How Celebrities Become Political During Times of Threat

Todd L. Belt
Department of Political Science
University of Hawaii at Hilo
200 W. Kawili St.
Hilo, HI  96720-4091
Email: tbelt@hawaii.edu
Phone: 808-974-7375

Abstract
This paper develops three models to explain the proliferation of celebrities in news coverage of threats to public safety. The three models are the avoidance model (based on politicians’ penchant for credit claiming and blame avoidance), the saturation model (based on the exigencies of the 24-hour news cycle) and the structural model (based on media profit motivation). The three models are evaluated by use of three case studies: Hurricane Katrina, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, and the 2011 Tucson shootings. Of the three models, the avoidance model provides the greatest explanatory power. However, inference is limited as the case studies demonstrate the possible confounding influences of issue duration, issue complexity, and responsibility attribution.
Introduction

Hollywood’s relationship with Washington has had its ebbs and flows. The McCarthy hearings of the 1950s brought the entertainment industry under the microscope. Opponents to the Vietnam War enlisted a number of musicians and actors to their cause, notably Jane Fonda, who continued her political activism following the war (Brownstein 1990). Following the war, relatively few celebrities were actively engaged in politics until the mid-1990s (other than Ronald Reagan). Over the past dozen years or so, celebrities have become frequent sightings at congressional hearings, often to the consternation some members of congress — particularly those on the opposing side (AP 2010). Recognizing this trend, the revered National Journal recently released a list of the 20 “Most Politically Effective Celebrities of All Time” (Brownstein 2011). Celebrities now not only contribute to political campaigns, but openly endorse candidates and sometimes even toss their own hats into the ring.

While celebrity involvement in politics is now viewed as commonplace, it has become increasingly noticeable during threatening events. During the Hurricane Katrina disaster, singer Kanye West’s comments that “Bush doesn’t care about black people” was played over and over again on the news. Following the initial disaster, actress Angelina Jolie became involved in lobbying congress for relief while fellow actor John Travolta airlifted supplies to the region. Many other celebrities became involved in the relief effort and the subsequent rebuilding of New Orleans’ Lower 9th Ward. Several years later, Kevin Costner promoted machinery to separate oil from seawater as the Deepwater Horizon continued to leak into the Gulf of Mexico. And further blurring the distinction between politics and celebrity is Sarah Palin, whose comments following the January 2011 Tucson shootings created a firestorm.
This paper evaluates the growing prevalence of celebrities in the conduct of public policy dealing with threats — specifically, the cases of the shooting and two disasters mentioned above. Insights from these case studies are brought to bear on three models that may explain the proliferation of celebrities in news coverage of public policy responses to threats.

Beyond evaluating these explanations, this research paper shares similarities with research demonstrating that campaign media focus on the horserace and candidate personalities at the expense of public policy. Focus on celebrities in the specific policy arena of public threat illuminates the benefit or detriment to public discourse played by their inclusion. This paper evaluates the ramifications of this trend for democratic politics and identifies future avenues of research in this vein of political communication research.

**Why Celebrities Matter**

Does it matter that celebrities become involved in politics, or are they a distracting sideshow? Obviously, celebrities have above average incomes and can afford to make large political contributions — a point well understood by former president Bill Clinton both during and after his presidency (Van Natta et al. 2007; Wayne 1996). And certainly, celebrities can trade on their good name to win elected office. Beyond this, what real political power do celebrities hold?

A primary reason celebrities command public and media attention is novelty. People want to hear and see celebrities simply because they are famous. Indeed, this is often why celebrities are invited to congressional hearings. In 2009, model/actress Christie Binkley testified before congress regarding the issue of nuclear power, and she defends her presence in the politics on the basis of novelty: “A model talking about a nuclear power plant is going to
capture a different audience than a nuclear scientist will” (quoted in AP 2009). In this way, the novelty of the celebrity, and his/her attendant media coverage, can spotlight an issue that might otherwise be ignored.

Celebrities also command interest because, for the most part, they are motivated not by personal gain, but act out on moral grounds (Busby 2007). Moreover, celebrities’ lack of political alliances and ability to self-fund advocacy projects means that they can act as “autonomous free agents” (West and Orman 2003: 111). The fact that they have virtually no stake in an issue, yet still care passionately about it, draws attention. And in a different vein, some people want to hear what a celebrity has to say in order to gauge that celebrity’s level of intelligence against what they otherwise know about the celebrity in other, more managed venues (Jones 2010).

Beyond the power of novelty, celebrities have a vastly different affective relationship with the public than politicians. Most individuals experience the political world indirectly through mass media (Lippmann 1922). This is also true of peoples’ experience of the world of celebrities, but there is a slight — and important — difference. The public lives vicariously through celebrities, experiencing the broad range of emotions that their acting or singing conveys (e.g. hope, joy, laughter, enthusiasm, fear, anger, worry, sadness). Moreover, individuals gain a sense of intimacy when they know the details of celebrities’ lives (Graber 2009), and these details sometimes appear inescapable in our media-saturated world. The intense affective relationships citizens have with celebrities bridges otherwise banal policy reasoning with emotions (Marshall 1997). In this sense, celebrities have “stepped in to fill the public void” (Jones 2010: 219) left by traditional institutions such as political parties and the news media (Patterson 1993). Some have even suggested that a celebrity acts as a proxy for the common
citizen, so the public is more tolerant of many celebrities’ simplistic analyses of complex political issues (Jones 2010; Marshall 1997).

But this is not to say that celebrities have an equal and measurable influence across the entire electorate. Research shows that people who are more politically engaged are likely to have their opinions reinforced if they agree with a message, or dismiss a messages with which they disagree, contributing to polarization of the electorate (see Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1997; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2001; Zaller 1992; Zanna et al. 1976). Accordingly, many celebrities have drawn a significant amount of public outrage, and even hostility, for the positions they take (e.g. Jane Fonda, The Dixie Chicks). By contrast, people with low levels of political engagement are more likely to be swayed by celebrities, but perhaps with little political import as these individuals tend to be less politically active. Instead, research suggests that media coverage of celebrities in politics is more likely to affect the public’s level of awareness of certain issues (i.e. agenda setting) and the importance the public places on those issues (i.e. issue salience), than to have a significant impact on attitude change (see Hayes 2008; Iyengar and Kinder 1987).

But highly salient issues on the public agenda mobilize the public for action, and therein lies the primary effect of celebrity advocacy on political attitudes. This, in turn, can lead to practical effects on policymakers (and even politicians can get star-struck). If Jesse Helms is thrust into the spotlight by a visit from Bono (singer of the rock band U2), he will certainly be aware that the issue of debt relief is on the public’s mind, as are his actions. Bono, an otherwise politically weak actor, can force the issue into media the spotlight and cause policymakers — otherwise strong political actors — to be very judicious in the decisions they make (Busby 2007).
Causes Célèbre

Social activism has become expected in Hollywood — it is the contemporary “noblesse oblige.” Nearly every celebrity has a cause, a fact lampooned by an internet rumor that Paris Hilton had taken on the cause of binge drinking elephants in India (Corcoran 2007). Similarly, The Onion, ran a satire story titled: “Rare Disease Nabs Big-Time Celebrity Spokesman,” in which Ted Danson contracted the fictitious “Flehner-Lathrop Syndrome” (The Onion 2000). Even though having a cause has become cliché, it now looks bad for a celebrity not to champion a cause.

As the entertainment industry is dominated by liberals, accordingly, many of the causes promoted by celebrities are left-leaning. A list of celebrities and their causes would be exhausting, but some of the more notable ones are Ted Danson’s American Oceans Campaign (now Oceana), Elizabeth Taylor’s AIDS Foundation, Demi Moore and Ashton Kutcher’s Foundation to End Human Trafficking, Scarlett Johansson’s advocacy on behalf of Planned Parenthood, Willie Nelson’s advocacy of biofuels, Bono’s concern for debt forgiveness for lesser developed countries, Pamela Anderson’s advocacy on behalf of PeTA, and Rob Reiner’s opposition to tobacco use. The left-leaning Huffington Post now has a “Celebrities Talk Politics” page. The abundance of liberal celebrities espousing left-wing causes has turned many of them into “whipping boys” for right-wing commentators.

But celebrity involvement in politics is by no means monopolized by the left. Notable right wing celebrities with specific issue concerns include Kelsey Grammer’s promotion of RightNetwork, John Voight’s association with the TEA Party, and Charlton Heston’s presidency of the NRA. Actor Chuck Norris pens a syndicated conservative opinion column. Other than
these notable cases, conservative celebrity activism mainly comes in the form of electoral activity rather than having a specific issue orientation.

Celebrities on both sides of the political fence have become increasingly active in the arena of electoral politics, with some making particularly notable endorsements. Actress Barbara Streisand has actively supported democratic candidates for some time, but other celebrities have recently ramped-up their involvement. In 1996, Bill Clinton held several fundraisers in Hollywood to support his reelection campaign, establishing a network that Al Gore tapped into in 2000 (Miller and Shogren 2000; Welkos 1996). During the 2000 presidential election, actors Martin Sheen and Ben Affleck joined Al Gore on the campaign trail, while actors Chuck Norris and Bo Derek campaigned on the republican side for George W. Bush (West and Orman 2003). In 2006, actor Michael J. Fox, who suffers from Parkinson’s disease, spoke in a commercial endorsing Claire McCaskill for the US Senate seat from Missouri. McCaskill’s opponent was against embryonic stem-cell research, a cause championed by Fox and his Foundation for Parkinson’s Research (Rutenberg 2006). Oprah Winfrey and Bruce Springsteen famously endorsed Barack Obama for president in 2008, along with a host of other Hollywood notables. On the other side, Kelsey Grammer, Clint Eastwood and others supported John McCain’s campaign (Elfman 2008).

And lastly, some celebrities have entered the electoral arena as candidates themselves. Celebrity mayors include actor Clint Eastwood, who was elected mayor of the city of Carmel California, and professional basketball player Kevin Johnson, mayor of Sacramento (Jerry Springer was mayor of Cincinnati prior to becoming a celebrity). Celebrities who have become members of the US House of Representatives include singer Sonny Bono, and athletes J. C. Watts, Steve Largent and Heath Shuler. Notable celebrities who have served in the US Senate
include actors Fred Thompson of Tennessee and Al Franken of Minnesota, and professional athletes Bill Bradley of New Jersey and Jim Bunning of Kentucky. Celebrity governors include actor Arnold Schwarzenegger of California and pro-wrestler Jesse Ventura of Minnesota. Of course, this list would be remiss if it did not note that former President Ronald Reagan was also an actor.

Defining Celebrity

When discussing the impact of celebrities on politics, the definition of just who is a celebrity can get fuzzy. Tabloids have dealt with this problem by creating a celebrity stratification typology composed of: A-list, B-list, C-list, and so on. But mixing celebrity with the political world causes even more difficulty. West and Orman (2003) developed five types of what they term “Celebrity Politicos.” The first are “Political Newsworthies” who include political pundits, such as James Carville, and high-profile politicians such as John McCain. The second type of celebrity are the “Legacies” which include members of the Kennedy family, the Bush family, and the like. The third and fourth types are “Famed Nonpoliticos” delineated by whether they were elected officials or unelected lobbyists and spokespersons. Actors, musicians, and sports figures all comprise these “Nonpoliticos.” The last group are “Event Celebrities” who are famous for being part of a single political incident, such as Anita Hill or Sarah Brady (see Brown and Orman 2003: 2-5).

While Brown and Orman’s typology among celebrities is helpful, what is more important for this research project is to delineate policy makers from celebrities. To that end, policy makers are defined as those with real decision making power and command over political resources — and specifically in the cases studied in this paper, the ability to respond to threats to
public safety. Policy makers, then, include elected officeholders and appointees. During Hurricane Katrina, President Bush would be considered a policy maker while former presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton would be considered celebrities (whereas, during the Oklahoma city bombing, Clinton was a policy maker). While celebrities can certainly impact policy making decisions (as noted above), the final decision rests with the office holder. A celebrity will be evaluated in this study if he/she comments on policy or if he/she receives media coverage actively engaged in policy formulation of implementation. Examples include Sean Penn saving people from floodwaters in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina or Kevin Costner attempting to promote water-oil separators during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Celebrities whose involvement amounts merely to financial contributions or fundraising activities will not be evaluated as their coverage arguably cannot be thought to influence policy decision making or implementation.

Models of News Programming Decisions

It is obvious why policy makers receive media coverage during times of threat — their decisions can mean the difference between life and death. But what is less clear is why celebrities, with significant less policy expertise, are given a platform in the media for advocacy during a time of crisis. From a utilitarian standpoint, celebrities take away precious air time that otherwise could be spent covering policy makers’ important decisions and directives. In order to explain the phenomenon of this apparent celebrity encroachment on policymakers ability to gain media coverage during times of crisis, three models are proposed. All three models are drawn from the exigencies facing office holders and media organizations.
Avoidance model

The first model, which I term the “avoidance model,” explains the proliferation of celebrities in public threat stories as arising from politicians’ tendency to claim credit and avoid blame. Officeholders, be they elected or appointed, seek to be portrayed in a favorable light for three reasons: to retain their position, to advance to a higher position, or to avoid embarrassing their political party or the individual responsible for their appointment. To that end, office holders seek to associate themselves with positive events (credit claiming) and distance themselves from negative events (blame avoidance, see Ellis 1994; Hood 2010; Mayhew 1974; Weaver 1986). Research has demonstrated that blame avoidance is an even greater motivation for office holders than credit claiming (see Hood 2010; Weaver 1986). In this sense, Lincoln’s famous quote applies: “It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt.” A crisis is fraught with blame, from responsibility attribution to criticism of governmental responsiveness. This is an area of public policy where only fools rush in if they have no stake in matter. Certainly those with designated authority and a specific linkage to the problem at hand will need to exercise their due diligence during the crisis while simultaneously engaging in spin control (Hood 2010). If there exists a dearth of information coming from policymakers during a time of public threat, media outlets can be expected to fill the void with other voices, including those of celebrities.

Saturation model

The second model explains the phenomenon of celebrity inclusion in policy debates as being due to round-the-clock coverage of public threats in the media, hence the term “saturation model.” The tendency to follow what other news outlets are reporting in an endless race to not
get scooped, as well as to one-up other news outlets, has created a highly competitive
marketplace (see Baum and Kernell 1999; Cohen 2008; Rosensteil 2005). To fill voids in the
news hole, 24-hour news channels have developed theme and opinion-oriented shows to
supplement their regular news coverage, such as CNN’s *Crossfire* and Fox News Channel’s *The
O’Reilly Factor* (Milligan 2010). But all of these shows rely on the news of the day for in
order to generate commentary. The news hole still needs to be filled, and with a round-the clock
broadcast, filling it with interesting content can be daunting. The ongoing schedule necessitates
news content generated from all quarters in order to avoid redundancy in coverage. This is
particularly true if a news item stretches out for several months. Coverage of celebrities helps to
keep the issue fresh and to avoid the public’s inevitable lapse into issue fatigue.

*Structural model*

The last model I term the “structural model,” and it explains the phenomenon of
celebrities in crisis policy coverage as due to decisions made within the business structure of
media outlets. Structural models of the media industry have received a significant amount of
attention in the scholarly literature. Some scholars note the deleterious influence of overall
media consolidation on the quality and nature of information available to the citizenry (Alger
1998; Bagdikian 2004; McChesney 1999). At the level of the televised media outlet, the focus
on ratings pushes news organizations to develop “softer” stories that they think will bring the
largest audiences. These stories, the conventional wisdom dictates, include crime, disasters,
human interest and celebrity stories, especially stories with striking visuals (see Hamilton 2004;
McManus 1994; Rosenstiel at al. 2007; Zaller 1999). Another widely-shared view is that hard
news must be humanized or personalized in order to appeal to large audiences (Bennett 2009; Hart 1999).

Disasters and threats to public safety are tailor-made to attract heavy news coverage. These stories feature striking visuals combined with compelling human drama. In this way, they are hard news stories with a soft news edge — they can be personalized. Better yet, resources required to cover this sort of story are minimal — they often combine reporters’ discussion of events with camera “sprays” of the affected area. This type of coverage requires little background research, which can contribute heavily to production costs. Adding celebrities to the mix of this type of coverage can be defended as just another compelling angle on an otherwise hard news story. Outlets that forego celebrity coverage as it applies to these events worry that they risk losing audience share to their competitors.

The Cases

The three cases analyzed here include Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico emanating from the Deepwater Horizon, and the January 2011 shootings in Tucson, Arizona. These cases were chosen because they represent the most striking threats to public safety in recent memory. The 2010 earthquake in Haiti might have been considered — and it certainly generated a great deal of celebrity interest — but it was not included in order to keep the cases politically equivalent by focusing on strictly domestic cases.

These three cases involve very different sets of policy response. Hurricane Katrina was a national disaster and the responsibility for relief rested with government, although discussions of which level of government was responsible for which relief efforts remains a debated issue (see Maestas et al. 2008). Responsibility for the oil spill emanating from the Deepwater Horizon
explosion was more difficult to pinpoint, with the lessee (BP), the operator (Transocean), the
designer of the blowout preventer (Cameron International) and the blowout preventer cementer
(Halliburton) all pointing fingers at one another (Zeller 2010). As private efforts for remediation
faltered and the oil drifted toward the gulf coast, President Obama stepped in and asserted
ultimate responsibility. Lastly, the shootings in Tucson were the act of one troubled individual,
but blame for the incident soon came to be directed at the inflammatory tenor of political
dialogue in a highly ideologically polarized nation (Krugman 2011; Peters and Stelter 2011).
Certainly, “toning down political rhetoric” is a nebulous policy solution and it is unclear whom
should implement it. Other concrete policy responses to the shooting included a bill in congress
that would ban the sale of high-volume ammunition magazines.

Hurricane Katrina

Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the gulf coast on August 29, 2005. After the storm
moved inland, a series of levees around the city of New Orleans flailed, causing a tremendous
flood. Television screens and newspapers were strewn with constant images of flooding,
floating dead bodies, and thousands of displaced people. The scene turned frantic, as gunshots
could be heard in the background of live newscasts of looting. Countless stories were told of
hospitals in New Orleans without power or doctors, people sitting on their roofs hoping to be
rescued, and of course, the over-filled Superdome. These images had a clear impact on the
public’s perception of the handling of the crisis by government officials, at the city, state, and
federal levels. Clearly, the government had not been prepared for the disaster following the
hurricane, and the belated relief effort was inadequate, to put it mildly.
In addition to the horrific images and stories of the disaster, anger toward the governmental response was fueled by administration incompetence. Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff described to reporters his reaction to reading about the levee breaks in the newspaper headlines, implying that the head of the Department of Homeland Security was obtaining his information about the ongoing disaster in New Orleans from the newspaper instead of more immediate and internal sources (Brinkley 2006). Additionally, relief coordinators and the media alike were astounded by the lack of experience among the upper management positions at FEMA, which were filled by political hacks with no experience in emergency management (van Heerden and Bryan 2006).

The public’s attention was turned to the president’s lack of response, and he caught much of the blame for the mismanagement of the disaster relief. In turn, Bush administration officials blamed the state officials in Louisiana as having neglected their own responsibilities. Despite these efforts to shift the blame, 61 percent of the American public blamed President Bush himself for much of the problems with the relief effort (Trippet 2005). In the days following the hurricane, Americans’ confusion as to who was responsible for relief in the aftermath of the hurricane became apparent. All levels of government were held responsible, with 73 percent of Americans blaming the government at the local and state levels, 70 percent also blaming the federal agencies, and 57 percent placing blame on the victims themselves for the disastrous state of affairs following the storm (Trippet 2005).

Beyond President Bush and Secretary Chertoff, six other politicians made notable appearances in the media addressing the policy response to the disaster. At the federal level, these included FEMA director Michael D. (“Brownie”) Brown, and Louisiana Senators David Vitter and Mary Landrieu. At the state level, notable policymakers that received coverage
included Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco and Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour. But perhaps the most noteworthy politician involved in relief policy was New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, who sharply criticized both state and federal relief efforts, causing a rift between himself and Governor Blanco.

Against this backdrop of misery and political in-fighting, celebrities began asking (and in Kanye West’s case, answering) questions about the relief effort, while others took it upon themselves to assist evacuees. Early on, Sean Penn assisted in the evacuation, and at one point could be seen bailing out his own boat as it had sprung a leak (MAN 2010). More celebrities gained media exposure for their efforts when the Katrina evacuees were moved to the Houston Astrodome. Talk-show-host-cum-media-magnate Oprah Winfrey visited the astrodome, bringing along actors Jamie Foxx and Julia Roberts. The trip helped deliver supplies to the needy, and Oprah eventually funded 65 new homes for families displaced by Katrina (Baltimore 2009). Former president George H. W. Bush and former first lady Barbara Bush visited evacuees at the Astrodome while former president Bill Clinton visited evacuees at the Reliant Center next door. Other celebrities who drew media attention for taking part in the relief effort included George Clooney, Matthew McConaughey, Faith Hill, Chris Rock, Macy Gray and Michael Moore (Mimon 2011).

In total, 15 celebrities made national news for their efforts during Katrina Relief efforts. By comparison, eight policymakers made news (see Table 1). This yields a ratio of celebrities to policymakers at roughly 2:1 in the news. This is not to say that each individual was accorded equal attention and an equal speaking platform in the media, but it does give some idea of where media attention was focused. In this sense, the measure indicates the “gate-keeping” mechanism of the media.
Deepwater Horizon

On April 20, 2010, the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded in a spectacular fireball. Of the 126 members of the crew onboard, 11 lost their lives. The gushing well was capped three months later on July 15, 2010, and a cement seal was poured into the well in August while relief wells siphoned off the remaining leaking oil. The process of killing the well was finally completed in September, but not before an estimated five million barrels of oil leaked into the Gulf of Mexico (source: New York Times 2011). The most immediate toll, other than the 11 workers who lost their lives, was to sea life. As the spill continued, it was only a matter of time before the slick made landfall on the gulf coast.

During the cleanup, BP frequently clashed with government officials, most notably over the issue of which chemical dispersants to use on the spill (Schor 2010). It was obvious that BP would not be able to control the spill on its own, and that it would need governmental assistance. President Obama performed an awkward dance of both taking responsibility while simultaneously distancing himself from BP, whom he said he would hold accountable. Obama received criticism in the media for his apparent inaction. In an interview with Matt Lauer on NBC’s Today show, Obama defended being in Washington instead of the gulf coast so that he could speak to experts, in order to, in his words: “know whose ass to kick” (Stolberg 2010). An AP-GfK poll taken in June found that 52 percent of Americans disapproved of Obama’s handling of the crisis, but 83 percent disapproved of BP’s handling of it (source: CBS News 2010).

As the oil got closer to shore, Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal raced to construct sand berms to protect the coast (McKinley and Rudolf 2010). In contrast to Jindal’s frantic efforts to prevent disaster, Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour initially reassured residents that there was
little to fear, but later requested more skimmers to protect his state’s fishing and tourism industries (Guttman 2010).

Observers commented on the lack of Hollywood’s presence during the crisis as compared to Hurricane Katrina (Giacobbe 2010). One actor, Ian Somarholder, who had a brief stint on the TV series Lost, recorded public service announcements for the Audubon Society and made comments to the press (Giacobbe 2010), but he was no A-list celebrity commanding the attention of say, Angelina Jolie. On Anderson Cooper’s CNN show, AC 360°, film director Spike Lee, voiced the opinion of many that President Obama appeared too mild-mannered and inactive during the crisis, imploring the president to “Go off!” (Leopold 2010). Actor Ted Danson went on Larry King Live to advocate a moratorium on ocean drilling (Leopold 2010). Kevin Costner, who was motivated by the Exxon Valdez spill to support oil-spill mitigation research, provided demonstrations of equipment and testified before congress (Goodale 2010; Guarino 2010). Even though his machines failed in their initial tests, BP leased 32 of them from Blue Planet Water Solutions for $52 million (Goldenberg 2011; Sahagun 2011). Alec Baldwin penned a column on Huffingtonpost.com condemning the corruption within the Minerals Management Service and advocating that the government “let BP die” (Bladwin 2010).

During the gulf oil spill, Sarah Palin was no longer in political office and had no policy making authority to help with the leak stoppage or cleanup. Palin had spent nine months out of office, having resigned her governorship on July 26, 2009. Yet, she commanded an audience and commented many times on the issue — placing her outside of governance and more in line with celebrities. Palin, who built a following during her vice-presidential campaign for her mantra “drill baby, drill,” was clear in her support for continued oil drilling in the face of the accident. Palin invoked the Exxon Valdez oil spill as evidence of her commitment to drilling in
spite of the risk, saying that “no human endeavor is ever without risk” (quoted in Weigel 2010). Palin also explained Obama’s apparent hands-off approach to dealing with the crisis as being due to his ties to big oil (Mascaro 2010).

In total, the number of major policymakers who made news were three, while the number of celebrities making news was six. As with the media focus during the Katrina relief effort, the ratio of celebrities to policymakers in the news was again 2:1 (again, see Table 1). Certainly, Sarah Palin did not fill as much of the media space as President Obama, but the ratio helps to establish which individuals were welcomed in the policy discussion.

_Tucson Shootings_

On January 8, 2011, a mass shooting occurred at an open meeting in a supermarket parking lot in Casas Adobes, near Tucson, Arizona. Six died, including US District Court Chief John Roll, a congressional staffer, three retirees and a nine-year old child. Fourteen more were wounded, including US Representative Gabrielle Giffords, who was shot through the head (Lacey 2011).

Policymakers stepped forward to offer their condolences and to make sense of the tragedy. President Obama visited Representative Giffords in the hospital, called for a national moment of silence, made a televised address to the nation, and led a memorial service in Tucson. Speaker of the House John Boehner tearfully asked the nation to pray for Giffords and her family and issued statements regarding the shooting, saying that “an attack on one is an attack on all who serve” (Amira 2011). However, the Speaker received criticism for not attending the victims’ memorial service, choosing instead to attend a reception in Washington for RNC Chair candidate Maria Cino (Camia 2011). While these statements fall short of actual policymaking in
the sense of disasters and relief efforts, they play an important role of consoling and bringing order to the nation during a time of crisis.

Arizona Governor Jan Brewer issued several statements and spoke at the victims’ memorial, calling the shooting an “assault on our democracy” (Madison 2011). Governor Brewer also signed into law a bill that would block the Westboro Baptist church from protesting at the funeral of the nine-year old shooting victim (Mehta and Cruz 2011).⁶

Other policy prescriptions came from US Senator Charles Schumer and US Representative Carolyn McCarthy, both of New York, and Senator Frank Lautenberg of New Jersey. Recognizing that shooting suspect Jared Loughner failed a drug test when he tried to enlist in the Army, Senator Schumer proposed legislation that would flag such an individual in an FBI database when they attempted to purchase a gun (Gold 2011). Senator Lautenberg and Representative McCarthy sponsored matching bills in the House and Senate that would ban the sale of high-capacity ammunition magazines similar to the ones used in the shooting (Gold 2011). These magazines had been made illegal by the 1994 assault weapons ban, but the provision had sunset in 2004 and was not renewed.⁷

On the celebrity side, actresses Sophia Bush and Gwyneth Paltrow were related to victims of the shooting and sent condolences and tweeted thoughts on the subject (Weiss 2011), but hardly became involved in policy advocacy. Michele Obama attended the memorial for victims of the shooting alongside President Obama, and received further media coverage for penning an open letter to parents regarding the incident (Altman 2011). But the biggest celebrity story of the shooting incident involved Sarah Palin.

As explanations for the shooting developed, those who saw it as a result of inflammatory political rhetoric singled out Sarah Palin. In an interview following the shooting, one of the
victims, Eric Fuller, said: “It looks like Palin, Beck, Sharron Angle and the rest got their first target” (quoted in Marr 2011). Fuller went on to discuss the targeting map that Palin’s political action committee, SarahPAC, created for the 2010 mid-term elections. The map targeted with gun crosshairs certain congressional districts to take back from the democrats, including Gifford’s. Palin responded by releasing a video-recorded statement in which she called such accusations a “blood-libel” manufactured my “journalists and pundits” (quoted in Tumulty 2011). Her comments created a firestorm, as the term “blood libel” has anti-Semitic origins. A CBS News poll taken at the time showed that only a third of Americans though that the country’s heated political rhetoric had anything to do with the shooting (Carty 2011).

In all, just two (very political) celebrities made significant headlines in the media discussions following the Tucson shootings: Sarah Palin and Michele Obama (again, see Table 1). By contrast, six policymakers were featured in the news. The overall ratio was three politicians per celebrity, more than reversing the pattern of the other two cases.

Discussion

Both Hurricane Katrina and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill became long, drawn-out disasters. As the days and months of the disasters wore on, public frustration with unsatisfactory policy response became magnified. What politician who was not already under scrutiny would dare to tread in these dangerous waters? Hardly any good could come of it. But in the case of the Tucson shootings, policymakers need only to look like they are not capitalizing on someone’s misfortune in order to gain media attention. Well chosen words, expressions of empathy, and legislation to enhance public safety are pretty innocuous actions under these conditions (save backlash from the NRA). If the avoidance model were the correct one, we
would expect fewer politicians than celebrities to make media appearances in the cases in which they had the most to lose, and that is what happened.

In contrast to politicians, celebrities act as a megaphone for public concerns. Like other citizens, celebrities were dismayed by the poor policy responses in the Hurricane Katrina aftermath and the gulf oil spill, and they wanted to speak up. And as with many Americans, they wanted to do something. To borrow a term from economist A. O. Hirschman (1970), celebrities have a great deal “voice.” They also have the resources (money and schedule flexibility) to become actively engaged in policy implementation efforts, such as travelling to the Houston Astrodome to help in relief efforts or to New Orleans to help the rebuilding effort. In these cases, it appears that celebrities filled the void left by policymakers. And in the Tucson shooting case, policymakers had less cause to avoid the scrutiny that comes with a presence in the media — further lending support to the avoidance model.

Less evidence exists to support the saturation model — that celebrities are covered to help fill the 24-hour news cycle. Certainly, over the extended stories of Katrina and the oil spill, media outlets needed to find a good deal of material to cover. The issue is one of supply and demand, and the saturation model can certainly dovetail with the avoidance model — given a dearth of policymakers speaking out and a surplus of celebrity involvement, what is a reporter to do?

Heavy reliance on celebrities violates the journalistic norm that reporters ought to go and get the story, rather than letting it come to them (in turn acting as a mouthpiece rather than a reporter). Tom Rosenstiel, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, put it this way: “When journalists cover celebrities, what they are doing is they are relying on a crutch... They are hitchhiking on the celebrity of a person to get their story noticed rather than figure out a way
to make… whatever the issue is, interesting in its own right” (AP 2009). But do media decision makers think about it this way?

Alexandra Wallace, Senior Vice President of NBC News, says that the most important people to cover in crisis situations are the people who have “first-hand knowledge about what happened. When there’s a human toll, I want to hear from the people that experience it.” The premium is not filling time with celebrities, but going out and getting reporters on the ground to get interviews. The main concern is to tell a compelling story from the angle of those most affected. This type of journalism requires greater effort and a greater expenditure of resources than interviewing or trailing celebrities, undercutting the saturation model.

This leads to the structural model, which predicts coverage based on the race for ratings and minimizing production costs. Research shows that network news coverage of political stories declined by a third from 1977 to 1997, with a commensurate increase in “softer” news stories (see Graber 2001: 178). This happened because of the transformation of newsrooms into profit centers in the 1980s — network news was expected to make a profit (Gunther 1999). So is celebrity coverage during crises just another aspect of this shift to soft news to enhance profitability?

These profit motivation among media outlets is greatest among local news stations, where budget cuts in recent years have been heavy, and the ratings competition is ferocious (Rosenstiel et al. 2007). In surveys conducted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism in 2002, news directors of local stations across the US were asked in an open-ended question what was their primary goal in putting together their newscast. Of the 63 news directors that answered, 44 percent said their most important goal was covering stories with relevance to viewers, 19 percent said accuracy, another 19 percent said telling a compelling story, and only
one of the 63 (1.6 percent) said entertaining the audience. To say that news directors make news decisions simply to entertain audiences in order to boost ratings is not borne out by the facts. Though it may sometimes not seem to be the case, providing accurate and compelling stories is the primary goal of news organizations. In fact, NBC’s Wallace says that it is only important to cover a celebrity during a crisis if they are “an interesting interview [and] if they are credible and there” at the scene of the crisis.¹⁰ And audiences are beginning to indicate a distaste for celebrity coverage — a recent Rasmussen poll finds that 87 percent of Americans think that there is too much coverage of celebrities in the news (Rasmussen 2010). These data undercut the structural model.

Conclusion

This study has developed and evaluated three models of media behavior. Each model purports to explain why celebrities become prominent during times of threat to public safety. In the course of evaluating three case studies, the avoidance model seems to be the best fit. However, inference is limited due to three confounding variables that arose in the course of study.

To the extent that they are instructive, the three cases indicate that the proliferation of celebrities in news stories about threats to public safety has more to do with policymakers avoiding the camera than with reporters and news directors searching out celebrities for interviews and comment. Celebrities got involved in the Katrina and oil spill disasters because they could. Celebrities were not the only ones who rushed to the gulf to help in the aftermath of Katrina or to lend aid during the oil spill — many individuals with the wherewithal did so. Celebrities received coverage because they were at the scene and had firsthand knowledge of
relief and cleanup efforts. Of course, it certainly didn’t hurt that celebrities were recognizable—making stories more compelling.

The three cases presented in this may be insufficiently symmetrical to provide meaningful causal inference. A variable that seems to provide additional explanation of media behavior in the three cases is issue duration. Two of the cases had long durations of media exposure, while the other was relatively short. The long durations of the two disaster cases provided time for desperation to build. The public (including celebrities) became fed-up with ineffective policy implementation and began to speak out and help out. Accordingly, it would be instructive to replicate this study with a greater variety of public threat cases with differing durations in the media eye, in order to hold the variable constant across cases.

A second potentially confounding variable that limits the amount of inference that can be drawn from this study is issue complexity. If an issue is significantly complex, celebrities will be less likely to put themselves out in front of the news cameras. As an act of nature combined with planning and relief failure, Katrina was the easiest to understand. The Deepwater Horizon oil spill was a complicated issue combing high-technology engineering with marine science. The details of the issue went beyond the comprehension of most Americans. Moreover, the “blame game” that transpired further complicated matters of remediation. Lastly, the Tucson shootings were fairly simple to understand, although answers to the “why?” question diverged. As with the duration variable, an increased number of cases with matching levels of issue complexity would enhance inference.

And lastly, the variable of responsibility attribution seemed to play a key role in differentiating media behavior among the three cases. Attributions of responsibility are important because, during times of threats to public safety, the public is looking for answers. A
close eye is kept on those deemed responsible so that they carry through on solving the problem at hand, and preventing future ones of the same nature. Iyengar distinguishes the important differences between causal and treatment responsibility (1994: 9). While BP may have been causally responsible for the oil spill in the gulf, treatment responsibility seemed to rest with both BP and the federal government. Treatment responsibility during the aftermath of Katrina was a lesson in federalism, with state, local, and federal agencies bearing different levels of responsibility. And in the case of the Tucson shootings, attribution of treatment responsibility, other than minor changes to federal gun laws, seems nebulous. Knowing who is responsible is essential in evaluating the effectiveness of policy response. If the response is ineffective and responsibility is known, then demands can be made on those responsible, or individuals may act on their own to implement policy. Accordingly, some continuity in responsibility attribution among cases study would further augment causal inference.

A final, and surprising, lesson from this analysis is that celebrity involvement in media coverage of threats to public safety is nothing to be feared. Celebrities generally have something meaningful to say in these situations, otherwise they would not get covered. Celebrities are giving voice and action to public concerns when officials fail to speak or act incompetently. In this sense, celebrities are influential in holding policymakers accountable through the media by focusing public attention on the issue at hand.
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References


Rosenstiel, Tom, Marion Just, Todd Belt, Atiba Pertilla, Walter Dean and Dante Chinni. 2007. We Interrupt This Newscast: How to Improve Local News and Win Ratings, Too. New York: Cambridge University Press.


Notes


2 For a discussion on the influence of entertainment on the political socialization of young adults — less politically engaged than other adults — see Jackson 2009.


4 Crossfire was cancelled by CNN in 2005.

5 Assigning a reporter to background research takes him/her out of the rotation for story coverage, increasing labor costs.

6 The Westboro Baptist church has gained notoriety for protesting at the funerals of US service personnel, carrying signs saying “God hates fags” and such.

7 These bills are still moving through congress as of this writing.

8 Personal communication, July 18, 2011.

9 For details of the study, see Rosenstiel et al. 2007.

10 Personal communication, July 18, 2011.