



Studying celebrity news

Journalism

2014, Vol. 15(2) 137–143

© The Author(s) 2013

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1464884913488717

jou.sagepub.com**Annik Dubied**

University of Geneva, Switzerland

Thomas Hanitzsch

University of Munich, Germany

Celebrity news and the dark planet of contemporary journalism

There was a time when news coverage of celebrities was mostly confined to tabloids, distinctive magazines and special sections of newspapers. Today, celebrity news is an endemic phenomenon; it has found its place across the entire media spectrum where it proved its capacity to attract a wide range of publics and to drive consumption (Turner, 2010). Celebrity coverage has become omnipresent and pervasive even to the extent that it constitutes a new normality in the contemporary media world.

The increasing presence of celebrity news has often been subjected to critical accounts of the media and cultural industries. Public consciousness tends to perceive celebrity coverage in terms of a dirty pleasure of sensationalist tabloid reporters who capitalize on exposing the private lives of the famous. It is considered by many to be the ‘dark planet’ of contemporary journalism. As a symptom of tabloidization it is seen as contributing to the dumbing down of news content and journalistic quality (Franklin, 1997). Celebrity news may well distract public attention from the important issues in public conversation, diverting public interest from the issues that really matter (Couldry et al., 2007; Postman, 1985). In this issue, Martin Conboy warns that such a cultural flattening may have a broad, if apolitical, democratic potential.

The consequences of the ‘discursive bleeding of celebrity discourse’ (P. David Marshall, in this issue) into the political context might also be more direct. In his contribution to this special issue, Jason Wilson argues that the infiltration of the political sphere by the celebrity logic raises questions about reforming political leadership and modes of democracy in an environment where significant proportions of the population have tuned out from official politics. These questions bear enormous relevance across contemporary democracies.

Corresponding author:

Annik Dubied, Department of Sociology, University of Geneva, Faculty of Social Sciences and Economics, 40, Bd du Pont d’Arve, Geneva 4, 1211, Switzerland.

Email: annik.dubied@unige.ch

Furthermore, coverage of celebrities is often critically assessed in the context of an industrial manufacture of popular culture. Here, celebrity news is seen to constitute an essentially conservative, or even reactionary, category of news content that tends to preserve existing social inequalities, thus contributing to the conservation of materialist hegemony. Due to its close relationship to consumption (Dyer, 1979), celebrity content may well be perceived as a perfect vehicle for the propagation of consumerist values (Cashmore, 2006; Lowenthal, 2006[1961]; Marshall, 2006), thus effectively articulating the mainstream ideology of market capitalism.

The pervasive and growing presence of celebrity news may thus be seen as a sign of journalism's decadence and deterioration. It is here that 'celebrity news' is often presented as a contradiction in terms. This idea was taken up by a conference organized by the University of Geneva in September 2010, when the idea for this special issue was born. The conference carried the title 'Celebrity news – an oxymoron?', and indeed, in their contributions to this special issue, Graeme Turner, P. David Marshall and Martin Conboy all pointed to the seemingly oxymoronic appeal of the concept of 'celebrity news'.

The two different logics of production – one for conventional news, and one for celebrity content – seem to be irreconcilable at first glance. The normative logic of traditional news is geared toward public service and the greater good, looking at audiences in the understanding of a citizenry that needs to be supplied with relevant news to make informed political decisions. Celebrity content, on the other hand, addresses its audiences in the capacity of consumers, focusing on the realm of the personal and the private (Gorin and Dubied, 2011).

We tend to think, however, that drawing an antagonistic relationship between celebrity news and other domains of journalism inevitably puts journalism scholarship behind the times. Such a distinction not only disconnects with the realities of journalistic production and consumption; it suffers, as Martin Conboy rightly notes in his contribution to this issue, from a tendency to idealizations when it comes to the social relevance of journalism. There is a clear danger in mass communication research of evaluating celebrity news against the norm of traditional mainstream journalism. But when 'serious' hard news serves as the yardstick of 'proper' or 'genuine' journalism, celebrity news will inevitably fail the test.

Neither is the distinction between celebrity news and other forms of news content always clear cut, nor is celebrity coverage in all its forms necessarily a social peril. Celebrity coverage brings a wide range of socially and politically relevant issues into public consciousness (Ashton and Feasey, in this issue; Cashmore, 2006; Evans and Hesmondalgh, 2005; Gorin and Dubied, 2011). Celebrity content may therefore have the potential to 'widen the public sphere' (Marshall, 2010: 40), and to 'democratize access to knowledge of aspects of individuals' lives' (Conboy, in this issue). Whatever it may be, it deserves to be studied.

Modernization, need for orientation, and the rise of celebrity news

We share some of the hesitations that people in the scholarly world have toward celebrity news. It is true that celebrity feeds the news with sensation, scandal, and drama, that it

propagates a questionable obsession for people's private lives, and that it even fuels celebrity worship. It is also true that celebrity news plays out in the political economy of the media, in the political arena, and in private consumption.

At the same time, however, celebrity news deserves its place in media content and in journalism scholarship. From a sociological point of view, celebrity news is, in part, journalism's response to fundamental changes taking place within modern societies. Counter-intuitive as it may sound to many of us, and controversial as it may be in some academic circles, there is even a justifiable place for celebrity in the news. The extensive coverage of celebrities is journalism's answer to the challenges posed by three major shifts in modern society: individualization, social value change, and mediatization.

Beck (1992: 128) relates processes of modernization to three essential dimensions of individualization: disembedding, or a 'removal from historically prescribed social forms and commitments'; disenchantment, or the 'loss of traditional security with respect to practical knowledge, faith and guiding norms'; and reintegration, or a 'new type of social commitment' that supersedes traditional social forms. Traditional social institutions – such as family, religion, and school – continue to lose grip on people's lives and cease to provide collective normative orientation. As a result, individuals need to be selective in managing their selves and everyday lives. People are not only confronted with an increased plurality of options, they also gain flexibility in choosing between them, with important consequences for the articulation of identity. Individuals are no more 'born into' their identities. As Bauman (2000: 31–32) argues, identity is transformed 'from a "given" into a *task* and charging the actors with the responsibility for *performing* that task and for the *consequences*' (emphasis added). Identity work in modern societies is not necessarily predetermined by social origin but increasingly an individual exercise.

Social value change is the second major process that contributes to the rise of celebrity in the news. Global research points to a remarkable shift in general social orientations from survival values to self-expression values, with self-expression values being especially emphasized in wealthier societies (Inglehart, 1997, 2000). Inglehart and Welzel (2005) also postulate an ongoing 'emancipative value change' that goes along with an emphasis on freedom of choice and equality of opportunities, priorities for lifestyle liberty, gender equality, and personal autonomy. As the material resources for survival are generally secured in post-industrial societies, people need orientation to navigate a multi-optional space of lifestyles and to articulate their identities.

Mediatization, finally, is commonly understood as the increasingly pervasive relevance of the media and its logic for social processes of any kind (Krotz, 2008; Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999). There was a time, argues Hjarvard (2008: 13), when social institutions were the most important providers of information, tradition, and moral orientation for individuals:

Today, these institutions have lost some of their former authority, and the media have to some extent taken over their role as providers of information and moral orientation, at the same time as the media have become society's most important storyteller about society itself.

The media can no longer be separated from other social institutions, or even from personal experience and everyday life. People do not live, any more, with the media – but increasingly *in* the media (Deuze, 2012). In mediatized societies, identity work and the expression of lifestyles are unthinkable without the media – and here especially without social media where distinctions between the public arena and the private realm become increasingly fuzzy.

Hence, individuals in modern societies are confronted with weakening social institutions, eroding collective norms, and increasing multi-optionality. These major shifts create a need for orientation – to be satisfied by the media. With journalists exposing the private lives of famous people, celebrities may serve as carriers of identity markers, as exemplars for particular ways of life and expressing oneself, and as models whose stories are subject to public conversation. Celebrity news may also provide a set of standardized lifestyles, thereby reducing social complexity to a manageable array of options that are ‘ready to apply’. The obvious advantage is that individuals do not have to construct their lifestyles and identities from scratch, but they can rely on existing role models covered by the media – for the better or worse. And indeed, there is ample evidence for the growing relevance of celebrity role models (Giles and Maltby, 2004; Wicks et al., 2007).

Celebrity news in the literature

Despite the growing body of celebrity reporting and the expansion of celebrity news into virtually all media sectors, research about celebrity news is still a rare instance. One reason for this scarcity is perhaps the fact that the study of celebrity news falls between a number of disciplines, none of which have devoted sufficient attention to the phenomenon. In communication and media studies, there is a great deal of research on the tabloidization of news media, as well as about personalization and sensationalism in the news. Celebrity coverage does not yet constitute an important area in this field, which tends to be preoccupied with the study of mainstream news about political affairs, as well as of elite media and elite journalists. Cultural studies, on the other hand, have a fairly long history of studying celebrity, though not necessarily news and news production. Furthermore, the structural and normative contexts of communication and media research further contribute to the contentious appeal of celebrity news studies. It is always easier to defend a study of conflict news and election coverage to potential sponsors, as the relevance of this kind of content is fairly undisputed in the public arena and scholarly world, while following celebrity often gets discredited as ‘guilty pleasure’ (Marshall, 2006: 4).

Research about the informational character of celebrity news can be traced back to the works of Edgar Morin (1957). In his book *L'esprit du temps* (1962, not translated into English) he argued that celebrity news, which he describes as ‘romantic crime coverage’, is news. In pointing to the real-imaginary dialectic that he found to be inherent in celebrity news, Morin – perhaps unwittingly so – put us on a challenging path in pinpointing some of the ambivalence this news genre is facing.

In some of the classic works in the area of celebrity studies, such as Richard Dyer’s *Stars* (1979), news coverage of celebrities surfaces here and there, without much

in-depth analysis of its communicative constituencies. Authors do agree that celebrity is inextricably bound with modern mass media, but since the focus of their work is on celebrity culture, the media and the relevant communicative processes are mostly treated as contexts, or givens. More recent writings on celebrity in a cultural studies tradition increasingly reflect on the legitimacy of celebrity studies, when the field had suffered from a 'long-standing hostility to popular culture itself' (Turner, 1999: 63). Focusing on the social function of news coverage, Turner points to the ability of celebrity news to produce and negotiate identities and to challenge traditional power relationships. And Andrew Mendelson (2007), in his study of paparazzi, reminds us that the double-faced nature of celebrity news is always a worthy research question: on the one hand worshipping the celebrity, on the other hand shamelessly destabilizing the manufactured image of glossiness.

Celebrity news is a genre both revealing and worthwhile on the one hand, and at the heart of journalistic disputes on the other. News coverage of celebrity is not only at the forefront of an explanation of the social function of news (Turner, 1999), it also poses a number of challenges to journalism and its study. First, celebrity news routinely transgresses boundaries between fact and fiction, and often flirts with advertising and public relations. This bears important questions for definitions of news and professional identities of journalists. Second, celebrity news constitutes a serious challenge to media laws and professional codes of conduct. While these issues remain embedded within national regulatory frameworks, they allude to tensions between public interest and protection of privacy, and they pertain to the place of celebrity reporting between unethical conduct and investigative practice. Third, celebrity news may be indicative of problems that are also relevant to other, more traditional domains of journalism. The relationship between journalists and their sources (celebrities, for that matter) create issues that may well have implications for the entire occupation: access to sources, aggressive publicity management and public relations, psychological bonding and personal ties between reporters and celebrities – to mention but a few.

About this special issue

We believe that the phenomenon of celebrity news deserves more attention from the scholarly world. While the coverage of celebrity has become fundamental to modern mediascapes around the world, the study of its production, content, and reception has only hesitantly become an accepted part of journalism scholarship. This special issue therefore intends to provide a venue for the theoretical, critical, and empirical engagement with celebrity news in both national and international contexts.

This introduction is followed by seven essays, standing within different traditions of journalism and communication scholarship. In the first article, Graeme Turner argues that celebrity news has developed new modes of production that set its practices and assumptions apart from traditional news and newsgathering. This leads to the 'redefinition of gossip as news', as celebrity news moves out of the social pages and onto the front pages.

In the following essay, P. David Marshall makes a case for the development of persona studies where research on the celebrity is a subset of a wider study of how the self

and public intersect and produce versions and identities that in some way continue to support the wider demands of our work economies. The rise of persona and presentational media, he argues, paves the way for a new era of journalistic practice intertwined with a new public/private/intimate public sphere.

Martin Conboy calls for a reconsideration of the interplay between celebrity news and journalism: 'beyond oxymoron and towards the appreciation of a paradox'. His contribution explores some of the forms and functions of celebrity news in contemporary British culture and concludes that celebrity can present the world as a more emotionalized, personalized place, very unlike traditional journalistic views of the world.

In the fourth contribution, Laura Ahva, Heikki Heikkilä, Jaana Siljamäki and Sanna Valtonen place celebrity news in the context of the current crisis in public communication. Based on results from focus group discussions in Finland, they found three interpretative frames of celebrity representation: normative, critical, and alternative. They conclude that celebrities' potential as a means to address alternative or implicit politics is recognized but not actively utilized by citizens.

Jason Wilson shifts the focus to Australia, where former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd had used celebrity media to circumvent official or elite political media channels to speak directly to a broad constituency, and to become an 'intimate stranger' whom people were prepared to entrust with national leadership. Later, however, the authenticity of Rudd's persona was brought into question by elite journalists seeking a response to this novel strategy.

The sixth article reports findings from a content analysis of online celebrity news and audience responses. Hilde Van den Bulck and Nathalie Claessens demonstrate that the media focus on celebrities' professional and love lives, while audiences cover more superficial topics, such as appearances. Furthermore, media tend to be less and readers more judgmental in discussing celebrities.

Daniel Ashton and Rebecca Feasey, finally, draw on focus group discussions with young female readers to explore the ways in which they make use of, find comfort in, or take umbrage at the news coverage of celebrity illness. They conclude that the orchestrated and air-brushed images of the celebrity that appeared in the glossy gossip sector did not resonate with their own lived experiences and understandings of the illness.

References

- Bauman Z (2000) *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Beck U (1992) *Risk Society, Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage.
- Cashmore E (2006) *Celebrity Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Couldry N, Livingstone S and Markham T (2007) *Media Consumption and Public Engagement: Beyond the Presumption of Attention*. London: Palgrave.
- Deuze M (2012) *Media Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Dyer R (1979) *Stars*. London: British Film Institute.
- Evans J and Hesmondhalgh D (2005) *Understanding Media: Inside Celebrity*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Franklin B (1977) *Newzak and News Media*. London: Arnold.
- Giles DC and Maltby J (2004) The role of media figures in adolescent development: Relations between autonomy, attachment, and interest in celebrities. *Personality and Individual Differences* 36: 813–822.

- Gorin V and Dubied A (2011) Desirable people: Identifying social values through celebrity news. *Media, Culture & Society* 33(4): 599–618.
- Hjarvard S (2008) The mediatization of religion: A theory of the media as agents of religious change. *Northern Lights 2008: Yearbook of Film & Media Studies* 6: 9–26.
- Inglehart R (1997) *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic and Political Change in 43 Societies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Inglehart R (2000) Culture and democracy. In: Harrison LE and Huntington SP (eds) *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*. New York: Basic Books, 80–97.
- Inglehart R and Welzel C (2005) *Modernization, Cultural Change and Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Krotz F (2008) Network, connectivity and flow: Key concepts for media and cultural studies. In: Hepp A, Krotz F, Moores S and Winter C (eds) *Media Connectivity: Concepts, Conditions, and Consequences*. New York: Hampton Press, 13–31.
- Lowenthal L (2006[1961]) The triumph of mass idols. In: Marshall PD (ed.) *The Celebrity Culture Reader*. London: Routledge, 124–152.
- Marshall PD (2006) Intimately intertwined in the most public way: Celebrity and journalism. In: Marshall PD (ed.) *The Celebrity Culture Reader*. London: Routledge, 315–323.
- Marshall PD (2010) The promotion and presentation of the self: Celebrity as marker of presentational media. *Celebrity Studies* 1(1): 35–48.
- Mazzoleni G and Schulz W (1999) ‘Mediatization’ of politics: A challenge for democracy? *Political Communication* 16(3): 247–261.
- Mendelson A (2007) On the function of the United States paparazzi: Mosquito swarm or watchdogs of celebrity image control and power. *Visual Studies* 22(2): 169–183.
- Morin E (1957) *Les stars*. Paris: Seuil.
- Morin E (1962) *L’esprit du temps. Essai sur la culture de masse*. Paris: Grasset.
- Postman N (1985) *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. London: Penguin.
- Turner G (1999) Tabloidization, journalism and the possibility of critique. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2(1): 59–76.
- Turner G (2010) Approaching celebrity studies. *Celebrity Studies* 1(1): 11–20.
- Wicks PG, Nairn A and Griffin C (2007) The role of commodified celebrities in children’s moral development: The case of David Beckham. *Consumption, Markets and Culture* 10(4): 401–424.

Author biographies

Annik Dubied is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Geneva. Her research interests lie in the sociology of communication, and focuses on popular culture and the storytelling phenomenon through various case studies (celebrity news, representations of human–animal relationships, crime news).

Thomas Hanitzsch is Professor of Communication at the University of Munich, Germany. He founded and chaired the Journalism Studies Division of the International Communication Association. A former journalist, his teaching and research focuses on global journalism cultures, war coverage, celebrity news and comparative methodology.