

# Tom Daley's *Something I want to say*. . . : examining contemporary celebrity, identity and sexuality

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In December 2013, Tom Daley, Team GB diving medallist and television presenter, uploaded a short video to YouTube elusively entitled 'Something I want to say . . .' In it, Daley tells us that despite "dating girls" in the past, he'd not had a "serious relationship" until last spring, when he met someone who makes him feel "so happy and so safe ... well that someone [pause] is a guy". Within days it had attracted nearly 10 million views and around 35,000 comments. It crossed over from new media to old media, featuring in newspaper articles, and being discussed on radio and television programmes. As such, this video deserves the attention of media educators. To offer some possible starting points, in this article we explore what it can tell us about contemporary celebrity, identity and sexuality.

Having mostly avoided the blanket Olympic coverage over the summer, we first encountered Tom Daley when we started to work together on the CelebYouth research project that is exploring the role of celebrity in young people's aspirations. The project is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and based at Brunel and Manchester Metropolitan Universities. As part of this we carried out 24 group interviews about celebrity culture with



Video still: [http://b.vimeocdn.com/ts/460/333/460333496\\_640.jpg](http://b.vimeocdn.com/ts/460/333/460333496_640.jpg)

young people aged 14–17 in six schools in London, Manchester and the rural South West. When we visited these schools across England, but especially in the South West, young people aged 14–17 talked to us about Tom Daley and how they had grown up with him, following his journey to Olympic success. When we came to choose 12 celebrities to analyse in detail, we picked Tom Daley as one of these, alongside fellow sports star Mario Balotelli, royals Kate Middleton and Prince Harry, musicians Beyoncé, Nicki Minaj and Justin Bieber, actors Emma Watson and Will Smith, Reality TV stars Katie Price and Kim Kardashian, and entrepreneur Bill Gates. (You can read about how we selected these 12 here: <http://www.celebyouth.org/final-top-12-celebrities-from-the-group-interviews/>)

For the case study of Tom Daley, Heather studied his media representation including reading an autobiography and biography, following the news coverage of Daley across six months and enduring every episode of season one of the TV-celebrity-diving-competition *Splash!* that Daley fronts. While we each followed the media coverage of four different celebrities, we shared information on our case studies and regularly discussed breaking news about the celebrities whose lives we had learnt so much about. One such story was Tom Daley's *Something I want to say* video, which struck all three of us as brave and inspiring. But in this article we try to take a step back and look critically at the 'something' Tom Daley wants to say. For those who missed his rise to fame we begin with some background.

## Who is Tom Daley?

Tom Daley hails from a working-class family in Plymouth, South West England.

Through a series of television shows and auto/biographies, many facets of his life have become public knowledge – among these, his childhood dreams of diving in the Olympics, his ongoing competition with the many brilliant Chinese divers, the bullying he experienced at school and the loss of his father to cancer shortly before London 2012. By contrast, we are given very little information about his sexuality. In his 2012 autobiography, Daley tells us of his attraction to and kiss with a female diver on a rival team; and in past media interviews, where he's been repeatedly asked about his relationship status, he's said that he wants a girlfriend but currently doesn't have time for a serious relationship because diving takes first place in his life.

Tom Daley's celebrity is a mix of Olympic medallist and Reality TV star. This is interesting because he crosses over a widespread distinction in contemporary celebrity between 'proper' and 'improper' celebrities. 'Proper' celebrities' fame is based on talent and hard work, while 'improper' celebrities are viewed as famous for nothing. Two of us (Kim and Heather) explored these distinctions in a paper published in 2013 and found that 'improper' celebrity is associated with working-class women's routes to fame such as glamour modelling, reality television and becoming the partner of a footballer (colloquially known as a WAG). It may initially appear fair to judge marriage a less valuable route to fame than sporting or musical accomplishments. However, the same judgements made of those WAGs who date and marry footballers are rarely applied to middle- and upper-class women, such as Kate Middleton, who also acquire their celebrity status through marriage rather than on



Publicity image from *Splash!*: [http://db2.stb.s-msn.com/i/93/33A81C3E6846E0302F60548249F2BE\\_h498\\_w598\\_m2.jpg](http://db2.stb.s-msn.com/i/93/33A81C3E6846E0302F60548249F2BE_h498_w598_m2.jpg)

the basis of particular achievements. Further, making your living via *Big Brother* and other Reality TV programmes, seems to us a great deal tougher and more precarious than doing so through appearing in films.

Tom Daley's involvement in reality television started early through a 2010 BBC 'fly-on-the-wall' documentary *The Diver and his Dad*, which followed his daily life – training, studying and at home with his family – focusing on his close relationship with his father, Rob. Recently Daley has increased his television work through his lead role in the prime time ITV Saturday night programme *Splash!* in which celebrities learn to dive and then compete against each other in a live show. He acts as a mentor to the celebrities and both dives and talks in each episode of *Splash!* His diving coach acts as one of the three judges on the show.

Daley's embodiment of both high status and low status forms of celebrity is not unique – cycling medallist Victoria Pendleton is just one of many world-class athletes to appear in *Strictly Come Dancing* (see <http://www.celebyouth.org/femininity-celebrity-and-olympic-role-models-the-case-of-victoria-pendleton/>) but it is unusual for an Olympian who is still at his peak. His position has not been without tensions. He, and four of his diving team mates, were publicly criticised by David Sparkes, Chief Executive of British Swimming, in 2012 when they posted on YouTube a video of themselves lip-synching to LMFAO's hit 'Sexy and I Know It' (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bws52wtv6Ts>). More recently Sparkes again spoke out critically, suggesting that Daley's involvement in *Splash!* shows a lack of commitment to his diving. Daley's mother, Debbie Daley, wrote a strong defence of her son through an open letter published in the *Daily*

*Mail*, a newspaper that has sponsored his career. This letter focuses readers on his hard-working Olympic credentials and his 'ordinary' background within a close-knit family, in which, following his father's death, he's now the 'male breadwinner'. In this way, despite his Reality TV work, Daley has been saved from falling into the 'improper' celebrity category.

These distinctions also relate to wider hierarchies of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' celebrity that we have identified in young people's talk about celebrity in the study. For example, participants in the rural schools evaluated Daley's celebrity status positively in relation to his work ethic and having overcome bereavement and bullying. In the next section we look in more detail at his celebrity representation and how it exemplifies two key shifts in celebrity images.

### A contemporary celebrity

In his work on classic Hollywood stars, Richard Dyer used detailed readings of the images of Marilyn Monroe, Paul Robeson and Judy Garland, to show how these stars relate to work, sexuality, and ethnicity, but also how these aspects of our lives 'depend on more general ideas in society about what a person is and stars are major definers of these ideas' (2003, p.7). Although, as Su Holmes and others have pointed out, the images of many current celebrities are rather different from those of such celluloid greats, we would argue that what Dyer said remains true of current celebrities: they too provide a means to 'articulate what it is to be a human being in contemporary society' (2004, p.7). For example, when people discussed singer Miley Cyrus twerking at the 2013 Video Music Awards, they were not simply or even mainly talking about her behaviour, but instead expressing social anxieties, notably about the so-called sexualisation of culture and in particular, the relationship between sexualised media, girlhood and notions of childhood innocence. And, when we take part in debates about footballers' 'outrageous' earnings we are collectively negotiating our ideas about the relationship between work and reward and about what we, as a society, do and should value. However, despite these continuities in what Graeme Turner (2004) and others call the cultural significance of celebrity, there have been shifts in the nature and social function of stardom since the 1950s. Here we look briefly at two that provide an important context for Daley's 'Something I want to say . . .' video.

First, as Henry Jenkins (2006) discusses, media convergence is altering the relationship between production and use – for, in our interactive world, all use is, on some level, also production.

While readers/viewers/listeners never passively absorbed information from the mass media, they are now able to participate in online communities of users who are also generating online content, thus increasingly blurring the boundaries between the user and the producer, the reader and the writer, the professional and the amateur. As mentioned above, Daley uses the same social media as his fans, micro-blogging site Twitter, photo-sharing site Instagram, YouTube and another video-sharing site Keek; and the volume of 'user' comments beneath his 'coming out' video, were far in excess of the video to which they were a response. However, perhaps the most intriguing and pertinent example of such blurring is fanfiction, the stories through which fans re-imagine Daley's life. There are romantic fanfictions, such as *Mistletoe and Babies...*, a first-person narrative written from the point-of-view of Daley's wife arriving home from work on Christmas Eve to him and their children. There are also sexually-explicit stories, such as *Larry and Tom Daley*, in which Daley joins Louis from One Direction for a threesome in the flat Louis shares with bandmate Harry.

Second, the boundaries between the public and the private are shifting and blurring in new ways. While there's long been an interest in the lives and loves of the rich and famous, such information classically was found within intertexts such as gossip magazines which operated between the main texts of an artist's films, albums, books etc. For most celebrities, text and intertext have converged, in forms such as *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and via social media that give us the illusion and expectation of instant access to celebrities' thoughts and feelings. While Daley's diving remains in place as the 'real' reason for his fame, for many of us, 'intertexts' such as *The Diver and his Dad* and *Something I want to say . . .* are the main routes through which we know him. He has made extensive use of social media throughout his career, or as Chas Newkey-Burden put it in his biography of Daley – he "is cleverly building his fan-base and connecting with it online" (2011, p.169). He set-up regular Twitcam sessions where he speaks direct to his fans and answers their questions more than a year and a half before the London Olympics. What we

see in these videos and his other uses of social media, are very public performances of a very 'private' self. By inviting fans to share and gain insights into their 'private' self, stars come to feel closer to us, even ordinary, and authentic. This is at the heart of Daley's *Something I want to say* . . . video and is explored in the next section.

### Authenticity: 'Honesty is something I really do believe in . . .'

Authenticity or 'being oneself' is a moral duty: it is required of everyone from politicians to *Big Brother* housemates. Sociologist Nikolas Rose has analysed how we are now compelled to choose our futures and to make, know and examine our-selves. We are assumed to be individuals who are 'motivated by anxieties and aspirations concerning [our] self fulfilment, committed to finding [our] true identities and maximising [our] authentic expression in their lifestyles' (1996, p.196). Given the importance of authenticity, we now look at how Daley does this in the video.

We are all well-trained at searching out the 'real' and distinguishing it from the 'fake', and we enjoy doing this. Annette Hill, discussing *Big Brother* viewers, illustrates that catching that 'moment of truth' is central to viewing practices and pleasures: "audiences look for the moment of authenticity when real people are 'really' themselves in an unreal environment" (2002, p.324). In his video, Daley uses the aesthetic devices of 'the reveal' and 'the confessional' to establish intimacy, interiority and authenticity. Sitting in his bedroom talking to us, direct-to-camera, apparently unmediated, as Daley does, suggests a truth-telling via intertextuality, taking credibility from the video diaries of 1990s, the *Big Brother* diary room of the 2000s, and everything in between. He tells us that when some of his relatives asked 'Why don't you just do a statement, why don't you do a magazine cover. Why don't you do a TV interview?', his response was, 'I didn't want to get my words twisted. I wanted to put an end to all the rumours and speculation and just say it and just tell you guys'. The repeated word 'just' here functions to reinforce the intimacy.

As he suggests 'people will call me a liar', so he has a tricky job negotiating authenticity in this video. When he says that he initially told fewer than five people about his new relationship, we assume one of them was his publicist. This makes us think about how this

video has been managed by the celebrity industry to promote the 'Tom Daley brand'. We also suspect that the timing of this announcement, just before the second season of *Splash!* started on ITV, isn't a coincidence. However, despite these suggestions that the video was far from organic, Daley cleverly constructs himself as real, through anticipating and vocalising such doubting and dissenting voices. He tells us 'For me honesty is something that I really do believe in and I've always been honest. I may have been, you know, vague in some of my answers but I've always been honest'. He defends his previous silence by saying, 'One of the things that's been important to me has been having some form of private life', anticipates people asking 'Well why did you do a book, and why did you do a documentary?', and responds 'I've only ever talked about things I feel comfortable talking about'. This pattern of personal revelation, followed by voicing the doubts of others and then providing a defence against these, recurs through the short video. Daley also positions his speaking out as a way of his being honest in the face of dishonest reporting: 'recently I was misquoted in an interview and it made me feel really angry and frustrated and you know, like emotions I'd never felt before, um, when reading something about myself'.

Following work by critical psychologists Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell (1987), we are not suggesting that such discursive techniques are always planned, or necessarily even recognised by the speaker in the moment. But the language that people use in their everyday life does perform social functions, including positioning the speaker in a particular light. Of course, where celebrities are concerned there is also the additional complexity of more formalised strategies of presentation through Public Relations. So, as viewers, we are invoked to believe Daley is honest here through the form the video takes and the discursive techniques he uses, but also in the ways that it draws on earlier texts about him. For example, *The Diver and his Dad* begins with Daley recounting a dream, apparently giving us an uncensored glimpse into his unconscious, of standing on the 10m board for his final dive in London 2012, needing only an average dive to take gold, looking down and seeing a shark but being unsure whether it's real. On diving in, he is swallowed by the shark and dies but, still in his dream, he sees the headlines announcing his death. As he remarks, 'I

don't know what my imagination was doing'. This documentary is filled with such difficult moments, from Daley arguing with his father to his going within him to his brain scan. Following from this, we can experience this video as another difficult moment.

### Coming out? 'In an ideal world, I wouldn't be doing this video . . .'

In canvassing public opinions on the video, we found that two reactions dominated. First, that it's sad that this is 'news' - sometimes followed by a statement that his diving is more interesting/important and that 'in this day and age' celebrities (and perhaps, by extension, others) shouldn't feel the need to make a public announcement about their sexuality. Second, that the speaker 'knew' already - although this was often accompanied by a vagueness about what it is that they knew. What do these reactions tell us about contemporary sexuality?



Tom Daley Calendar: <http://blogs.coventrytelegraph.net/passtheremote/tom%20daley%202012%20nov.jpg>

Tom Daley's sexuality is partly public property. He makes money out of it, as the above image from the cover of the 2013 Tom Daley Calendar suggests. Go to Amazon and you can buy Mrs Tom Daley T-shirts in a range of 11 colours. The fanfictions discussed earlier involve Tom in having sex with both men and women. Because of this, any relationship of Daley's, whoever it were with, would be news.

But while this announcement is about a relationship it is not simply about that, as the level of media interest indicates. About a minute into the video, Daley says 'in an ideal world I wouldn't be doing this video'. He tells us not just that he's in a relationship but that he's in a relationship with a guy, and he pauses for several seconds before communicating

that second part, a silence pregnant with meaning. Thus this video has clear elements of the 'coming out' genre. So it's news because very few people in the world of sport have come out. Wikipedia's list of LGBT sports people is longer than one might expect but on closer inspection, it contains very, very few household names. Most recently, Liam Davis has become the first English professional footballer to come out as gay during his career since Justin Fashanu in 1990, and 16 years after Fashanu's tragic suicide. The reaction to Daley has been overwhelmingly positive – he has over ten times as many thumbs up than thumbs down on YouTube, suggesting that public attitudes towards same-gender relationships are changing and providing evidence for Mark McCormack's (2011) thesis on 'the declining significance of homophobia' (see <http://markmccormackphd.com/the-declining-significance-of-homophobia/>). But what Daley did is still tough – particularly at 19 years of age and in the glare of the media. In seeing it as non-news, the speakers whom we canvassed position themselves and their society as having moved to a progressive view of sexuality and so deny the very conditions that make his revelations so brave.

As we said above, there are parts of what Daley says that indicate he's 'coming out'. But this is not one of the modernist 'coming out' tales which sociologist Ken Plummer astutely analysed in his book *Telling Sexual Stories*. Such modernist stories are characterised by a temporal patterning of a journey from youthful suffering, via contest and struggle against an enemy, to a mature 'coming to terms with yourself', finding a new home within a like-minded community. For Plummer the 'coming to terms' phase is critical: 'It is associated with coming to work out fairly clearly the nature of sexuality: to give a label, to resolve the problems posed through signification, to find the story which explains it all' (1995, p.88-9). But Daley doesn't label himself.

So when we asked people what they thought about Daley and they said that they 'already knew', what was it that they already knew? Indeed one group of young people we interviewed for the CelebYouth project were certain he had come out as gay over a year before he released this video. Initially, in the media reaction, there was a rush to 'categorise' him as gay or bisexual, perhaps reflecting this knowing and suggesting the widespread erasure of bisexual and queer identities and

experiences, and the constant requirement to fit into categories (see <http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2013/12/02/comment-i-made-a-mistake-with-my-tom-daley-headline-but-a-mistake-was-all-it-was/>). But not only are there no labels in Daley's sexual story, there's no journey. He doesn't come out of the closet, for while 'it did take me by surprise a little bit, ... it was always in the back of my mind that something like that could happen'. And he hasn't changed, 'of course I still fancy girls', the 'of course' suggesting that this should not even need to be said.

Interestingly, the story he tells in a television interview with broadcaster Jonathan Ross only a few days after posting the video (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kD6WJjHkCQ>) does have a sense of a journey. For example, he recounts, 'when you're growing up you may always have those kind of thoughts ... I felt like there was something wrong with me ... I didn't know other people felt that way ... I felt like so alone ... I felt like I couldn't be who I wanted to be. And from Monday I've felt like I could just be myself'. However, this doesn't detract from the distinctiveness of the video through which he broke the news. As Ken Plummer points out, all narratives have their time. So it is perhaps a sign of our own times that Daley tells an individualist story of love that comes along, surprises him and massively changes his life, rather than a collectivist narrative of finding an identity within a community. Despite this, "for narratives to flourish there must be a community to hear ... " (p.67), and while Daley's video garnered an enthusiastic response from the LGBT community, and reportedly served as inspiration for others, both celebrity (Arsenal women's footballer Casey Stoner) and non-celebrity (see <http://www.riveronline.co.uk/content/2014/01/27/how-tom-daley-inspired-ku-student-come-out-bisexual>), to come out it, it can be seen positively that Daley has aimed his message at a wider audience and at his fan base more generally.

Britishness: "It's a very different culture ... " In the absence of a fixed sexuality with which Daley aligns himself, we will end by briefly looking at the aspects of his identity that are fixed in the video: his Britishness, and related to this his desire to continue his sporting achievements despite hurdles in his personal life. When he speaks about these he reminds us "I'm still Tom" and he uses the word 'journey'

twice, expressing that "I hope you can join me in my journey to Rio 2016 too".

Tom Daley is regularly depicted wrapped in the British flag. Indeed a huge 14m Union Jack is unfurled before his opening dive in the final of the first season of *Splash!* The nationalism in this video is more subtle, not a massive flag dominating the screen, but a couple of pillows on which he casually reclines and which are mostly obscured by his body. Like the blue Union Jack motif that backs the cover image for his calendar (reproduced earlier), we can see this as part of what Michael Billig calls 'banal nationalism', an everyday nationalism of 'the embodied habits of social life' (1995, p.8). This is also evident in his references to Olympics past and present that bookend the video, a mention of the medal he won for Britain in 2012 and the one he hopes to win in 2016.

In his autobiography and in his mother's open letter to David Sparkes, we are reminded again of Daley's Britishness through the contrasts they make to the Chinese divers:

When the Chinese are younger, their parents make the decision whether they want them to be musicians, well educated or sportsmen or sportswomen and they keep working at it for their whole life. The diving training sounds brutal. The Chinese coaches are very forceful but are normally technically excellent. It's a very different culture; one that I'm sure I would do really badly in. (Tom Daley, 2012, p.110)

The Chinese comparisons really annoy me – and I know that they annoy Tom. He was not born in Beijing. He was born in Plymouth. I saw a documentary a few years ago which showed the Chinese boot-camp style of training in sport. This is not Tom. He would not function if his life was just diving. (Debbie Daley, 2013)

Daley's success is constructed as the triumph of British individualism against the Chinese 'brutal' production-line approach. Tom Daley, in distinction from the Chinese, is always himself, and in being himself, he is intrinsically British. The honesty that compels him to say 'something' is similarly 'authentically Tom' and 'authentically British', and perhaps, in this way, embracing sexual diversity becomes British too, even as this very

Britishness makes other forms of diversity more difficult.

Together Kim Allen (Manchester Metropolitan University), Laura Harvey (University of Surrey) and Heather Mendick (Brunel University) make up the CelebYouth research team who are researching 'the role of celebrity in young people's classed and gendered aspirations'. This study is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. You can follow their work via Twitter @CelebYouthUK or at their website [www.celebyouth.org](http://www.celebyouth.org).

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