

Research Notes:

"The Press Celebrity, The Celebrity Press: Historical Antecedents, Future Prospects"

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Abstract

A research note which attempts to examine the powerful role which celebrity has come to play in the redefining the missions and outcomes of much of contemporary journalism.

Introduction

My title, "The Press Celebrity, The Celebrity Press: Historical Antecedents, Future Prospects," refers to a phenomenon that we all know perhaps all too well. But there is a recent bit of reported news on the celebrity press front that begs to be at least considered. Earlier this year, Tina Brown, former editor of *Vanity Fair*, *the New Yorker* and *Talk* magazines, was interviewed by Simon Houpt of the Toronto *Globe and Mail*.

"I think we are no longer in an era of celebrity anything," said the woman credited with a large share of today's obsession with celebrity. "I...have this stubborn belief that people are sick of [it]."¹

Clearly Ms. Brown was simply being provocative, a stance at which she has obviously excelled over the years. Or she is simply wrong. For, by all the evidence at hand, it can be argued that we now live in an era of, quite simply, the celebrity of everything. If so, the likely implications for journalism are both very interesting -- and far from clear. And therefore any engagement of the topic must, I suspect, end up with far more questions than answers. But let us begin.

Our first consideration is, in effect, to dismiss dismissal. It would after all be too easy to simply wring our hands, speak movingly of traditional virtues, and put the whole subject aside. For those so inclined, however, we can offer one of the very best denunciations of celebrity worship ever written:

"The American Citizen lives in a world where fantasy is more real than reality -- where the image has more dignity than the original. We hardly dare face our bewilderment, because our ambiguous experience is so pleasantly iridescent, and the solace of belief in contrived reality is so thoroughly real. We have become eager accessories to the great hoaxes of the age [and] these are the hoaxes we play on ourselves." The author, of course, was the late Daniel Boorstin. The book, *The Image*, was published more than four decades ago.²

But if we can resist the dismissive temptation -- and for many of us it remains a decidedly attractive temptation -- the very triumph of celebrity journalism in all its forms raises significant questions. At first blush, at least five come to mind.

First, with all its distractions from the putatively serious model of journalism, celebrity journalism calls into question the very nature of what is news. There are, one might argue, at least two schools of thought on this subject: One that might be called the Social Construction school, and one that might be called the User-Defined school. Proponents of the former would be Michael Schudson and Jay Rosen.³ Proponents of the latter would include Mitchell Stephens and others.⁴

The Social Construction school states that journalism is, quite simply and indelibly, whatever it is that journalists do. Like the proverbial tree falling in the deserted forest, without journalists there can no such thing as journalism. It exists only as a social construct, a social product, of a journalist's labors.

In contrast, the User-Defined school argues that even if there were no such creatures as journalists in existence, news would still exist. Imagine, if you will, that you wake one fine Paleolithic morning, step outside your tidy caveperson's cave, and then set off down a nearby path. Soon you chance upon your friend Mary. You say, "Mary, what's happening?" And Mary answers, "Well my saber-tooth kitten ran away last night, and my nephew is going to visit tomorrow, and I..." Whatever Mary tells you is news, whether there is a journalist around or not. It is clear that, simply as a starting point, it is this second school of thought, the User-Defined school, which forms the best platform on which to understand, to come to terms with, celebrity journalism.

Second, if the User-Defined school has some merit -- and it is hard to argue that it does not -- the question of demand arises. Celebrity-focused journalism has, as one observer noted, "the magnetic appeal of the proverbial car wreck. Try as people might (and there is no reason to believe they really try) readers cannot look away."⁵ And if it is what so many of our fellow citizens seem to want, are we not bound by some strange socio-professional contract to at least try and provide it to them some of the time?

There is even an evolutionary argument about this demand. "Our modern skulls have a stone-age mind," said science writer William Allman a few years ago.⁶ The theory supported by this notion is that the tendency to obsess about the sex lives of others, to consume large quantities of gossip, and to worry about the rising and falling social status

of others may have not only contributed to the success of our prehistoric ancestors, but also helps make at least some of us what we are today.

Which leads to our third issue, the question of audience. Or to put it, with your permission, another way: Who actually reads this stuff? By most accounts, two-thirds of the consumers appear to be women. But that should not be a surprise, because women in our culture clearly are the predominant consumers of media in all its forms, be it magazines, newspapers, books, television, theatre, or whatever. By the best estimates, 25 million people make up an audience for the print versions of celebrity journalism, plus between two or three times that number who regularly consume the broadcast or online versions of same.⁷ What this may mean is that we are approaching a number equal to perhaps one third or even one half of the adult population of the United States. Do the math, and one cannot help but end up with an awful lot of customers for this type of journalism.

And where there are potential customers in a market economy such as ours, there will be efforts to capture them, which leads to our fourth factor, competition. Most social historians agree that there have been at least three widespread and well-documented youth crazes in American culture in the last century and a half: One in the 1890s (it seems that bicycles were all the rage), one in the 1960s (*pace* the baby-boom generation and its alleged distrust of anyone over thirty), and another in the mid-1990s. Clearly these celebrity magazines and television shows, both reflect -- and perhaps even help to shape -- a youth-centric view of popular culture. And if one looks, for example, at *People* magazine, one can over time see clear evidence of responses to competitive pressures. Upon examination of the editorial product, one is compelled to reach the conclusion that the editors have quite intentionally moved the publication in a particular direction: younger readers.

As it turns out, over the last decade substantial new competition has appeared for *People*, and the new publications have posed a threat to the magazine's franchise, specifically by aiming "lower" -- not, as some might argue, in terms of editorial merit or quality, but rather by explicitly targeting a younger readers.⁸ The pivotal aspect of this is similar to that in broadcast television, with younger demographics proving to be more attractive to advertisers. At the moment it is apparent that the same dynamic is now well at work in the world of celebrity magazines.

Our fifth, and last, observation concerns the power of celebrity journalism. What began in its modern form in the 1920s with Walter Winchell's syndicated news column has now grown -- some would say "metastasized" -- to represent a significant portion of the world's information industry. The power, for example, of the New York City tabloids to help define the daily news agenda for the rest of the national press should not be underestimated.

It is true, however, that the power has about it a clearly ephemeral quality, which I suspect is one of its most interesting aspects. It is notable not only how bright some of the lights burn but also how quickly some are extinguished. A pop-quiz for those so inclined:

Very quickly, from just last year, can you correctly identify Trista and Ryan? Andrew and Jen? Tara Reid? And an easy one: Bennifer? It is possible that, for some, Andy Warhol's shelf-life estimate about celebrity was an overstatement.

And so, in conclusion, how are we to finish this rumination? With a jeremiad calling for the reform of the informational appetites of our fellow citizens? With a rejection of the imperatives of the information-entertainment economy? I suspect that this is neither the time nor the place for either of these. Moreover, I am not sure that I could offer either of those with the requisite conviction.

The only thing I know for certain is how hard it is -- for journalists and for the members of the general public as well -- to resist the temptations, both good and bad, of Boorstein's "pleasant iridescences."

ENDNOTES:

1. Simon Houpt, "Talking Tina Makes Herself Topic A," *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 6 March 2004, <<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/articlenews/tpprint/lac/20040306/houpt06/tpentertainment>>.
2. Quoted in "Obituary: Daniel Boorstin," *The Economist*, 20 March 2004: 94.
3. For a further elaboration, see Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News* (New York: Basic Books, 1978) and Jay Rosen, *What are Journalists For?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).
4. See Mitchell Stephens, *A History of News* (Ft. Worth: TX: Harcourt Brace, 1996) and Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004).
5. "Face Value: Star Power," *The Economist*, 7 August 2004, 54.
6. Quoted in Jack Shafer, "Press Box: Doing the Celebrity Rag," *Slate*, <http://slate.msn.com/id/2091502>>.
7. Work on the gender specificity of media consumption can be found in David Abrahamson, Rebecca Lynn Bowman, Mark Richard Greer and William Brian Yeado, "A Quantitative Analysis of U.S. Consumer Magazines: A Ten-Year Longitudinal Study of Transformation," *Journal of Magazine and New Media Research* 5:1 (Spring 2003).
8. Richard Stolley, founding editor, *People* magazine, phone interview with author, 9 March 2004, New York.

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