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Call Me Maybe: An Analysis of the Effect of the Celebrity Persona on the American Telethon

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors
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Honors Capstone Project in Communication and Rhetorical Studies

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between the celebrity persona and the American telethon. Today, it is rare to find a celebrity that is not connected to a specific, charitable or social cause, making apparent strides in the charity industry because of their ability to influence the general public. In the last 70 years, telethons have evolved in a myriad of ways because celebrities and charity are intertwined. Most significantly, the seriousness and sacredness of the American telethon has decreased because of how many telethons are currently in existence. Additionally, an increase in the number of celebrities involved in telethons has contributed to this loss of inviolability. Evaluated through a descriptive analytical lens, this thesis examines three telethon events to paint a picture of this evolution and to demonstrate how celebrities from Jerry Lewis to Kanye West have played a role in the progression and eventual commercialization of telethons. Celebrities have learned from the standards Lewis set, both building upon them and steering clear of the ways in which he tarnished the relationship between celebrity and charity with his exaggerated persuasive appeals. These events do have a right to shy away from what was once considered to be the “gold standard” of telethons. There is no one formula; it is more so about striking the proper balance between charity and celebrity to ensure that the new standard reflects the goals and ideals its telethon has set out to achieve.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A phenomenon that defined American culture for the latter half of the 20th century, the telethon is a unique invention that has done remarkably well at remaining relevant in the modern era. What may seem like an outdated invention, telethons have raised countless dollars for a variety of causes, places and spaces over the last 70 years. Telethons, whether having done so deliberately or not, help to bring out the altruistic side in everyone a little bit more – both with those on screen and off. Telethons are rarely met without the presence of celebrities and other important figureheads in order to garner the support of audiences everywhere and tackle some of America’s (and the world’s) biggest issues.

This project studies the relationship between the celebrity persona and the telethon. How that relationship has changed and its effect on the modern American telethon is researched to determine what a telethon looks like in today’s standards, as well as whether celebrities have a spot at the telethon table. A setting that is primarily viewed as sacred and reverent, telethons cover a wide array of topics, most of which revolve around serious issues such as natural disasters, chronic illnesses or poverty, among others. It is not always easy for celebrities, often seen as flashy and over-the-top, to navigate this particular genre. Celebrities have learned to steer themselves through this setting; however, that is not to say their involvement has been met without criticism. Looking to debunk the idea that all celebrity involvement in a telethon is negative, this thesis aims to look at both sides of the equation – the good and the bad – that comes with the intersection between celebrity and philanthropy.

In this thesis, telethons are examined through a descriptive analytical lens. Three case studies investigate telethons spanned across a total of 64 years, uncovering the truth about how celebrities have affected telethons as well as what role celebrities plays in these ever-changing

events. The Jerry Lewis Labor Day Telethon (benefitting those affected by muscular dystrophy) A Concert for Hurricane Relief (benefitting those affected by Hurricane Katrina) and Red Nose Day (benefitting children affected by poverty) help unpack how telethons have changed over the years as a result of celebrity involvement. Overall, these studies find that the seriousness and sacredness of the American telethon has decreased over the years. Two primary reasons account for this decrease: an increase in the number of telethons on air and an increase in celebrity involvement. An industry has emerged as a result of the dozens of telethons that air yearly, undoubtedly commercializing what was once a unique invention. With the addition of celebrities into the mix, telethons are more likely to be irreverent settings, contributing to the overall shift in the telethon genre that was once a sacred, reverent place.

Despite these shifts associated with celebrity involvement in telethons, celebrities do not ruin telethons entirely. In fact, celebrities can be positive forces of change in an era where society is apathetic towards creating change. The para-social relationship, a relationship that occurs across a significant social distance, is the key contributor to how celebrities garner support for these important causes telethons promote. Without a celebrity on-screen encouraging viewers from afar to donate or to become advocates themselves, it is likely individuals will be less in the know about these issues and more indifferent about doing good. Telethons have expanded their reach as a result of the transformation they have undergone; celebrities have helped to bring a variety of causes and social issues into the spotlight with their prominence across multiple social platforms. As long as celebrities understand the fine line between what is and is not appropriate for the genre of a telethon in today's standards, the future of fundraising is a bright one.

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INTRODUCTION

Celebrities are like magnets, with the ability to pull ordinary humans at maximum force until it is no longer possible to do anything but become attached. Once attached, sometimes without even noticing, society becomes engrossed in their every move, action and thought. The media's production of celebrity has allowed for these individuals to become ubiquitous. Society's fascination with becoming magnetized to celebrity culture has created a world in which celebrities take center stage – in the movies, on the news and any other platform that can be viewed by mass audiences. Bring the American telethon – a 70-year-old tradition – into this mix. Televised fundraising events have long seen celebrities incorporated into their makeup. But, how does a celebrity persona affect the charity associated with a telethon?

Celebrities are known for highlighting the spirit of philanthropy when they get involved with a telethon – a medium in which millions can be included in the action. The argument that celebrities are a requisite to the charity industry explains why telethons have been keen on incorporating celebrities since their inception. In the last several decades, however, telethons have evolved in more ways than one – they are no longer a simple affair with a few doses of variety show entertainment scattered throughout its run. The first telethon aired not long after the conclusion of the second World War. In this time span of less than 100 years, telethons have changed drastically based on the relationships with broadcasters, ties to national fundraising or philanthropic organizations and the audience viewership in general. It was thought that telethons would end their brief run in the 1950s until contemporary cultural figure Jerry Lewis, who some hailed as the “king of telethons” emerged and completely rebranded what everyone knew to be the celebrity telethon. Although the MDA Labor Day Telethon, raising money for the Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA), no longer airs, many other telethons have taken its place and

continually reformulate into the telethons we are familiar with on screens across America and now, the world.

It is often said that celebrities do not belong in the realm of telethons because they are too different (personality-wise) from what the telethon is trying to achieve. Charitainment, or the idea that disasters are portrayed as short-term problems that can be fixed through supporting relief aid, is often associated with celebrities who get involved in humanitarian efforts. On the contrary, some argue that celebrities can successfully form relationships with those they do not know, thus helping move along the mission of a telethon. These relationships allow for celebrities to connect with communities through media while also allowing for them to change the social construction of that community. Celebrities have the power to convince the audience tuning into the telethon to donate or get involved in one way or another because of how much audiences enjoy interacting with celebrities across these significant social distances. Although it is likely audiences will never meet the celebrities seen on-screen, celebrities are masters of persuasion and, in turn, have the power to change the trajectory of what the telethon is attempting to do. By studying the evolving nature of the telethon, one can uncover how celebrities fit into telethons today, in an era where virtually every celebrity attaches themselves to a humanitarian issue.

This thesis examines how celebrities and their corresponding identities have affected telethons and their outcomes over the years. Today, telethons are rarely multi-hour affairs. The modern-day telethon typically takes the form of a benefit concert that is less than two hours in length. However, telethons have not disappeared, nor do they air without the presence of entertainment's most notable stars. This thesis looks to answer the question of how telethons have changed over the years as a result of the celebrity persona. There is a significant amount of

controversy, primarily rooted in Lewis's MDA Labor Day Telethon, that leads people to believe when celebrities get involved with a telethon, the event becomes a mere spectacle that does not have the telethon's best interests at heart. However, others claim that when a celebrity joins in on the movement, the telethon is enhanced as it can reach audiences far and wide. Albeit a phenomenon that has defined American culture for decades, the telethon is in many ways, outdated. The tradition of sitting around the television at home with the hope that Oprah will pick up the phone when you call to donate has somehow remained a constant after all these years. However, the chances of talking to Oprah herself while tuning in are quite rare. The celebrity industry has found it increasingly necessary to associate with a particular charitable cause – there is a subtle but implied guilt celebrities feel to attach this to their brand. This thesis shows the increase in celebrity involvement with charity over the years, and how that involvement has affected the American telethon.

“The telethon as we know it no longer exists.” Sabrina Cognata, award-winning writer, producer and storyteller claims this quote to be true. Celebrities have drastically changed the ways in which we think to fundraise, and it is no secret that telethons have evolved as more celebrities choose to get involved. However, by studying this evolution, a plethora of information can be uncovered about how to alter the telethon tradition in a way that can benefit not only the cause being supported, but the celebrity looking to be supportive as well.

Methods

Three major telethon events are looked at through a descriptive analytical lens – the MDA Labor Day Telethon, A Concert for Hurricane Relief and Red Nose Day. The MDA Labor Day Telethon is perhaps the most well-known telethon to date, albeit no longer airing. Hosted by comedian, actor, singer and filmmaker Jerry Lewis, the telethon began airing in 1966 and went

through many changes before concluding its run in 2010. Over the years, the MDA Labor Day Telethon has been called “the most successful fundraising event in the history of television” and has raised approximately \$2 billion for muscular dystrophy research and service programs (Muscular Dystrophy Association, 2018).

A Concert for Hurricane Relief aired with the intent to raise money, relief and awareness to those who suffered as a result of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The telethon, which took the form of a one-hour concert, generated \$50 million and was viewed by roughly 8.5 million viewers (Hall, 2005). The money raised during the event was donated to the American Red Cross Disaster Relief Fund. Celebrities such as Hilary Swank, Richard Gere and Harry Connick, Jr. made appearances throughout the hour; however, the most memorable celebrity appearance was Kanye West due to his impromptu comments made on live TV regarding how black people are portrayed in the media.

Red Nose Day, not just a telethon but an international fundraising campaign, raises awareness and funds for children in need. The movement uses red noses sold at Walgreens – one of the movement’s national partners – prior to the telecast to bring awareness to a day dedicated to help ameliorate childhood poverty. After the initial success of its fundraising efforts in the United Kingdom in association with its major charity Comic Relief, Red Nose Day expanded to the United States and has since taken the form of a telethon that airs on NBC every spring. Red Nose Day is supported by celebrities like Anne Hathaway, Jack Black, Julia Roberts and Lauren Graham, among others. Their faces are typically seen during NBC’s telecast and have become a part of the Red Nose Day “brand” over the years.

In this thesis, each telethon is analyzed with the same criteria in mind. Analysis focuses on three key components – celebrities involved in the telethon, statements made by celebrities

during the telethon and how those statements both affected the telethon and subsequently demonstrate that telethons have evolved over the years. Additionally, this thesis looks at the reasoning behind why celebrities choose to get involved in telethons. Is it for the sole purpose of promoting the cause at hand or are there other motives that encourage a celebrity to participate? A number of other criteria will be looked at as well; however, how the celebrity persona affects each telethon will be looked at in the greatest depth in order to reveal differences in the ways that celebrities engage with telethons.

Limitations

Although there are hundreds of telethons to choose from, these three cases – the MDA Labor Day Telethon, A Concert for Hurricane Relief and Red Nose Day – were selected for specific reasons. The MDA Labor Day Telethon holds the record for the longest running telethon in the United States. Additionally, it is considered one of the most well-known telethons and set the stage for those that followed. Relying on scholarship, there is also a significant amount of research and discussion surrounding the MDA Labor Day Telethon, making it a fair choice for analysis.

A Concert for Hurricane Relief reintroduces the idea of pop-culture political protest. This telethon, taking the form of a benefit concert, was chosen because of the significant ways in which a particular celebrity (Kanye West) demonstrated how celebrities use their stardom to talk about topics important to them. This case is a prime example of the why – why do celebrities choose to get involved with telethons?

The justification for choosing Red Nose Day is rooted in the fact that it is more than just a telethon – it is an international fundraising campaign that displays its year-long efforts in a televised event. Red Nose Day involves dozens that do not just partake in the telethon –

celebrities visit children affected by poverty in countries near and far. These visits are highlighted in short, “sizzle-reels” that are aired during the hour-long telethon. Red Nose Day was selected as a case because it is a telethon that uses humor as a part of its brand. Additionally, it looks deeply into the idea of celebrities as humanitarians and philanthropists – a topic that experts in the field have gathered a significant amount of research on.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The overall purpose of this thesis is to study the evolving nature of the American telethon and how it has changed over the last 70 years. Telethons are seldom seen without the presence of a celebrity. Through this descriptive study, the role celebrities have played in that evolution and whether or not their presence is productive toward the telethon's overall mission is identified. This review highlights some of the literature that exists on the subject and has been divided into three categories – positive, negative and neutral – according to the author's opinion on how a celebrity affects a telethon.

Positive

Celebrities have a long history of helping during times of tragedy (Asia News Monitor, 2010). According to Jonathan Taplin, film professor at the University of Southern California, celebrities and artists who get involved in humanitarian crises are doing something important. He says "They could be ignoring this, or they could be doing something. The fact that they're not ignoring it seems to me to be a good sign to everybody" (Asia News Monitor, 2010). Taplin produced the Concert for Bangladesh in 1971 and believes celebrity involvement with worldwide issues cannot harm anything or anyone; rather, their involvement is an effective way to get other individuals more in tune with what is going on in the world around them. Using George Clooney as an example, this article notes that the Hope for Haiti concert is Clooney's third major fundraising event. Once a celebrity partakes in one event, the likelihood of them becoming attached to a particular cause or the fundraising sphere in general is greater than them not getting involved in the first place, according to Taplin (Asia News Monitor, 2010).

Telethons can be seen as transactions in today's standards – entertainment in exchange for donations from viewers. Although few studies have been conducted on whether the amount

or quality of entertainment is a universal feature of telethons and other national campaigns, it can be said that entertainment and other celebrity-like features are nearly universal in this sphere (Einolf, Philbrick & Slay, 2012). There has long been the assumption that celebrity fundraising appeals encourage giving. However, there is little research that exists on whether celebrities are the best method for achieving this goal. Celebrity spokespersons and victims are two groups audiences connect to. Therefore, ordinary individuals become more inclined to donate. So, although people notice celebrity endorsements and can become familiar with the various causes their favorite celebrities promote, celebrities are not the only way in which the public is motivated to donate (Einolf, Philbrick & Slay, 2012).

Once extensive publicity has been created for a particular cause, an individual who sees that all of its friends have already donated will be more likely to donate as well. Conforming to what our peers do is another tactic that allows donations to increase – a celebrity may be the cause of that publicity, but it is the individual’s acquaintances who do the actual persuading in this instance (Einolf, Philbrick & Slay, 2012). Overall, there needs to be more research conducted on how national fundraising events like telethons can achieve maximum success. Those who have already conducted the little research that does exist say that the value of celebrity endorsements should be looked at because fundraisers already assume that celebrities help to raise money (Einolf, Philbrick & Slay, 2012).

Negative

Olivier Driessens, Stijn Joye and Daniel Biltreyst’s article provides a comprehensive, critical analysis of celebrities’ involvement with two charity media events following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. The article’s main claim is that celebrity involvement with telethons subsequently lead to aspects of charitainment, or the idea that disasters are portrayed as

oversimplified, short-term problems. The article recognizes the four roles that celebrities play in charity media events such as the telethon. All four of these roles, according to the authors, contribute to charitainment. Celebrities “add an aura of exclusiveness and glamour, render distant suffering relevant to domestic audiences, function as principal motivators and contribute to the commodification of charity” (Biltreyst, Driessens & Joye, 2012). This particular journal article makes it clear that these four roles do not disregard the benefits associated with including celebrities in telethons; however, the overall point this research is trying to get across is that celebrities contribute to the oversimplification of complex issues that telethons aim to raise awareness for.

Jerry Lewis has long been considered the “king of telethons,” specifically since the first telethon benefitting the Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA) in 1966. Research on spectacle discourse is plentiful and most definitely plays a role in the overall discussion regarding whether celebrities contribute positively or negatively to the American telethon. An article from *Journal of Popular Culture* does not dismiss Lewis and his behaviors entirely; in fact, this particular research states that Lewis’s multidimensional celebrity status is one of the key reasons that telethons were so successful during their inception and over the last several decades (Smit, 2003). However, a trend that has shown up in multiple findings indicates that celebrities contribute to the “spectacle” many associate with telethons that have aired since the mid-1980s. A telethon’s visual and ideological structure is coerced in such a way to encourage financial success. Many find using celebrities or emotional appeals as poor ways to encourage donations because it makes a spectacle out of natural disasters or having a disability or illness. Lewis used specific camera techniques and angles during his telethons to provide a “more complete image of ‘disability’” (Smit, 2003). Lewis believed his telethon would be more successful if he used these

tactics, among others, in order to persuade his audience into donating. Lewis created a spectacle out of the children his telethon aimed to benefit, with this example showing the negatives associated with celebrities' involvement in telethons (Smit, 2003). The MDA Labor Day Telethon is just one example of how celebrities were known for encouraging practices of spectacle, commodification and power; however, most of the literature that covers this topic does in fact surround the MDA Labor Day Telethon. Lewis set the stage for this idea and therefore is the subject of many books, journal articles and studies regarding this matter.

Neutral

Graeme Turner's *Understanding Celebrity* takes a more neutral approach to celebrities as a whole. Instead of agonizing over the debate of whether celebrities should be involved in humanitarian efforts, celebrities are analyzed across all forms of media in Turner's book. Celebrity is described as an innate quality possessed by those that are just a few steps above what is considered ordinary (Turner, 2004). Additionally, research suggests that celebrity as an industry is a better way to describe how celebrities have evolved over the years because of how we commodify and look up to these individuals. This is due largely in part to an increase in media and technology – we are seeing celebrities more often and can interact with them on social media, a concept that has not been around all that long. Celebrities have turned into such a commodity – their primary function is both commercial and promotional (Turner, 2004). This allows them to fit quite well into the world of telethons. The parallels between celebrities and telethons are as strong as they are today because of recent popular culture trends – when we think of a telethon, we think of its corresponding celebrity that has become the face or spokesperson of that telethon.

Changes in media and technology have significantly contributed to the amount of celebrities seen on-screen during a telethon. This correlation neither helps nor hurts the overall telethon; it merely makes way for new challenges that were unheard of during a time when technology was not as prevalent. In his journal article titled *Small Change – Big Difference: Tracking the Transmediality of Red Nose Day*, author Matthew Freeman uses Red Nose Day to put emphasis on his idea that telethons have merely evolved over time and juxtapose between good-hearted fun and scenes of poverty (Freeman, 2016). This evolution is a result of new, digital technologies inserting themselves into multiple charity campaigns. Today, telethons face the challenge of finding that perfect balance because of this change over time. Despite the challenge, these are media platforms that were not always in existence; they are now shaping telethons in ways that were never imagined before and benefitting the fundraising cause at hand. Telethons that use a variety of media platforms encourage audience participation and a subsequent symbiotic relationship (Freeman, 2016). With new forms of media, audiences can join in on the action and learn more about the cause being discussed during the telecast as opposed to simply watching the telethon absentmindedly from home. Celebrities are key players in promoting the message of encouraging individuals far and wide to donate using unique, modern-day methods like texting, social media and the internet, to name a few.

HISTORY OF TELETHONS

The focus of this project is on the relationship between celebrities and telethons. Before diving deeper into this bond, it is important to understand the origin of the telethon and how it has evolved into the spectacular production millions of Americans view multiple times a year. The first telethon was created not long after World War II (Longmore, 2016). With broadcast television, a recent mass medium thrust into mid-20th century America, the telethon became the newest tool that could reach thousands and tap into everyone's hearts, homes and wallets. Broadcasted by the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and hosted by comedian Milton Berle, the first telethon aired on April 9, 1949 and lasted 16 hours. Berle was television's first major star, resulting in the telethon being called a "broadcast sensation" with the accumulation of approximately \$1,100,000 for the Damon Runyon Cancer Fund (Waxman, 2017). Like today's telethons, Berle's telethon consisted of performances, music and everyone's favorite models and chorus girls answering phones. This telethon became an annual occurrence for Berle as he went on to host three more. Each was more successful than the last until February 1953, when NBC announced it would cut its broadcasting ties with the telethon as complaints of schedule disruption and canceled programs from affiliates overshadowed the telethon itself (Longmore, 2016). At this moment in time, everyone thought the telethon had ended its brief run. What happened instead, however, was a flourishing for years to come.

Telethons and their associated flourishing in the second half of the 20th century is largely in part due to the disability-related charities that had been at work years before television was an option to display the needs they faced. The National Society for Crippled Children and Adults (which was eventually renamed to the National Easter Seals Society), the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis (NFIP), also known as "March of Dimes," the Arthritis

Foundation, the United Cerebral Palsy Associations (UCP) and the Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA) were all forefronts in the revival of the telethon (Longmore, 2016). It was the leaders of these charities that contributed to promoting their causes on a stage for all of America to see. The first multi-hour disability-related fundraising show was titled “Celebrity Parade.” The 15-hour telethon was produced by UCP and broadcasted from Chicago, where many national television stars were brought in as hosts to boost fundraising efforts and audience viewership. The Arthritis Foundation aired its first telethon in 1953 from New York City and featured more than 300 stars from both the sport and entertainment worlds. The 1950s and 1960s were dominated by disability-related telethons. If you were tuning in to watch a benefit show during this time, the chances it was benefitting UCP or March of Dimes were high (Longmore, 2016). This general pattern of the American telethon went on for quite some time, until the late 1960s when Jerry Lewis emerged as the “king of telethons,” a name he was referred to by many (Romero, 2009).

The emergence of Lewis and his involvement with MDA created with it a new format that transformed telethons well into the turn of the century. Recruiting celebrities to help promote MDA, a new organization at the time, was one of MDA’s first goals when it was founded in 1950. Paul Cohen, MDA’s founder, took it upon himself to meet with comedians and entertainers who would be change-agents for muscular dystrophy awareness. One of those entertainers was Lewis. Dean Martin was also approached by Cohen, thus forming a duo that would change the way America thought about the ways in which they could support a cause. Lewis produced his first telethon alongside Martin in 1953 at Carnegie Hall in New York City. With NBC’s ban on airing telethons, Lewis and Martin went to American Broadcasting Company (ABC) television and radio networks to create a two-hour, late-night MDA benefit

show. Lewis and Martin were not the hosts but would be the following year when the telethon returned. Martin left the duo shortly after, but Lewis remained and continued hosting MDA-related shows in the many years that followed. Lewis is seen to have transformed the telethon in this era because he made a point to expand their coverage to more cities and more people. Telethons could now be called “national” due to their appearance in dozens of cities across the United States. 1966 saw the emergence of the first MDA Labor Day Telethon when MDA decided to air during this time rather than during Thanksgiving. The MDA Labor Day Telethon ran for 49 years until the 2014 *Show of Strength Telethon*, which served as MDA’s last telethon. The MDA Labor Day Telethon had already been trimmed down from its usual 20+ hour run time to an eventual two hours by 2013, three years after Lewis decided to stop hosting. The event no longer served as a telethon in the traditional sense, but rather a benefit concert that most modern-day telethons take the form of. Steven Derks, MDA President and CEO claims the decision to stop airing an annual telethon was influenced by “the new realities of television viewing and philanthropic giving” (Muscular Dystrophy Association, 2015). The new realities of television viewing involved just the opposite – with an audience more invested in fundraising via digital and mobile channels as opposed to sitting in front of the television and calling a number, MDA has since turned to different ways to raise support and funds, such as through social media and other digital channels that do not require the subsequent production of a telethon (Muscular Dystrophy Association, 2015).

The 1970s and 1980s brought with it a period of fewer separate, local telethons. These telethons were replaced with more telethons following the national format and taking place on a much larger scale (Longmore, 2016). Telethons in this period and the decades that followed were dominated by four major disability-related organizations and their respective causes. United

Cerebral Palsy was one of those organizations, stating that 22 million households had tuned in at some point to one of their shows (Longmore, 2016). Other organizations had similar numbers that were equally impressive, especially for a period where television was continually evolving as it surged across the American household. The Easter Seals Telethon was broadcasted to an estimated 60 million people during its most popular years. Throughout the 1990s, 40 million viewers tuned into the Arthritis Telethon. And of course, the MDA Labor Day Telethon with its unprecedented 100 million viewers was perhaps the largest contributor to charities' estimates of just how many audience members were watching telethons on their television screens at home – a quarter of a billion, according to their estimates (Longmore, 2016).

Just as suddenly as their popularity spiked, telethons were met with an equally dramatic decline. A *New York Times* article published in the late 1980s claimed it was cost that resulted in the decline in the number of telethons and their popularity. The cost to develop, produce and broadcast a telethon was pricy; unlike the 1960s, where television stations would often donate both time and resources, telethons in later decades came with hefty price tags because of the increased amount of time and effort it took to produce one of these spectacles (Belkin, 1987). Not only were fewer television and radio companies broadcasting telethons, these industries were evolving as well. The Federal Communication Commission's (FCC) requirement that local television stations donate their time to meet the mandate of providing community service programming was no longer an incentive once Ronald Reagan became president and deregulated many of the FCC's rulings (Longmore, 2016). These changes in the television business and government resulted in telethons becoming less traditional and altering their overall format. Not only did it allow for telethons to become more doable cost-wise, this reformat fit what the audiences wanted – something short, sweet and star-studded. And the telethons we view today

are just that – short (typically lasting between one to two hours), sweet (lighthearted in nature with no shortage of imagery that tugs at one’s heartstrings) and full of the celebrities they love. George Clooney, Anne Hathaway, Bradley Cooper and Matthew McConaughey are just a few of the dozens of celebrities many view as humanitarians, partly due to their involvement with telethons over the years.

Throughout this thesis, a variety of celebrities and statements they have made during their corresponding telethon are examined. The modern-day telethon typically takes the format of a benefit concert, includes celebrities throughout its programming and responds to one catastrophe, natural disaster or common cause going on somewhere in the world (Romero, 2009). Examples of various causes that have resulted in the creation of telethons over the years range from hurricane and earthquake relief, cancer prevention and research, child poverty, and terrorist acts such as 9/11. Because all these catastrophes are more specific and take the form of shorter, primarily musical events, their lasting effects will never quite measure up to what we saw in the mid-20th century with the MDA Labor Day Telethon, even with the involvement of celebrities (Romero, 2009). Regardless of length or overall format, telethons still manage to garner support in today’s world of constant technological changes and upgrades. Although these innovations may no longer require the support of this old-fashioned fundraiser, the telethon will likely remain relevant as long as the celebrity persona makes its way in.

WHY CELEBRITIES?

In addition to a background surrounding the history of telethons, prior knowledge surrounding that of celebrities and their history is needed to fully understand the analysis of celebrity involvement with telethons. Celebrity is an innate quality, possessed by those that are a few steps above ordinary. That extraordinary quality is primarily discovered by those in the industry, such as talent scouts (Turner, 2004). From there, we view that individual as suddenly different because of the ways in which media portrays them to be. Celebrities are plastered everywhere, on television screens, in magazines, at the movies and more. Celebrity commodification through promotions and publicity, as well as the ways in which celebrities are represented and treated by the media, help to define celebrity into more than just the word itself. No longer is there a mere celebrity that exists. An entire celebrity “industry” has resulted because of how much we commodify and come to look at these individuals that, as we described earlier, are just a little less ordinary than the next. As historian and social theorist Daniel Boorstin puts it, “the celebrity is a person who is well-known for their well-knownness” (Turner, 2004).

Fred Inglis, author of *A Short History of Celebrity*, traces the idea of celebrity back to the British monarchy and Elizabeth I. During this time, celebrity was not as much of an earned idea as it is now. Those who fawned over Elizabeth I and other monarchs alike did so out of obligation – acts such as cheering and children giving gifts to the queen were all considered duties because the queen was a predetermined role that warranted that sort of behavior (Inglis, 2010). Moving across the map, the idea of celebrity can also find pedigrees in Paris, specifically looking at Baron Haussmann and his “grands boulevards,” an arrangement that allowed for the most fashionable to both see and be seen (Inglis, 2010). Those who could afford the best of the best, the “haute couture” from the finest department stores, had the ability to show off their looks

in this way as Paris became the city that put appearance at the center of celebrity (Inglis, 2010). Those who were not as affluent could admire the spectacle and look up to these individuals – similarly to how ordinary people today look up to celebrity fashions, lifestyles, relationships and more.

Despite these two historical perspectives, the most generally accepted historical origin of celebrity is found in the 1920s with the birth of mass media, including but not limited to newspapers, radio and television (Wesolowski, 2018). Shortly after the end of the first World War came the invention of Hollywood and the idea of “the star.” Celebrity is often referred to as a product of culture and technology because of how film and radio worked to bring individuals into the spotlight for others to watch and listen to (Inglis, 2010). There was a certain reassurance associated with the individual recognizability cinema stars provided at this time in history. Over the next half of the 20th century, humans became celebrity watchers. An example frequently used by researchers is Princess Diana. The affection the public had for Diana paved a new path for celebrities and how the people consumed them. It was Diana’s particular form of celebrity – royalty – that attracted people’s interest and affection. And it was the death of Diana that many saw for the first time an unprecedented amount of public expression of emotion over the death of a celebrity (Turner, 2004). This emotion translates well into the sentiments many have about celebrities. Although we will likely never meet them, we feel an emotional, personal attachment to celebrities because of their prevalence in the media and other spotlights, places where we can get a firsthand look into their lives as if we are a part of them. Diana’s funeral became a media event watched by a global audience, everyone united in response because they felt as though they lost an acquaintance (Turner, 2004). Diana is just one example; however, most celebrities hold the power they do because of media and the integral role it plays in allowing us into celebrities’

lives. Some of the most notable dictators of the last century, such as Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin, turned themselves into stars as they persuaded thousands with their celebratory propaganda (Inglis, 2010). Rallies, parades, events like the Olympics and others allowed for the smooth transition of the world stage of politics into a celebrity spectacle. The distance that exists between celebrities and their audiences is what makes the overall idea of celebrity a sacred one (Inglis, 2010).

It can be said that there are many different types of celebrities; however, Chris Rojek, an author in the field of Celebrity, Leisure Studies and Popular Culture, narrows it down into three genres – ascribed, achieved or attributed. Celebrities can be ascribed through blood relations, such as the British royal family. A person can achieve celebrity status through competition such as a sports star. And celebrities can be attributed by the media; television personalities are one example of this (Turner, 2004). These three genres imply that through achievement, attribution will follow. However, this is not always the case as oftentimes there does not need to be any sort of significant achievement for someone to suddenly become famous and achieve celebrity status. This is seen with the example of the accidental celebrity, most often referred to as “celetoids.” Although the celetoid finds itself thrust into the spotlight, that spotlight is both short and unpredictable (Turner, 2004). It is rare that a celetoid would have a large role or even participate in a telethon because telethons are known to recruit established, well-known celebrity figures – telethon producers choose celebrities they know have a large fan base and will receive positive reception to garner the most support.

CELEBRITY AND CHARITY

With the basics of celebrities in mind, one can begin to look at how celebrities fit into the realm of charity and subsequently, telethons. There has been significant research conducted on the intersect between celebrity and charity, which is typically where debate ensues as many believe the genre of a celebrity is quite different from that of the genre of a telethon and its associated charity. It has been said that in popular culture, celebrities occupy influence (Drollinger & Wymer, 2014). Celebrity endorsers retain certain, perceived qualities that can positively influence an audience to donate to charity. Those qualities include expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, likeability and admirability (Drollinger & Wymer, 2014). When a celebrity provides trustworthy information about a charity to an audience, that audience is more likely to donate. Sometimes this information is merely logos, or logical information and facts; however, when a celebrity says it, the audiences will believe it more than they would were a non-celebrity to promote the cause.

The para-social relationship, or a relationship that occurs across a significant social distance, is a concept often used when looking at how celebrities interact with other, non-famous individuals (Turner, 2004). The para-social relationship has proven to be particularly effective for celebrities when they choose to get involved in charity or stand up for an important cause. These types of relationships have been occurring between average individuals and celebrities for decades, regardless of what type of media existed at the time. As a member of The Beatles, John Lennon and his urgency to speak out against Nixon and the Vietnam War led to the celebrity gaining a massive following of people who agreed with what he was saying about peace and ending the war. This celebrity took a proactive role in his attempt to persuade people to protest the war, encouraging them to host bed-ins, attend rallies and gather groups of people far and

wide, overseas and in America (Whitehead, 2012). Perhaps one of the most famous gatherings Lennon sparked took place at a peace rally in Washington D.C., where crowds stood at the Washington Monument and sang his famous anti-war song “Give Peace a Chance” (Whitehead, 2012). Nearly half a million demonstrators came together because of what Lennon was saying (and singing), even though he was all the way over in the United Kingdom. Although there was no social media at the time, Lennon came up with crafty ways to mobilize his audience to speak up and sing out about what was wrong in the world. Most people Lennon rallied never met him; however, their para-social interactions and desire to get on board with what he was saying is what drummed up so much of his support throughout the 1960s.

Looking at this relationship through a more modern lens, social media allows celebrities share to an extensive audience what they are currently up to, what they are currently thinking about and how they are currently feeling. Celebrities know that their audience, the millions of average individuals in awe of their stardom, is vast and broad, so they share how they feel about a variety of topics in ways that can reach the largest number of people. Celebrities are often effective protestors and persuaders because of the para-social relationship. Through our investment in wanting to connect with celebrities from afar, we quickly agree with and follow whatever they are generating discussion about.

Celebrities give off a second persona of sorts when they are involved with a telethon. Because of their recognizable attributes that distinguish them from non-celebrities, celebrities are sought after by consumer marketers, television producers, nonprofits and other organizations to help take a product, cause or mission to the next level (Drollinger & Wymer, 2014). Telethons and their celebrity counterparts, whether they know it or not, give off visual and auditory rhetoric that convinces audiences everywhere to give, to act and to not stand idly by but rather do

something about the particular cause at hand. It is a type of rhetoric that is not always deliberately created; humans are pulled towards the words these celebrities speak as they are personalities we are familiar with and apt to listen to. Para-social relationships are particularly effective and seen in the production of telethons often because the celebrity is speaking to us as individuals on the screen, in a place we are nowhere near. But that interaction creates a sense of community, a new dimension of sorts, that encourages whoever is watching to listen and do as the celebrity says – one of the many reasons why celebrities are so often seen in the charity setting.

Celebrities are oftentimes referred to as superficial, an image that has become engrained primarily from the tabloids many are drawn to at a newsstand or in the aisle of a supermarket. Whenever they are not referred to as this, they are talked about in terms of their talent or what they are known for. Comedians, singers, actors and dancers are a few of the ways in which we refer to those in the spotlight. Therefore, when it comes time for a telethon, it seems out-of-the-ordinary to include a celebrity whose persona contrasts so greatly from the somber affair that the telethon was created for. How can Jack Black speak about children in poverty during Red Nose Day if all we see him as is a comedian who stars in a variety of blockbuster hits? How should Jack Black navigate a telethon – should he be subdued in order to match the tone of the cause or use his comedic personality to appeal to his audience and encourage fundraising? There is a fine line that needs to be met; Red Nose Day is a special case as it takes pride in both fun and entertainment as a big component of what it stands for. However, the dissonance that exists between the celebrity persona and the charitable aspect should not be met with hesitation, but with belief in the fact that many celebrities are also viewed as humanitarians – humanitarians who are beginning to understand how to interact with and navigate through what the telethon is

working towards. This thesis analyzes that dissonance, both when it has worked well and when it could have gone better.

TELETHONS THROUGH THE AGES

MDA Labor Day Telethon

Comedian Jerry Lewis, often referred to as “the telethon guy” or “the king of telethons,” is known for his role with the MDA Labor Day telethon. Serving as host for 45 years, Lewis paved the way for the American telethon and its prosperous history. The MDA Labor Day Telethon has been called “the most successful fundraising event in the history of television” (Muscular Dystrophy Association, 2018). The first MDA Labor Day Telethon did not actually air on Labor Day; the telethon underwent quite a few other changes such as a shorter run time and a different format to match that of the more modern-day telethons that were airing in addition to Lewis’s. The MDA Labor Day Telethon ran for 49 years until the organization’s 2014 *Show of Strength Telethon*, serving as the final telethon for MDA. MDA President and CEO Steven Derks said “the new realities of television viewing and philanthropic giving” were reasons for the organization’s decision to stop airing its annual telethon (Muscular Dystrophy Association, 2015).

Lewis raised a significant amount of money – \$2.6 billion – between his telethons and other fundraising activities dating back to 1952. It can be said that Lewis set the stage for what the genre of a telethon would become, mainly because he dominated the telethon sphere in its origins and for the decades that followed. The MDA Labor Day Telethon is ritualistic – whether watching “Jerry’s Kids” on screen or waiting to hear Lewis sing his signature tune “You’ll Never Walk Alone” – everyone knew what to expect when they sat down to watch on Labor Day, year after year. That being said, a lot can change over the course of several decades. It would be of great concern if the MDA Labor Day Telethon did not evolve over its nearly seven decades of air time. Changes aside, there is something to be said about the telethon that established a gold

standard for telethons everywhere. The MDA Labor Day Telethon contains elements of sacredness because of how it merged celebrity with charity without fail for so many years.

“And I’d like you to meet one of the people that gives me the energy and gives me the drive to put seven months before this show, of laborious and loving work. And he represents maybe 135,000 of my kids. He is our national poster child, he is my very best friend. He is my pal and he’s one of the most super kids ya ever met in your whole life. And he loves me like crazy because the minute he looks at me he smiles and when I look at him I wanna kiss his head.”

- Jerry Lewis during 1974 MDA Labor Day Telethon (https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=97&v=9iLaE-c77M0, 0:37, accessed on March 25, 2019)

One of the most sacred, ritualistic things Lewis did during his telethon each year was discuss the children his telethon benefitted as well as bring out those children for the audience to see. This allowed the audience to visualize where their dollars were going – pathos, or an appeal to emotions, is something Lewis was known for. In the quote above, it is apparent that Lewis was invested in the work he did, a prime example of what a celebrity philanthropist looks like. What is most interesting about this tradition is that Lewis considered the kids to be “his.” He referred to the children as his own, which back then, created the brand of “Jerry’s Kids.” Jerry’s Kids is an example of how the MDA Labor Day Telethon created an atmosphere of institutionalized reverence. Lewis was known for exaggerating his rapport with muscular dystrophy victims, seen particularly in the above quote as Lewis refers to the child as his “very best friend.”

Lewis’s exaggerated appeals were a staple to any MDA Labor Day Telethon. Television producers of the MDA Labor Day Telethon were known for utilizing the cameras to provide what they thought of as more complete images of “disability” by juxtaposing differences in height in order to create a visual of what the disease does to one’s body. Additionally, Lewis and his celebrity counterparts remained tall in stature throughout the duration of the telethon, rarely kneeling down in an attempt to share the same eye level as the children or those in wheelchairs.

These staging motifs focused the viewers' attention to a physical difference in order to make more money (Smit, 2003). These exaggerated appeals and statements are something Lewis was known for capitalizing on. Lewis painted a picture of collective suffering whenever he grouped the children together, perhaps to better connect with his audience in an effort to encourage them to donate. However, Lewis's spectacle discourse surrounding children with muscular dystrophy was, and still is, met with criticism, particularly from the disability community (Smit, 2003).

“He’s not only a funny man, but he’s a loving man, and he’s a man that’s there for us when we need him, he’s always been there whenever we needed him. He is far greater a human being than he would like to have you believe because if you believed he was the human being we know him to be, he would probably be out of work. I can only be referring to the one and only Mr. Warmth, Mr. Don Rickles, ladies and gentlemen.”

- Jerry Lewis during 1982 MDA Labor Day Telethon (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2rB4Buo9qY>, 0:03, accessed on April 2, 2019)

Lewis's telethon "style" created an overall aesthetic turned tradition of celebrities merging with charity (Gotkin, 2015). Hollywood's biggest stars would spend time on air with children affected by muscular dystrophy and MDA-funded researchers searching for a cure. Arguably the pioneer of the telethon, Lewis's use of celebrities during his telethon broadcasts set the stage for telethons in the years to come (Romero, 2009). In one telethon with Don Rickles, in 1982, the audience got an idea of the kind of person Rickles was before he even arrived on stage. Lewis's description of him painted the picture of celebrity philanthropist as seen by many, a term used often in today's world of celebrities merging with philanthropic efforts, charities and more. Rickles, a stand-up comedian, actor and author, appeared on the MDA Labor Day Telethon nearly every year, alongside other major stars of the mid-20th century such as Frank Sinatra, Johnny Carson and Wayne Newton (Anaya, 2018). Whenever a celebrity made an appearance on-air, it would typically be met with an ask – "please call now, before it's too late" (Smit, 2003). This was Lewis's catchphrase; however, it was not uncommon for celebrities like Rickles

or others to make similar asks to boost fundraising numbers. Although Lewis made the conscious choice to use celebrities in his program, the MDA Labor Day Telethon's overall evolving nature into a star-studded spectacle begs the question of how sacred is a telethon to be? Lewis's unique invention quickly became a commercialized thing, leaving many to wonder whether this form of fundraising had gone too far.

"Welcome to my 60th year. And due to the fact that I am 84 years old, I'm not going to be on this program at any time without a stool. You should just know that it's a wonderful thing at this age, to sit. And I want you to know something very important. Uh, come head, who's on this camera. You don't want to show my button and the white shirt, come over here. Good! I got this man from the 3rd right, some years ago. I would like you to know, that before we even start, I want you to know that I received a letter from a big fan, and he wrote, 'I cannot wait to see your telethon because you're reentering the American mainstream consciousness.' That's a wonderful sound, that I am indeed, entering the American mainstream consciousness. That consciousness had been there for me over these many years and no matter how hard I try, they won't go away, they hang there with me every year. Now just as a matter of fact, there used to be 14 telethons in this country some years ago. There ain't none now. But we're here. And that means we've been doing something right."

- Jerry Lewis during the 2010 MDA Labor Day Telethon (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Kh63gRo_Gs, 0:00, accessed on April 1, 2019)

Lewis was sure to make it known that his program was the gold standard of telethons. Towards the end of his reign, Lewis would often draw attention to the history of telethons and how the MDA Labor Day Telethon was the sole survivor, albeit going through many changes over its run. Towards the end of the 20th century, various telethon programs that benefitted the National Easter Seals Society, the United Cerebral Palsy Associations and the Arthritis Foundation disappeared (Longmore, 2016). Despite experiencing a decrease in viewership for a period of time, the MDA Labor Day Telethon retained its sole survivor status because Lewis and his producers expanded programming to dozens of cities. Additionally, changes made to break from the traditional telethon format attracted more entertainers, celebrities and corporate sponsors to participate (Longmore, 2016). When Lewis began his telethons, they clocked in at

1,290 minutes, or 21 and a half hours. By 2014, the final year the MDA Labor Day Telethon aired, the running time was 120 minutes. Two hours is still a bit lengthy by today's charity benefit concert standards; however, two hours is nothing compared to the charity marathon that ensued for decades. In 2011, after over 50 years of tradition, the MDA Labor Day Telethon began cutting down its run time. Other changes, such as switching from a broadcast on Thanksgiving Day to Labor Day weekend, were instigated as time frames available for broadcast were slim. Doubters believed a telethon on Labor Day weekend would not be as effective because of holiday travel; however, it ended up being the most successful event in the show's history – thus creating the tradition of sitting around the television every September. All of these changes turned traditions is how Lewis got the label of “entering the American mainstream consciousness.” A writer from *The Atlantic* magazine recalls the feeling of when Lewis and his crew were on television – “it was more than just a show – it was an event” (Cohen, 2011). This feeling describes the awareness every individual had for the program Lewis orchestrated. This consciousness increased over the years with every Labor Day weekend broadcast. The American public knew Lewis for his telethons, his work with muscular dystrophy and his gregarious personality that kept him on air for so many years.

A Concert for Hurricane Relief

Hurricane Katrina devastated Louisiana and its coastal regions on August 29, 2005 when a Category 3 hurricane made landfall. Over the course of that day, the storm increased to a Category 5, making it clear Hurricane Katrina was to change the trajectory of New Orleans and coastal Louisiana for years to come. Considered one of the worst hurricanes in United States history, Hurricane Katrina resulted in the death of approximately 1,200 people and cost an estimated \$108 billion in property damage (Gibbens, 2019). Like most natural disaster-centric

telethons, A Concert for Hurricane Relief was organized in a matter of days as a result of the horrific effects of the storm. Celebrities such as Leonardo DiCaprio, Harry Connick Jr. and Hilary Swank, to name a few, were contacted to participate in whatever way they could. Eight and a half million viewers tuned into A Concert for Hurricane Relief on September 2, 2005, raising approximately \$50 million for hurricane relief. The television special was also nominated for a Primetime Emmy Award, under the category of “Outstanding Picture Editing for a Special” (Hall, 2005).

Albeit a benefit concert, some celebrity appearances throughout the evening were not musical performances. One of the most notable performances of the night came from Kanye West, who spoke about the lack of help being provided to Louisiana by the federal government. What West did on air during A Concert for Hurricane Relief is something many believed to be unthinkable, with *The Atlantic* magazine calling it “the most famous moment of pop-culture political protest in recent memory” (Kornhaber, 2017).

“I hate the way they portray us in the media. If you see a black family, it says ‘they’re looting.’ If you see a white family, it says ‘they’re looking for food.’ And you know, it’s been five days because most of the people are black and even for me to complain about I would be a hypocrite because I’ve tried to turn away from the TV because it’s too hard to watch. I’ve even been shopping before even giving a donation. So now I’m calling my business manager right now to see what’s...what is the biggest amount I can give and...and just to imagine if I was...if I was down there and those are...those are my people down there. So anybody out there that wants to do anything that we can help. With...with the setup, the way America is set up to help the...uh the uh, the poor, the...the black people, the uh...the less well-off as slow as possible. I mean, this is, Red Cross is doing everything they can. We...we already realize a lot of the people that could help are at war, right now, fighting another way, and they’ve...they’ve given them permission to go down and shoot us...George Bush doesn’t care about black people.”

- Kanye West during A Concert for Hurricane Relief (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1D32sfj0Vsk>, 41:22, accessed on March 18, 2019)

West did not appear on air until there were approximately 20 minutes left in the telethon; however, his words were perhaps the only thing left on the minds of viewers for the remainder of

the program. Although West tried his best to remain calm and composed in his words, his overall demeanor while on screen makes it clear that the words spoken were very much off the cuff and unscripted. West was very still and maintained good posture; however, he used many filler words (such as um or uh) during his talk. With his hands in his pockets, West came across as very casual and calm. However, once one heard the words being spoken from his mouth, it becomes more apparent that West was nervous about what he was doing.

Despite the negatives in West's overall speech delivery, his stunt was impactful in the moment and memorable in the long run because of its unexpectedness. West's role in this case study generates an example of institutionalized irreverence. Unlike in Lewis's case of institutionalized reverence, West's irreverent persona cuts against how telethons are supposed to run, going off the idea that all telethons are to be sacred, serious events. West's remarks, albeit serious, do not fit the typical genre of the telethon. Telethons have always followed a similar format, one that is scripted and clear. For a celebrity to mess with that was unlike anything viewers had witnessed before. A debate about what West said and whether or not he had any right to say it on live television suddenly ensued as it cut against the grain of the telethon individuals were used to. Although there is the predetermined notion that all telethons follow the same format with the same goal, West's irreverence leads one to question the goal of this telethon; perhaps it was not just to raise money, but rather to expose the racial inequality going on in areas affected by Katrina and around the entire country. The statements made on-air by West affected the telethon's goals in the sense that they created a shift in the overall discourse of the evening. A Concert for Hurricane Relief had the goal of raising money for the areas and people affected by Hurricane Katrina. West's attitude of irreverence shifted the focus of the night

to a different topic of equal importance and begs the question of whether telethons should remain in their roots as sacred, scripted events.

“With the breach of three levees protecting New Orleans, the landscape of the city has changed dramatically, tragically, and perhaps irreversibly. There is now over twenty-five feet of water where there was once city streets and thriving neighborhoods...and subtle and but even any ways more profoundly devastating is the lasting damage to the survivors’ will to rebuild and remain in the area. The destruction of the spirit of the people of Southern Louisiana and Mississippi may end up being the most tragic loss of all.”

- Mike Myers during A Concert for Hurricane Relief (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1D32sfj0Vsk>, 41:08, accessed on March 18, 2019)

Myers, contrary to West’s comments during the segment, remained completely on script.

This quote fits the mold of institutionalized reverence that Lewis had created for the American telethon – although West was suddenly improvising, Myers read from a script he quite obviously did not write, all from the teleprompter as if nothing is happening. One can nearly tell in Myers’s facial reactions that he is stunned by what West was doing; however, that did not change his decision to pretend like everything was going as planned. In an interview with GQ Magazine after A Concert for Hurricane Relief, Myers is cited saying, “I assume that George Bush does care about black people – I mean I don’t know him, I’m going to make that assumption – but I can definitively say that it appeared to me watching television that had that been white people, the government would have been there faster” (Andrews, 2014). Myers giving an opinion after the broadcast itself verifies his commitment to reverence during the telethon. Many celebrities aside from just Myers who were involved in A Concert for Hurricane Relief praised West’s remarks after the fact and claimed they were proud for what had happened (Tesema, 2017). Their remarks were not as powerful as West’s because they did not take place during the broadcast; however, they were a step in the right direction regarding the idea of celebrities using their power to get America into action mode (Tesema, 2017).

Para-social relationships works particularly well in the telethon setting because of the ability they give celebrities to generate conversations across an audience they will likely never have the chance to interact with face-to-face. Additionally, they create a sense of community – a new dimension of sorts – that encourages whoever is watching to listen and do as the celebrity says. This is one of the many reasons why celebrities are so often seen in this charity setting. West used the pull of the para-social relationship, knowing his audience would be influenced by virtually anything he said, to encourage them to think about how black people are portrayed in the media. West’s decision to make a statement about the government’s handling of Katrina in this setting was in fact irreverent; however, for purposes of persuading an audience, it can be seen as a smart move.

Red Nose Day

Red Nose Day is more than just a telethon; it is an international fundraising campaign run by Comic Relief Inc., a nonprofit organization based in the United Kingdom. The overarching mission of this organization is to end childhood poverty, both in the United States and around the world. Red Nose Day occurs annually in the form of an hour-long televised event that aims to raise money for this cause. Since its arrival to the United States four years ago, Red Nose Day has raised nearly \$150 million for children living in poverty. On its website, the organization asserts that it has “changed and saved the lives of 16 million kids” (Red Nose Day, 2018). This money has contributed to children receiving educational services, essential medical services, shelters for those who are homeless and meals for those who are hungry. Some of the campaign’s biggest partners are NBCUniversal, Walgreens, Mars Wrigley Confectionary and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Red Nose Day, 2018).

Red Nose Day capitalizes on the fact that they are comedic. Buying red clown noses (the official symbol of the campaign) at Walgreens not only bolsters fundraising efforts all year, it brings awareness to help children in need by reminding everyone that looking goofy can be for good. The tone of the entire telethon is a lighthearted, comedic one, despite the fact that the topics being talked about are serious issues. Dozens of celebrities have attached themselves to the Red Nose Day brand, some of the most notable being Anne Hathaway, Olivia Munn, Jane Lynch, Ed Sheeran, Jack Black and Kelly Clarkson. A combination of live celebrity appearances as well as pre-recorded videos of celebrities visiting with children in need creates the overall structure of the Red Nose Day telecast each year. This case study takes a particular look at Red Nose Day 2018, which raised over \$42 million in its one-hour time frame.

“As a country, I would like us to come together to end childhood poverty...and drop Olivia Munn in the dunk tank.”

- Chris Hardwick during Red Nose Day 2018
(NBC, accessed on May 24, 2018)

Red Nose Day is a telethon meant to not take itself too seriously – irreverence is a part of its brand. The celebrities involved with Red Nose Day use the campaign’s brand to help achieve the goals Red Nose Day has set out to accomplish. Part of this telethon’s ethos originates in the fact that it is comedic – the event’s mission statement seeks to “drive positive change through the power of entertainment” (Red Nose Day, 2018). The red nose has created a brand for itself and for those who wear them. They are people who are described as having “big hearts” and help others buy into the utopic idea that if someone does something good, it will create a chain reaction and encourage others to donate and help the cause. Most of all, Red Nose Day promotes the message of the power of the smile – when one smiles, the entire world smiles, too (Freeman, 2016). All of these characteristics do not make for a lack of respect, as irreverence suggests. However, they are characteristics that differ from that of the classic telethon format, such as the

MDA Labor Day Telethon analyzed prior. Telethons have merely evolved over time and juxtapose between good-hearted fun and scenes of poverty, always searching for that perfect balance (Freeman, 2016).

Another example of Red Nose Day using irreverence as part of their brand is in the video package “The First Time.” During the pre-recorded segment airing as a part of Red Nose Day 2018, a variety of celebrities are found talking about their first time donating to support Red Nose Day. However, to put a comedic spin on the situation, the celebrities make it sound like they are talking about their first time having sex. Kristen Bell is the first to talk about her donation experience – “Uh, well the first time is something that no one ever forgets. I mean it’s a big deal. I spent a lot of time thinking about who I wanted to do it with, and like, where the best place to do it was” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2tYhu1CP6c>, 0:07, accessed on March 24, 2019). Sasheer Zamata, known previously for her role on Saturday Night Live, claims girls are ready to do it before boys because “we mature at a younger age and we have more awareness of the world” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2tYhu1CP6c>, 0:35, accessed on March 24, 2019). At one point, celebrity Sean Hayes compares buying a red nose to buying a condom. He says he goes to the drugstore (likely Walgreens, with its official partner status), to make that “special purchase” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2tYhu1CP6c>, 0:51, accessed on March 24, 2019). Other celebrities appear in the video to discuss their “first time” until it is clear that they are actually talking about donating to Red Nose Day. Red Nose Day and the celebrities involved use this comedic tactic in the hopes that it will raise more money – it is something memorable that people can laugh at, perhaps relate to and eventually feel strongly enough about to donate.

“The last thing I always wanted this trip to be was to be the celebrity who comes over to Africa and cries on TV and says, ‘Send your money over.’ I really wanted us to come and like, be like, ‘Everything’s positive. Everything’s great.’ This is always what celebrities do, and I always think, ‘Ah, no, is it really that bad?’ And then I sort of turned up, and yes, it is.”

- Ed Sheeran during Red Nose Day 2018
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gq9EBMjOuo4>, 1:29, accessed on March 23, 2019)

It would be inaccurate to analyze Red Nose Day without looking at all of its moving pieces. Ed Sheeran’s visit to Liberia paired with the event’s more comedic elements is a great example of how Red Nose Day is a merger of the two telethons looked at prior – there is a side of reverence with Sheeran and those whose actions take a more serious tone, focusing specifically on individuals who benefit from the fundraising efforts. What is particularly interesting about Sheeran’s trip to Liberia video, seen in the above video clip, are his comments on the visit. Sheeran puts a spotlight on other celebrities that have done what he is doing now. He knows there is a preconceived notion that when a celebrity visits a place, they do two things – get emotional and ask for money. However, the footage Sheeran partakes in is expressive and raw because of his honesty about the situation – now that he is in the thick of it, he knows things are indeed as dire as they seem.

It is no surprise that Red Nose Day uses tactics of pathos to connect with its audience in addition to its humor and irreverence. Within this specific example, Red Nose Day’s pathos is balanced out with its overall ethos of finding fun in times of hardship and using it to lift those up who need it the most. Sheeran’s usage of the para-social relationship, highlighting the mix between celebrity and charity, shows how celebrities can better use their clout to connect with audiences without being disrespectful to the cause at hand. Not only does Sheeran’s approach successfully steer clear of charitainment, it encourages other celebrities to do the same – proving the celebrity persona can in fact bring fruitful benefits to a telethon event.

DISCUSSION

An article published by *Medium* claims “The telethon should be remembered as a singular media format that holds up a mirror to many important aspects of American culture” (Gotkin, 2015). Each of the case studies considered – the MDA Labor Day Telethon, A Concert for Hurricane Relief and Red Nose Day – reveal differences in the ways that celebrities engage with telethons. They also show how telethons have evolved over the years as a result of celebrity involvement. America grew a deep respect for Jerry Lewis’s telethon because of the ways in which Lewis crafted his messages and created a genre of telethons – one that is generally serious when it comes to the fundraising cause at hand. It undoubtedly became a part of American culture because of the work Lewis put forth. Whatever Lewis’s motivation for devoting himself to the telethon, it also seems clear that the telethon was instrumental in crafting Lewis’s image for several generations of television viewers. It is not out of the realm of possibility that Lewis put up this façade on television in order to attract viewers and create with it a brand that would last decades. Whether he knew it or not, Lewis created a cultural fascination with the MDA Labor Day Telethon, all in the name of raising money for research (Smit, 2003). Although Lewis’s persona gives off the impression that his intention was to respect and care for those with muscular dystrophy, analysis suggests a more measured assessment. Lewis often portrayed those with disabilities as weak; labeling them as “Jerry’s Kids” ended up demeaning the lives of those with muscular dystrophy, making it seem as though their lives were dependent upon an able-bodied person (Smit, 2003). The evidence of using camera angling in such a way to raise more money makes it clear Lewis was selling his telethon more than anything else. His practices turned charity into a business, which in the process demeaned those who benefitted from it. There is no argument that Lewis made strides in the research world for those living with

muscular dystrophy; however, his rhetoric and celebrity persona distract from what the telethon should have focused on – driving positive change without disparaging those affected by the disease.

Unlike Lewis, Kanye West and his persona take a very different approach to navigating telethons. Since September 2, 2005, experts have studied how Americans publicly communicated about race in the aftermath of Katrina (Czaja, 2007). One of the ways in which they communicated was via discussions surrounding West's improvisation during the Hurricane Katrina telethon. West used his ethos as a black man who experienced things similar to those he was talking about. It is unclear whether that was West's motivation to get involved the telethon; however, it is likely to have played some role. The irreverent persona of West does not fit the mold of the generic telethon; however, who is to say there is only one mold to fit? A Concert for Hurricane Relief demonstrated that telethons could be used as platforms to shine a light on significant injustices in the country and around the world. Instead of just raising money, West made it clear celebrities were to use their well-knownness to promote social change and make others aware of important issues. Highlighting the para-social relationship, West sparked conversation about whether race and politics play a role in the aftermath of a natural disaster. In an era with little to no social media, West's comments still spread quickly; conversations about what was wrong with the ways in which the government handled relief efforts in Louisiana were plentiful in the weeks, months and even years following West's statements (Tesema, 2017).

Some fifteen years later, it is clear that West's comments were just the beginning in a wave of celebrities using their clout to generate discussions and protests. However, some believe that the wave has stopped, and celebrities have talked more about raising money and less about enacting change like West did in 2005 (Tesema, 2017). Parallels have been made between

Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Harvey, which ties with Katrina for the costliest tropical cyclone on record (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2018). Similar to Katrina, Harvey brought with it questions of race and politics as it hit poor communities most vulnerable to flooding, causing some of the city's homeless population to take refuge in unsafe areas (Misra, 2017). Although many celebrities participated in *Hand in Hand*, a benefit concert to aid victims of Hurricane Harvey, there was no moment of irreverence like West's outburst during the telecast. And although irreverence may not always have a place in telethons, breaking away from the script every now and again is sometimes the best way to get America moving in the right direction regarding social injustices, especially during a time in which there is a particularly heated political climate (Tesema, 2017).

Learning from its counterparts, Red Nose Day decided that irreverence would not only find a way into its telethon; rather, it would become a part of its brand, all in an attempt to raise money for children affected by poverty. Examples used within the Red Nose Day case study beg the question of how important it is to search for the balance between seriousness and humor in a telethon setting. As we have seen with the evolution of Lewis's telethon to how West acted during A Concert for Hurricane Relief, over time, telethons have become more irreverent. The unique invention of one person has now become a commercialized, predictable event. Comedy, glitz and glam are all things seen across the board in today's telethons; however, these aspects of a telethon got their start ever since Lewis decided to shift with the times and turn his telethon into more than just a fundraising campaign, but a spectacle people could not turn away from. It is important, however, to understand when that irreverence has gone too far. In the case of Red Nose Day 2018, combining video that disguises donating with sex talk and a cause benefitting children can be seen to some as too aggressive to appear on air. Although quirky and fun, there is

something to be said about the juxtaposition between the two. With all the changes telethons have seen over the years, the question of reverence demands an answer – how serious and sacred should telethons be when they are constantly attempting to win over audiences nationwide?

The idea that disasters are portrayed by celebrities as short-term problems remedied by supporting relief aid has been a difficult one to put to rest (Biltreyst, Driessens & Joye, 2012). Telethons that are purposefully irreverent, like Red Nose Day, carefully craft the way in which they present their information. However, when a telethon makes irreverence a part of their brand, the pathos-driven commentary can be overshadowed or not taken as seriously. Looking to the future, producers of programs like Red Nose Day need to be cautious in what they present, as well as how they present it, in order to both remain credible and remind audiences everywhere that the celebrity persona can help, not hinder, the overall outcomes of a telethon.

CONCLUSION

The seriousness and sacredness of the American telethon has decreased over the years for two primary reasons. Evidence from this study suggests that an increase in the number of telethons on air and an increase in celebrity involvement are the two contributing factors to this decrease. With a telethon out there for every cause, there is a lack of sincere focus and sacredness for what the telethon once was. Over the years, the celebrity persona has affected telethons by contributing to their irreverent tendencies. The question left now is quite simple – what does the future of telethons look like, and where does the celebrity persona fit into that equation?

An increase in the number of telethons has undoubtedly commercialized what was once a unique invention. Today, nearly everything is connected to a cause – causes that more often than not have some sort of association with a telethon to advocate for something or someone's behalf. The unique invention of one has now turned into a commercialized concept. Factors such as changes in media and technology have contributed to this increase in dominance of cause-related television programming. Additionally, when you replicate something, it loses its focus. Although the facts make it clear telethons are one of many methods to help ameliorate problems and challenges faced by individuals, groups and societies, the sacredness has gotten lost in the commercialization over the years.

Another reason for the decrease in reverence associated with telethons has to do with the celebrity persona. Because celebrities can be so widespread and seemingly different from the usual tone associated with an event that focuses on serious topics, telethons have become more irreverent with the addition of celebrities. Whether using comedy to brand itself or the addition of performances and discussions that encourage audiences to tune in regardless of the cause,

celebrities have contributed to this shift in the genre of a telethon. Despite the irreverent tendencies associated with celebrity involvement, research suggests that the celebrity persona has merely made way for a different kind of telethon. Although it tends to shy away from the gold standard created by Jerry Lewis in the 50s, telethons with the presence of celebrities are not all bad. Celebrities fit into telethons today by using their prominence for good – to promote messages and ideas that are important to them and to others.

So, what does this decrease in sacredness mean in the grand scheme of things? Does the celebrity persona deserve a place in the genre of a telethon? Based on conclusions drawn from evidence and analysis, it is naïve to think that they do not. Celebrities are key players in these events; just because the genre of a telethon has become more irreverent over the years does not mean there are not positives associated with these shifts. The transformation of telethons since their creation in the mid-20th century have expanded their reach, made individuals more aware of a variety of causes and social issues brought up by celebrities who use their prominence to make them known. Telethons have a right, in today's era, to be less sacred and reverent than they were in their origins. With this in mind, however, a telethon should be sacred to the point where it does not disrespect or downplay the cause or charity being looked at. There is a fine line between what is appropriate and what is not. The future of telethons must find the balance in order to continue their success. Those who have successfully navigated this new genre of telethons have helped the industry steer clear of past criticisms regarding charitainment and hopefully will allow for a bright future for those celebrities who choose to get involved in philanthropy.

Lewis's inevitable yet inadvertent transformation of charity into something more than just a cause set the stage for the evolution of telethons, thus ensuing the debate discussed in research and in this thesis. The celebrity persona affects the charity associated with a telethon by

blending less traditional and often irreverent methods of persuasion with the traditional telethon setting with origins dating back to 1949. Celebrities who get involved with telethons have the opportunity to creating meaningful conversations surrounding important topics and issues, ones that benefit from the spotlight. The biggest issue telethons face today is the misconception of their overall genre. This new genre of telethons requires celebrities to use their ethos via the para-social relationship in discussing topics of great importance, specifically in the realm of the cause being advocated for during its corresponding telethon. The evolution of the telethon over the past 70 years has proved that there is no one formula to the American telethon. So what if the telethon as we know it no longer exists? As long as one can strike a balance between the sacredness and silliness, what results will be respectful, reputable and remembered by those in the years that follow.

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