

We're just the same as you – only more famous

In a real crisis, do celebrities help? Some have been praised for leading by example during the pandemic, but many have shown an extraordinary inability to relate to ordinary people.



Three musketeers: Madonna, Rihanna, and JK Rowling have all joined the fight against Covid-19.

The video shows a bath with rose petals floating on the surface, and a very famous person crouched in front of the taps. "That's the thing about Covid-19," says Madonna as gentle music plays in the background. "It doesn't care about how rich you are, how famous you are, how funny you are, how smart you are [...]. It's the great equaliser."

The singer is one of many celebrities whose reaction to the pandemic has sparked wide discussion. While some have put their fame to good use in helping and encouraging those on the front line, others have astonished the public with their clumsy response.

Tom Hanks and his wife Rita Wilson were among the first to use their influence, when they announced in mid-March that they had both tested positive for the virus and urged people to take the threat seriously.

Two other actors, Max Brooks and his father Mel, have made a funny video about protecting the elderly. Among singers, Ariana Grande was quick to advocate social distancing; Miley Cyrus has made a series of broadcasts about self-care, while Cardi B, Lady Gaga, and Taylor Swift have all urged fans to behave responsibly.

Other celebrities have put generous amounts of money towards fighting the virus: Rihanna has given \$5 million (£4020,000), and the sports presenter Gary Lineker has donated about £300,000.

Some others have used their talents to help those self-isolating: Olympic gymnast Matt Whitlock has posted exercise routines you can do at home, while musicians, such as Coldplay's Chris Martin, have streamed live performances.

But there have been bad examples too. Vanessa Hudgens told fans on Instagram that the authorities had overreacted to the pandemic, while her fellow actress Evangeline Lilly encouraged everyone to carry on as normal, declaring, "Some people value freedom over their lives."

People have been particularly **incensed** by stars like Madonna who claim that the virus is an "equaliser", when they have the luxury of spending the lockdown much more comfortably than others and have far better access to medical care. Music producer David Geffen was **castigated** for posting a photo of his huge yacht with the caption: "Sunset last night...isolated in the **Grenadines**

avoiding the virus. I'm hoping everybody is staying safe."

So, in a real crisis, do celebrities help?

Star trek

Some say, of course, they do. Celebrities are hugely influential – now more than ever, thanks to social media. Many of their fans are more likely to trust them than the government: America's **surgeon general** acknowledged this when he asked Kylie Jenner to post advice about the virus on Instagram. When JK Rowling shared a video about a helpful breathing technique against the coronavirus, it was shared over 25,000 times.

Others argue that the crisis shows our ridiculous obsession with celebrities. The people we should really celebrate are those who keep the country running, from health workers to shop workers. When we see the **amateurish**, home-made videos posted by some famous people, we realise how reliant they are on producers and make-up artists to convince us there is something special about them.

YOU DECIDE

1. Which celebrity would you most trust to give advice in the present crisis?
2. Do celebrities have a moral obligation to use their fame to help others?

ACTIVITIES

1. Paint a portrait of your favourite celebrity and use it as part of a poster telling people how to behave responsibly during the pandemic.
2. Write a song, using an existing tune or one you have composed yourself, about social distancing. Ask someone in your family to video you performing it – you may even want share it.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

“Fame is like a river, that beareth up things light and swollen, and drowns things weighty and solid.”

Francis Bacon (1561-1626), English philosopher, writer, scientist, lawyer, and politician

What do you think?

Q & A

Q: What do we know?

A: There is a strong tradition of celebrities helping others in difficult times. During WW2, the singer Vera Lynn played an enormous part in maintaining British morale. In 1971, George Harrison organised the pioneering Concert for Bangladesh, bringing international rock stars together to help the hungry and homeless. In 1985, the Live Aid concert to raise money for famine relief in Ethiopia was watched by almost 40% of the world's population.

Q: What do we not know?

A: Whether celebrities who behave badly during the crisis will be forgiven when it is over. The French fashion designer Coco Chanel and singer Maurice Chevalier were both accused of collaborating with the enemy during WW2, but were still able to pursue successful careers afterwards. The same accusation was made against the English author PG Wodehouse – yet he was later given a knighthood.

WORD WATCH

Incensed – Angered. The term derives from the Latin *incendere*, meaning to set fire to something.

Castigated – Severely criticised.

Grenadines – A group of islands in the Caribbean. They make up part of St Vincent and the Grenadines, which gained its independence from Britain in 1979, but still has the Queen as head of state.

Surgeon general – The head of America's public health service.

Amateurish – Unprofessional. An amateur is someone who does something for the love of it rather than for money, but the term is sometimes used as an insult.

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