BIOETHICS AND CELEBRITY PHILANTHROPY

Ivica Kelam¹
Darija Rupčić Kelam²
Aleksandar Rac¿³

¹Faculty of Education/Center for Integrative Bioethics, University Josip Juraj Strossmayer in Osijek, Osijek, Croatia
²Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University Josip Juraj Strossmayer in Osijek, Osijek, Croatia
³Department of Public Health and Health Protection, University of Applied Health Studies Zagreb, Croatia

ABSTRACT

The advent of neoliberal capitalism at the beginning of the 1980s led to the rise and media promotion of celebrity philanthropy. Groundbreaking events in the media affirmed celebrity philanthropy, for example Bob Geldof’s organisation of the Live Aid concert in 1985 with the aim of collecting aid for the hungry in Africa. Geldof’s example was an inspiration for other celebrities such as the musician Bono Vox, the actress Angelina Jolie to engage in philanthropic activities. In the analysis of their philanthropic activities, on the one hand it is apparent that there is uncritical glorification of their activities, while at the same time, critics point out that their philanthropic activity primarily serves as a means to repair their public image and promote neoliberal capitalism. In this paper, we will investigate the phenomenon of celebrity philanthropy through an integrative-bioethical analysis of the activities of Bono Vox using the example of his product (RED), and show that celebrity philanthropy, despite the often unquestionably noble motives of celebrities, is not the answer to problems that burden society such as poverty, hunger, inequality and climate change. Moreover, in the case of the product (RED) campaign, it is apparent that it operates on a surface, visible media level, solely solving consequences and not questioning the causes of inequality, the spread of AIDS and poverty. In this way the product (RED) strengthens neoliberal capitalism and its harmful consequences.

Keywords: celebrity philanthropy, product (RED), Bono Vox, bioethics, neoliberal capitalism

INTRODUCTION

How much celebrity philanthropy has an impact on the opinion of ordinary people perhaps is best illustrated by the following example. Scholar Riina Yrjölä, in her work The Global Politics of Celebrity Humanitarianism, quotes Oxfam’s research on celebrity endorsement of charitable causes. According to Oxfam’s research, 78 percent of the 1,200 respondents felt that celebrity-endorsed campaigns ‘get the message to people who might not otherwise care’ and 63 percent declared that celebrities can ‘raise awareness of important issues’. According to the survey, today, not only do people appreciate celebrities’ actions, for causes seen as legitimate, but they also tend to

https://doi.org/10.5593/sgemsocialF2018/1.6
understand such celebrities as powerful actors in the global political agenda, alongside 'traditional politicians'. When asked who people thought could end global poverty, the top-ten list came out as follows: 1) Me 2) George Bush 3) Bob Geldof 4) Bono 5) Tony Blair 6) Gordon Brown 7) Nelson Mandela 8) Bill Gates 9) Pope Benedict XVI 10) Oprah Winfrey. The United Kingdom’s ex-prime minister Tony Blair came in at number five – behind Live8 and Make Poverty History ambassadors Bob Geldof and Bono – indicating a distinct change in the role of celebrities in contemporary political agenda setting. These research results indicate that certain celebrities, especially Bono and Geldof, have established a special position among UK citizens: they have become people’s representatives, truth-tellers and moral guides. The answers reflect this trust in their authenticity: Bono and Geldof are often described as genuine, passionate, sincere, truthful people who represent people’s collective voices against politicians [1]. This survey of public opinion once again confirmed that the public has a very positive attitude towards celebrity philanthropists led by Bob Gedof and Bono Vox. What is particularly astonishing and at the same time alarming is the fact that respondents really believe that celebrities like Bob Geldof and Bono Vox can eradicate global poverty. Unfortunately, as time went by, the great expectations held by the public of Geldof and Vox were not justified, and we can say that the critics were right when Geldof and Vox were recognised as global promoters of neoliberal capitalism and promoters of status quo in society. Bioethics is defined as the science of life, which emerged in response to the growing threat to the survival of life on planet Earth in the second half of the 20th century. But, through a systematic analysis of their philanthropic activities, we will see that, in spite of certain celebrities' noble rhetoric, the problems for which they offer solutions still remain unsolved. This is partly thanks to their merit, since their messages and efforts are mainly limited to treating symptoms (the distribution of drugs against AIDS or malaria) by encouraging conscientious consumerism (read product (RED) systematically ignoring the causes of 'disease', and the neoliberal capitalist system that systematically generates problems against which they are unsuccessfully fighting.

Ilan Kapoor, in the introduction to his book Celebrity Humanitarianism, shows how celebrity humanitarianism, far from being altruistic, is significantly contaminated and ideological: as in the above joke, it is most often self-serving, helping to promote institutional aggrandisement and the celebrity 'brand'; it advances consumerism and corporate capitalism, and rationalises the very global inequality it seeks to redress; it is fundamentally depoliticising, despite its pretensions to 'activism'; and it contributes to a 'postdemocratic' political landscape, which appears outwardly open and consensual, but is in fact managed by unaccountable elites [2]. In this paper we will put the biggest emphasis on the philanthropic action of Bono Vox through analysis of his campaign product (RED) which will show that the primary purpose of this campaign is to raise the brand value involved in it and polish the narcissistic image of Western consumers who, by buying product (RED), soothe their consciences, as they are convinced that they are helping to fight AIDS in Africa.

**CELEBRITY PHILANTHROPY**

According to the simplest definition, the term 'celebrity philanthropy' refers to celebrity-affiliated charitable and philanthropic activities. Celebrity philanthropy is a relatively new phenomenon. Although charity and fame are not a new phenomenon, it was only in
the 1990s that celebrities from sport and entertainment, mainly from the Western
hemisphere, became involved with a particular type of philanthropy. Celebrity
philanthropy in contemporary Western societies is not isolated to large one-off
monetary donations, by definition. It involves celebrities using their publicity, brand
credibility and personal wealth to promote not-for-profit organisations, which are
increasingly 'business-like' in form. In their book *Celebrity Philanthropy*, Jeffreys and
Allatson term celebrity philanthropy 'celanthropy' – the fusion of celebrity and cause as
a representation of what the organisation advocates [3]. Bono Vox best fits the
celanthropy definition. According to Kapoor, the integration of celebrity philanthropy
and branding has enabled the creation of a brand-identity (the 'humanitarian celebrity'),
with widespread and instant recognition that sells not just a product but also a lifestyle,
value and aspiration. Thus, just as Nike is associated not merely with shoes but
'transcendence', Benetton not just with clothing but 'multicultural diversity', and
Starbucks not just with coffee but 'community', so stars such as Jolie or Bono are
associated not just with entertainment but 'caring', 'compassion', or 'generosity' [2].
According to some scholars, the rise of celebrity philanthropy demonstrates a wider
shift in global governance in the neoliberal period, one 'that brings northern
governments, NGOs and global celebrities together'. Celebrity politics, other scholars
conclude, is part of a new 'expert-celebrity' axis, and function 'to convince electorates
that they are being well governed' [4]. This new mode of governance, in which
celebrities act as 'significant emotional proxies' [5], the caring face of the global
technocracy, has already become so ingrained that most people have forgotten to
question the fundamental legitimacy of the likes of Bono as a spokesperson for Africa
or anywhere else.

Indeed, when we look at media reports about Bono Vox, we see that the media often
uncritically celebrate him as a saint, so for example *TIME* magazine had Bono on its
cover page and posed the rhetorical question 'Can Bono save the world?' [6], and three
years later, he reappeared on the cover of *TIME* magazine, this time together with
Melinda and Bill Gates when he was declared Man of the Year [7]. On the other hand,
Bono Vox himself encourages the building of his media image, presenting himself as
the voice of those who cannot speak, when he says: 'I represent a lot of people [in
Africa] who have no voice at all ... I now represent them. They haven't asked me either.
It's cheeky but I hope they're glad I do, and in God's order of things, they are the most
important [1].' This is Bono's statement explaining why he was involved in the Jubilee
2000 campaign. From this statement by Bono, his messianic role in saving the voiceless
Africans, whom he so generously represents in front of rich consumers from developed
countries is apparent. After the Jubilee 2000 campaign ultimately resulted in failure,
Bono decided to change tactics and instead of seeking more help for the poor in Africa,
he turned to commercialising aid for the poor through his product RED campaign.

**PRODUCT (RED)**

The Product (RED) was established by Bono Vox and philanthropist Bobby Shriver.
The Product (RED) campaign was unveiled at the 2006 Davos World Economic Forum,
and after that, it launched across much of the developed world. The campaign involves
teaming up with corporations to sell (RED) products, with participating corporations
donating part of the profit to the privately run foundation – The Global Fund to Fight
AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Licensing deals have been made with many of the most prominent brands, including Apple, Bank of America, Gap, Hallmark, Starbucks, Nike, Motorola, Penguin, Microsoft, Emporio Armani, and Dell. (RED) products range from iPhones and credit cards to T-shirts and fashion wares. Gap T-shirts, for example, have such mottos as ‘INSPI(RED)’ and ‘ADMI(RED)’ emblazoned on them, while the Apple iPhone and Belvedere vodka are coloured red. According to Bono, 'Product RED piggybacks the excitement and energy of the commercial world to buy lifesaving AIDS drugs for Africans who cannot afford them' [8]. According to their own interpretation on the product (RED) website, (RED) sees itself as a ‘win–win’ campaign, with businesses making profits while doing ‘good’, consumers buying what they ‘need’ for a worthy cause, and the Global Fund receiving sustainable funding. The Product (RED) manifesto thus states: 'Every two minutes a teenager is infected with HIV. Yet it is preventable. AIDS is the leading cause of death among women worldwide. Yet it is treatable. Today 400 babies will be born with HIV. Same thing tomorrow. And the next day. AIDS no longer has to be a death sentence. One pill a day. For just 30 cents can stop mothers from passing on the virus to their babies. This is where You come in. As Consumers, we have tremendous power. What You choose to buy, or not to buy, can impact someone else’s life. Every time You shop (RED), share (RED), dance (RED), eat (RED), a partner makes a donation to the fight against AIDS thanks to Your choice. Never before have our collective voices or our collective choices been so important. There is an end to AIDS. It’s You [9].' The Product RED campaign attributes symbolic meaning to its registered trademark, (RED), stating that the parentheses represent 'embracing brothers and sisters dying of AIDS in Africa [9]'. At its initial launch especially, (RED) carried out a massive media campaign, including TV commercials, promotions on Facebook and YouTube, charity art auctions, magazine advertisements (notably in the prestigious medical journal, The Lancet), and a new song released by U2 and Elton John. Bono made full use of his global celebrity for marketing purposes, appearing on The Oprah Winfrey Show and others. He guest-edited an issue of The Independent, while garnering a host of celebrity endorsements for product (RED) from the likes of Oprah Winfrey, Bill Gates, Nelson Mandela, Kanye West, Julia Roberts, Penelope Cruz, and Scarlett Johansson. At the same time product (RED)’s corporate partners carried out their own advertising campaigns, with companies such as Gap reportedly spending $58 million on its product (RED) operations, $7.8 million of which went on marketing [2]. Between 2006 and 2018, product (RED) claims to have raised over $500 million for the Global Fund. According to product (RED), the Global Fund grants that product (RED) supports have impacted nearly 110 million people with prevention, treatment, counseling, HIV testing and care services [9]. It should be noted though that this dollar figure represents a little more than 1 percent of the Global Fund’s total income to date. Despite such a small share in the overall Global Fund budget, RED has created the impression that the Global Fund is funded to a greater extent thanks to private consumers. In addition, there have been accusations that product (RED) and its corporate partners have spent more on advertising than they have taken in from sales, although determining the veracity of such accusations is hard to prove given the noteworthy lack of transparency from all corporations involved about net sales, profits, and advertising budgets [2]. In its March 2007 issue, Advertising Age magazine reported that Red companies had collectively spent as much as $100 million in advertising and raised only $18 million. Officials of the campaign said then that the companies had spent $50 million on advertising and that the amount raised was $25
million [2]. From these few examples, it is apparent how much the campaign product (RED) represents a problem in bioethical discourse. Below we analyse this campaign and its conversion of philanthropy into another means of strengthening consumerism and neoliberal capitalism through the encouragement of narcissistic behaviour of product (RED) customers, building up, in theirs eyes, narcissistic self-images as saviours of distant Others.

EAT. DRINK. SHOP. LIVE (RED). SAVE LIVES

This sentence is on the front page of the website for product (RED) and at the same time perfectly defines the philosophy of this concept of helping others [9]. Riina Yrjölä quotes in her work the definition of product (RED) by Bono Vox, who, when launching product (RED) at the 2006 World Economic Forum in Davos, referred to the attendees as 'fat cats in the snow [or] I should say winners in the snow'. Bono reminded his listeners that the war against poverty was not going to be won with traditional philanthropy, but rather through commercial ventures. Philanthropy, as Bono insisted, was 'like hippy music, holding hands', while Product Red was 'more like punk rock, hip hop ... [which] should feel like hard commerce' [1]. According to Bono, classical philanthropy is simply ridiculous and frivolous, because it does not solve problems; on the other hand, the concept of product (RED) is a serious attempt to help poor and sick people in Africa through the purchasing power of wealthy Westerners. This discourse clearly starts from the assumption that distant Others in Africa are in need of our salvation. According to Bono, we will not help the poor and the sick (distant Others) in Africa by requiring the correction of economic inequality, but in a much more banal way, through the buying of branded items from global corporations, which will, in turn, redirect part of their profits to help the needy. Consequently, product (RED) ideally fits in a new paradigm that both aid and trade are central to development. This paradigm its removed from former leftist charges against trade, which is embodied in the motto aid and not trade. On the other hand, this paradigm is also opposing a pure neoliberal stance against aid, which is also embodied in the motto trade and not aid. So, finally, in the end, the paradigm of product (RED) would be trade and aid, or more precisely consumption and aid. Richey and Ponte, in their paper, point out that product (RED) sits well with the subtle relationship between consumption and citizenship that characterises 'stakeholder capitalism'. In stakeholder capitalism, rather than relying on the state or the market, consumer rights are exercised through consumer organisations. These rights are exercised not only to obtain 'value for money', but also to demand social and environmental change. Action takes place via engagement of the consumer organisation with the state and corporations, and (increasingly) via individual acts of 'conscious consumption' – backed up by systems of certification, labelling and codes of conduct. In this operating environment, consumer-citizens are portrayed as ever more informed, reflexive, active, (sometimes) socially and environmentally conscious, and able to make a difference with their purchasing power. Depictions of product (RED) consumers as fashion-conscious yet actively engaged, reflexive, able to personally customise their purchases, and therefore inspi(RED) are part and parcel of this trend [10]. Ponte and Richey emphasise that the essential problem with product (RED) initiatives is that they teach people how to give from a narrowly individualistic and consumption-oriented perspective. Products are manufactured and then linked to 'needs' identified in the
developing world, primarily Africa, which supplies a convenient trope for ‘needy’. In this process, ‘charity’ itself is sold as a commodity transfer: development interventions equal donations of commodities, things that needy people need. Companies that both produce these necessary goods and sacrifice their corporate profit to share them with the global poor invite consumers to ‘partner’ with them through the purchase of product (RED) products. Through real time and virtual events, where people come together to share experiences with others who share their framework of values, these companies not only provide commodities themselves, but also construct an entire realm in which these products become meaningful – commodities’ regimes of value [10]. Colleen O’Manique and Ronald Labonte, in their article ‘Rethinking (Product) RED’, published in the medical journal *The Lancet*, offer a devastating critique of the product (RED) campaign. The authors note that the (RED) website features an ‘impact calculator’ to measure how your purchase helps in Africa. But they wonder where you’ll find a deeper analysis of the role of global capitalism and its built-in inequalities: ‘There is no impact calculator tabulating the relational injustice of the economic institutions that privilege some (largely middle and upper class, and in developed countries) consumers able to buy (RED) while increasing risk and vulnerability to HIV and other diseases among those unable to afford even life’s necessities. The implacable logic of this injustice is hidden in high-gloss advertisements in which looking good (fashion), making good (profit), and doing good (charity) become a feelgood endorsement of an unhealthy status quo. The seemingly just consumer supplants the just citizen and social justice itself is commodified’ [11]. The authors correctly conclude that we should 'be wary of the 21st century’s new noblesse oblige that replaces the efficiency of tax-funded programmes and transfers in improving health equity with a consumption-driven “charitainment” model whose appearances can be as deceptive as they are appealing' [11].

**CONCLUSION**

In this paper, we have tried, through a brief analysis of product (RED), to point to the fundamental problem of celebrity philanthropy. Instead of changing power relations and correcting and removing the causes of inequality in the world, product (RED), through its cleverly devised message, reinforces the neoliberal system and increases inequality. The success of the concept of product (RED) lies in the perfect simplicity and ease with which wealthy consumers can 'help' and be part of 'change' that will lead to the elimination of poverty and ultimately lead to a just society. In that sense, celebrity philanthropy is used as a perfect means to uphold the status quo. It may well provide funds for, say, poverty projects, but as we have seen, it fails to tackle the broader politics of inequality—a wider politics that would bring out the antagonism between the rich and the poor, implicating the celebrities themselves in the production of some form of social apartheid. Celebrity work may well bring media attention to humanitarian crises, but as we have underlined in our analysis of product (RED), the media tends to focus only on the celebrities who carefully build their public image, and at the same time, systematically ignore the poor, the disenfranchised, AIDS sufferers, who all become distant Others. They become just nameless faces at the scene where celebrities appear for the public. In that context, celebrity philanthropy plays a role not in saving the distant Others, so much as the system itself. It aims to stabilise, if not advance, the global capitalist order, helping to deflect attention from the latter’s inherent structural
violence – inequality, unevenness, dispossession. It attempts to naturalise capitalism, presenting it as the only solution for all social ills, and showing its neoliberal variant as neutral, pragmatic, and non-ideological. But the strength and success of celebrity philanthropy lies not only in celebrities and their corporate and media backers; we, are their audience, and we are also deeply involved, since we, through our consumption, help to sustain this system. Our consumption reflects our beliefs in the ‘good works’ of celebrities, and, in that way, we have unquestioned trust in their authority to influence public policy or promote neoliberal solutions – all helping to propagate the political economy of celebrity culture. Our act of (celebrity endorsed) charity shopping enables us to do our bit for the ‘poor’ and become humanitarians-for-a-day and look very good in our own eyes; yet at the same time, it further binds us to consumer capitalism. One of the disturbing outcomes of celebrity philanthropy is depoliticisation. When philanthropy work depends on spectacle and show, the tendency is to valorise dramatic stories and moral arguments, and quick and short-term solutions, often at the expense of broad, complex, and long-term political solutions. In the bioethical discourse, celebrity philanthropy at first appears attractive, since through media visibility it is trying to help and protect life that is threatened by disease, poverty, inequality, exclusion and so on. However, when we analyse celebrity philanthropy in greater depth, we see that critics reasonably suggest that celebrity philanthropy is not and cannot be a response to the problems facing humanity. That does not mean that we need to completely discard the philanthropic activity associated with celebrity philanthropy, since many of their activities truly help people on the ground, but we need to be aware of the limitations and potential dangers posed by over-reliance on celebrity philanthropy.

We will conclude the paper with Harry Browne’s harsh words on Bono Vox’s philanthropy: ‘But for anyone serious about global affairs, (RED) is clearly just another example of corporate-social-responsibility whitewashing ((RED)washing?), whereby not only do particular companies get injected with the purifying Bono medicine, but transnational consumer capitalism as a whole is furnished with conspicuous evidence of its vital role in making the world a better place, at a cost of peanuts’ [12].

REFERENCES


https://doi.org/10.5593/sgemsocialF2018/1.6


