hope’ as one of the anchors stated, we can conclude that ‘hope’ was dominantly defined as being synonymous with the provision of ‘money’, echoing the idea stated above that capitalism appears to be (part of) the preferred answer to human suffering. Underlying and enforcing this was a strong sense of causality. In addressing the audience and emphasizing the importance of the media charity show, the anchors articulated a naturalized and causal relation between the disaster and the fundraising efforts. One example of this also referred to the role of celebrities in this process. To quote the Flemish anchor Martine Tanghe: ‘We need to raise as much money as possible to give Haiti a future again. That is why we called upon celebrities.’

## **Discussion**

Taking these four roles together, both charity media events articulate a dominant, yet not absolute, discourse of charity in which a disaster is represented as a short term problem that can be largely remedied by collecting money and supporting relief aid. This resonates a neoliberal discourse of which various articulations are to be found in both charity shows as relief aid was portrayed as ‘premised on an unequal world order, whereby the poor depend on the rich’ (Chouliaraki, 2006: 136), including celebrities. Taken one step further, the media charity shows under study are not so much about the distant suffering of others, they are about us. ‘We’ are portrayed as a true caring nation, as Good Samaritans and the beneficiary of our philanthropic pity becomes a homogeneous whole, to some extent even subordinate or interchangeable. This mediated disposition of ‘us’ as caring and benevolent persons was strengthened by directly addressing the spectator with statements such as ‘one phone call can give you the warm and nice feeling that you have done something for someone in distress and need’ (Linda De Mol) or when commenting on the frequently overloaded telephone lines: ‘This is how I identify the Netherlands: generous and full of compassion when disaster

strikes' (Linda De Mol). In the Flemish show, anchor Stef Wauters concluded an interview with a representative of the Belgian rescue team B-Fast by stating that 'we and all Belgians are very proud of the work done by you and your team [in Haiti]'. Addressing the 'self' as source of humanitarianism or morality while downplaying the distant other refers to Chouliaraki's politics of irony (cf. supra) as well as to the idea of international relief aid as a project of self-construction (see Mason (2011) for a similar account of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's response to the earthquake).

The focus on celebrities further strengthens this dominant neoliberal articulation of charity as their involvement or function to bring exposure to the disaster was limited in time and effort. Celebrities do not bring structural solutions or long term engagement to the table. In addition, although being initiated as blurring the boundaries between information and entertainment, both shows devoted minimal attention to the complexity of the disaster situation and its underlying structural and geopolitical causes. Both the Dutch and Flemish charity shows remained rather superficial in their analysis of the disaster. For instance, when criticisms of the Haitian government were raised, this was primarily to ensure audiences that any money they donated would be safeguarded by NGOs and not by local authorities. In other words, criticism was used to remove any scepticism of potential donors and not to elaborate on or to denounce the precarious political situation in Haiti. Broader political issues were largely ignored as the overall message of charity media events is, understandably, one of hope and positivity. Emotions are the dominant register in this representation of international relations, with feelings of pity being induced by sensational sound bites such as 'the world is coming to an end', 'a disaster of unprecedented size' as well as by spectacular footage of the disaster.<sup>4</sup> Amidst all images of devastation and misery, both charity shows under study also focus on positive stories from the disaster area such as a birth or a successful search and rescue operation, next to the celebrity-driven entertainment that offers the spectator some diversion.

It is important to stress here that we understand these well-intentioned practices to be an inherent part of the 'telethon' format and do not question their value as such, nor do we disregard the societal importance, usefulness and impact of fundraising campaigns. The balance is however lost. Such simplified representation of a complex issue obscures the fact that the earthquake was not only a natural event but could have equally been articulated as a human-made disaster, posing the hard question of responsibility and accountability of local authorities as well as of the international community. The repetitive use of visual and narrative stereotypes, including celebrities, in high-profile fundraising events arguably creates a flow of decontextualized and depoliticized interpretations of distant suffering. Such representations in news reporting as well as in prime-time entertainment shows ultimately and exclusively imply short term and ad hoc relief aid instead of long term, structural and/or political interventions. From a critical perspective, it favours non-committal altruism while failing to fully address spectators as socially engaged citizens. Such consistent 'naturalization and de-politicization of suffering lead the audience to believe that nothing can be done about this or other problems' (Pantti, 2009: 89), hence inducing compassion fatigue and dangerously raising the threshold for future telethons or relief aid campaigns.

## **Conclusion**

This article has offered a critically informed analysis of celebrity involvement in two charity media events following the 2010 Haitian earthquake. Applying a qualitative content analysis, we have studied these shows or telethons not as a genre, but as a media event. This allows to analyse them in their full complexity by extending the focus from the television product, or

the text, to the product in its wider social, cultural, economic and political context. Accordingly, it is possible to examine media events as ideological constructs and focus on their hegemonic function as they present a particular version of world problems, such as humanitarian crises, and favour certain solutions, such as relief help and philanthropy, while excluding others.

While the literature generally tends to reduce the involvement of celebrities in charity media events to their viewer drawing capability, our study demonstrates that it should be understood in a much broader sense. Four distinct roles emerged from the qualitative content analysis. First, celebrities grant charity appeals an aura of exclusiveness and glamour; second, they render distant suffering relevant to domestic audiences; third, they function as principal motivators; and finally, they contribute to the commodification of charity. These results partly echo previous criticisms on celebrity charity, for instance that celebrities move the attention away from the distant suffering to the local audiences, which rewrites the problematic issue into a story about 'us' versus 'them'. In addition, it has been shown how exactly celebrities' involvement adds to the transposition of compassion into a spectacle of charitainment and competition. Especially in the Flemish media charity show, competition was artificially stimulated through the interprovincial contest among celebrities to raise the highest amount of donations. By contrast, the Dutch show repeatedly stressed the unity of the Netherlands, but in subtle ways, this also proved to have the single purpose of raising more money. Furthermore, celebrities are also used to increase the reciprocity with and the personal satisfaction of the audience. Lay people are allowed to have contact with the otherwise unreachable celebrity and they are granted the reward of a personal conversation with a certain celebrity for their donation. For these purposes, both charity shows largely dwell on the extraordinary dimension of celebrities' nature. The ordinary dimension was only present in the Flemish charity show where celebrities were portrayed as 'normal' members of the audience, hence underwriting a sense of unity. Following this, it is fair to say that the celebrity is an important tool to establish a relationship with the audience. Still, there is a danger of what we have called 'celebrity charity fatigue', since there could be an overexposure to celebrities, reducing the exclusiveness of their involvement and the glamour they add to the cause. Future research on charity media events should look into these dynamics between the televised product, the celebrity and the spectator.

Overall, our study of both the Dutch and the Flemish shows demonstrates that celebrities are important actors in the articulation of a dominant discourse of charitainment. This discourse is focused on the mediated spectacle of giving: raising relief aid by dwelling on pity and an overtly positive goal of hope while largely ignoring the complexity of the disaster situation and its underlying structural and geopolitical causes. In doing so, entertainment, (sensational) emotions and short-term fundraising are central features of charity media events. Celebrities have proven to be a very valuable and vital asset in endorsing these features and henceforth (re)producing the discourse of charitainment.

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## Notes

1. Flanders, the Dutch-speaking northern part of Belgium, has a population of about 6 million people.
2. This assumption has been disputed as it tends to depict societies as 'being stable and marked by a shared set of values, [which] is highly doubtful when we consider contemporary fragmented 'late' or 'post'-modern societies' (Hepp and Couldry, 2009: 5).
3. A doubtful case in the Dutch show was for instance a brief interview with international celebrity and 'baby telepathist' Derek Ogilvie. He was quoted saying 'I am here to promote a show I'm doing' after which he elaborated on all ticket details and mentioned that 1000 seats would go to Haiti, which equals 35,000 euro out of the total box office.
4. Commenting on his work as foreign correspondent in Haiti for Dutch radio and television, journalist Hans Jaap Melissen (2010: 64) quotes from a mail he received from the producers of the telethon: '[t]he stories will be used to persuade people to donate. Henceforth, they can be emotionally appealing or slightly shocking'.