

Four reflections on Beast Philanthropy: A response to Davies

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Four reflections on Beast Philanthropy: A response to Davies

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Twenty years ago, the American ethnographer Mitch Duneier (2002) responded to a critique of his book *Sidewalk* published in the American Journal of Sociology by Loic Wacquant (2002). He was appalled by Wacquant's (in his view) purposeful distortion of his book, saying, '[i]n its obvious omissions and misrepresentations, it fails to meet minimal standards of scholarly criticism and debate. It is not akin to combat in a sport with rules, like boxing, but to a free-for all in the schoolyard.' Thankfully no such combat is required to respond to Rhodri Davies' article on MrBeast's philanthropy. Davies has produced a sumptuous and useful interrogation of MrBeast's approach to content creation, online philanthropy, and the myriad debates within charity studies his giving causes us to reassess.

There is no need for me to recount Davies' arguments here, and space restricts my ability to explore every avenue of what MrBeast's giving may mean for how we think about contemporary charity or philanthropy. Instead, I offer four short reflections, driven by the key questions Davies' piece raises for me.

On Goodness and Wealth

It has been asked, if it's true that philanthropy is 'love of humankind' (Breeze, 2021), how come so many famous philanthropists were so awful to mankind outside of their philanthropy (Sawaya, 2008), earning their fortune through 'business strategies that greatly exacerbate the same social and economic inequalities that [they] purport to remedy' (McGoey, 2015: 9)? I don't think this is particularly true of MrBeast, and obviously making any judgement about an individual's personal morality, and the motivations for their charitable behaviour from highly edited and controlled videos is impossible, and to speculate unhelpful. We don't know if MrBeast's philanthropy is genuine altruism or a self-interested attempt to drive clicks and

likes—and it's probably both, with some guilt thrown in related to the speed of his wealth-building. But Davies does give MrBeast too much credit when it comes to responding to tensions and criticisms in his approach. The claim that MrBeast's ability to address concerns about his giving is restricted by the medium he uses is faulty if the person in question has the power to choose a different medium. It is logical for a young man who has done well in one sphere (producing enticing but witless YouTube videos) to turn to another sphere (philanthropy) and think he can only apply the same framework, but now with sponsorship and a sincere manner. But his wealth provides the power to choose another avenue and approach, and the failure to do so suggests, so far, that he is unconcerned with the criticism.

As to whether the sources of MrBeast's wealth are problematic, Davies asks if the potential harm incurred by social media's attention economy, especially to mental health, may be seen as comparable with the damage inflicted by the Sackler family via the opioid crisis (see Radden Keefe, 2022). I doubt it: the impact of social media on young people's mental health is often typified as overwhelmingly negative, but the evidence is mixed and still emerging (Orben et al., 2019; Valkenburg et al., 2022). Vapid content creation will not be seen in the same way as OxyContin because we won't be able to identify specific individuals to blame: the difference between any negative impacts of the YouTube economy and the Sackler's pushing of dangerous medications, is that we're all guilty in this regard. MrBeast has merely demonstrated he understands modern capitalism better than most, and thus is riding the crest of a money-making wave society has chosen to invent. The economic question, and extent to which MrBeast's content-creation philanthropic model is borrowable by others is however driven by scale. The biggest influencers (from YouTube, to Twitch, to OnlyFans) have attained amazing audience numbers, inspiring others to try and make their fortunes that way. But, like any industry, there are millions of failures for every success. If all YouTube content was charitable or philanthropic in nature, then no-one would make enough to help anyone. In this sphere, it seems that

monopolies and oligopolies are the only way to build enough of a brand to help people, as there's not enough influencer economy to go around, and even here, with the most subscribed individual YouTuber, the public donation levels associated with a surprising number of MrBeast's fundraising videos are quite small, hovering around the \$20,000 mark, despite the very successful campaigns that Davies highlights.

Finally, as to whether MrBeast is a good person or not, I watched a video of Donaldson and his team [putting a \\$250,000 Lamborghini through an industrial shredder](#), and I was filled with sadness, at the immense waste of it all. My gloom at its grotesqueness may speak to my position in the 'reaction economy' as Davies outlines, or it could just be a generational problem, of the internal horror and jealousy of the not-rich middle-aged. This is just what the world looks like now—silly, superficial, with few boundaries drawn between spheres of public life (e.g. commerce and charity, wealth, and altruism). Philanthropy is meant to have a utopian aspiration but is being redirected through acts like these into consumption, where all we achieve is stabilising the present, not radical reform for the future (Nickel and Eikenberry, 2013). MrBeast is not a bad person, but, like so many of us, he's trapped by our addiction to consumption.

On Advertising and Charity

In one video I picked to watch at random, MrBeast and his team [support a dog rescue shelter in Thailand](#). It's a pretty unremarkable video, nicely put together, lots of focus on the heroic individual leading the shelter, the lack of funding and the number of dogs that need help, with some inspirational soppieness at the end where the donations are revealed. But about two-thirds through the video, it jumps to MrBeast delivering an advert for a macadamia nut company who have donated to help the project. It's not just a simple 'Thanks for their support'-style message either: Mr Beast expands on the health benefits of macadamia nuts, stresses how they are superior to other superfoods, and proclaims the company in question to have made macadamia

nuts affordable, before presenting deals that viewers can get on nut products, with additional donations to be made because of these purchases. I was reminded of *The Greatest Movie Ever Sold*, a postmodern take on the problem of incessant advertising and product placement within movies, where the director agrees to star in several cranberry juice commercials inserted into the documentary in order to finance it.

That was at least done to make a political point. In comparison, Mr Beast's nut advert was one of the most grotesque advertorials I'd ever seen, especially given its inexplicability. If he is worth \$500m as Davies suggests, why he couldn't afford to buy some rudimentary medical equipment, a new van, and some simple buildings for the dog shelter himself, I do not know. Well, I do know. It's that constant partnerships with companies and sponsorship opportunities will continue to build his brand, reputation, and networks, where philanthropy is not a social or humanitarian practice but an integrated part of present-day creative capitalism (Thorup, 2015). These advertorials as part of the American business-charity relationship are not new. Appropriately, Davies references Paul Longmore's (2015) outstanding work on the history of charity telethons in the US. Longmore's research does show how these televisual extravaganzas simplified, individualised, and depoliticised medical issues, especially those facing children, drawing on the medical rather than social model of disability. And he also demonstrated how local businesses would, if they donated, get their five minutes of attention, able to plug their brand on national television. This commercialisation of charity, the use of incentives to give, expose a 'selfish motive behind the boasted altruism' (Longmore, 2015: 72), and feel deeply grubby to my secular-Methodist sensibility. The biennial Comic Relief telethon in the UK for example partners with brands such as supermarkets and clothes shops to sell fundraising items but does little in their television events except a quick thanks. MrBeast's continued use of advertising cheapens his charity now he doesn't need it.

On Charity and Structural Change

MrBeast's giving reminds me of the madcap charity stunt, rather than planned foundational philanthropy. The YouTube attention economy means we resort to a mad trolley dash around the world's problems, coincidentally ones that will look good on video and grab the attention. Davies says that MrBeast's model relies on films making compelling viewing and therefore 'dictates an emphasis on individual interventions and tangible solutions', as opposed to 'upstream' activities like research or advocacy which are more amorphous and less televisual. I understand that argument, but would it not be great for MrBeast to try and upend that cynicism about youth attention spans regarding important issues? The man seems hugely energetic, full of ideas, creative, and to genuinely care about the things he does and the people he works with. If he set himself the challenge of generating structure-focused YouTube philanthropy, I'd be fascinated to know how he'd tackle it, and he certainly has the cultural power to be able to try. Alison Body and colleagues' work (Body et al., 2020, 2021) is currently focused on the apolitical and transactional nature of much child-focused philanthropy. The emphasis is on surface level giving, led and decided on by adults, where fun is prioritised, and practiced as a space where young people don't explore their own ideas and values. Instead, this activity encourages more transactional giving, a sense of giving for a reward. Given MrBeast's popularity with younger audiences, he has the potential to raise 'critical consciousness rather than passive engagement' (Body et al., 2020: 200), and achieve something deeper. Given how much his online content has shifted since his first video, I am vaguely hopeful he, like Taylor Swift, will find a political voice and use his talents for structural change.

On Charity Studies and the Search for the Sociological

Finally, I reflect on Davies' (and the editors of this volume who invited his piece and responses) attempt to make visible those parts of the sector that cross over into cultural studies, applying a wider, more structural sociological analysis. It is sometimes forgotten in our research circles that the charity sector is not some abstract entity, operating according to its own rules (Dean

and Wiley, 2022). Patterns, processes and impacts within the sector are impacted by culture (from national to popular) and wider social issues, currents and inequalities. Much sectoral research pretends it doesn't.

For example, we don't talk enough about celebrity or cultural trends in nonprofit research. In *The Power Elite* (1956), C. Wright Mills showed how power within American civic life had become centralised among the political elite, the wealthy, and the military, three sections which were diffuse, inter-changeable, with centralized authority. The military rarely have quite the same influence today, but as Mills asserted at the time, through the growth of television the celebrity wielded growing cultural power:

the institutional elite must now compete with and borrow prestige from these professional in the world of celebrity ... The celebrities are The Names that need no further identification ... Wherever they go, they are recognized, and moreover, recognized with some excitement and awe. Whatever they do has publicity value. More or less continuously, over a period of time, they are the material for the media of communication and entertainment... (Mills, 1956: 71-2)

At a time when young people often have a social media-led way of engaging with giving and even their friends and family (Dean, 2020), it is odd that scholars do not pay enough attention to how these things work in practice. More empirical, micro-relationship research is needed with young people to see how they actually interact with MrBeast's videos and what it leads them to think and do.

We must get better at embedding wider social ideas and change processes into our understanding of charity and giving. I thank Rhodri Davies and the editors of this volume for bringing this case, and the myriad issues it raises, into sharp relief.

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