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The Celebrity Icon Mask: The Multi-Institutional Masking of Sir Jimmy Savile

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to develop the concepts of masks and masking to interrogate the role of institutions in the co-production of 'untouchable' celebrity icon status. The empirical focus is the multi-institutional masking of Sir Jimmy Savile OBE KCSG. For decades, Savile was celebrated as one of the UK's best-loved celebrity icons. One year after his death, he was exposed as a serial sexual predator. We argue that the largely compartmentalised official reports on Savile have presented a partial analysis. They have emphasised the importance of Savile's celebrity status while taking it for granted, downplayed the significance of his moral standing in British society, and marginalised the proactive, enabling role of the BBC, the NHS and the British establishment. However manipulative the individual, we propose that it was Savile's cumulative multi-institutional masking as celebrity personality (the BBC), celanthropist (the NHS) and, ultimately, celebrity icon (the British establishment) that co-produced his 'untouchable' status and enabled him for decades to deflect and discredit rumour, gossip and allegations about his sexually predatory behaviour. We conclude by reflecting on the 'researchability' of powerful elites, and by suggesting how our analysis might inform further research into the power dynamics that have co-produced the 'untouchability' of other celebrities subsequently exposed as serial sexual predators.

Keywords

celebrity, Goffman, icon, mask, persona, sex offender, Sir Jimmy Savile

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Introduction

This article develops the concepts of masks and masking to interrogate the role of institutions in the co-production of 'untouchable' celebrity icon status. The empirical focus is the multi-institutional masking of Sir Jimmy Savile OBE KCSG. Over the past decade, numerous celebrities have been exposed as serial sexual predators. These revelations have resulted in criminal and civil prosecutions, public inquiries, digital feminist activist campaigns and heated debate on the toxic nature of the gendered power hierarchies that characterise the entertainment industries. In the USA, the most high-profile cases have involved the US comedy actor once known as 'America's Dad', Bill Cosby, the Hollywood movie mogul, Harvey Weinstein, the double-Oscar winning Hollywood actor and Director of London's Old Vic Theatre, Kevin Spacey, and the singer, songwriter, music producer and former professional basketball player, R. Kelly. Cosby was sentenced in September 2018 to 3–10 years in prison for drugs and sexual molestation offences. Weinstein was sentenced to 23 years in prison in March 2020 on two counts of sexual assault, though more than 80 women made allegations against him. Kelly is facing criminal charges of sexual assault, battery, sex trafficking and racketeering. While some of the charges against Spacey have been dropped, he remains under investigation and a fresh lawsuit alleging sexual assault was filed in September 2020. The Channel 4/HBO documentary, *Leaving Neverland* (2019) featured the testimony of two adults who allege that, as children, they and others were groomed and repeatedly abused by Michael Jackson. It has resurrected accusations that the 'King of Pop' was in fact a predatory paedophile.

The paradigmatic case in the UK remains the exposure in 2012 of celebrity icon Sir Jimmy Savile OBE KCSG, one year after his death, as a serial sexual predator. Since the public allegations against Savile were posthumous, there could be no criminal prosecution or trial and guilt cannot be established in a court of law. However, a compensation scheme enabling Savile's alleged victims to claim against his estate was approved by the High Court and upheld, when contested, in the Court of Appeal (Tran, 2014). And numerous investigations and inquiries have concluded that Savile's guilt is beyond doubt, casting him as an arch manipulator who exploited his 'untouchable' celebrity status to sexually harass, assault and silence his victims for more than five decades. For Peter Davies, formerly chief executive of the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, Savile's 'power was celebrity; access to the corridors of power; the aura of invincibility and untouchability' (quoted in Lampard and Marsden, 2015: 42). The joint NSPCC and Metropolitan Police investigation finds that Savile 'used his celebrity status as a powerful tool to coerce or control [his victims], preying on the vulnerable or star-struck for his sexual gratification' (Gray and Watt, 2013: 24). The Lampard Report on allegations that Savile committed sexual offences in multiple National Health Service (NHS) institutions portrays a 'manipulative television personality using his celebrity profile and his much-publicised volunteering and fundraising roles to gain access, influence and power in certain hospitals'. The report into Savile's offending within Stoke Mandeville Hospital, where he volunteered for years, established a Charitable Trust and for which he reportedly raised £20 million, concludes: 'His celebrity persona led the people around him to accept behaviour which would not have been tolerated from other volunteers or directly employed members of staff' (Johnstone and Dent, 2015: 138). Health Secretary, Jeremy

Hunt, told the House of Commons that people 'were too dazzled or too intimidated by the nation's favourite celebrity to confront the evil predator we now know he was' (BBC, 26 February 2015). And the review of Savile's alleged offending at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) finds that 'most people in the BBC held the Talent [like Savile] in some awe and treated them deferentially; they appeared to have the ability to influence careers and were themselves untouchable' (Smith, 2016: 42). Because Savile was embedded both within and across multiple institutions, more than 60 official reports have been produced. Spanning the entertainment, health, education, charity and criminal justice sectors, these reports have concluded that Savile was one of the UK's most prolific and multi-faceted sexual predators. As a result, his public persona has metamorphosised from celebrity icon into the personification of evil.

It is not our aim in this article to pronounce on Savile's guilt. Rather, we are interested in broadening the scope of analysis to think about the interlocking power structures underpinning his 'untouchability' and the origins, dynamics and impacts of the multi-institutional masking from which he benefitted. To this end, we propose that important parts of the Sir Jimmy Savile story remain under-developed. In general terms, it is significant that key institutional inquiries have been compartmentalised, looking broadly in isolation at Savile's interactions with and alleged offending within the BBC (Smith, 2016), the NHS – albeit multiple hospitals – (Lampard and Marsden, 2015), or other specific institutions and locations. However logistically understandable, this compartmentalisation means that the multi-institutional nature of Savile's status validation – for us, *the* crucial factor underpinning his 'untouchability' – though acknowledged in places, is conceptually and structurally marginalised. More specifically, we would suggest that, firstly, the official understanding of Savile has emphasised his celebrity status while taking it for granted: the story begins after Savile has already become a powerful celebrity. Second, it has downplayed the significance of Savile's moral standing in British society – deriving from his unprecedented, high-visibility charitable acts – which turbocharged his celebrity status. Third, by portraying Savile as an arch manipulator who for decades exploited the institutions with which he was most closely associated, it ultimately exonerates those institutions as naïve victims of his grotesque deceit. This portrayal diminishes their pivotal role in transforming Savile into a uniquely British celebrity icon and protecting his carefully honed, mutually beneficial public persona.

In what follows we develop the hitherto under-used concepts of masks and masking to advance sociological understanding of Savile's untouchable celebrity icon status. Concentrating precisely on those factors that conventional wisdom downplays, we interrogate how Savile became a celebrity icon, foreground the moral component of his status transition, and demonstrate the pivotal, proactive role of UK institutions in the multi-dimensional validation processes that enabled him for decades to deflect and discredit rumour, gossip and allegations about his sexually predatory behaviour. In doing so, our analysis seeks to elucidate how multi-institutional masking contributes to the co-production of 'untouchability', empowering those celebrities to neutralise with remarkable effectiveness negative counter-characterisation and – as official reports and due process into Savile, Cosby, Weinstein and others have concluded – exploit and abuse with impunity.

The article is organised as follows. We begin by establishing our key concepts and theoretical framework through examining the intersections between celebrity, masks and

masking. We then discuss our methodological approach, before going on to identify and analyse the overlapping phases in Savile's multi-institutional masking which co-produced his untouchable celebrity icon status. Next, we consider the resilience of multi-institutional masking by examining how it contributes to neutralising counter-characterisation. We conclude by reflecting on the 'researchability' of powerful elites, and by suggesting how our analysis might inform further research into the power dynamics that have co-produced the 'untouchability' of other celebrities subsequently exposed as serial sexual predators.

Studies of Masks and Masking: An Institutional Perspective

Masks are typically understood to be techniques for disguising, concealing or displaying the self. The etymology of 'person' is the Latin *persona* which means an actor's mask or character in a play (Marshall, 2010, 2016; Marshall et al., 2015, 2020; Mauss, 1985). In ancient societies, ceremonial masks could empower those wearing them to heal, inhabit or punish. Synnott (1990: 61) notes that contemporary culture is replete with advice to mask our true feelings and emotions, so much so that research has highlighted the negative physical and mental health implications that can result from adhering to this cultural imperative (Pennebaker, 1997). People routinely use cosmetics to 'put their face on' and many submit to surgical make-overs and face-lifts to create a preferred public persona (Korichi et al., 2008). Pollock (1995) has noted from an anthropological perspective that research has tended to focus on *what* masks do in particular contexts, and has been less concerned to explain *how* masks work. For him, masks work by 'modifying those signs of identity which conventionally display the actor, and by presenting new values that, again conventionally, represent the transformed person or an entirely new identity' (Pollock, 1995: 584). While anthropologists have tended to focus on the symbolic, ritual and practical properties and functions of masks as physical artefacts, sociologists have also conceptualised masks as performative adaptations. Our conceptual framework of multi-institutional masking is built around an engagement with Alexander's (2010) analysis of the celebrity icon mask, and we introduce Goffman (1955, 1958, 1967) to bring both agency and interaction to masking as a process. Marshall et al.'s (2015, 2020) theorising of 'persona' as the strategic and tactical presentation of 'personal identity for different publics' has also proved valuable in developing our approach.

Building upon Barthes' (1956) depiction of Greta Garbo's face as an 'absolute mask' of ethereal beauty, Alexander argues that celebrity icons, as objects of worship, must transmit a star persona that is as close to surface perfection as possible. For their surface perfection – the icon mask – also mirrors their moral depth or soul (Alexander, 2010: 324). Garbo's 'deified face' is imbued with the aesthetic and symbolic power to commit icon worshippers to 'moral ideals' (Alexander, 2010: 324; see also Henning, 2017).

Garbo epitomised the golden age of Hollywood, when screen idols were viewed as untouchable gods and goddesses (Gamson, 1992: 265). For subsequent generations of Hollywood stars, that moral depth needed to be evidenced through visible philanthropic actions – what Rojek (2014) defines as celanthropy. To illustrate his argument, Alexander considers Audrey Hepburn, whose selfless dedication to humanitarian work as a UNICEF ambassador demonstrated her morality and reinforced her unimpeachable iconic status (Wilson, 2011). Members of the contemporary Hollywood elite, such as Angelina Jolie,

Brad Pitt and George Clooney, are expected to wear icon masks that display their celanthropic and activist credentials.[1] Recognition of this expectation has led some to query the 'true' motivation of celanthropists and philanthrocapitalists, pointing to the tensions between hollow, self-serving instrumentalism and the purer moral drive to help the needy (Jeffreys and Allatson, 2015; McGoey, 2015). Whatever their celanthropic credentials, it is challenging even for Hollywood stars to protect their iconic status in a 24/7 spectacular culture. Yet even if the mask 'slips', revealing faults, improprieties or self-destructive tendencies, only rarely are these transgressions treated as truly scandalous. Celebrity icons are judged by a different set of moral standards. Almost without exception, redemption is possible. Although they can 'crash and burn, ending careers and taking the individuals behind the icon masks permanently off the world's live stage . . . the celebrity as mythical sign remains alive in memory, undiminished in its projection of charisma and power' (Alexander, 2010: 331). For Alexander, the only 'fall from grace' that cannot be forgiven is the public degradation, usually through ageing, of the icon mask.

Alexander's work is based on a convenience sample of the world's most exclusive movie celebrities whose fame (at least in the global north) is transnational and transcendent. However, as we have argued elsewhere (Greer and McLaughlin, 2020), celebrity icons are also embedded in the 'structures of feeling' characterising the national culture of which they are part (see also Tyler and Bennett, 2010). Alexander also has little to say about the status transformation processes involved in the mediatised production of a celebrity icon mask. Like the official reports into Savile, his analysis begins after the celebrities have already achieved iconic status, when their masks are fully formed and fixed in place. Finally, we diverge conceptually from the implicit binary in Alexander's analysis – that there are 'real' individuals concealed beneath the celebrity icon mask, whose essential self might be revealed if the mask slips. For a more dynamic and provocative understanding of the fluid, multi-layered and agentic nature of masking as a process, we turn to Goffman.

For Goffman, because of the amplification effects of 'first impressions', an indispensable everyday task for human beings is the dramaturgical art of impression management. This requires people to become skilled, reflexive image workers who are engaged in constant masking. Social actors play many parts, transforming their appearance according to audience reaction. Donning an appropriately convincing mask is essential to realising critical transactional objectives, including reputational gain and enhanced social standing (1967: 5). The performative alchemy of the social actor–audience relationship is all-important in creating a situationally contingent, negotiated social reality:

> When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be. (Goffman, 1958: 17)

Making maximum use of a given stage or setting is crucial to the effectiveness of the performance, which occurs in two distinct areas – the public 'front stage' region and the private 'back stage' region – each with different rules of behaviour (Goffman, 1958:

114–115). Formalised 'front stage' performances, which require the social actor to convince audiences that what is enacted is 'the real reality' (1958: 28), contrast with the informal 'back stage', where actors can 'step out of character' (1958: 115), and where front stage performances are 'knowingly contradicted' (1958: 114). However, even 'back stage' social actors may have difficulty separating themselves from their public persona. Put simply, for Goffman social actors are an assemblage of many interconnected roles and are indistinguishable from the multitude of audience-focused roles they perform. The theatricalised masks people wear are thus related to 'fluidity of identity, with acts of mimicry in which the mimic becomes that which she or he imitates' (Henning, 2017: 168). Which mask predominates at any one time depends on performative skills, flow of agency and situational context – that is, on 'what is going on' on a given stage. Goffman was clear, however, that performative agency cannot be taken for granted – intention and effect are not the same thing. Impression management can go wrong and examining the potential disjuncture between the impressions social actors seek to 'give' and those they actually 'give off' to audiences remained a central concern in his work (Carrabine, 2019). Manning (1992) proposes that Goffman regarded social actors as 'a set of performance masks hiding a manipulative and cynical self'. Thus, Goffman's social actors may be less preoccupied with ensuring that promises and commitments are actually realised, and more concerned with the amoral objective of projecting a persuasive impression that those promises and commitments will be realised. As he puts it, 'The very obligation and profitability of appearing always in a steady moral light, of being a socialized character, forces one to be the sort of person who is practiced in the ways of the stage' (Goffman, 1958: 244).

To a greater or lesser extent, all social actors have the chameleonesque ability to disguise their true intentions (Goffman, 1967: 65). Not surprisingly, then, Goffman was fascinated with the dramaturgical agency of confidence tricksters and professional gamblers, the ultimate two-faced performers, who 'must employ elaborate and meticulous personal fronts and often engineer meticulous social settings' to manipulate and deceive gullible others (Goffman, 1958: 218–219).

We seek here to develop Alexander's more deified conceptualisation of the celebrity icon in terms of aesthetic surface, moral depth and celanthropic force, and Goffman's agentic and systemic interests in social actors' impression management as part of the interaction order, to examine the complex interrelationship between individuals and institutions in masking processes. In addition to being individual performers, social actors are also expected to wear institutionally prescribed masks and are, in turn, masked by the normative credentials and attributes of the institutions to which they belong. The rituals and practices of institutional masking can degrade and humiliate social actors and strip away individual identities – what Goffman (1968) called the 'mortification of the self'. They may equally serve to reinforce the social actor's preferred public persona by diminishing any disjuncture between the impressions they seek to 'give' and those they actually 'give off'. Institutional actors benefit from additional status validation and a range of 'trappings of power' in the form of resources, privileges and protections that would be denied others. Particularly where there is a strong moral component – for example, the Church officially ordaining and theologically empowering priests, or, in the present case, the culture industries, charities and the establishment officially validating

and professionally empowering celebrities – institutional masking may greatly amplify the capacity to do good. However, it may also contribute to the production of an 'untouchable' celebrity persona, capable of neutralising negative counter-characterisations and empowering individuals to act with impunity.

Thus masks, for us, are performative adaptations that are curated and cultivated over time to project a preferred public persona to specific audiences. Masking is not static, as Alexander (2010) appears to suggest, but dynamic, in line with Goffman (1958, 1967; see also Marshall et al., 2015, 2020). In self-presentational terms, masking is always transitional and a work in progress. Social actors can wear several masks at the same time, which may be mutually reinforcing or disruptive of particular aspects of a multi-layered identity. Masking processes are always interactive. This is why institutions are so pivotal in the co-production of powerful and resilient masks.

We propose that Savile is an exemplary case study of Goffman's conceptualisation of social actor-as-confidence trickster: a celebrity icon, in line with Alexander's analysis, who was a skilled image worker and practiced manipulator of surface and depth, celebrity and morality, people and situations, time and place. However, the masks worn by Savile could not have been constructed alone. They required multi-institutional validation. Throughout his career, Savile's performative agency enabled him to move within and between institutions, simultaneously developing and exploiting multiple masking processes to co-produce an instantly recognisable public persona. His multi-institutional masking as celebrity personality, celanthropist and, ultimately, celebrity icon was sufficiently robust to enable him for decades to neutralise rumour, gossip and allegations about his sexually predatory behaviour. In what follows, we seek to examine and explain the pivotal and proactive role of UK institutions in the co-production of Sir Jimmy Savile's 'untouchable' celebrity icon mask.

Researching the Celebrity Elite: Methodological Considerations

Reflecting on doing life-story research, Oakley (2011) argues that:

> The interpretive act, or series of acts, through which lives are constituted involves a process which is very like the 'triangulation' used by qualitative social researchers. You take one account and put it next to another, and then the next one: you look at the context and consider what makes sense.

Data extraction and the interpretive act are not straightforward in relation to the life-stories of 'untouchable' elite celebrities. Celebrities and celebrity culture have been researched from multiple perspectives (Cashmore, 2006; Douglas and McDonnell, 2019; Dyer and McDonald, 1998; Gamson, 1992; Marshall, 1997; Rojek, 2001; Van Krieken, 2012). Yet, as is the case with researching elites more generally, there is a scarcity of in-depth and up-close analyses of the 'celebritocracy' (Greer and McLaughlin, 2020; Leypoldt and Engler, 2010; Marcus, 2019; Phegley and Badia, 2006; Tomaselli and Scott, 2009). Because of access problems, this type of research cannot normally be undertaken using traditional methods. Open sources – including, in recent years,

seemingly unrestricted, tell-all social media profiles – may exist alongside artistic works, interviews, documentaries and obituaries, and archived personal papers, correspondence and diaries (DeAngelis and Desjardins, 2017). However, considerable legal and PR effort is expended controlling what is publicly known about the lives of elite celebrities, by whom, when and how (Cashmore, 2006; Ciszek, 2020; Fitch, 2017). A crucial form of biofictional masking is realised through often ghost-written memoirs and autobiographies and authorised biographies (Lee, 2014; Mayer and Novak, 2019). It is only when truly scandalous behaviour precipitates an elite celebrity's 'fall from grace' that private biographical information appears in the public realm, enabling a wholesale reinterpretation of their celebrity persona.

In the case of Sir Jimmy Savile, we are dealing with one of the UK's most comprehensively interrogated celebrity lives. The challenge for researchers is to engage with often contradictory, criss-crossing narratives deriving from Savile's total status transformation from celebrity icon to one of the UK's most notorious sexual predators. For 50 years Savile lived his life in the media spotlight, generating a phenomenal quantity of almost always celebratory reportage and imagery and projecting himself as a completely transparent biographical entity. There is a 'rags to riches' autobiography (Savile, 1974) and a self-penned 'how to live a good life' book, *God'll Fix It* (Savile, 1978), official biographies by Bellamy (2012) and Davies (2014), and a raft of interviews, commentaries, documentaries and news stories. Numerous obituaries also commemorated an extraordinary and remarkably scandal-free life story. But because of the multitude of official investigations, news reports and documentaries on the Savile scandal, there now exists a radically contrasting interpretation of his previously celebrated life-history. The depth and breadth of biographical information that is now available makes it possible to reconstruct and re-evaluate Savile's relationships with key British institutions and to identify the masking role they played in the different phases of his status transformation.

Despite the availability of this rich archive of pre- and post-scandal biographical information, the Savile case has received limited academic attention. Furedi (2013) has examined how what he views to be moral crusaders have ruthlessly exploited the case to raise public consciousness of child sexual abuse. Boyle (2018a, 2018b) has analysed the media reporting of Savile within the broader context of unacknowledged everyday sexism. Writing from a psychoanalytical perspective, Silverstone (2014) has traced Savile's deficiencies in personality and behaviour back to an emotionally disturbed, uncared for childhood and adolescence. Bainbridge (2020) has analysed the therapeutic dynamic at play in the media reaction to Savile's exposure as a serial sexual predator. Aust and Holdsworth (2016) have considered how the Savile scandal has impacted on the BBC's programme archive. And we have researched the activation of a scandal that embroiled the BBC in an unprecedented crisis, quickly amplified across multiple institutions, and triggered a chain of events that resulted in the biggest public inquiry in British history (Greer and McLaughlin, 2013, 2015, 2017). While this body of work has examined the Savile case from a range of perspectives, there has to date been no academic analysis of the pivotal role key British institutions played in co-producing his 'untouchable' celebrity icon status.

Rethinking the Celebrity Icon Mask: The Multi-Institutional Masking of Sir Jimmy Savile OBE KCSG

Sir Jimmy Savile's celebrity icon mask was of a radically different nature from those described by Alexander (2010). His relentless manipulation of surface and depth relied on the complex interplay of self- and institutional masking processes. Benefitting increasingly and cumulatively throughout his career from the active support, reward and validation of some of Britain's most sacred institutions, Savile subverted the conventional norms around celebrity icon status by reconfiguring both the significance and display of celebrity and moral worth. Within the very particular British national context of institutionalised class prejudice and entrapment, and radical generational change, his was a calculated, flamboyant, instantly recognisable and, increasingly over time, moralised mask crafted to convey the impression that it is authentic and acceptable to be yourself. Through modifying the signs of identity that conventionally display the celebrity icon (Synnott, 1990), the strikingly unconventional, yet nationally celebrated and institutionally validated impression Savile cultivated was that to be both famous and virtuous, no mask is required.

We propose that Savile's elevation to the status of untouchable celebrity icon can be understood in terms of three interconnected masking processes in which three of the UK's most prominent institutions played a pivotal and proactive role: the celebrity personality mask, primarily co-produced with and validated by the BBC; the celanthropist mask, primarily co-produced with and validated by the NHS; and the celebrity icon mask, primarily co-produced with and validated by the British establishment. We would argue that all contemporary celebrities who have been elevated to this elite status have worked through variations of these masking processes, albeit perhaps in different ways and with the resources and support of different sets of institutions. In the following sections, we outline and analyse the multi-institutional masking of Sir Jimmy Savile in greater detail.

Institutionalising the Mask of the Celebrity Personality: The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)

Savile's ascent to UK stardom was as rapid as it was dramatic. In many respects Savile personifies Boorstin's (1992: 57) definition of a celebrity as a person who is 'known for their well-knownness'. Having worked in the Yorkshire collieries as a Bevin boy, nearly losing his life in a mining explosion, he entered the entertainment industry as a dancehall manager and disc jockey in Leeds and Manchester. Savile was in the right place at the right time: a unique period of social transformation in Britain that witnessed the birth of rock and roll and pop music, the 'Swinging Sixties', the countercultural youth revolution and the rise of celebrity culture (Kynaston, 2015). It was a time of unprecedented, highly lucrative opportunities in a rapidly evolving mass media landscape and also the moment when traditional cultural and moral boundaries were being challenged (Cashmore, 2006). Having cut his teeth in the dancehalls of Leeds, Manchester and London in the late 1950s, deejaying on Radio Luxembourg and guesting on the first televised pop music shows propelled Savile to national fame.

On New Year's Day 1964, at the age of 38, he presented the first ever edition of what would become the UK's flagship pop music programme, *Top of the Pops* (TOTP). Described as 'the mirror that nurtured and reflected every new musical style, fashion craze and youth movement' (Humphries and Blacknell, 2014: xvi), TOTP eventually attracted UK audiences of 15 million viewers and was transmitted to approximately 120 countries. Savile introduced the inaugural episode with what would turn out to be the immortal sentence: 'It's Number One, it's *Top of The Pops*'. Exemplifying Goffman's (1958: 245) contention that the self is 'a performed character . . . a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented', this was Savile's breakthrough moment. In terms of institutional masking, his performance quite literally made him the 'face' of British pop broadcasting and transformed him into an A-List BBC celebrity – a status he retained throughout his lifetime.

By the early 1970s Savile was deeply institutionalised into the BBC. Britain's first millionaire DJ and member of the emergent celebritocracy conveyed the impression that he was a wheeler and dealer – the 'top man' or 'governor' (his words) or 'the Daddy' or 'the Godfather' (the BBC's words). As one of the UK's highest paid broadcasters, he revelled in the trappings of material success, and made much of owning an E-Type Jaguar, several customised Rolls-Royces, and rushing between properties in Manchester, Leeds and London.

Savile's institutional masking was further reinforced when he extended his broadcasting portfolio into the BBC's worthier end of programming. He presented two popular chat shows – *Savile's Travels* and *Speakeasy* (1969–1973). The former featured Savile touring Britain playing records requested by guests, while the latter, produced in co-operation with the BBC's religious department, was a discussion programme for radio in which teenagers could air their views on topical moral and ethical issues. Four million listeners routinely tuned-in to BBC Radio One's first serious-minded talk show. In this guise, Savile – already the face of British pop broadcasting – now became the primetime face and voice of the BBC, presenting shows on the most popular television channel and radio station in the country.

Savile also presented *Clunk Click* (1973–1975), an award-winning series of public information films and advertisements on road safety, which was subsequently developed into a Saturday evening BBC show. This show, in turn, became *Jim'll Fix it* (1975–1994), the primetime BBC favourite that enabled Savile regularly to reach an audience of 20 million viewers, an astronomical figure that represented almost half of Britain's population at the time. At the height of its popularity, the programme received 20,000 'Dear Jim' letters per week asking Savile to 'fix it' for them to, for example, meet pop and sports stars, fly on Concorde, or ride on the world's tallest rollercoaster. Sitting in his 'magic armchair', over the years Savile presented more than 1,500 lucky children with a medal engraved with the words *Jim Fixed It for Me*. By now, Savile's celebrity image was not just that of a mainstream A-List BBC entertainer – he was the host of the most popular television shows in the history of UK broadcasting.

Thus the institutional support and validation of the BBC was pivotal in co-producing Savile's mask of the celebrity personality, and the Corporation's support continued to underpin his charmed career. Savile was inter-mediatised across numerous primetime BBC radio and television programmes and afforded a direct line to the 'inner

circle' of programme makers. For decades, Savile-centred programming was central to the BBC's marketing logics. As a Saturday evening television fixture in tens-of-millions of UK households, he was also integrated into that most foundational social institution – the family.

Savile understood that image was everything, and his style initially evolved in line with wider pop culture. There exists an extensive visual record, spanning almost two decades, of a stylishly dressed celebrity whose surface image reflects, more or less, the fashions of the time. But in curating the mask of the celebrity personality, Savile quickly deviated from mainstream trends and, as his fame grew, he became increasingly known for sartorial eccentricity. It was on *Top of the Pops* that Savile displayed his self-mocking trickster appearance, with eccentric outfits, bling jewellery and cigars, cartoonish mannerisms and hyperverbalism consisting of virtually unintelligible yodelling, patter and signature catch phrases or 'Savilisms'.

In stark contrast to Alexander's (2010) celebrity icons, whose surface perfection signifies everything, Savile insisted that he had always viewed his appearance as irrelevant. Reflecting on his career after 50 years in the media spotlight, he illustrated this point through direct reference to the superficiality of the masks that other celebrities wear:

> I've never worn make-up on TV. I would hate an engineering job to make me look like Richard Gere and when people saw you in the street they'd say, 'Ooh, you're a horrible-looking bastard in real life. People used to say, 'You've got to wear make-up on TV', and I'd say, 'Piss off, I'm not wearing nothing'. (Hattenstone, 2000)

This claim always to have rejected the significance of surface appearance could only be made retrospectively, once his celebrity icon mask was firmly fixed. In his iconoclastic claims to have rejected make-up on television, Savile indicated, both literally and figuratively, that he had nothing to hide: there was no mask.

In deploying their assemblage of masks in everyday life (Goffman, 1955, 1958), many social actors are able to acquire some level of celebrity status. Very few celebrities secure the institutional validation essential to the co-production of the celebrity icon mask. We propose that the next overlapping phase in Savile's multi-institutional masking was the institutionalisation of the deeply moralised celanthropist mask, primarily co-produced with and validated by the NHS.

Institutionalising the Mask of the Celanthropist: The National Health Service (NHS)

Whatever Savile's actual views of his image in the early phases of his career, the initial creation of a more-or-less 'conventional' celebrity persona was instrumental and ephemeral. No sooner was the mask of the celebrity personality in place than Savile began modifying and developing it by drawing increasing attention to his celanthropic activities and moral depth.

First, Savile began openly to proclaim his moral convictions and, in particular, the importance of being a practising Catholic. He demonstrated this religiosity by presenting religious affairs programmes and giving church sermons. The putative moral dimension

of Savile's celebrity persona was simultaneously highlighted and institutionally validated when he was described in 1971 as 'the spearhead of [the BBC's] Christian attack' on immorality in the British media (Davies, 2014). Further validation came later that year when, along with British pop star Cliff Richard, Savile was invited to join Lord Longford's contentious inquiry into the regulation of pornography.

Second, Savile publicly declared himself to be a confirmed bachelor who was devoted to his mother. His relationship with his mother, he claimed, was the reason why he never married and never had a long-term girlfriend (Savile, 1974: 9). One of the most remarkable manifestations of Savile's moral masking appears in his book, *God'll Fix It*, written at the age of 52, in which he sets out his nostrums for living a good life:

> I return to my rules of common sense. They dictate that it's not right to make love to anyone if it causes them distress. So I mustn't make love to anyone if they are in, say, a state of drunkenness or don't know what they're doing. I mustn't take them knowing that when they return to normal they'll be distressed. That is my principle for not hurting a life. No-one must hurt a life, not for selfish passions. Nor would I want to make love to someone if someone else's life is upset. I'm therefore very careful, as I pick my way through life, that I don't enter into any relationship that's going to harm someone else's life . . . I'm absolutely sure I must not distress anyone, must not destroy their life. (Savile, 1978: 57)

The third and most significant dimension in Savile's co-curation of the celanthropist mask was his extraordinary charity fundraising work. By the early 1970s, he was leveraging his celebrity capital and entrepreneurial skills to assist numerous UK charities. He became the honorary president of PHAB (Physically Handicapped in the Able-Bodied Community) and the spokesperson for the British Polio Fellowship. Savile was different, however, in the sheer volume of positive publicity he generated by: (a) voluntary work in NHS hospitals; (b) organising and participating in charity fundraising events, particularly marathons; and (c) the declaration that he was donating most of his considerable earnings to unfashionable small charities:

> When I came into the big money after having five-and-a-half years down the pits for £20 a week, I arrived at a crossroads in my life. I had to decide whether to go in for riotous living or carry on as I was and use some of my time and money in helping other people. (*Illustrated London News*, 20 December 1969: 14)

Savile scaled up his charity work in 1979 by launching a high-profile fundraising campaign to raise £10 million for Stoke Mandeville Hospital's renowned Spinal Injuries Unit. This would be Savile's crowning celenthropic achievement, the moment when he became synonymous with the NHS and the point at which the mask of the celanthropist became institutionalised. No British celebrity had ever undertaken, still less succeeded, in such an ambitious charity fundraising undertaking, and it took Bob Geldoff's 75-act, dual-continent benefit concert for famine in Africa, *Live Aid* (1985), to surpass it. Over the course of multiple charity events spanning three decades, Savile raised more than £20 million for the Unit, and a further £25 million for other charities. These high-publicity moral feats reinforced his status as the go-to celebrity for institutions and charities wishing to benefit from his fundraising Midas touch – ranging from the Duncroft Approved

School for Girls to the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) – and created a powerful state of institutional dependence on Savile. This interdependence, in turn, resulted in Savile commanding extraordinary agency within those institutions in the form of NHS hospital and other charity board positions, unfettered access to restricted areas, and – as the official reports clearly demonstrate – behavioural latitude amounting to untouchability.

As Savile's celanthropist mask became ever-more firmly fixed in place, his physical appearance changed more dramatically. For Alexander (2010), the conventional path for celebrities is to prioritise the aesthetic surface, fortifying the icon mask though age-defying regimes that can resist the ravages of time. Savile did the opposite. He rejected with increasingly brash conviction the significance of his surface appearance. To signal its irrelevance and to intensify the focus on his moral depth, Savile visually accentuated his eccentric nature and, as time passed, his ridiculousness. His tailored suits were replaced with track suits and, eventually, the shellsuit. The jewellery became ever-more garish and 'bling' – heavy gold rings, jewel-encrusted Rolex watches, bracelets and medallions. The informality of the 'trash' clothing, the (ironic) 'masters of the universe' symbolism of the cigar, the jingle-jangle of the jewellery, and the wildness of the dyed blonde hair, language and mannerisms all jarred with accepted notions of good taste, style and celebrity aesthetics. Over time, Savile became a visual caricature of himself – instantly recognisable, comical, even laughable, but widely – if never universally – regarded as a moral beacon and, therefore, sincere and authentic.

Situated in a performative context that radically disrupted the conventional signs of celebrity, Savile's 'elaborate and meticulous personal front' (Goffman, 1958: 218) is that surface appearances are merely forms of masking. It is what lies beneath that matters most. Thus, in the mid- to late 1970s, which multiple reports have concluded was the height of his criminal offending, Savile is one of the most instantly recognisable, multi-award-winning, institutionally validated celebrity faces in Britain. Yet this is not the 'sacred visage' of Alexander's (2010) Hollywood icons. Rather, Savile presents his eccentric, jester-like surface appearance simultaneously as irrelevant – an amusing distraction – and transparent – merely a window to the true self within. His co-curation of that 'true self' projected a wacky and irreverent but, above all, a deeply moral celebrity personality and celanthropist driven not by pursuit of the superficial aesthetic and material trappings of stardom, but by the commitment to do good and help others. The progressive sculpting of the moral dimensions of Savile's masks, in conjunction with cherished national institutions like the BBC and the NHS, secured establishment validation and, ultimately, elevated him to the status of untouchable celebrity icon.

Institutionalising the Mask of the Celebrity Icon: The British Establishment

Savile's ability to dissolve the boundaries between celebrity and philanthropy changed the terms of his relationship with British institutions. What he came to represent extended beyond conventional celebrity. Savile became a powerful symbol of the transgenerationally shared values of entrepreneurialism, meritocracy and altruism. As such, in addition to being highly 'practiced in the ways of the stage' (Goffman, 1958: 244), Savile became a political asset. Accordingly, he was photographed in the company of British Prime

Ministers Harold Wilson, Ted Heath, James Callaghan, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Margaret Thatcher, who had appeared both on *Jim'll Fix It* and his radio programmes, wrote a letter to Savile for his unprecedented second appearance on the biographical primetime television show, *This is Your Life*, in 1990. She stated, 'so many great Britons have a touch of eccentricity about them and Jimmy truly is a great Briton. He is a stunning example of opportunity Britain, a dynamic example of enterprise Britain, and an inspiring example of responsible Britain' (Davies, 2014: 49).

We propose that it was Savile's moral more than his cultural masking – his celanthropy more than his raw celebrity – that underpinned his institutionalisation into the British establishment and his untouchable celebrity icon status. This key point is comprehensively underplayed across multiple official reports. It was for establishing the Stoke Mandeville Jimmy Savile Trust, working at Leeds General Infirmary (where he had been told years earlier that he might be paralysed following his mining accident), and heading an emergency task force to reform Broadmoor, Britain's most notorious psychiatric hospital, that he was institutionalised into the NHS. It was for these and other widely publicised good deeds that he was awarded with honorary doctorates and fellowships by the Universities of Leeds (1986) and Bedfordshire (2009). In the Queen's New Year Honours 1972 Savile was appointed Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (OBE) for personal services to hospitals and charities. In 1977 he received the first of two Catholic honours. The Cross of Merit in the Sovereign Military Order of Malta was awarded to Savile for his service to charities and for upholding Christian values. The Queen honoured him again in 1990 with a knighthood for his 'charitable services' and the celebrity icon became Sir Jimmy Savile OBE. The same year that Savile received his royal knighthood, further institutional validation followed when he was recognised by the Catholic Church through a Papal knighthood for his charity work, being made Knight Commander of the Pontifical Equestrian Order of St Gregory the Great by Pope John Paul II. Despite Whitehall concerns, Savile became a friend to Prince Charles and Princess Diana, both of whom reportedly came to him at times of need. It is claimed that Diana came to Savile for advice about dealing with hostile press coverage and both royals confided in Savile about their marriage problems (Morton, 1997). Savile's final state honour was bestowed in March 2008, when the then Prime Minster, Gordon Brown, presented him with a medal recognising his war-time service to the nation as one of the Bevin Boys.

Each of these instances of institutionalisation further sedimented Savile's position within British society, enabling him to amplify both his celebrity status and his moral presence and increasing both his access to other key institutions and his influence among the establishment elite. By the 1990s, Savile was ensconced within the BBC, the NHS, Department of Education, the State, the Church, the Monarchy, the Military and the nation. As he aged, he became a treasured artefact in Britain's post-war memory museum, spanning the rock and roll years, the 'Swinging Sixties' and the counter-culture, glam rock, punk rock and rave. Savile was so deeply institutionalised, and so self-assured about his own performative agency, that he felt he could interact with royalty, senior politicians, the clergy and fellow celebrities entirely on his own terms – in his trademark shellsuit, string vest, bling jewellery and cigar. Constantly caricaturing and then dismissing as irrelevant the conventional celebrity aesthetic surface and promoting always his celanthropic moral depth, Savile's celebrity icon mask became a constituent part of the national culture.

The Power and Resilience of Multi-Institutional Masking

Over the decades, Savile's detractors insisted that he was too good to be true, perceiving a powerful sense of self-aggrandisement and self-satisfaction in his dealings with the institutions with which he worked. The motives for his celanthropic activities were queried, and, for some audiences at least, there remained a significant disjuncture between the impression he clearly intended to 'give' and the one that he actually 'gave off' (Goffman, 1958). The *Independent* (17 July 2013) reported that it had taken the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, five attempts to have Savile knighted (see Burrell, 2013). Her Cabinet Secretary noted: 'Mr Savile is a strange and complex man. He deserves high praise for the lead he offers in giving quiet background help to the sick. But he has made no attempt to deny the accounts in the press about his private life two or three years ago'. These accounts related to alleged claims about Savile, reported in *Sun* newspaper series, 'The dark truth about Jimmy Savile' (*Sun*, 11–13 April, 1983),[2] that he had slept with multiple women during charity events – 'a claim that was at odds with the Government's battle against the spread of HIV and Aids' (Brown, 2013). Savile failed, then, on four separate occasions to pass the rigorous official vetting process that precedes all royal knighthoods and seeks to ensure that those so honoured do not bring the system into disrepute. And yet, on Thatcher's fifth attempt, she succeeded. It seems that Savile's unprecedented charitable acts were ultimately sufficient to overshadow any lingering concerns or periodic rumours about his private life or 'backstage' darker side. And he was well aware of the suspicions. When asked why the knighthood took so long, he replied, 'I would imagine that I unsettled the establishment because the establishment would say, 'Yes, Jimmy's a good chap, but a bit strange, a bit strange . . . And I think maybe in the past I suffered from the vulgarity of success' (Barber, 1991: 248).

Savile was, in short, seen by some to display the characteristics of Goffman's (1958) confidence trickster, or worse. As a result, an alternative but always marginal counter-characterisation of Savile would surface periodically, presenting him variously as perplexing, creepy, vainglorious, sleezy and unsettling. Anthony Burgess wrote (Lambert, 1990: 18), 'If they can give Jimmy Savile the OBE and now a Knighthood, well, the honours system is so dishonoured that no-one would want it. It's got no significance'. After interviewing him, psychiatrist Anthony Clare (1992: 241), concluded that:

> Sir James Savile is a quintessentially self-made man, indeed he is *the* self-made man and he is constantly, shrewdly, reshaping his creation to meet whatever are the needs of the immediate moment . . . He now possesses an outstanding ability to play an astonishing range of roles – entrepreneur, disc jockey, eccentric, devoted son, millionaire, prison warden, hospital porter, friend of the famous, confidant of Royalty, knight of the realm, fool, jester, sage and pirate.

For Clare, there was something 'wary', 'edgy' and 'chilling about this 20th-century 'saint'. Savile's critics' worst suspicions appeared to be confirmed during a prickly interview with Louis Theroux in 2000:

> Interviewing Savile is a thankless business. He is very accommodating, he answers every question, and reveals absolutely nothing. And even if he does let something slip, you're never sure whether to believe it. (*Sunday Times*, 16 April. See White, 2000)

> Not that he managed to penetrate the Savile shell, but he did manage to show what an extraordinary carapace it is. We were able to gain an insight into what a solitary life Savile leads . . . and what a monstrous effort of ego and discipline has gone into creating his public persona. (*Independent*, 15 April. See Maume, 2000)

> Jimmy never really reveals anything about himself to anyone: that almost everything he says and does in public – all the silly jokes, and the putdowns, and the big cigars, and the publicity is just an elaborate smokescreen for his feelings. (*Daily Mail*, 14 April. See Matthew, 2000)

It is remarkable that no journalist picked up on Savile's inconclusive reply to Theroux's question about tabloid rumours that the man who made children's dreams come true was a paedophile: 'How do they know whether I am or not? How does anyone know whether I am. Nobody knows whether I am or not. I know I'm not'.

Returning to Goffman (1958: 17), precisely because they were proactively co-curated with and validated by some of Britain's most cherished institutions, the masks of the celebrity personality, the celanthropist and, ultimately, the celebrity icon convinced enough – if never all – social actors within those same institutions that the 'Savile' they were seeing actually possessed the attributes he appeared to possess, that the tasks he was performing would have the consequences that were implicitly claimed for them, and that, in general, matters were what they appeared to be. A powerful celanthropic mythos consistently neutralised periodic counter-characterisations, which barely disrupted, still less precipitated a migration of performative agency away from Savile and his deeply moralised, culturally emblematic public persona. Savile's multi-institutional masking was key to resolving, and for some audiences eradicating, the impression management tensions between intended and actual, 'given' and 'given off'. It was sufficiently robust to deflect rumour and gossip for decades, and appears also to have enabled him to persuade police that he was the victim of malicious intent when he was questioned by the police, at the age of 83, about historic sex offences in 2009 (*Guardian*, 16 October 2013).[3]

In his lifetime, Sir Jimmy Savile OBE KCSG achieved status distinction as a scandal-free, untouchable celebrity icon, capable through his celanthropic endeavours of reminding the nation that it is never too late to do the right thing for the less fortunate (Alexander, 2010). In death, he was eulogised as a 'national treasure':

> This House mourns the death of Sir Jimmy Savile OBE who has died two days before his 85th birthday; recognises his enormous contribution to charitable giving, raising more than 40 million for charities during his lifetime; appreciates his essential Yorkshire character; remembers the smiles brought to the faces of children who appeared on *Jim'll Fix It*; enjoyed his choice of music during his time as a disc jockey; and sends its condolences and sympathy to family and friends in Leeds, Yorkshire, the UK and throughout the world. (House of Commons, 31 October 2011)

One year later, in October 2012, explosive revelations and subsequent investigations triggered the multi-institutional co-production of an entirely new persona, in the context of a posthumous total migration of Savile's performative agency, and the celebrity icon was remasked as Britain's most notorious celebrity sex offender.

Conclusions

In this article we have developed the hitherto underused concepts of masks and masking to illuminate the role of institutions in the co-production of 'untouchable' celebrity icon status. Our conceptual framework has been built around an engagement with Alexander (2010). Our empirical analysis has been directed by a critique of the posthumous official investigations into Sir Jimmy Savile.

Conceptually, we have argued that masks, as interactive performative adaptations, are integral to self-presentation and always a work in progress. We have developed Alexander's conceptualisation of the celebrity icon mask in terms of aesthetic surface, moral depth and celanthropic force. However, to improve upon what we see as Alexander's individualised and static analysis we have used Goffman to highlight the agency and interaction that characterise masking *as a process*, and to demonstrate how social actors can simultaneously wear multiple masks which might be mutually reinforcing or disruptive of particular aspects of a multi-layered persona. Most significantly, we have moved beyond Alexander and Goffman to foreground the pivotal role of institutions in masking processes. By masking social actors with their normative credentials, institutions can validate and reinforce those actors' preferred public personae – diminishing or erasing any disjuncture between the impressions they seek to 'give' and those they actually 'give off'. It is our contention that masks are at their most resilient when they are co-produced with, validated and continually reinforced by multiple institutions, never more so than when there is a strong moral component. Just as multi-institutional masking can increase a social actor's capacity to do good, it can also empower them to neutralise negative counter-characterisations and transgress with impunity.

Empirically, we have sought to address significant gaps in the largely compartmentalised official response to Savile's posthumous exposure as a sexual predator. Our multi-institutional analysis of Savile's masking has interrogated his celebrity, foregrounded the significance of his celanthropic power, and challenged the tendency in official reports to exonerate and re-legitimise those institutions that played such a crucial, proactive role in masking him by portraying them as having been duped by an arch-manipulator. This is not to suggest that Savile's characterisation as an arch manipulator is incorrect. Clearly, he was a master of hustle, deception and distraction – an exemplar of Goffman's confidence trickster (1958). But it is only part of the story. And, crucially, this partial narrative contributes to presenting UK institutions as victims and bystanders rather than active parts of the publicity machine that made Savile an untouchable celebrity icon.

If, following Goffman (1955, 1958, 1967), social actors are an assemblage of many interconnected roles, and stage performers are indistinguishable from their performances, then Savile *was* the celebrity personality, the celanthropist and the celebrity icon at the same moment that he *was* the alleged serial sexual predator. The fluidity of identity means that all of these roles could be accommodated and that Savile was able to wear all of these masks simultaneously. But it was the firmly fixed, multi-institutionally validated and deeply moralised mask of the celebrity icon, with all the power, influence and behavioural latitude – the untouchability – it afforded, that predominated publicly and both situationally and symbolically defined 'Savile'.

We conclude by reflecting on the 'researchability' of powerful elites, and by suggesting how our analysis might generate further research into the institutional power dynamics that

have co-produced the 'untouchability' of other celebrities subsequently exposed as sexual predators. The resilience of multi-institutional masking processes makes the masks of the powerful extremely difficult to dislodge, particularly when they are alive. Sir Jimmy Savile's celebrity icon mask remained firmly fixed in place for a full year after his death. If anything, those same institutions that were so pivotal in co-producing Savile's untouchability while he was alive doubled-down when he died and, along with a hagiographic news media, led the UK through a period of national commemoration that elevated the celebrity icon still further to the status of 'national treasure' (Greer and McLaughlin, 2013). It took a combination of investigative journalism and digital activism, the triggering of a relentless 'trial by media' (Greer and McLaughlin, 2017), and more than 60 official inquiries costing millions of pounds, to finally dislodge Savile's celebrity icon mask. And this redefining disruption of multi-institutional masking processes, signalling a total migration of Savile's performative agency, only became possible after he had died.

In the case of celebrities like Bill Cosby and Harvey Weinstein, we now understand how for decades they were able to deploy interlocking institutional protections and legal strategies to manipulate the media and neutralise a rising tide of allegations of sexual assault (Egan, 2019; Farrow, 2019; Kantor and Twohey, 2019; Peters and Besley, 2019; Terán and Emmers-Sommer, 2018). It was only when these protections had diminished sufficiently that their multi-institutional masks could be dislodged and counter-characterisations could take hold, triggering criminal investigations and successful prosecutions.

We would propose, then, that there is a tipping point at which the institutional masking practices that safeguard an individual's celebrity capital give way to institutional masking required to safeguard the institution's reputational capital. Exactly where this tipping point lies may vary significantly between powerful elites and cases of alleged corruption, incompetence or immorality, and will depend heavily on the extent to which the institutions are reliant on, or even defined by, the individuals against whom the allegations are being made (Lee and Marshall, 2019). Once performative agency migrates, those same institutions that co-produced the celebrity's untouchability may with equal vigour engage in the total annihilation of the former persona and the multi-institutional re-masking of the individual as a different and new persona. Savile, Cosby and Weinstein now wear the mask of the serial sexual predator. This 'absolute mask' personifies what they have been all along.

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Notes

1. In 2011, *The Give Back Hollywood Foundation* launched the Hollywood Pledge, providing celebrities with the opportunity to accumulate instant moral depth by endorsing philanthropic endeavours that might motivate their fans to make the same commitment.
2. The series was subtitled: 'How Jimmy fixed beatings and loved a bevy of beautiful birds'.

3. See: https://www.theguardian.com/media/interactive/2013/oct/16/jimmy-savile-police-interview-transcript (accessed 28 December 2020).

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