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THE MONEY ISSUE

The Celebrity Solution

By **JAMES TRAUB**

In 2004, [Natalie Portman](#), then a 22-year-old fresh from college, went to Capitol Hill to talk to Congress on behalf of the Foundation for International Community Assistance, or Finca, a microfinance organization for which she served as “ambassador.” She found herself wondering what she was doing there, but her colleagues assured her: “We got the meetings because of you.” For lawmakers, Natalie Portman was not simply a young woman — she was the beautiful Padmé from “Star Wars.” “And I was like, ‘That seems totally nuts to me,’ ” Portman told me recently. It’s the way it works, I guess. I’m not particularly proud that in our country I can get a meeting with a representative more easily than the head of a nonprofit can.”

Well, who is? But it is the way it works. Stars — movie stars, rock stars, sports stars — exercise a ludicrous influence over the public consciousness. Many are happy to exploit that power; others are wrecked by it. In recent years, stars have learned that their intense presentness in people’s daily lives and their access to the uppermost realms of politics, business and the media offer them a peculiar kind of moral position, should they care to use it. And many of those with the most leverage — [Bono](#) and [Angelina Jolie](#) and [Brad Pitt](#) and [George Clooney](#) and, yes, Natalie Portman — have increasingly chosen to mount that pedestal. Hollywood celebrities have become central players on deeply political issues like development aid, refugees and government-sponsored violence in Darfur.

Activists on these and other issues talk about the political power of stars with a mixture of bewilderment and delight. But a weapon that powerful is bound to do collateral damage. Some stars, like George Clooney, regard the authority thrust upon them with wariness; others, like [Sean Penn](#) or [Mia Farrow](#), an activist on Darfur, seize the bully pulpit with both hands. “There is a tendency,” says Donald Steinberg, deputy president of the International Crisis Group, which seeks to prevent conflict around the world, “to treat these issues as if it’s all good and evil.” Sometimes you need the rallying cry, but sometimes you need to accept a complex truth.

Celebrities, and especially Hollywood celebrities, have always engaged in public philanthropy. In “An Empire of Their Own,” Neal Gabler describes charity dinners of the 1930s where movie-industry moguls would gather at the Hillcrest Country Club and outbid one another with gifts to the United Jewish Welfare Fund and other Jewish causes. In later years, movie stars and politicians treated [Marvin Davis](#)’s Carousel Ball, to benefit diabetes research, as a command performance. But the “grip ’n’ grin celebrity stuff,” as the publicist Howard Bragman calls it, has largely passed into history. Nowadays, says Bragman (whose coming book is to be titled “Where’s My Fifteen Minutes?”), “you’ve got to have something for People magazine to shoot you at. You can’t just get \$20 million a picture; you’ve got to serve turkey to the poor too.” The old Hollywood philanthropy was passive and dutiful. In those days stars were shaped by the studio system before being delivered to the public. Now, in the era of People and the E! channel and the global swarm of paparazzi, stars shape themselves, and their brands, through their own public acts. And their audience is not just fans but everyone; a star’s life is a kind of public movie. You have to do something with all that attention. As Portman says, “If they’re going to follow me

around and take pictures, I'd rather talk about Finca than what dress I'm wearing or who I'm dating or whatever nonsense people care about.”

Most celebrities no longer have charities; they have causes. [Eve Ensler](#) has enlisted [Jane Fonda](#), [Salma Hayek](#), [Jessica Alba](#) and others to perform her play “The Vagina Monologues” to raise money to combat sexual abuse against women. Next month, Ensler’s organization, V-Day, will celebrate its 10th anniversary with a weekend of “Superlove” in the New Orleans Superdome, where Ensler’s team of stars will celebrate the resilience of “Katrina warriors” — women in the region who have suffered physical or emotional abuse. [Ricki Lake](#) campaigns for natural childbirth; she understands, she says, that “doing something pro-mom and pro-baby and pro-midwife” is her “life’s work.” [Paris Hilton](#) was supposedly planning to go to Rwanda soon after she finished her jail stint, and Playing for Good — an organization that staged a three-day “international philanthropic summit” on the resort island of Mallorca, with “the acclaimed actress and philanthropist [Eva Longoria](#)” as the host — had hoped to use Hilton’s redemptive escapade as an episode in a reality show to be titled “The Philanthropist.” The show appears to be in turnaround.

An entire industry has sprung up around the recruitment of celebrities to good works. Even an old-line philanthropy like the Red Cross employs a “director of celebrity outreach.” Oxfam has a celebrity wrangler in Los Angeles, Lyndsay Cruz, on the lookout for stars who can raise the charity’s profile with younger people. In addition to established figures like [Colin Firth](#) and [Helen Mirren](#), Oxfam is affiliated with [Scarlett Johansson](#), who has visited South Asia (where the organization promotes girls’ education) and is scheduled to go to Mali. Cruz notes that while “trendy young people” are attracted to the star of “Match Point” and “Lost in Translation,” Johansson had “great credibility with an older audience because she’s such a great actress.”

The stars themselves have their own retainers to fend off the celebrity recruiters and to screen and sift charitable opportunities; publicists say their major clients get dozens of requests every week. The more deeply committed figures, like Angelina Jolie, retain firms like the Global Philanthropy Group, which, according to a representative, offers “comprehensive philanthropic management.” This includes establishing and staffing foundations, bringing in subject-area experts or even helping the novice philanthropist figure out what he or she actually wants to do. A similar organization, the Giving Back Fund, works with athletes like the quarterback Ben Roethlisberger and the basketball players [Jalen Rose](#) and Shane Battier.

Both the stars and the causes, in turn, depend on corporate sponsorship. It is the sponsors who pay for the galas at which the stars raise money for their causes; sponsors normally pay for the stars’ first-class air tickets and hotel suites. Corporations need causes as much as stars do. Like the stars, they understand that they must shape and protect their brand identities; and they understand that those identities will be judged by the broad public, through public acts. As Howard Bragman puts it, “Celebrities, sponsors and a cause: it’s the golden troika of branding.”

The costs are small compared to the good will. Thus [Alicia Keys](#)’s Keep a Child Alive, which provides antiretrovirals to victims of AIDS in Africa, has 78 “corporate partners,” including [CBS](#), Continental Airlines, Condé Nast and Chanel, to pick a few from the C’s. And just as stars have philanthropic managers to help them with causes, corporations with a cause can turn to celebrity recruiters to find just the right star. Thus Rita Tateel, who describes her occupation as recruiting and coordinating celebrities for “cause-related marketing and public relations,” recently hooked up Purina, which wanted to support “small animal-rescue organizations,” with Emily

Procter, a star of “CSI Miami,” who, Tateel says, “lives and breathes animal rescue.”

The celebrity-philanthropy complex reflects the hierarchy of stardom itself. Ricki Lake and midwives, or Emily Procter and animal rescue, occupy humble rungs; at the very top stand the global celebrities and the global causes — Angelina Jolie and refugees, George Clooney and Darfur, Bono and foreign aid. Corporate sponsors tend to drop out at these altitudes, both because George Clooney doesn’t need anyone to buy him a plane ticket and because few corporations are likely to view Darfur as a good branding opportunity.

These are the moral heights of the celebrity-philanthropy world, and they were first reached by rock musicians. [George Harrison](#) and [Ravi Shankar](#) led the way with their Concert for Bangladesh in 1971, but the phenomenon really took off in 1985, when the Irish rocker Bob Geldof helped organize Live Aid to benefit starving Ethiopians. That same year, several British entertainment figures established Comic Relief, a night of performances by Britain’s leading comics and other celebrities, broadcast by the BBC, with the goal of raising money and awareness to fight poverty in Africa. Each year, several of the stars would travel to Africa to monitor how the money had been spent and then report back to the national audience. Over the last two decades, Comic Relief has enrolled figures like [Keira Knightley](#), Helen Mirren and [Ewan McGregor](#) in its cause. The program has had a galvanizing effect on British public opinion.

It was Bono, the lead singer of [U2](#), who expanded this specifically British phenomenon into the U.S. Bono’s own involvement began with Live Aid; in 1997, he agreed to join the campaign to gain debt relief for the world’s poorest countries, an effort that involved high-level lobbying in Washington and elsewhere. In 2002, Bono established DATA, an advocacy group focused on debt, foreign aid, trade reform and AIDS in Africa. DATA demonstrated that the singer was in this for the long haul, and that he cared not just about clarion calls but also about the tedious business of developing expertise and political organization.

Bono used the leverage of fame in a way that few stars had before. He studied the issues, and he lobbied not just U.S. representatives but their aides. He approached [Bill Gates](#) and [George Soros](#), whose vast wealth has enabled them to become central figures in the world of advocacy, and made them his partners. He became a roving ambassador for Africa, traveling there frequently. And he shouldered his way into the places where the world’s most consequential decisions are made — Davos, the [G-8](#), the [World Bank](#), 10 Downing Street and the White House. Bono offered decision makers an implicit bargain: do the right thing, and I’ll say so in public. His currency was not just his fame but his credibility. Bono made himself into such a gold standard that the White House insisted he stand with President Bush in March 2002, when Bush announced the Millennium Challenge Account, his signature initiative on foreign aid.

And it was Bono, more than anyone else, who built the superhighway between Africa and Hollywood. In 2004, Brad Pitt invited Bono to his home to address a group that included [Tom Hanks](#), Sean Penn, [Julia Roberts](#), [Justin Timberlake](#) and the architect [Frank Gehry](#). Bono offered a potent magic: you could write a kind of song, or make a kind of movie, that would save children in Africa. And there was Africa itself — the real thing, the continent of suffering and want, as against the glittering bubble of wealth and fame in which celebrities live. In 2005, Bono enlisted Hollywood’s leading figures in an advertising campaign to promote increases in development assistance for Africa. One of his chief recruits was George Clooney, whom Bono invited to accompany him to the G-8 meeting in Gleneagles, Scotland; when the activists seeking more aid to Africa wanted to put pressure on the heads of state gathered there, Clooney was wheeled out to do the morning shows. He was assigned to buttonhole

[Paul Wolfowitz](#), then the head of the World Bank, to pressure the White House to increase financing for the bank's public-education programs in the third world. Clooney balked only at buttering up [Laura Bush](#). I attended the meeting and heard him tell Jamie Drummond, the executive director of DATA: "I just don't feel it's right for me to meet the first lady. I've been very critical of her husband in public; I think there's something unmanly about meeting with his wife first."

Now the path to stardom almost seems to run through Kinshasa and Khartoum. Clooney, [Don Cheadle](#), Brad Pitt, [Matt Damon](#) and the producer [Jerry Weintraub](#) – though mostly the first two – have created Not on Our Watch, a fund-raising and advocacy group currently focused on Darfur. They raised \$9.3 million for refugees with events like a yacht party in Cannes for the opening of "Ocean's 13." Mia Farrow has worked with the Save Darfur Coalition, which has tried to pressure China to use its influence with the Sudanese government. The singer [John Legend](#), who says that he was electrified by the experience of reading "The End of Poverty," by the economist [Jeffrey Sachs](#), has teamed up with Sachs on a poverty action tour, in which the economist talks about his antipoverty work in Africa (and the singer sings.) Matt Damon has established a foundation called H2O Africa, which finances sanitation and clean-water projects in Africa. Alicia Keys has Keep a Child Alive. And, of course, Angelina Jolie, good-will ambassador for the Office of the [U.N.](#) High Commissioner for Refugees, has become a tireless spokeswoman for the rights of refugees.

Microfinance is a one-star cause. Though for some reason the subject appeals to female royalty, including Queen Rania of Jordan and Princess Maxima of the Netherlands, Natalie Portman is the only member of Hollywood royalty who has dedicated herself to it. Perhaps this is because microfinance is a good deal more complicated than supplying fresh water to parched villages, and a good deal less glamorous than confronting the janjaweed in Darfur. The premise of microfinance is that very poor people should have access to credit, just as the middle class and the rich do. They typically don't have such access because banks that operate in the developing world view the poor as too great a credit risk, and the processing cost of a \$50 loan is thought to wipe out much of the potential profit. But small nonprofit organizations found that tiny loans could not only raise the incomes of the rural and small-town poor but also, unlike aid and other handouts, could help make them self-sufficient. And they found as well that if they harnessed the communities' own social bonds to create group support, repayment rates among the very poor could be higher than among the more well-off. (Indeed, commercial banks, apparently having recognized their error, have now begun to extend loans to the poor.) The idea of microfinance is thus to introduce the poor to capitalism. This is not, it's true, star material.

In 2003, Natalie Portman's senior year at Harvard, a very bad thing happened to a friend of hers in Israel, where Portman lived until age 3, which she says persuaded her that she had an obligation to do some sort of good in the world. (Portman has declined to specify just what it was that happened.) Perhaps, she thought, she could do something about Israel and [Palestine](#). She contacted Queen Rania of Jordan, the wife of King [Abdullah II](#), which is one of those things you can do with barely a second thought if you are a movie star. As it happened, the queen serves on the board of Finca, and talked to Portman not about the Middle East but about the liberating power of microfinance, which she was eager to bring to the region. Finca then operated in Latin America, the former Soviet Union, Central Asia and Africa; Portman, who knew nothing about microfinance, said that she would like to visit some sites before making up her mind. She was sent first to Guatemala and then to Uganda.

For someone who has been a movie actress since she was 11, Portman appears to be a thoroughly unspoiled person. We met earlier this winter in a Greenwich Village cafe. She wore a dark gray peacoat over her Finca T-

shirt. Her hair was pulled back, showing a face that seemed to be composed of the smallest possible number of strokes — an open face, without plane or shadow. Portman grew up on Long Island, went to a good public school where she entered a project in the Intel science fair and headed off to Harvard. It was a more normal life than most teenage stars have, but no less protected. “I didn’t know anything about poverty,” Portman conceded. “I knew it existed, but I didn’t know to what extent. It’s the kind of thing you see on commercials — ‘For a dollar a day, you can keep this child fed.’” These initial trips to the developing world, she said, constituted “probably the most important moment of my growing up.”

Portman seems to have lived a blameless life and is in no way a courter of controversy; and in microfinance she found a genuinely feel-good cause. Though she was shocked by the poverty, she was delighted and relieved to find that the women in Finca’s lending circle in Jinja, a village outside Kampala, Uganda, were grateful and generous and thoroughly friendly. “There’s as much joy and as much sadness” there as people in Manhattan or Jerusalem feel, she discovered. And microfinance was changing their lives. Portman returned to Uganda last summer and saw signs of progress over the three and a half intervening years. The woman who sold fruit by the side of the road now had a scale; the woman who sold meat had a refrigerator. Finca lends primarily to women, who, Portman says, use their money more wisely than men do and are likelier to repay their loans. Microfinance, for Portman, is a story of female empowerment. “When the women talk to me, they say how good they feel about themselves,” she says. “When you ask what’s the best thing about this, they say, ‘I can kick out the man who was beating me.’”

Portman didn’t have to do very much when she came back and became Finca’s international ambassador of hope in 2004; she simply made a point of talking about microfinance when she did any publicity. She appeared on the cover of *Vogue* and in the long story inside talked about her work with Finca. “The influence of that interview was huge,” says Christina Barrineau, then the director of the U.N. Year of Microcredit. “Anyone who Googled it immediately came to our Web site, and I was flooded with e-mails from young influentials who wanted to learn more about how they could help.” Portman became the “patron” of the Year of Microcredit, which so far as she can recall involved nothing at all; but her role brought the issue to the attention of other stars, including Brad Pitt, who traveled to Africa in 2005 and talked about microcredit to *People* magazine. Barrineau, now the managing director of the Financial Access Initiative, a research center that studies the role of finance in the lives of the poor, says: “My goal was to change how people saw poverty. I wanted people to see poor people as the solution, not the problem, and as the heroes, not the charity cases.” That, she says, has begun to happen, thanks in part to Portman. What made the actress such an effective messenger on this issue, Barrineau says, is that “she’s extremely smart, and she’s not controversial.”

Portman has since visited Finca sites elsewhere in the world and has talked about microfinance at Harvard, Stanford, [New York University](#) and elsewhere, not to mention in dozens of articles in women’s magazines. She has helped produce a CD, “Big Change: Songs for Finca,” and recently worked on a documentary on the organization’s work. She is the chairwoman (with Queen Rania) of Finca’s Village Banking Call to Action campaign, which seeks to serve one million clients through 100,000 village banks by 2010.

There’s no question that causes do a great deal for the brand identity of the stars and the sponsors who embrace them. But what, exactly, do stars do for causes? They raise money, of course. But that is often less important than raising consciousness, as Natalie Portman has done. John Prendergast, a longtime activist on African issues and the chairman of Enough, an organization that brings attention to atrocities around the world, says: “Celebrities

are master recruiters. If you're trying to expand beyond the already converted, there's no better way to do instant outreach than to have a familiar face where people want to know more about what they're doing in their personal lives." People come to see Natalie Portman, and they go away learning about microfinance.

Sometimes you have to see this hydraulic action to appreciate its raw power. In late January, George Clooney spoke at the U.N. after returning from his first trip to peacekeeping sites as the U.N.'s "messenger of peace." It was the only U.N. press conference I've attended where the speaker was mobbed by squealing officials bearing cellphone cameras. Clooney gave an exceptionally judicious and high-minded speech to the press. The first question was "Is this worth more than an Oscar?" Afterward, Clooney sat for interviews with CBS and NBC, CNN and the BBC, [Al Jazeera](#) and Al Arabiya and several European networks. His comments were broadcast all over the world, including on the E! channel. That was instant outreach.

Stars also have access. They have access to the moguls and the media barons whom they hang out with as a matter of course. But they can also get a meeting with foreign ministers and heads of state. "It's going to be hard for a foreign government to say no to [Nicole Kidman](#)," as Donald Steinberg, of the International Crisis Group, puts it. (Kidman is the good-will ambassador for the U.N. Development Fund for Women.) Natalie Portman could drop in on senators. And that's not only because secretaries of state are star-struck like the rest of us. (Though George Clooney, like Portman, does say that he is slightly embarrassed to find that members of Congress, whom he was taught to think of as Olympians, treat him with awestruck deference.) Power over public opinion is a precious commodity to a political leader. Nobody wants to be on the wrong side of a figure like Bono, who uses his global microphone to mete out praise and (more circumspectly) blame. Indeed, Bob Geldof, a far less diplomatic figure, recently joined President Bush on his swing through Africa and upbraided the traveling press for failing to give the president his due on issues of assistance and AIDS, saying that Bush "has done more than any other president so far."

When the goal is to increase public receptivity to a cause or a practice, as in the case of microfinance, it seems clear that celebrity advocacy can make a crucial difference. When the goal is to change policy in Western countries highly sensitive to public opinion, as is the case with debt relief, foreign aid or (increasingly) [global warming](#), stars can, and have, helped tip the balance. But the ultimate test of celebrity advocacy is when the goal is to persuade a recalcitrant country to change its behavior, which after all is the object of much of the world's diplomacy. John Prendergast, who functions as a celebrity go-to guy on issues of conflict in Africa, says that Darfur provides the perfect example. "A year ago," he notes, "there was no prospect of a U.N.-led peacekeeping force, and civilian protection was looking more and more elusive as the days ticked by. After intensive work by a number of these celebrities in coordination with work by strong activist groups, we have a unified Security Council authorizing a peacekeeping force, and China playing an assertive role behind the scenes in getting Sudan to agree to that force." But celebrity advocacy on Darfur has often been scotched by the same forces that hinder more conventional diplomacy. In December 2006, George Clooney and Don Cheadle went to China and talked to leading government officials about Sudan. "It was largely a pro forma exercise," Cheadle says. "There was not a lot that we got out of it."

Last April, [Steven Spielberg](#), who had agreed to work with organizers of the Beijing Olympics, sent an open letter to President [Hu Jintao](#) asking him to press Sudan to comply with U.N. mandates. China quickly dispatched a high-level envoy to Khartoum, and in August, the [U.N. Security Council](#) authorized the peacekeeping force. But China soon relaxed the pressure on Khartoum, and Spielberg recently ended his role with the Olympics in

frustration over Chinese intransigence on the subject. Sudan remains a humanitarian catastrophe, and the Sudanese president, [Omar Hassan al-Bashir](#), has continued to play cynical games with the U.N. and the international community. You get the impression that he's not terribly moved by what Mia Farrow or George Clooney or Steven Spielberg have to say about him. Bashir need not care about Western public opinion so long as China and Arab states and African neighbors support him; and they don't care much about Western public opinion either.

As stars increasingly move into the world of diplomacy, they will run up against the same brick walls that diplomats do. What then? Bono has for years absorbed flak from the left for praising President Bush, and for accepting a half or even a quarter of a loaf on issues like increasing aid to Africa. Clooney now gets the same harsh treatment for finding nuances on Darfur and reaching out to the Chinese. In a telephone interview, he criticized activists like Mia Farrow who say, "The time for talk is over." Clooney said: "The problem with that kind of talk is that you leave people with very few outs. If the time for talk is over, what time is it?" Clooney seems to be a diplomat by temperament; he says that directing has taught him to deal with conflicting agendas. Clooney freely admits that he did not hector the Chinese in his meetings. "They're a superpower," he said. "When you get into a room with these guys, you have to find a way for it to be their idea."

Many stars — and many activists for that matter — feel not only entitled but also obliged to engage in grandiose rhetorical posturing. Eve Ensler explained to me that the victims of sexual abuse in New Orleans and the raped and mutilated women in eastern Congo were caught up in the same "global strategy to destroy women," which she referred to as "femicide." Ensler was well into the link between global warming and patriarchy before I steered her back to the Superdome. This habit of categorical thinking is both the virtue and the bane of celebrity advocacy. Donald Steinberg, of the International Crisis Group, talks about "a simplicity on the other side of complexity" that some stars he has worked with, like Angelina Jolie, are able to summon — a ringing clarity that is not simple-minded. Bono likes to say that "statistics don't rhyme," but he has a gift for making them rhyme.

There's also, however, a simplicity on the hither side of complexity. Steinberg points out that figures like Clooney and Cheadle have a very nuanced grasp of the situation in Darfur, but most don't. "When you go on 'Oprah,'" he says, "no one wants to hear, 'There are 18 rebel groups who have to come together, and the problem is one of fighting over power and wealth sharing in the entire Sudan.'" The same is true with issues of development. "There is a tendency," Steinberg says, "for celebrities to treat Africa as a victim on a [Jerry Lewis](#) telethon. For many of us who believe that the future of Africa lies in real democratic governance, in trade and investment, in empowering the middle class, this conveys a message that's actually counterproductive."

I tried to draw Natalie Portman out on this subject. After all, one of the real virtues of microfinance is precisely that it treats the poor not as victims but as actors in their own behalf. Portman understands this perfectly well; she says that people should have the right to invest their money as they wish, and to fail, for that matter. But for the young actress, microfinance is an uplifting story, not an ideological choice between self-reliance and handouts. Poor people also need direct assistance, she said, from "programs that other people work on." Portman seemed to know enough about her subject — but no more than enough. I asked if she had the time to read books on economic development. Portman giggled and said, "I have time; I just don't want to."

That's not hard to fathom; Portman is a 26-year-old movie star. Still, she thinks of her discovery of poverty, and of this particular solution to it, as a pivot point in her life. She has stopped doing commercials. "I want to be

comfortable and proud of everything I do,” Portman says. She has designed a line of vegan shoes. She doesn’t want to be controversial, but she does want to be taken seriously. When we spoke, Portman was about to leave for London on a publicity tour for her current film, “The Other Boleyn Girl.” Trying to be obliging, I said, “Would you like to say anything about your movie?” Portman laughed and said, “No.”

James Traub, a contributing writer, is working on a book about democracy promotion.

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