

# LOST IN THE WILDERNESS?

## Celebrity, protest and the news

**Libby Lester**

*The deployment of celebrities is a well-established practice in environmental politics, but does the involvement of actors, singers and comedians give environmentalists an edge in the battle for positive and ongoing news coverage or simply feed contemporary anxieties and debates about the state of the public sphere? This paper attempts to understand better the interaction between celebrity, protest and the news over time by asking how celebrity functions as a form of political protest, how celebrity protest relates to changing logics in news production, and how news access for non-elite political challengers gained via celebrity is negotiated and contested. The material presented here is based on an analysis of news coverage of the 35-year-long conflict over Tasmanian wilderness and interviews with journalists, activists and government/industry public relations specialists, and thus explores textual outcomes but also behind-the-scenes production dynamics and changing political/media contexts over time. The paper finds the media acting in complex and often contradictory ways as they struggle to retain control of the news agenda. It also argues that by attending to these empirical complexities and the changing dynamics over time of the celebrity–movement–media interaction, we are better equipped to address contemporary concerns about the state of the media as public sphere.*

**KEYWORDS** celebrity; environmental protest; news access; political conflict; social movements; source–media relations

### **Introduction**

Celebrity as strategy to gain news access is a well-established practice in modern environmental politics, yet the interaction between celebrity, protest and the news remains under-analysed. This paper contends that by moving beyond formal politics to the sphere of movement politics and its juncture with media and celebrity, we have the possibility of better understanding the changing dynamics of media roles in broader political conflict. More specifically, we can gain new insights into how celebrity and other symbols function in mediatised politics, how non-elite political challengers can strategically gain and maintain news access, and how power is negotiated and contested by journalists and their sources. All are issues that go to the heart of contemporary concerns and debates about the state of the public sphere.

This paper addresses these issues by presenting research into celebrity protest in the ongoing political conflict over the Tasmanian environment. Australia's southern island state is the location of one of the most deeply contested environmental debates in the world, racked by almost four decades of bitter political and social conflict over wilderness and development. Described as the only political system in the world primarily informed by the environment (Hay, 1991, p. 64), Tasmania is home to both the world's first green party and the first environmental conflict to create international interest. The conflict has been ongoing, unrelenting—and mediatised. Here, the media have done more than

*Journalism Studies*, Vol. 7, No 6, 2006

ISSN 1461-670X print/1469-9699 online/06/060907-15

© 2006 Taylor & Francis DOI: 10.1080/14616700600980686

simply report the conflict or provide an arena on which the battle is fought. They have been a key player: negotiating access, shaping meanings, circulating symbols, pushing for actions, contesting decisions. Another key player has been the environment movement, deploying celebrity and other symbols as strategy to interrupt media and industry/government power and gain ongoing positive news access. As such, the Tasmanian conflict provides a significant case study opportunity to analyse the historical specificities and changing dynamics of the relationship between celebrity, environmental movement and news over the last 30-plus years.

Two key research findings are presented. The first shows a significant change in the nature of the relationship between news, politics and celebrities, with celebrities *per se*—as opposed to prominent people with expertise in or previous links to an issue—now recognised in the news as legitimate voices in the environmental/political discourse. However, the second main finding indicates that this legitimacy may come at a price, with a primary variable being a celebrity's association with certain non-elite political challengers, such as the Tasmanian environment movement. Thus, despite the "major redefinition" of the media's function and mode of operation that has been identified in relation to celebrity (Turner et al., 2000, p. 1), we still find celebrity subject to many of the same organisational logics, professional practices, political economy factors and other influences on news production that have made protest such a problematic strategy for social movements seeking news access in the past.

In attempting to untangle some of the complexities and contradictions underlying these actions, this paper, firstly, draws on existing literature on news access, political conflict, protest and celebrity to identify salient themes and features, and secondly, presents key findings from the Tasmanian case study, isolating significant similarities and points of divergence between celebrity and protest events as strategies for news access. To conclude, it suggests several directions deserving of further attention if we are to understand better the celebrity–movement–media interaction, and argues that it is here, within the empirical complexities of the interaction and its changing dynamics over time, that we are able to attend to broader concerns about the media's role in political conflict and address contemporary concerns about the state of the media as public sphere.

### **Contested Terrain: News Access, Political Conflict and Celebrity as Protest**

Hall et al.'s primary definition concept (1978) has provided valuable insight into the power dynamics that provide "official" voices with news access, yet has proved not supple enough to engage with how alternative voices, marginal voices, gain access. And they do gain access. Every day, stories from unofficial sources, unexpected directions, are found in the news. How they get there is an issue of vital importance. If access is a crucial ingredient in "creating and sustaining the realities of publics" (Molotch and Lester, 1975, p. 237), the study of access is a study of power. Whose voices are heard and how is a central question for debate on the health of the public sphere/s. As Schlesinger (1990, p. 82) contends, "the conditions of survival of alternatives are crucial to the survival of any public sphere at all". To attempt to isolate how celebrity functions as a strategy for challenger news access, it is necessary to cross several diverse but inter-related debates in the existing literature. Thus, to begin, this section outlines the broad dynamics of news access and political conflict, and considers the interaction between media and social movements, the organised

"alternatives". It then describes current understandings of protest as strategy for news access and celebrity's linkage to politics.

For Wolfsfeld (1997), the media are an arena on which battles for political influence are fought, structurally and culturally. There is a large welcoming main gate for those regarded as "exceptionally eminent" and a small dark rear gate intended for the "exceptionally weird" (1997, p. 20). But once in, through whichever gate, the struggle becomes one over meaning and is, therefore, "more than a simple test of raw force" (1997, p. 55). As Wolfsfeld repeatedly points out, the stakes are high as the political standing of challengers can rise significantly among those who receive media coverage (1997, p. 67). Social movements typify these challengers. They can be described as an organised effort involving a large number of people to challenge a major aspect of society, either its authorities or cultural codes, from outside the political process, often employing unconventional actions or extra-institutional means (Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993, p. 115; Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994, p. 116; Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2004, p. 98). They need the media to promote their preferred frames and, hence, a complex relationship begins. Yet, while the movement and media relationship may be marked by a "competitive symbiosis", it is not a relationship of equal power—movements need the media far more than the media need them, translating "into greater power for the media in the transaction" (Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993, p. 117).

Symbols are sometimes the only resource available to movements seeking media access: powerful images, strong rhetoric, symbolic acts. Here, the image of a dying seal can mean more than a seal dying. It represents not only the pollution of the ocean but an environment in crisis (Anderson, 1997, p. 9). A starving child represents hunger, famine and a world gone mad. A big tree is a forest, an ecosystem—life itself. Shared understandings and meanings create a cultural resonance on which the battle for social change is fought. Here, symbols open the possibility of non-elite challenges to the "strategic power and routinised media interventions of dominant institutions" (Cottle, 2004, p. 41).

Yet, the mobilisation of symbolic power is not simple. Symbols shift. Sometimes movements create the shift, sometimes they simply monitor and adapt, but they must always treat symbols with care as misuse or overuse can see potentially powerful symbols dissipate into meaningless images, negative rhetoric. Hilgartner and Bosk highlight the importance of this in maintaining issues as public problems:

If the symbols used to frame a problem become too repetitive, if they come to saturate the prime public space, then either new ones must be found or the problem will usually undergo a decline because of its diminished dramatic value. Decline does not, of course, imply problem melioration; sheer boredom with that particular public drama may enable competitors to take its place. (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988, pp. 62–3)

The deployment of celebrity as strategy for news access trades heavily on the symbolic. While, as will be discussed below, celebrity as protest remains an under-analysed area, a significant body of work exists examining the responses of journalists and media organisations to staged protest events, and provides relevant insights into the movement–media relationship when control of the news agenda is at stake. For social movements, protest can bring great rewards, including entry to the news arena and subsequent mobilisation and validation, but it is an inherently risk-filled strategy. Studies of the news coverage of protest have found that events may be labelled and framed in

such a way that prevent social movements and other challengers from achieving political legitimacy. Halloran et al.'s seminal study of the 1968 London anti-Vietnam demonstration found that both press and television coverage of the event concentrated selectively on the same aspects, which left readers and viewers with a "generally negative impression of the demonstration and its participants" (1970, p. 311). In a follow-up paper to the study, Murdock (1981, p. 208) identifies why these definitions tend to reflect those of the "legitimated holders of power". The event orientation of news is one reason in that it ignores underlying causes and content. This, in turn, means that journalists need to frame these events, seemingly without context, for the reader. The links the media often identify are those that will be salient and familiar to the largest number of readers as possible, and thus tend to be not at the level of underlying structures and processes but at the level of "immediate forms and images" (1981, p. 215). Another reason is the presentation of events as theatre and spectacle, and thus emptied of their radical political content. Once the London demonstration was described in theatrical terms, and "therefore both transitory and 'not for real', it became simultaneously both entertaining and capable of being contained and assimilated" (Murdock, 1981, p. 216). The findings of Halloran et al. are reinforced by Waddington's comprehensive survey of studies of media coverage of public disorder, which finds a consistency across time, place and types of disorder (1992, p. 175).

Yet, recent research into protest events rejects the notion that the media do not allow them to become the catalyst for meaningful discussion of broader social issues. DeLuca and Peeples' 2002 study of the coverage of the Seattle World Trade Organisation protests, for example, argues that most public discussions now take place via television, computers and newspaper front pages—screens—and new technologies have created both new forms of social organisation and new modes of perception. Images have a premium over words, "emotions over rationality, speed over reflection, distraction over deliberation, slogans over arguments, the glance over the gaze, appearance over truth, the present over the past" (DeLuca and Peeples, 2002, p. 133). On today's public screen:

...corporations and states stage spectacles (advertising and photo ops) certifying their status before the public/people *and* activists participate through the performance of image events, employing the consequent publicity as a social medium for forming public opinion and holding corporations and states accountable. Critique through spectacle, not critique versus spectacle. (DeLuca and Peeples, 2002, p. 134, original emphasis)

Likewise, Craig (2002, p. 51) argues that "spectacle" is integral to the production of public culture and a language of public culture, and regards spectacles "as focal points that visualise issues and events, and generate public discourse". Both studies are positive about the value of public discussion prompted by the protests. The 2000 Melbourne World Economic Forum protests, for example, were successful in the sense that media coverage tended to problematise the issues of globalisation (Craig, 2002, p. 50), while in Seattle, the attention of a "distracted" media was gained by the symbolic violence and the uncivil disobedience, allowing the protesters' message to be "played more extensively and in greater depth" (DeLuca and Peeples, 2002, p. 144).

How does celebrity compare as a form of political protest, as strategy to gain news access for social movements? A rich and diverse body of literature has analysed the relationship between celebrity and media from Boorstin's *The Image* (1972 [1961]) to more recently Gamson (1994), Turner et al. (2000), Rojek (2001), West and Ormon (2003) and Turner (2004). Here, the celebrity-politics-news nexus tends to be considered in relation

to the role celebrity plays in the formal political sphere—that is, in terms of celebrity support for candidates, celebrities standing for office themselves, or the celebrityisation of political leaders. Nevertheless, insights are found into the role fame plays in contemporary mediated politics that are of relevance to this study.

Celebrity now has a greatly expanded presence in the news media, a result of the incorporation of the publicity and promotions industries into “all aspects of media production” (Turner et al., 2000, p. 1). It is expected to provide the solution to the problems of contemporary life, thus “celebrities are called on to (and do) carry meaning in situations far beyond what might reasonably be seen to be their professional expertise and to audiences far exceeding those who might be supposed to be interested in the products they represent” (Turner et al., 2000, p. 164).

A defining characteristic of contemporary times is what is popularly called “information overload”, and celebrities can be seen as one way in which to short-circuit this. As advertisers all know, the individual celebrity persona provides a powerful condensation of meaning which can be attached to commodities and issues; similarly, celebrities can act as prisms through which social complexity is brought back to the human level. (Turner et al., 2000, p. 166)

How this translates to the political realm has been a central point of reflection in the United States, where celebrities may use their fame to gain political power, but also in the United Kingdom and Australia, where political identities may be celebrityised. For Turner (2004, p. 134), however, the discourse of inauthenticity that surrounds celebrity in Australia and the UK both constrains the individual celebrity from running for office and the politician who celebrityises politics or “subordinates the representation of the political issues to the celebrityised persona of the politician” and thus is perceived to diminish the capacity for public debate.

The celebrity of political leadership and celebrities *per se*, then, can crystallise issues, create meanings and humanise institutions (Marshall, 1997, p. 244; Turner, 2004, p. 85). However, cultural hegemony is not easily achieved, and meanings can remain uncontrolled. Here, similar questions arise when considering both celebrity and protest events as strategies to gain news access. Most importantly, we need to ask how do protest events and the deployment of celebrity influence the ability of political challengers to gain long-term legitimacy? How does access in its crudest sense translate into the opportunity to negotiate meanings over time? How is it a hindrance?

Protest is an attempt to suddenly shift the political/cultural ground. It is often initiated quickly and finished fast. It is a burst of colour or activity that meets the space/time/entertainment demands of the news media. And this is primarily how it has been studied—short-term strategy and short-term impacts. It may indeed prompt issues to obtain public status but how are these sustained as public issues in the long term? In regard to environmental issues, what role do experts and institutional intervention play in the promotion and sustainment of an issue in the public arena? And, when extended over time, how and why are discourses prompted by disruptive events reclaimed by powerful voices (Molotch and Lester, 1975)? How can non-elite actors sustain legitimacy? Hansen, in his study of strategies employed by Greenpeace in the UK to gain media access, finds:

It is one thing for environmental groups to achieve massive media coverage for a short period of time in relation to specific issues. It is quite a different task to achieve and

maintain a position as an “established”, authoritative and legitimate actor in the continuous process of claims-making and policy-making on environmental matters. (Hansen, 1993, p. 151)

Recent discussions on protest, such as those provided by Craig (2002) and DeLuca and Peeples (2002), argue that spectacle can indeed become a catalyst for non-elite challenger news access. Nevertheless, I would suggest that it has yet to be shown if and how images, symbols, slogans and spectacle act as catalysts for such access and, indeed, public debate in the long term. Media research that looks across time and is grounded in history is better equipped to ask how protest and other symbolic acts, such as the deployment of celebrity, provide news access in the long term for political challengers, and how the news media and challengers negotiate such access over time. It is also able to consider the eventual impact of such strategic activity on the power of the symbols themselves.

### **Background and Method**

The material presented here emerges from a larger study of the ongoing Tasmanian wilderness conflict (Lester, 2005). For almost four decades, Tasmania has been the site of a bitter dispute over land use and the environment. The battle to prevent the damming of Lake Pedder in Tasmania’s remote south-west was a seminal moment in Australian environmental history (Doyle, 2000, p. 115; Hutton, 1987, p. 2). While the lake was drowned for hydro-electricity in 1972, from the campaign emerged the modern environment movement in Australia (Lohrey, 2002, p. 9); the world’s first green party, the United Tasmania Group, which stood candidates in the 1972 Tasmanian election under a charter which began by declaring its members “united in a global movement for survival” and “rejecting any view of man which gives him the right to exploit all of nature” (Pybus and Flanagan, 1990, p. 34); and a mutual recognition of the value of a media–movement relationship (Lester, 2005, p. 52). The campaign to save the Franklin River, again in the south-west and again earmarked for hydro-electric development, came a decade later. With 1272 people arrested in World Heritage-listed wilderness over the summer of 1982–83 and attracting international media, identities and organisations, it has been described as the first environmental campaign to attain global stature (Hay, 1991, p. 64). Throughout the 1980s, logging in various National Estate forests around the island prompted bitter, sometimes violent, protests, as did ultimately abandoned plans for a massive pulp mill in 1989. The mid-1990s saw a protracted campaign to prevent road construction in an area in the state’s north-west, now known as the Tarkine. Recent debate has centred on the clearfelling and woodchipping of old-growth forests, including in the Styx Valley near the Tasmanian capital, Hobart, and associated forestry practices, with more than four million tonnes of wood chips exported annually. A proposed A\$1.3 billion pulp mill is set to increase woodchip production to seven million tonnes.

A methodology was designed for the investigation that attempted to grapple with what Allan (2004, p. 3) describes as the “messy complexities, and troublesome contradictions, which otherwise tend to be neatly swept under the conceptual carpet”, and draws on both quantitative and qualitative analysis of local, interstate and national media texts, 25 semi-structured interviews with main actors, including journalists, environmental activists, Greens MPs, and industry and government public relations specialists; and direct observation of protest and celebrity events. This approach follows the recognition among

researchers in the area of source–media relations of “the need to supplement a media-based assessment of source activity with observational analysis, or interviews with source representatives themselves, in order fully to assess their success or failure in influencing agendas” (Anderson, 1997, p. 37). Thus, the interviews and direct observation allowed an examination of how agendas were formulated and executed, while the textual analysis—following Hansen et al. (1998), Deacon et al. (1999) and Gitlin’s understanding of media frames as providing a key analytical site (1980, p. 7)—allowed an examination of actual outcomes.

The primary media outlets were selected for analysis on the basis of their ongoing, detailed coverage of Tasmanian environmental issues throughout the research period, that is, the mid-1960s to the present: the Hobart metropolitan newspaper *The Mercury*, published since 1854 and a tabloid since 1993, was bought by Rupert Murdoch’s News Limited in 1986 and has an average Monday to Saturday circulation of 53,000; the Melbourne metropolitan broadsheet *The Age*, also published since 1854, is owned by the Fairfax group and is the paper of choice for the educated middle class, with a Monday to Saturday circulation of just over 200,000; and the public broadcaster’s ABC television news, which generally has the lowest audience of the three Tasmanian-produced news bulletins. Other newspaper, television and radio reports were also extensively accessed, including the national broadsheet, *The Australian*; regional tabloids Launceston-based *The Examiner* and Burnie-based *The Advocate*; ABC Radio; and the WIN and Southern Cross commercial television networks.

### Contested Terrain: Tasmanian Wilderness

Throughout the history of the Tasmanian wilderness conflict, a gradual shift from prominent people with expertise in or otherwise clearly linked to the environmental sciences, politics, business or the “elite” arts to celebrities, well known for their well-knownness (Boorstin, 1972 [1961], p. 58), is evident. Entertainers—soapie stars, musicians, film actors, television hosts—with no special expertise or previous links to an issue are now permitted by the news media to participate in public debate, while in the conflict’s early period, their involvement was treated by the media as no more than a sideshow to the central news discussion.

During the Lake Pedder campaign, in the late 1960s to early 1970s, Milo Dunphy, bushwalker, activist and son of famed national parks campaigner Myles Dunphy, was a significant figure in the news, with his public appearances and utterances covered by even the hostile local press. During the Franklin campaign a decade later, UK television botanist David Bellamy was the most prominent of the well-known protesters to participate. His arrest and subsequent 50th birthday spent in Risdon Prison led newspapers and television bulletins in Australia, and was covered internationally. Bellamy’s prominence and the growing fame of Wilderness Society leader Bob Brown, legitimised after he was named “Australian of the Year” by *The Australian* newspaper and gained a seat in the Tasmanian Parliament at the height of the wilderness blockade, helped draw celebrities including entertainers into the campaign. Yet the involvement of these singers and soapie actor recruits created only minor media interest. The news media remained more interested in the actions and occasional arrests of businessmen Dick Smith and Claudio Alcorso, elite artists Guy Boyd and Lloyd Rees, writers Manning Clark and Xavier Herbert, and politicians John Button and Don Chipp, than soapie star Lorraine Bayly or TV detective Leonard Teale.

And this distinction was extended to international entertainers: Australian newspapers ignored a protest by comedian Spike Milligan outside Australia House in London.

A difference is evident in news coverage of the Franklin protests across the various media between the prominent person and the celebrity entertainer, with the involvement of the latter having little impact on the news discourse in the early period of the conflict. Journalists and news organisations made distinct choices about celebrity involvement, restricting access to those who were perceived as legitimate participants in public debate. Nevertheless, a more complex set of interactions is also evident, and here it is useful to turn to the media's coverage of staged protest events during the Franklin and early forest campaigns. As shown elsewhere (Lester, 2005, pp. 93–131), the staging of protest events allowed the Tasmanian environment movement to gain periodically substantial access to the news media: for example, the start of the Franklin Blockade in December 1982 led to a three-fold increase in the number of news stories on the issue in both *The Mercury* and *The Age*, while the environmental movement's anti-dam spokespeople also featured more prominently in the news than their pro-dam opponents. However, this quantifiable crude access did not guarantee ongoing, positive framing of the movement or its actions: these were, in fact, rarely framed positively in the long term. In a repeated but increasingly concentrated pattern, the news media responded to protests by initially reporting them as legitimate, novel and dramatic events. A change inevitably followed; however, this change did not, as one might expect, take the form of withdrawal of access. Crude access continued to be provided but the framing of the protests changed from genuine protest, real drama, to "theatre", "stage-managed", "farce" and "media stunts". I have argued that this reframing was a means for the news media to regain control of the news agenda and thus power while still benefiting from the copy provided by the movement and fulfilling journalistic requirements and expectations to cover the debate (Lester, 2005, p. 124). Consequently, we begin to see a range of contradictions come into play. For example, instead of the media forcing protesters to stay in costume for the sake of continued access, as Wolfsfeld (1997, p. 21) found, the media in Tasmania at times forced them out of costume. This is not to say that protesters were not labelled as deviant; rather in an attempt to regain power but also retain news copy, the media's message was contradictory. Protesters were portrayed as both "greenies", "ferals" "anarchists" and thus deviant, and as a highly organised, well-oiled, middle-class publicity machine with substantial institutional and political support. Thus, the movement's right to be either a legitimate definer of events or a grass-roots movement affectively committed to its political/environmental cause were both challenged, and control of the news agenda returned to the media and its more powerful sources.

A trigger for this reframing can often be identified within protest events; at the Franklin, it was a protester declaring his actions to be "environmental theatre", and thus not genuine protest, that sparked a flurry of stories questioning the legitimacy of the movement's actions and commitment. Even subsequent violent and dangerous protest situations at the Franklin retained this "theatre" framing. Professional journalistic practices and routines, elite sources pressing for protest and other symbolic acts to be emptied of commitment and/or meaning, and organisational and institutional pressures potentially lead to negative reframing of protest activity, and thus a strategically minded movement cannot afford to be too overt about strategy and tactics with the media.

This reframing dynamic is also evident in relation to celebrity protest. In all media outlets studied for this investigation, early news stories reported David Bellamy's

involvement in the Franklin campaign as evidence of the significance of the political conflict. For example, in a typical response, *The Mercury* reported under a London dateline:

World-famous botanist Prof David Bellamy is flying to Tasmania this week to join the Gordon-below-Franklin protest, and he expects to spend his birthday in jail. "It is vital that we save this valley, and I am quite prepared to go to prison," Prof Bellamy said . . . "We should say now that this piece of Tasmania, which is incredibly rich in flora and fauna, is sacrosanct from industrial development." (*The Mercury*, 1983, p. 1)

Here, Bellamy's commitment, expertise and legitimacy are to the fore. However, on arrival, Bellamy announced that he was in Australia for a "pure public relations job—something that I have learned in the past five years is the most important thing to have behind you", that he planned to attract "worldwide attention", and "I'm here to do what I'm told for once in my life. Whatever Bob Brown tells me to do, I'll do it. If I'm asked to break the law, I'll break the law" (Guilliatt, 1983, p. 1). By cheerfully valuing his "well-knownness" above his scientific credentials and dismissing his independence, Bellamy had overtly drawn attention to his role as strategy for news access. Reframing quickly followed. In a particularly direct but substantially typical response, on 18 January 1983, *The Age's* commentator Michael Barnard wrote:

The "on-site" entry of English television botanist Dr David Bellamy into the Gordon-below-Franklin debate on behalf of anti-dam protesters—or as he would have us believe, on behalf of humanity—illustrates the extent to which the campaign against the dam has been engineered into a media event . . . Dr Bellamy's doubtless heartfelt concern for conservation (which is not exclusive to anti-dam protesters) is not in question. But when he provocatively announces halfway around the world, and persists with the theme in interviews here, that publicity is the major point of the ballet and that he is eager to challenge the authorities to the point of arrest, then something needs to be said . . . There is in modern society a new form of pseudo-sacrificial creature—the Media Martyr—to whom the grand gesture seems nothing unless the Press, radio and television is in place, timetable and camera in hand. It is common knowledge, for instance, that from early in the piece anti-dam protesters have notified the media, when, where and how the authorities will be challenged to arrest them. (Barnard, 1983, p. 11)

Here, then, Bellamy's involvement is dismissed as a blatant grab for news access, and we see the link made between celebrity, publicity and thus unauthorised control of the news agenda. Bellamy went on to spend a well-publicised 50th birthday in prison, but his involvement retained an "entertainment" framing across varying media outlets; personalised, and thus, I would argue, emptied of political or scientific expertise and thus substance.

Two decades later, we find clear divergences but also important similarities in news coverage of celebrity involvement in Tasmanian environmental campaigns. The Global Rescue Station action over the summer of 2003/04 in the Styx Valley, an area known for its giant *Eucalyptus regnans* and the focus of movement campaigning over the last five years, provides the opportunity for comparison with the Franklin blockade in that it was the first protest action to take place within the threatened landscapes themselves since the pattern of negative media framing described above caused the Wilderness Society to abandon this style of action in the early 1990s. The Global Rescue Station campaign centred around a group of international protesters living on a tree-top platform 65 metres above ground in

a massive tree known as Gandolph's Staff and communicating their actions via a campaign website, which also acted as conduit to mainstream media outlets. Celebrity involvement provided important parallel action, and, here, the strategy clearly involved entertainers. Singers Olivia Newton-John, John Butler and Jimmy Barnes visited the Styx Valley—Barnes and Butler were recorded singing from the platform for the website and their involvement was covered by local and interstate news. Actors Sam Neill, Toni Collette, David Wenham and Sophie Lee joined singers Barnes, Butler and John Williamson and popular author Bryce Courtenay in signing a letter to *The Weekend Australian* criticising Tasmanian forest practices (Courtenay et al., 2004, p. 18), which generated widespread news coverage. In March, London-based actor and former Tasmanian Essie Davis was given the prime last speaker's spot over movement leaders, including now federal senator Bob Brown, at a massive forests rally in Hobart. In local news coverage of the event, Davis was the focus of a break-out story while Brown was not quoted at all (*Sunday Tasmanian*, 2004, p. 5). Significantly, Davis's right to comment on the Tasmanian forestry issue is not questioned in the coverage, despite a heavy presence of industry/government responses. In fact, throughout the campaign, the right of celebrities to be involved is rarely questioned. Here, we see a clear divergence from earlier campaigns.

The success of the celebrity strategy in this regard is evident from comments made in interview by movement organisers. This from a senior Wilderness Society activist:

The positive stuff is to have Olivia Newton-John there singing a song in front of a 90-metre tall tree saying, "Save the forests." The logging industry might grit their teeth about it but there's very little for the logging industry and their supporters to grip onto . . . [With protest action] you get, "They're blocking machinery, they're trespassing and all that kind of stuff, so they've at least got something to talk about and can muddy the waters from what should be a very clear and clean message which is, "There's this magnificent wilderness here that a bunch of greedy people are trying to trash without anybody knowing about it." And in terms of getting the message out, it's much cleaner not to have a confrontation, but simply have your own positive message without the logging industry present. And if it's someone like Olivia Newton-John, it gets almost as much media interest and it's a much cleaner message. (Interview, 10 December 2004)

Movement leaders identify celebrities as not only providing a clear message, but also the sense of a sizable campaign. Their effectiveness is seen to dwell in their relationship to the media audience.

There'll be people in the community who feel that that their personal opinion has been legitimised. And other people who've read it from both sides. The Wilderness Society says one thing. The loggers say the other. Where does the truth really lie? If you've got someone who they respect in another field that expresses an opinion, then that can help sway the person one way or another. (Senior Wilderness Society campaigner, interview, 30 November 2004)

Interestingly, it is a strategy unlikely to be successfully adopted by government and industry, as this typical comment from an industry communications consultant suggests:

We looked at doing it ourselves and saying, "Okay, who can we look at sticking up in the Styx or at a clearfell and saying, "This is terrific,"?" and you end up with people like [racing driver] Peter Brock or some Tamworth country and western singer and I just went cold on all these things. (Interview, 25 November 2004)

Thus, we see in the recent Tasmanian conflict a divergence from earlier campaigns, an indication, I would argue, of the shift in the news media's relationship to celebrity identified by Turner et al. (2000) and others. The environment movement has been able to capitalise on this shift by using an increased number and range of celebrities to carry meanings and messages to the public via a wider number and range of media forms. On their part, the news media have allowed celebrities to become legitimate participants in the public debate about the Tasmanian environment. A story on the most recent field of battle, Recherche Bay, clearly illustrates the change; here, the reporter does not distinguish between the involvement of powerful political figures of the past who had direct investment in the conflict and a current well-known Australian actor, David Wenham:

Greens leader Senator Bob Brown took Wenham to Recherche Bay after using the same see-it-for-yourself tactic with Labor numbers man Graeme Richardson in the 1980s and former Labor leader Mark Latham before the last federal election. The strategy was again effective. (Bevilacqua, 2005, pp. 10–1)

However, key similarities to earlier campaigns are also evident, and show that the organisational logics, professional practices and ideologies, political economy factors, and the influence and interventions of elite sources that have driven news coverage of movement protest in the past continue to operate and, at times, over-ride these more recent changes. Here, the news media continue to act in such a way that they regain and retain control over the news agenda, and the contest for power in the media–movement relationship remains as strong as ever. In general terms, the pattern of reporting/reframing identified in relation to protest events and celebrity involvement in earlier campaigns holds—they are initially reported as genuine and legitimate, before negative reframing. However, while once the reframing attacked the right of a celebrity to be involved in the news discourse, it is now the content of their protest that is under scrutiny. Australian rocker Jimmy Barnes, for example, was confronted with forest industry workers when he visited the Styx Valley on 16 January 2004. The following day, *The Mercury* ran a front page photograph of Barnes, his wife Jane and forests worker Bob MacMillan, under a heading “Jimmy Barnes: hero or traitor”, a play on the title of Barnes's hit “Working Class Man”. It reiterated the theme in a pointer to a page two story: “Working Class Man Jimmy Barnes came face to face with the workers in the Styx Forest yesterday . . . and proved to be less than a hero to them. As one union chief put it: “As far as we're concerned, he's a working class traitor” (*The Mercury*, 2004, pp. 1, 2).

Here is evidence that in becoming “legitimate” participants in public debate, celebrity entertainers are now becoming legitimate political targets. Their participation may be legitimised, but so too are the comments of their critics. No longer do celebrities have the safety of being just the entertainers in the sideshow; their actions, messages and affiliations are now placed under critical review by the media and its more powerful institutional sources. Yet, this critical response to celebrity involvement should also be viewed in terms of the familiar pattern of media–movement negotiation and struggle over control of news access and thus political debate. In the end, the professional practices and organisational norms and logics of news dictates that ongoing access for political challengers is never guaranteed.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to understand better the interaction of celebrity, movement and news media and its changing dynamics over time by asking how celebrity functions as a form of political protest, how celebrity protest relates to the changing logics of news production, and how news access for non-elite political challengers continues to be negotiated and contested. While further comparative research is clearly necessary before patterns identified here can be applied more broadly, the Tasmanian case study suggests several directions in which we may look as we grapple to understand the roles of celebrity and the news media in political conflict.

Firstly, as documented elsewhere (Turner et al., 2000), the media have undergone a transformation in and through their dealings with celebrity. Those findings have been reinforced here. Well-knownness is now a legitimate criterion for participation in political debate. While the visibility of celebrity in the news has prompted countless cries of alarm, I would argue that we need to look more closely at the role celebrity is playing in the news in this regard before pronouncing the poor health of the public sphere. Symbols have played an ongoing and vital role in extending news access to non-elite challengers, in this case, the Tasmanian environment movement, and the movement has treated celebrity as one strategy in its symbolic toolbox. Just as a photograph of a threatened river or a lone protester on a platform high in the foliage of a giant tree can be a powerful carrier of meaning, so too can a well-known person, and increasingly, a well-known person with no particular knowledge of or prior links to the conflict. The demand for information over image, for rationality over emotion, for substance over symbol, has come repeatedly over the course of the Tasmanian environmental conflict from the media and powerful institutional sources wishing to retain or regain control of the public debate, in part because movement power is largely based on the symbolic. Thus, while we need to continue exploring how the symbolic works in the public sphere, we also need to attend to questions of source power and institutional pressures and be aware of the inequities and unevenness of the media arena.

Secondly, in a related point, we need to ask how the increased resourcing and sophistication of industry/government communications campaigns, with their well-financed and highly visible play for the symbolic, may limit challenger access to symbolic power. As has been shown here, celebrity as carrier of meanings may generally be beyond the reach of the powerful institutional interests in the Tasmanian environmental conflict, yet we have increasingly seen the symbols and images traditionally associated with the movement appropriated by government and industry. Enormous, ancient eucalypts, for example, were a feature of government/industry campaign advertising in the lead up to the 2004 federal election, and thus emptied of their symbolic power for the movement. Will the loss of other symbolic weaponry force the movement into a greater reliance on celebrity as meaning carrier or, over time, will industry/government be able to appropriate this symbol also, as it has done with 400-year-old trees?

Thirdly, dramatic shifts in framing have repeatedly occurred over the history of the Tasmanian conflict, with an outcome inevitably being a loss of movement power. If, as Murdock (1981, p. 215) argues, the event orientation of news during the London riots of the 1960s left a vacuum in public understanding of the underlying issues that could lead to shifts in framing to reflect the definitions of the "legitimated holders of power", we need to now ask how the identity orientation of news in the current decade may do the same. Here, then, we need to attend to the precise mechanisms that cause/prevent

negative reframing and how this may interact with celebrity and movement–media power.

Finally, the media, acting in complex and contradictory ways to retain power in its relationship with the movement, now on one hand report celebrity messages as authentic political comment, but on the other, continue to de-legitimise movement actions through various factors and influences, including organisational logics, professional practices and by privileging the definitions of the powerful. Given the continuing negative reframing of the Tasmanian environment movement's protest activities, we need to turn our attention to celebrities themselves and the personality management industry supporting them in the celebrity–protest–news interaction. If the pattern identified here becomes more firmly entrenched and concentrated as it did with staged protest events in Tasmania, how may this impact on movement access to the celebrities themselves? Celebrities and their managers may pause for thought before nailing their carefully constructed identities to the masts of certain social movements.

To conclude, then, the deployment of celebrities by the environment movement is not, in itself, an indication of the poor state of the public sphere. Celebrities can bring substantial gains in short-term publicity battles. However, when played out over the long-term, the nature of the mediated conflict is reconfigured, with the media acting in ways to regain control of the news agenda, and thus reducing any power gained by the movement. In this familiar pattern, celebrities may be the focus of career damaging criticism, and thus become less willing to associate with certain protest causes and those promoting them, which in turn, may further marginalise non-elite political challengers. This process, which has at its centre concerns about the growing influence of the personality management and public relations industry on political news reporting and debate, is the subject of a follow-up study.

Protest has always been a dangerous, difficult-to-control strategy for non-elite challengers. While it potentially brings great rewards, particularly in the short term, its necessarily overt staging and play with symbols carry real risks. Celebrity, it seemed, could provide an answer, able to capitalise on the contemporary visibility of celebrities and their new legitimacy as participants in public debate. However, in the end and when played out over time, old patterns apply. In the contest over meaning that is the news, the media act repeatedly to retain and regain power from social movements, who are continuously forced to disprove their illegitimacy. So, after 35 years of conflict in Tasmania, we find an environment movement dexterous and flexible, continually searching for new and emerging symbols, images and meanings to carry its messages and forge a place in the public debate, and we find a media acting in complex and often contradictory ways, struggling to control the environmental/political news agenda with other powerful institutions and contending interests, but also occupying a continuing relevance and centrality in political life. It is vital that this interaction between movement and media and its accompanying roles, responsibilities and dynamics remain the focus of empirical study and critical debate because at stake is the diversity of our cultural, political and, indeed, physical landscapes.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Professor Simon Cottle, of Cardiff University, Dr Brett Hutchins, of Monash University, and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

## REFERENCES

- ALLAN, STUART (2004) *News Culture*, 2nd edn, Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- ANDERSON, ALISON (1997) *Media, Culture and the Environment*, London: Routledge.
- BARNARD, MICHAEL (1983) "March of the Media Martyrs", *The Age*, 18 January, p. 11.
- BEVILACQUA, SIMON (2005) "Show-stopper Scene in a Tense Drama", *Sunday Tasmanian*, 1 May, pp. 10–1.
- BOORSTIN, DANIEL J. (1972 [1961]) *The Image: a guide to pseudo-events in America*, New York: Atheneum.
- COTTLE, SIMON (2004) *The Racist Murder of Stephen Lawrence: media performance and public transformation*, Westport, CT: Praeger.
- COURTENAY, BRYCE, COLLETTE, TONI, NEILL, SAM, WENHAM, DAVID, LEE, SOPHIE, WILLIAMSON, JOHN, BUTLER, JOHN and BARNES, JIMMY (2004) "Styx Needs Saving", *The Weekend Australian*, 5–6 June, p. 18.
- CRAIG, GEOFFREY (2002) "The Spectacle of the Street: an analysis of media coverage of protests at the 2000 Melbourne World Economic Forum", *Australian Journal of Communication* 29(1), pp. 39–52.
- DEACON, DAVID, PICKERING, MICHAEL, GOLDING, PETER and MURDOCK, GRAHAM (1999) *Researching Communications: a practical guide to methods in media and cultural analysis*, London: Arnold.
- DELUCA, KEVIN MICHAEL and PEEPLES, JENNIFER (2002) "From Public Sphere to Public Screen: democracy, activism, and the 'violence' of Seattle", *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19(2), pp. 125–51.
- DOYLE, TIMOTHY (2000) *Green Power: the environment movement in Australia*, Sydney: UNSW Press.
- GAMSON, JOSHUA (1994) *Claims to Fame: celebrity in contemporary America*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- GAMSON, WILLIAM A. and WOLFSFELD, GADI (1993) "Movements and Media as Interacting Systems", *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 528, pp. 114–25.
- GITLIN, TODD (1980) *The Whole World Is Watching: mass media in the making and the unmaking of the new left*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- GOODE, ERICH AND BEN-YEHUDA, NACHMAN (1994) *Moral Panics: the social construction of deviance*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- GUILLIATT, RICHARD (1983) "Bellamy to the Barricades", *The Age*, 15 January, p. 1.
- HALL, STUART, CRITCHER, CHAS, JEFFERSON, TONY, CLARKE, JOHN AND ROBERTS, BRIAN (1978) *Policing the Crisis: mugging, the state, and law and order*, New York: Holmes and Meier.
- HALLORAN, JAMES, D., ELLIOTT, PHILIP AND GRAHAM MURDOCK (1970) *Demonstrations and Communication: a case study*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- HANSEN, ANDERS (1993) "Greenpeace and Press Coverage of Environmental Issues", in: Anders Hansen (Ed.), *The Mass Media and Environmental Issues*, Leicester: Leicester University Press, pp. 150–78.
- HANSEN, ANDERS, COTTLE, SIMON, NEGRINE, RALPH and NEWBOLD, CHRIS (1998) *Mass Communication Research Methods*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- HAY, PETE R. (1991) "Destabilising Tasmanian Politics: the key role of the Greens", *Bulletin of the Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies* 3(2), pp. 60–70.
- HILGARTNER, STEPHEN and BOSK, CHARLES L. (1988) "The Rise and Fall of Social Problems: a public arenas model", *American Journal of Sociology* 94(1), pp. 53–78.
- HUTTON, DREW (Ed.) (1987) *Green Politics in Australia: working towards a peaceful, sustainable and achievable future*, North Ryde, NSW: Angus and Robertson.

- LESTER, LIBBY (2005) "Contesting Wilderness: media, movement and environmental conflict in Tasmania", PhD thesis, The University of Melbourne.
- LOHREY, AMANDA (2002) "Groundswell: the rise of the Greens", *Quarterly Essay* 8, pp. 1–86.
- MARSHALL, P. DAVID (1997) *Celebrity and Power: fame in contemporary culture*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- MOLOTCH, HARVEY and LESTER, MARILYN (1975) "Accidental News: the great oil spill as local occurrence and national event", *American Journal of Sociology* 81(2), pp. 235–60.
- MURDOCK, GRAHAM (1981) "Political Deviance: the press presentation of a militant mass demonstration", in: Stanley Cohen and Jock Young (Eds), *The Manufacture of News: social problems, deviance and the mass media*, London: Constable, pp. 206–25.
- PYBUS, CASSANDRA and FLANAGAN, RICHARD (Eds) *The Rest of the World Is Watching*, Sydney: Pan Macmillan.
- ROJEK, CHRIS (2001) *Celebrity*, London: Reaktion Books.
- SCHLESINGER, PHILIP (1990) "Rethinking the Sociology of Journalism: source strategies and the limits of media-centrism", in: M. Ferguson (Ed.), *Public Communication: the new imperatives*, London: Sage: pp. 61–83.
- SUNDAY TASMANIAN (2004) "Massive Forest Rally", *Sunday Tasmanian*, 14 March, p. 5.
- THE MERCURY (1983) "Expects to Turn 50 in State Jail", *The Mercury*, 10 January, p. 1.
- THE MERCURY (2004) "Jimmy Barnes: hero or traitor", *The Mercury*, 17 January, pp. 1, 2.
- TURNER, GRAEME (2004) *Understanding Celebrity*, London: Sage.
- TURNER, GRAEME, BONNER, FRANCES AND MARSHALL, P. DAVID (2000) *Fame Games: the production of celebrity in Australia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- VAN AELST, PETER and WALGRAVE, STEFAAN (2004) "New Media, New Movements? The role of the internet in shaping the 'anti-globalization' movement", in: Wilm van de Donk, Brian D. Loader, Paul G. Nixon and Dieter Rucht (Eds), *Cyberprotest: new media, citizens and social movements*, London: Routledge, pp. 97–122.
- WADDINGTON, DAVID (1992) *Contemporary Issues in Public Disorder: a comparative and historical approach*, London: Routledge.
- WEST, DARRELL M. and ORMON, JOHN (2003) *Celebrity Politics*, Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- WOLFSFELD, GADI (1997) *Media and Political Conflict: news from the Middle East*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Libby Lester**, School of English, Journalism and European Languages, University of Tasmania, Private Bag 82, Hobart, TAS 7001, Australia. E-mail: Libby.Lester@utas.edu.au