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Adrift or ashore? *Desert Island Discs* and celebrity culture

Jo Littler

Abstract

Why do we want to imagine celebrities as adrift, as banished from the rest of the world, and yet, at the same time, to find out more about them? The idea of celebrities as 'intimate strangers', with the media providing us with privileged access to the alleged 'real' person 'behind' a distanced, glossy façade of superstardom, has long been a constituent element of modern celebrity culture. *Desert Island Discs*' capacity to use and perpetuate such motifs has been a key reason for its success. At the same time, the programme also registers shifts in celebrity culture: towards a less white and male-dominated demographic, towards the hyper-intimate confessional, and towards expanding celebrity power. In this chapter I consider how *Desert Island Discs* connects to changing formations of celebrity culture, to ideas of meritocracy, and to a social culture of individualization.

Keywords:

celebrity, individualism, intimacy, meritocracy, power

Biog. note

Jo Littler is Reader in Culture and Creative Industries at City University of London.

Her books include *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility*

(forthcoming, Routledge, 2016) *Radical Consumption? Shopping for Change in Contemporary Culture* (Open University Press, 2008) and with Roshi Naidoo (eds) *The Politics of Heritage: The Legacies of 'Race'* (Routledge, 2005). She has edited several journal issues on celebrity culture.

1. Introduction

I begin with a confession: I did not grow up listening to *Desert Island Discs (DID)*, or indeed to Radio 4 at all. I came from a Radio 2 household, its domestic airwaves full of the gentle jocularly of Terry Wogan and the Floral Dance and the strangely sonorous tones of *Sing Something Simple* on a Sunday evening. But going to university and joining the ranks of the professional middle classes has meant that I have come to listen to *DID* sporadically over the years, sometimes as background noise and sometimes on purpose, when a speaker I have been interested in listening to has been scheduled to appear.

I have of course listened to it more frequently in preparation for this chapter and the conference preceding it, and this has generated a range of affective responses. I was fascinated by the story of the political activist Tariq Ali's secular, communist childhood in Pakistan (16 March 2008). I was upset by author Alice Walker's story of her relationship with her daughter, who she doesn't see anymore (19 May 2013). I was entertained by actor Kathy Burke's luxury item: a laminated life-sized man to surf on (15 August 2010). I was struck by the novelist Andrea Levy's statement that appearing on the programme had fulfilled one of her lifetime ambitions (12 June

2011). And I was moved by cultural and political theorist Stuart Hall saying that Miles Davis's music 'put his finger on my soul' (13 February 2000).

I also discovered a number of what were—to me—interesting facts about the programme. These included the information that presenter Michael Parkinson was accused by the BBC Board of Management in the 1980s of demonstrating a 'Yorkshire bias' in his choice of castaways (Parkinson 2012). I discovered that at one point in 2014 the programme had for the first time in its history reached gender equality in terms of its interviewees for that particular year. And I learnt more about its iconic place in UK popular culture, as demonstrated by the way it weaves in and out of books, plays, and other broadcasts (Symons 2012). These include how Henry, the protagonist of Tom Stoppard's play *The Real Thing*, fretted over his choices for a forthcoming appearance on *DID*, and what they would say to the world about his character (Stoppard 1982). And how, in 1996 the programme made a fictional appearance on the TV sitcom *Absolutely Fabulous*, when flamboyantly vapid PR agent Edina Monsoon (played by Jennifer Saunders) chose eight tracks, all of which were by Lulu.

These subjective points connect to the key themes of this chapter in ways that I hope will soon become clear. I focus here on the relationship between *DID* and celebrity culture, because of the latter's prominence in popular culture and also because of the important role it plays in illuminating and shaping relationships between individuals and the wider society. One of the main reasons why *DID* has endured for so long is because of its successful deployment of, and negotiation with, celebrity culture. At the same time, some of the mutations that the programme has undergone index changes in both celebrity culture and society at large. This chapter

explores these two different dimensions of the dynamic between the programme and celebrity.

2. Adrift: celebrity castaways

What exactly does the programme do with celebrities? Clearly it interviews them about their favourite music, it tells their biography and, crucially, *it imagines them all alone*. This begs the question: why do we want to imagine celebrities as adrift, as banished from the rest of the world and yet, at the same time, find out more about them?

In creating this aural *mis-en-scene*, *DID* in many ways stages for us celebrity writ large. It both dramatizes the function of celebrity and performs an allegory of that function; it simultaneously removes celebrities to a different space and time and brings us ‘up close’ to their star persona. Such a construction works by mobilising the notion of celebrities as being, in Richard Schickel’s (2000) phrase, ‘intimate strangers’. The idea that the media provides us with privileged access to the alleged ‘real’ person ‘behind’ a distanced, glossy façade of superstardom has long been a core, constituent element of modern celebrity culture. As Richard Dyer (1980, 1986) points out in his elegant studies of film stars such as Jane Fonda and Dirk Bogarde, the mediation of celebrity functions by telling you that you are *lucky*. You are having a special experience: privileged access to the secret life of the stars.

This is still how most media coverage of celebrities works, albeit manifested in different ways—perhaps by exposing dietary, financial, sexual or family secrets. Media constructs and stages this revelatory moment, which functions to perform an unmasking of the so-called ‘real’ star for us (Dyer 1980, 1986; Turner, Bonner & Marshall 2000; Marshall 2006; Evans & Hesmondhalgh 2005). *DID* similarly works

in this vein of intimate revelation. Its structured interview format, its incremental disclosure of the guests' special records, its autobiographical anecdotes, all purport to stage a revelation of 'the real' celebrity who the audience is encouraged to feel that they know much better at the end of the programme than at the beginning. Indeed, *DID*'s desert island motif is itself an allegory of celebrity culture, of the heroic individual who we like to imagine floating, to some extent, away from the rest of us.

There are many definitions of celebrity in circulation.¹ Perhaps the most persuasive is the basic, almost mathematical formulation which asserts that celebrities are recognized, or 'known', by greater numbers of people than they can themselves recognize (Gilbert 2004: 87); or, as the eighteenth-century French writer Nicholas Chamfort put it, 'Celebrity is the advantage of being known to people we don't know and who don't know us' (de Chamfort 1968: 78). Celebrity culture is therefore not a recent phenomenon; it has a long history, as exemplified by the adulation given to, for example, Roman emperors or Kings in feudal regimes (Braudy 1986). But this does not make it trans-historical, or a phenomenon that has always been the same. Clearly this is not the case. The manner in which celebrity is construed changes according to time and place (Morgan 2011; van Krieken 2012, Inglis 2010; Littler 2014). It has an intricate and direct relationship to the social formation, culture, politics and technology of which it is a part at any given moment, and reflects how the relationship between society and individuals is being imagined and managed (Holmes and Redmond 2006; Holmes and Negra 2011; Littler 2004; Marshall 2006). This set of power dynamics, specific to a particular epoch and infinitely contestable, is what cultural studies scholars describe as 'the conjuncture' (Gramsci 2005; Grossberg 2010; Hall 1987; Littler 2016).

¹ For a good summary of such definitions see van Krieken 2012

For example, earlier feudal or courtly fame was produced through the circulation of images and knowledge about a very *few* people—kings, emperors—on their coins and paintings, echoing the social and political structure of feudalism, in which very few people were in charge. Later, with the expansion of early merchant capitalism, theatrical culture and print, there gradually arose a different, more expansive formation of fame (Inglis 2010), and in the sixteenth century the word ‘celebrity’ itself was born (van Krieken 2012). This notion of celebrity is in turn different in texture from today's, as there are now *more* famous people, and a wider variety of expressive forms of communicative machinery with which to produce information about them, and through which they gain attention and currency.

Celebrity becomes more recognizably modern in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, aided by film and sound reproduction technologies. Now it was more firmly associated with entertainment and the cultural industries; this is the moment when celebrity is both industrialised and starts to become a motor for industry (Inglis 2010; van Krieken 2012; Williamson 2016). As I have discussed elsewhere, these are all key eras, or, borrowing again from Foucault, ‘epistemes’ of celebrity (Littler 2014).

Our modern formation of fame is imbricated with what the political scientist C.B. Macpherson termed ‘possessive individualism’, the pervasive discourse within which the individual comes to be imagined as a bounded unit. Macpherson traces this idea in political philosophy from the seventeenth century, ‘from Hobbes to Locke’. Possessive individualism was the development of ‘a conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them’ (Macpherson 2010: 3). Macpherson explains very clearly that the political context for this theory arises from the development of industrial capitalism and a

market society based around the idea of exchange between autonomous individuals. Such understandings were to help generate the rise of the isolated, rugged, romantic individual artist, beholden to nothing but a cloud.²

Such an analysis can be connected to work in different disciplines that are concerned with the parallel emergence of individualization. In particular, it relates to Foucault's (1977) work on the birth of authorship, where he considers how the author came to function as the key stamp of identity for a text. By way of contrast, in the introduction to her collection of fairy tales Angela Carter draws attention to the absence of individualization within them, highlighting their multi-layered authorship and comparing this to the co-creation of recipes and how nobody can know who invented potato soup (Carter 1990). We might compare such an absence of possessive individualism with, for instance, the extent to which the name of a chef such as Jamie Oliver is now used to endorse a range of products, from recipes to restaurants. Such forms of individualization, which today overwhelmingly take the form of personal branding, are all productive of modern celebrity culture; they all help generate it.

In today's world celebrity culture has achieved even greater prominence, not only quantitatively, with respect to the volume of interest it generates, but also qualitatively, that is, in terms of media framing. Particularly noteworthy phenomena include the recycling of so-called D or Z list celebrity (less famous stars, A-list being the most famous) into new media formats (Rojek 2001; Palmer 2005); the expansion of TV programming based around celebrity (Holmes and Jermyn 2004); 'live' celebrity tweeting and persona-building through social media (Marwick 2014); and the expanding influence of celebrity in other parts of the public sphere, including the

² The reference is to William Wordsworth's famous lyric poem 'I wandered lonely as a cloud' (1807), which has become emblematic of Romanticism.

work of NGOs and charities (Brockington 2014, Kapoor 2013, Littler 2015). All this is occurring in a moment that is now often termed ‘neoliberal’, an epoch promoting the idea that the autonomous individual should deal with the vicissitudes and dangers of contemporary life without social safety nets, particularly in the form of the welfare state (Foucault 2010; Hall et al 2014; Brown 2015; Crouch 2011). This political logic works by marketising collective public services and prioritizing the agency of the individual. In such political contexts it is unsurprising that celebrity culture, with its attendant emphasis on the tastes, characteristics and behaviours of particular ‘celebrated’ individuals, should flourish.

3. The shores of contemporary celebrity

How might *DID* be viewed in relation to these different cultural, social and political contexts? As Milly Williamson (2016: 1) argues, ‘fame is part of the historical process, and as such it helps to illuminate the balance of power in any society between different forces and values’. The programme undoubtedly registers something about how society has become increasingly individualized. It is perhaps hard to imagine a more graphic illustration of individualization than an autonomous celebrity stranded on an island. The fact that *DID* works to define people on this basis— and to *elevate* individualization as an achievement—is culturally meaningful. It is a playful fantasy, of course, but such fantasies have powerful cultural traction, and they also *produce* our understanding of what’s important and significant.

DID, then, helps to reproduce the logic of celebrity culture in terms of its elevation of individuals, as well as to dramatize that function via its playful imagining of the individual on, even to a large extent *as*, an island: remote, bounded and beyond all other human contact. But we need to look more closely at how its relationship to

celebrity culture is fashioned. Doing so reveals three main reasons why the programme has been so long-lasting. First, because its engagement with celebrity usually occurs in a genteel fashion: the programme intersects with the public sphere beyond the entertainment industry—particularly with what used to be called the establishment, or ‘the great and the good’; second, because it has adapted to changing social demands for inclusion and representation; and third, because it has surfed the waves of change in celebrity culture.

The gentility of *DID* is perhaps most notably observed in the absence of the word ‘celebrity’ in the official discourse surrounding the programme. Although, as noted above, the word has populist and commercial connotations, it is not highlighted in the framing of the programme. Instead, BBC narratives focus on the appearance of castaways who are ‘well-known’ or who make a significant contribution ‘to public life’.³ As the online audio archive text puts it, ‘Castaways are people who’ve played a significant role in their field or in society and who have a story they’re happy to share, and who we feel will appeal to the Radio 4 audience.’⁴ Whilst *DID* deals with celebrity, then, it appears to do so in a non-flashy, genteel fashion—via a very middle-class aesthetic—downplaying the commercial implications of its celebrity promotion.

This is a somewhat ambiguous formulation. On the one hand, it is admirable that the programme frames its interviewees as making a significant contribution to public life. On the other, that very framing begins to indicate something of the cultural and class dynamics at play, as well as hinting at historical exclusions around who exactly is permitted to take on a powerful role in the public sphere. The show is positioned as a ‘respectable’ form of celebrity interview, which is further emphasized

³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/1GZ9XQ8tpjMs4zv6Zny9Y0G/presenters>

⁴ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/4xJyCpMp64NcCXD0FVlhmSz/frequently-asked-questions>

by its frame, Radio 4, being positioned as ‘the station for intelligent speech’. This is a radio station that, as well as being seen as ‘a national treasure’ in British public life, has also become a byword for middle-class values, with all the associated veneration and exclusions that this entails (Mair 2008; Midgely 2011; BBC Trust 2011).

In pursuing this theme, it is instructive to consider the cultural forces operating at the time of the programme’s introduction in 1942. It was emerging at the end of a period when ‘mass’ or ‘light’ entertainment had particular resonances and associations in terms of gendered and class dynamics. Commercial entertainment culture was, as many historians and theorists have noted, often gendered as feminine and associated with the lower class (Hussey 1986; Williams 1981). ‘High’ and ‘low’ cultural distinctions were then still very much in evidence, as distinct from today, when the idea and practice of the ‘cultural omnivore’ has much more traction (i.e. when opera is widely disseminated via local cinemas and aristocrats happily consume and make pop music) (Williams 1981; Peterson 1992). What the Frankfurt School celebrity theorist Leo Lowenthal termed ‘idols of production’ were, in the early twentieth century, deemed to possess a higher social rank due to their association with work, the masculine public sphere, and the terrain of the Great and the Good; but ‘idols of consumption’, the celebrities of the entertainment industry, saturated with connotations of the feminine and lower class, were less highly valued (Lowenthal 1984).

Nevertheless, and as Jenny Doctor points out elsewhere in this volume, because of the wartime context in which the programme was launched, with increasing pressures on the BBC to be not only ‘for’ the people but ‘of’ the people, programmes such as *DID* in fact marked the beginning of a shift in the Corporation’s mindset in relation to popular culture. Although early BBC memos suggest some

initial ambivalence on the part of the production team towards the inclusion of guests from the entertainment industries,⁵ the actual castaways invited onto the show demonstrate considerably more enthusiasm for this sector. A significant factor here was that Roy Plomley was a great fan of popular entertainment in general, and positively emphasized it: from the opening series, comedians, popular singers, bandleaders and others were all regularly invited to appear. For example, the first castaway was Vic Oliver, comedian, actor and musician; the fifth was actress Pat Kirkwood; number six the famous bandleader and impresario Jack Hylton; and number ten comedian Arthur Askey.

Programme eight, however, took a different approach, introducing to its listeners a much less well-known ‘glamour girl from London’s Windmill Theatre’, Joan Jay. Plomley introduced her by noting that she ‘hopes to be well-known one day’—implying, of course, that she was not as much of a celebrity as the other castaways who had already been invited onto the show. Here, then, we already begin to see *DID* not only reflecting celebrity culture, by responding to the popularity or distinction achieved by its guests in other fields, but also shaping it: inclusion in its broadcasts elevated its guests in the national consciousness, consecrating their stories, opinions and, above all, their musical choices.⁶ Thus, while Plomley’s own interviewing manner evidenced the gentility and social deference that was characteristic of the BBC at the time, the guest list he constructed for the programme revealed something of the changing social dynamics already at play in the country at large.

Building on these populist roots, the second reason for the programme’s

⁵ For more on this see Stephen Cottrell’s chapter in this volume.

⁶ On this point, see also Andrew Blake’s reflections in this volume

longevity is that it has adapted to changing social demands for inclusion and representation by interviewing a broader range of people than just white upper and upper-middle class men. This is where the episodes featuring people I mentioned in the introduction—such as the working-class actor and director Kathy Burke, the writer Alice Walker, and the political activist Tariq Ali—are significant. As already noted, according to the online *DID* archive the programme achieved gender parity in 2014.⁷ This is social progress, although it has not been achieved without right-wing barbs, such as an opinion piece in *The Daily Mail* by Ephraim Hardcastle which raised the issue of whether his readership ‘had actually heard’ of women like (Artistic Director and Principal Dancer of the English National Ballet) Tamaro Rojo or (BAFTA award-winning playwright) Sally Wainwright.⁸ Hardcastle frames this through the arch, ostensibly neutral perspective of whether you, the readers, have heard of these women—completely bypassing the crucial point that it is *through the media itself* that people are most likely to *learn* about such figures. Such perspectives ignore *DID*’s implicit role as a site where understandings and definitions of what a major celebrity is, and who qualifies for it, are constructed as well as reflected. In recent years the programme’s expansion of its castaway list, going well beyond the simple endorsement of white male celebrities in order to achieve gender parity and a better ratio of ethnic diversity, has therefore been constructive and progressive—and not only for the programme but also for the society of which it is part.

Thirdly, *DID* has moved with the changing tides of celebrity. Over the years its celebrities have become increasingly keen to appear less formal and more relaxed and intimate in their address. This is clear when listening to the presenters, who are

⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/features/desert-island-discs/find-a-castaway?year=2015>

⁸ Ephraim Hardcastle, ‘Does Desert Island Discs have a gender policy?’ *Daily Mail*, 14 January 2015. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2908976/EPHRAIM-HARDCASTLE-Does-Desert-Island-Discs-gender-equality-policy.html>

themselves, of course, celebrities: we can hear the contrast between the jovial anecdotage marking the Roy Plomley years (1942-85) to the emotional, confessional era of Kirsty Young (2006-), whose interviewing style owes much to cultures of psychoanalysis and counselling. Young will often push the interviewee about their own understanding of an aspect of their behaviour or experience. For instance, when interviewing the actor, writer and comedienne Kathy Burke (15 August 2010), Young kept asking if she was sure she *really* didn't want a partner. When interviewing the actor, writer and musician Hugh Laurie (23 June 2013), Young tried repeatedly to make him state that he was still driven to satisfy his hard-to-please mother (and her tone was quite a contrast to Sue Lawley's more jocular interview with Laurie on 12 May 1996). Young has asked of the programme, 'What's its point, what's the aim? For me it's to strike up an intimacy with the guest that allows them to trust me and in turn properly reveal themselves' (Young 2012: ix). For her, the emphasis is on the interview achieving gradual revelation and emotional literacy.

Such a focus on the 'inner life' of the participants is indicative of what is sometimes described as the feminization of culture: the idea that our culture is increasingly prioritizing emotional literacy and empathetic modes of communication (Ilouz 2007). This is not to say that such presentational modes are automatically 'better'. That much is clear through, for example, Lillie Chouliaraki's (2013) work on historical differences in celebrity communication styles: contrasting the charity work of celebrities today with those of 50 years ago, Chouliaraki compares Audrey Hepburn's structured humanitarianism with what she describes as the more informal, yet much more *narcissistic* style of Angelina Jolie. Nevertheless, 'revealing' emotional literacy and informality are taken to be typical narrative modes of our epoch. Similarly, it is significant that *DID* has moved from having very structured

scripts to accommodating looser, more naturalistic interviews, echoing the more widespread social decline of deference and the rise of ‘post-Fordist’ informality.

Notwithstanding Roy Plomley’s personal enthusiasm for personalities from the world of light entertainment, it remains the case that until quite recently the majority of *DID* castaways have tended to come from a largely white, frequently male demographic, with largely middle or upper-class backgrounds that have been in keeping with the Radio 4 frame in which the programme is located. In more recent years this has changed, and such fluctuations in the nature of acceptable celebrity types not only indicate that *DID* has been ‘changing with the times’, but also illustrate again the programme’s position as an active agent within the process of celebrity construction, its formative role in moulding who counts as a celebrity. Not only does *DID* reflect celebrity, but inclusion in the programme also bestows it, and its choices of who might qualify as a celebrity contribute to shaping the wider terrain of celebrity culture as well as drawing from it.

4. Conclusions

P. David Marshall observes that different media technologies create particular hermeneutics and relationships to celebrity. He notes that the cinema screen is a technology of awe-inspiring distance: it blows up the star, maximizing aura, helping deify their image. TV, however, is a technology of the *familiar*; its aura is being continually broken—particularly on US TV—by short runs and advertising messages (Marshall 2001). Marshall doesn’t discuss radio, but it’s useful to extend this schema by thinking how radio works differently in relation to the star persona. This is particularly salient in the case of the *DID* interview, given that celebrities are most often associated with visual spectacle and excess. How does this particular form of

radio, this channel, and this specific programme, work to present celebrity? Musical choices, of course, augment the particular celebrity persona being presented, as Stoppard's Henry recognises and agonises over; the music imbues the celebrity with the intimately affective charge of the sonic realm, combined with the cultural and social distinction often inferred from the musical selection itself. The radio also works by the grain of the voice imbuing the celebrity with extra *gravitas* and credibility, an affective frame which is created through the uninterrupted public service intimacy of this mode of audio—through the sense of talking into somebody's ear—as well as through the highly classed establishment status of Radio 4.

These combined factors have helped *DID* become a 'marker' of celebrity status, with its castaways deemed to have achieved a canonical position in British public life. This is perhaps why certain celebrities are invited back repeatedly, with the number of invitations being broadly linked to the individual's degree of celebrity: David Attenborough and Arthur Askey (a very popular entertainer in his day) were invited back four times, Terry Wogan and many others three times; and sometimes a 'serial' castaway celebrity has been placed in what is effectively a Christmas slot (Askey's fourth on 20 December 1980, Petula Clarke's third on 24 December 1995, David Attenborough's third on 25 December 1998). This is also why it can be spoofed on the TV sitcom *Absolutely Fabulous*, and why the author Andrea Levy said, at the end of her episode, that she felt she had achieved a lifelong ambition (12 June 2011). Yet clearly the programme also publicizes the works of famous individuals, via what Grant McCracken (1989) terms 'celebrity brand extension': the role of media appearances as a form of promotion. Examples of this on *DID* would include celebrity double-act interviews (e.g. Morecambe & Wise, Flanders & Swann,

Michael Powell & Emeric Pressburger) or in-character appearances (e.g. Dame Edna Everage).

In the case of *DID*, promotion does not generally work to *overtly* publicise the single most recent work of the guest, though for David Attenborough's second appearance (10 March 1979) Roy Plomley obligingly enquired after 'your own blockbuster "Life on Earth"', which was reported as then completed and being shown. He did likewise for Petula Clarke's second appearance (20 February 1982): when the singer casually mentioned being 'right in the middle of *The Sound of Music*', namely, the run at the Apollo Theatre, West End, 18 August 1981–18 September 1982, this provided the springboard for a short discussion of the show and her next disc choice, which just happened to be from the same musical.

More typically, however, *DID* interviews range over several works (such as television programmes for actors, or books for authors) with which guests have been involved during their lifetime. But even this can be understood as functioning as promotion. For example, the *DID* episode featuring Bill Gates (31 January 2016)—the founder of Microsoft, who has regularly been listed as the richest man in the world—includes extensive discussion of his work as a philanthropist via The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. This foundation has been criticised for being self-serving, generating cash reservoirs for ultra-wealthy friends of the Gates' rather than channelling the majority of its resources to those it purports to help (McGoey 2015). It is therefore widely imbricated in the problematic system of philanthrocapitalism, which has been increasingly critiqued for extending neoliberal equalities rather than tackling them (Edwards 2008, 2009, 2010; Kapoor 2012; Littler 2015). Yet the respectable coding of the programme—which downplays both the frame of 'celebrity'

and the promotional function of celebrity projects—means that it nonetheless bestows prestige and reputational capital on both the celebrity and their works.

DID has endured is because it has surfed the different historical phases of celebrity culture, both tapping into them and helping reproduce them in its own particular way. In addition to working as an exemplar of celebrity's possessive individualism, the programme and its narratives also work both to connect with people and connect people together. It gives its audience a powerful, 'parasocial' way of bonding with other people (Giles 2000), and helps us achieve greater psycho-social understandings of what it's like to inhabit different places, skins and lives; in other words, to gain insights into 'subjectivity in history'.⁹

But at times the programme can also work to potential challenges some of the more pernicious effects of celebrity's possessive individualism and what are sometimes called 'the hidden injuries of media power': the use of media and celebrity as cultural legitimating devices, in relation to which 'ordinary' people do not have anywhere near as much value (Couldry 2001). For instance, through hearing the cultural theorist Stuart Hall say, as a castaway on *DID*, that he wanted to be remembered as an *enabler*, for helping people and building networks rather than making or producing one particular book or thing himself (13 February 2000).

What would happen if *DID* were to break out of its now comfortable celebrity routine and interview 'ordinary' people? There has actually been one example of a non-celebrity interview: Signaller Henry Wheeler was made a *DID* castaway on 24 November 1945. As the announcement following film star Deborah Kerr's interview the previous week put it: 'Next week's particular broadcast will come from an actual desert island – from Signaller Henry Wheeler of the Royal Navy doing garrison duty

⁹ Thanks to Wendy Wheeler many years ago for pointing this out to me. I vividly remember the phrase.

on a small island off the coast of Europe’ (quoted in Magee 2012: 41). The interview took place after the end of World War II, and featured a *literal* castaway, one stationed overseas, who thus became a brief *DID* celebrity—what Rojek (2001) would term a ‘celetoid’—because of his appearance on the programme. This appearance needs to be understood in the context of the succession of wartime ‘record choice’ programmes involving members of the Forces and later even Home Guard factory workers (see Jenny Doctor’s chapter in this volume): in particular one of them, ‘It’s Up To You’, ran until July 1945, while the disc-only ‘Forces Favourites’ continued for quite some years. His appearance, in this happy moment of post-war triumphalism, plugged the recent disappearance from the airways of the voices of actual members of the Forces. Tellingly, this interview was also conducted at a high point of British social democracy, when the welfare state was expanded in Britain in the aftermath of the war. As both Alan Sinfield (1997) and Selina Todd (2015) have argued, the expansion of rights for workers, including public pensions, free healthcare and education, was the promise and the premise on which the war had been fought for most working people. Indeed, 1945 saw the rise of a Labour party that sought to unite middle and working classes together as ‘the people’, as productive citizens ‘against the “vested interests” of the rich’ (Todd 2015: Kindle location 2544). In the latter case, *DID*’s invitation to Signalman Wheeler can be read as the programme’s response to these rising tides of social inclusivity.

What would it be like if, today, some non-celebrities, so-called ‘civilians’, people who are not nationally well-known or who have occupations not deemed to be middle class, appeared on the programme as well? Perhaps a gardener in a park, a community activist, a rubbish collector or the woman who has worked for years in the chip shop? I suggest that it might work to counteract some of the more noxious social

divisions celebrity can foster, and open up further possibilities for redistributing dignity. That is the suggestion I would like to send in a bottle, to throw into the cultural water that is this book, hoping that it might wash up onto the shores of the island.

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