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Things change, things stay the same: MrBeast and Novel Philanthropy

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Note: This article is part of a special Dialogues issue on the ethics, aesthetics, politics, and economics of MrBeast and entertainment-based philanthropy. To see the original paper which prompted this commentary response, click [HERE](#). To see all papers in this special issue, click [HERE](#).

There is a tendency in the study of philanthropy to see each new innovation or movement as transformative and distinct from what has come before. Before MrBeast there was philanthrocapitalism and before long there will be another shiny new toy for those of us who research or practice philanthropy to study. Over a decade ago, in his three-part 2010 BBC Radio 4 series ‘*How New is the New Philanthropy?*’, retired historian Hugh Cunningham argued that the current ‘new’ way of giving was in fact deeply indebted to the much lauded and much criticised philanthropy practiced by Andrew Carnegie over a century before. Things change, things stay the same.

Happily, Rhodri Davies’ analysis of MrBeast’s philanthropy avoids falling into this trap. Instead, he presents a nuanced and measured analysis of the criticisms of MrBeast and of his philanthropic endeavours, weighing up where the mud sticks and where it does not. I broadly agree with this analysis, and so rather than nit-pick the few areas where I might respectfully disagree, instead this response explores the relative novelty of MrBeast’s approach to philanthropy and of the criticisms that have been levied at it.

What isn’t new about MrBeast’s philanthropy?

As Davies notes, there is nothing new about spectacular philanthropy, even if the scale of the spectacle varies. From celebrity-laden telethons and awe-inspiring feats of endurance all the way to someone being sponsored to get into a bath filled with baked beans, spectacle (and silliness) as a way of raising funds for good causes has a long history. In 2016, just as MrBeast was beginning to establish himself in the top tier of YouTubers, Charlesworth (2016, p.224) noted that the philanthropic telethon format requires a host who can deftly move between “boisterous and subdued” presenting styles, recognising which moments call for “diversion” and which alternatively merit “sobriety”. The deftness with which MrBeast does this multiple times within short YouTube videos – from mock explosions to relatively

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nuanced discussions of poverty and need – demonstrate considerable skill in this, but the overall approach is not new.

Nor is the way in which philanthropic ‘value’ is generated through entertainment. Discussing the long-running British telethon Children in Need, Lury (2020) argues that such telethons trade in a ‘currency’ that includes both financial relations in the form of donations and emotional relations to the juxtaposition of engaging and exciting sketches and skits and emotive and heart-wrenching videos featuring the beneficiaries of the funds. Lury argues that the result of this model is that the beneficiaries – in this case poor, ill or disabled children – are assigned a monetary value which can be ‘extracted’ during the telethon. This traditional model of fundraising is therefore dependent on these two forms of currency being generated – emotional currency to capture the viewing audiences’ attention and financial currency in the form of donations. The novelty in MrBeast’s model is it only requires one of these currencies – the emotional draw, driven by the juxtaposition of light entertainment and emotive stories. The financial ‘value’, as Davies outlines, is derived from YouTube’s AdSense advertising algorithm.

It's also possible to view MrBeast’s philanthropy, and the audience watching it, as a form of ethical consumption. As we note elsewhere (Miller and Hogg, 2023), given the focus for viewers is on consumption rather than donations, viewing MrBeast’s videos of eye-catching philanthropy is the YouTube equivalent of buying ProductRED Apple or Nike products. So on top of having clear parallels with telethons and acts of spectacular philanthropy, MrBeast’s philanthropy also has much in common with the long line of initiatives referred to as ‘cause-related marketing’ (Hawkins, 2015).

And what is new?

Put simply, the novelty of MrBeast is in the way in which the ‘audience commodity’ (Smythe, 1977) is explicitly monetised and used to fund the next spectacular act of philanthropy – something that Davies draws on our work to describe as a “philanthropic perpetual motion machine”. Such an approach is certainly new. But is it sustainable?

There are some signs that it is not. Davies notes that the most spectacular videos, such as [“1,000 Blind People See For The First Time”](#) and [“1,000 Deaf People Hear For The First Time”](#) were posted on the main MrBeast channel rather than the smaller (in terms of subscribers) BeastPhilanthropy channel. Was this, as Davies speculates, so that MrBeast can personally profit from these videos rather than the proceeds going directly to the 501(c)(3) non-profit organisation linked to the BeastPhilanthropy channel? Or were they posted on the main channel because the number of views on the smaller channel would not have been sufficient to cover the costs of the philanthropic stunt?

The corporate tie-ins and, more recently, requests for direct donations suggest that the latter may be the case. That, while most certainly novel, the philanthropic perpetual motion machine that MrBeast has developed may not alone be sufficient to fund spectacular acts of philanthropy. BeastPhilanthropy videos have featured corporate sponsors include for-profit fundraising platform Omaze ([“We Fed Five Cities in 30 Days!”](#)), turkey retailers Jennie-O ([“I fed 10,000 Families For Thanksgiving!”](#)), online learning platform Skill Share ([“We Gave](#)

[Away 1 Million Meals!](#)’) and mobile phone based game Dragon City ([“We Built Wells in Africa!”](#)). As MrBeast explains in [“We Gave \\$3,000,000 of Aid to Ukrainian Refugees!”](#),

“We get a sponsorship on every Beast Philanthropy video so we can take the money and use it to help people in future videos. Which basically means if you skip this ad you literally hate people”.

Which criticisms about MrBeast’s philanthropy aren’t new?

Many of the criticisms that Davies presents of MrBeast’s philanthropy are, as he notes, far from novel. It is unarguably the case that in the vast majority of MrBeast’s philanthropic videos – if not all of them – that the good deeds are done to, rather than with, beneficiaries. This donor-led model of philanthropy is not new, and neither are criticisms of it. There is a long academic literature on the concept of ‘philanthropic paternalism’, with these critiques dating back to the 19th Century and beyond. These critiques note the lack of agency that those to whom philanthropic acts are ‘done’ are granted, and argue for more participatory approaches.

Linked to discussions of philanthropic paternalism are those from development studies which focus on the idea of the ‘white saviour’. Indeed this concept is so well embedded in our understandings of philanthropy that the Instagram account Barbie Savior (@barbiesavior) – which uses the children’s toy to parody paternalistic philanthropic activities in Sub-Saharan Africa – has almost 150,000 followers.

Criticisms of major donor philanthropy as being self-interested are also far from new. Indeed, it is the main focus of one of the most influential and widely read books on philanthropy in the last decade – Anand Giridharadas’ *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World* (2018). Whether using giving to shape political systems in their favour, as Giridharadas argues, using it to whitewash company or family reputation, as in the case of the Sackler family or, using it to grow a company or individual’s brand, as MrBeast has been accused of, the fundamental critique is the same: philanthropy is inherently self-interested.

Nor is discomfort with philanthropy being showy or visible in any way new. Being ‘showy’ takes many forms and to walk around any university campus or arts institution is to see decades and even centuries of showy philanthropy in the form of buildings, wings and facilities named in honour of whoever stumped up the cash for them. Philanthropy as entertainment has also attracted strong criticism long before MrBeast’s first forays into philanthropy. Nickel and Eikenberry’s (2009) analysis of marketized philanthropy and ‘charitainment’ lays out their critique of philanthropic activities where the causes of suffering and attempts to address them become too close to one another. Where the market is both the cause of and the solution to all of life’s problems, they argue, it leaves little space for discussion of why these problems exist and how they can be eliminated rather than simply soothed.

Among the many criticisms levied at MrBeast’s [“1,000 Blind People See For The First Time”](#) video, the argument that such philanthropic acts deal with the symptoms of problems,

rather than their causes is one which got significant traction. Alongside this, criticisms that the particularism of philanthropy mean it cannot and should not replace the state were so widely articulated that MrBeast took to Twitter two days after the video was posted to say that, *“I don’t understand why curable blindness is a thing. Why don’t governments step in and help?”* A critique so widespread, it seems, that even the philanthropist himself is making it!

Of course, these critiques of MrBeast’s philanthropy not being novel does not mean they are not valid. Philanthropic paternalism, self-motivated philanthropy, philanthropic particularism, marketized philanthropy and the limitations of philanthropy are all legitimate critiques of both MrBeast and the wider philanthropic world. But they are not new!

And which are new?

In funding his philanthropy – at least in part – through the revenue that YouTube’s AdSense algorithm provides, MrBeast is turning passive attention into philanthropic funds. This passiveness has attracted criticism, as Davies notes. These critiques are concerned that MrBeast is using his huge profile among children and young people to teach them that it is possible to engage in philanthropic acts without really doing anything except watch his videos. The novelty of this philanthropic approach – the philanthropic perpetual motion machine – is also the closest thing to a novel critique of MrBeast’s philanthropy. Yet even this is not necessarily new.

In her critique of cause-related marketing campaigns, Eikenberry (2009) argues that, *“It devalues the moral core of philanthropy by making virtuous action easy and thoughtless”* (52). Further, not only do these approaches damage philanthropy by making virtuous action easy, they could impact on viewers’ other charitable actions. Flaherty and Diamond (1999) found that engagement in brand-charity tie-ins and cause-related marketing campaigns may lead to lower future donations as consumers may feel that they have already done their bit and that their purchases, or in the case of MrBeast their attention, are their donations. Smith and Higgins (2000) similarly argue that consuming cause-related marketing, *“mediates our moral engagement by absorbing charitable giving within preexisting acts of exchange”* (205).

While these critiques are generally being made of more traditional forms of consumption rather than on the consumption of media, they are equally applicable to the consumption of MrBeast’s YouTube videos. As such, even critiques of the apparently novel aspects of his philanthropy can be traced back to previous academic critiques of philanthropy.

And what does this mean?

MrBeast’s philanthropy is certainly an evolution in how philanthropic activities are funded, but a revolution it is not. While on a grander scale than much of what has gone before, the spectacular and silly nature of his philanthropic acts and accompanying videos are steeped in a long tradition of philanthropy as entertainment. And so unsurprisingly, few of the criticisms of what MrBeast is doing and how he is doing it are new either.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about MrBeast's philanthropy and academic critiques of it is the potential to explore how the attention economy that he has so skillfully mastered can contribute to growing the size or impact of philanthropy, and whether it can provide a solution to any of these enduring criticisms. On that, the jury is very much out.

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