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Celebrity Coverage

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Celebrity is a word synonymous with fame, money, power, publicity, extravagance, accomplishment, fandom, culture, and at times notoriety, scandal, and even infamy. Celebrity news coverage has been increasingly flourishing and the media play a crucial role for its societal and cultural relevance. Celebrity can refer both to a well-known individual and the state of being well known. Celebrity, as a state, carries deep importance in most places (though what constitutes a celebrity may differ), and accordingly individual celebrities are esteemed as significant, even if they are only well known for being well known (Boorstin, 1961).

Members of the public idolize celebrities and can form parasocial relationships with them that provide a sense of engagement and belonging (Barron, 2015). Celebrities are thus transformed from strangers to beloved figures (Rojek, 2001). There is also a public collectiveness around celebrities which manifests in various ways from social conversations to attending public events like concerts or film premières, to forming fan clubs, and now online forums. People also travel to set locations, celebrities' homes, collect their endorsed paraphernalia, and mourn their passing. This adoration, commercialization, and power of celebrity forms celebrity culture (Barron, 2015).

The defining qualities of a celebrity vary. Merit, for instance, is highly valued. Students spend a significant portion of their learning memorizing notable figures—such as Neil Armstrong, Marie Curie, or Confucius. Despite being from different time periods and countries, many identify them by their accomplishments of being the first to walk on the moon, to discover radium, and to make a significant contribution to Chinese philosophy. Yet, merit alone does not a celebrity make, and while celebrities can be public figures, not all public figures are celebrities (e.g., Marshall, 2014; Rojek, 2001; Turner, 2014a).

In the mid-twentieth century, scholars observed and at times criticized the rise of celebrity culture and its connection to the development of mass media technologies. Leo Lowenthal of the Frankfurt School notably commented that celebrity was no longer accomplished via achievement, but was rather circumstantial and even by chance. He labeled this phenomenon as creating idols of consumption rather than idols of production (Lowenthal, 1944). Specifically, Lowenthal identified the newsworthiness of celebrities' personal lives in mass media. Indeed, a paradox within celebrity culture is the public's desire to idolize the public persona of celebrities and what they represent in society, while simultaneously desiring to know the "real" person behind that sometimes larger than life public image (Marshall, 2014). There are also ethical considerations of whether there is a media limit before reporting becomes too invasive to celebrities.

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Daniel Boorstin (1961) further scrutinized what he called "pseudo-events" that became intrinsic to mass media content. Pseudo-events are not naturally occurring but rather staged for the sake of publicity, largely centered on celebrity or celebrities. For instance, a significant portion of news is comprised of so-called pseudo-events such as press conferences, news releases, sit-down interviews, political debates, and so forth.

It was also during the mid-twentieth century that Andy Warhol, an artist who embraced the commodification of celebrity in his pop art, was aptly associated with the phrase "In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes." Whilst there are many contributing factors to fame, traditional mass and now digital media largely facilitate those plus or minus 15 minutes for most celebrities. This creates a symbiotic relationship that helps and hurts both parties, which in turn fuels the public's obsession or at least curiosity in celebrity culture.

Celebrity culture in journalism. The news industry both criticizes and panders to celebrity culture and the public's interest in celebrity. In an episode of the Netflix show *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, the lead protagonist questions how she knows about the Kardashians even though she has never watched their reality show, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. After a pause, she recalls it was from watching the news. The resistance to acknowledging the impact of celebrity on news is such that celebrity journalism has been called an oxymoron (Conboy, 2014). Nevertheless, celebrity culture has such an influence that celebrities are not reneged to celebrity-dedicated media like tabloids or gossip columns. In fact, many have noted the "tabloidization" of news media, in which content is driven by sensationalism and consumerism (McNamara, 2016). Rupert Murdoch's populist approach in his many news outlets is one example of news tabloidization. Television, and specifically the advent of cable news and the 24-hour news cycle, has also influenced news tabloidization through the reliance on images and needing to fill so much content. News tabloidization is popular with audiences, but is thought to water down news and oversimplify sometimes complex issues.

Regardless of the news source, a common news value journalists use to gauge the newsworthiness of a potential story is prominence, which includes celebrity. Part of Boorstin's (1961) argument against mass media is that it sacrifices meaningful issue exploration in lieu of celebrity. Journalists must decide to focus on celebrity-driven content that will likely capture audience attention, or promote hard news stories that may have more consequence but not equal prominence. Fortunately, there is room for both, but not necessarily with the same impact. A recent example is of TV actress Roseanne Barr, whose revival show was cancelled after public backlash to a racist comment she tweeted in May 2018. The reaction of ABC executives was swift and decisive, all of which played out in various media. As in most celebrity scandals, there were other pressing stories that day, but the top headline was the cancelation of a TV show.

Celebrity happens at the individual level as a person transforms from unknown to famous in a process of becoming a celebrity, which is referred to as celebrification (Driessens, 2013). Nevertheless, celebrities can have powerful influence on various public fields like politics, activism, trends, and so forth, which is referred to as celebritization (Driessens, 2013). Celebritization occurs when celebrities publically interpret and highlight various issues. Both celebrification and celebritization are considered newsworthy and the news industry can influence both processes.

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When covering celebrities, journalists often employ familiar language devices which socialize readers to a human interest focused world, concentrating on the most exaggerated or sensational experiences in life (Conboy, 2014). While he examined British tabloids, Conboy's identification of rhetoric in covering celebrities is not unique to these kinds of publications. Conboy points to the use of nicknames, nationalism, celebritization of news stories, and exploiting extreme highs and lows of celebrities, which are apparent in other media also.

Interestingly, in many high-profile news stories, journalists celebrify previously unknown individuals, both humanizing and exploiting them, morphing news coverage from fact-based to character-driven narratives. For instance, the internationally publicized case of Amanda Knox, who was accused (sentenced but eventually found not guilty) of murdering her roommate Meredith Kercher. Knox is American, Kercher from the United Kingdom, and both were on a study abroad stay in Italy. Coverage of the terrible tragedy celebrified Knox. News outlets around the world labeled Knox a range of nicknames including "she-devil" and "Foxy Knoxy." The coverage was also nationalistic, with U.S. coverage being more sympathetic to her, than that in the United Kingdom or Italy. Overwhelmingly, the story became about Knox rather than Kercher.

Besides covering celebrities, journalists can experience celebrification (Conboy, 2014). News organizations, specifically television, employ celebrity journalists and so-called personalities in prime-time viewing slots because audiences not only want to know about celebrities, they want their news from a celebrity. For years, CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite was labeled the most trusted man in America. Gendered reference aside, Cronkite was strictly a traditional news anchor who became a celebrity. Today, most celebrity news personalities function more as commentators or moderators, such as Sean Hannity, Rachel Maddow, or Anderson Cooper.

As Conboy (2014) points out, celebrities are important within their national context or prescribed communities, even if they are also global superstars. Because celebrities represent greatness, their communities proudly claim them and take specific interest in their lives, which is reflected in local and national media. Yao Ming is a well-known NBA player, but has a much higher profile in his native China via media coverage, especially in terms of advertising. That is similar for Shakira in Latin America or Rihanna in Barbados. All have achieved international status, but still have a strong national media presence in their home country or region.

Celebrity journalism and celebrity in journalism overlap and influence each other. The distinction between the two is not clear-cut and the value of celebrity journalism is not necessarily comparable to the value of hard news, as both have different priorities. Celebrity journalism should not be dismissed as totally superfluous, as it can inform the public.

To help distinguish celebrity journalism, Turner (2014b) purports it is unique in how it is produced, its use of images (largely provided by the paparazzi), and reliance on gossip as news. First, Turner argues that a large portion of celebrity news is self-generated and mainly for commercial purposes—to promote a film, book release, tour, and so on. The public relations teams behind celebrities cater to journalists with press releases, press passes, unique anecdotes for interviews, or promotional material.

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News in general, on the other hand, aims to inform based on consequential unplanned and pseudo-events that have measurable impact on the public.

Second, images communicate connotatively in ways that texts do not, and so are integral to celebrity journalism (McNamara, 2016). Celebrity images are so popular with the public, news organizations will place them prominently in their content in the hope that readers will also take an interest in other news stories placed beside them. The introduction of paparazzi images greatly influenced celebrity journalism and news tabloidization. McNamara (2016) explains that independent photographers—known as the paparazzi—who focus on celebrities emerged in the 1950s when publicists controlled photographers' access to celebrities. To avoid using staged photographs, the paparazzi began following celebrities, capturing them "candidly." Now, celebrities form acquaintances with the paparazzi, even tipping them off at times. These images are often lower quality as they are taken from distances, without proper lighting, or at unflattering angles. Celebrities also agree to exclusive photoshoots with professional photographers, usually in their home, which allows the audience to see the real life of their favorite celebrities.

Third, celebrity news reports gossip and rumors as news (Turner, 2014b). Subsequently, the value of celebrity news is not necessarily judged by its accuracy, but rather its access to exclusive insider information of celebrities' lives. Rumors sometimes surface as truth, but if they do not, most readers move on without much concern. It is noteworthy that another example of news tabloidization is the increased use of news panelists and opinion pieces, who also largely rely on opinions, insider information, and rumors (Turner, 2014b).

Amid reporting on extreme highs and lows of celebrity, analyzing and specifically rating celebrities is also fundamental. Each year, *Time* publishes their "Time Person of the Year"; *People* their "Sexiest Man Alive"; and *Forbes* their various highest-paid celebrities lists, to name a few. These rankings are also localized, such as *Forbes Africa's* "Top 30 under 30 Creatives." Besides annual rankings, there are also deeper analyses such as *Rolling Stone's* "500 Greatest Albums of All Time" or *AFI*'s "America's 100 Greatest Movies." Celebrities' worth are also colloquially and sometimes officially (e.g., The Ulmer Scale) ranked alphabetically—A-list celebrities being the most sought after and biggest global superstars.

Celebrity lists have grown in popularity via digital media. For example, *WachMojo.com's* "Top 10 Celebrities Who Never Graduated High School" or *IMDB's* various editorial and user lists that range from "Most Popular Celebrity" to "Celebrities I Like." Other online sources like *BuzzFeed* expand upon ranking celebrities to "listicles," which are ~~arti cles~~ formatted as lists.

Through ranking and analyzing celebrities via listicles, annual lists, public forums, expert panels, commentators, and so forth, it is apparent that evaluating public sentiment for celebrities is important in celebrity culture. The public is keenly interested in what others think of celebrities, and express their own opinions of celebrities.

Politicians are major news sources for journalists, and some politicians experience celebrification through media attention, such as Justin Trudeau or Hillary Clinton. Conversely, some politicians are celebrities who have successfully transitioned to politics, such as Ronald Reagan, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Donald Trump.

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Politicians stage pseudo-events for their own celebrification, but also, for the celebritization of their political party, issues important to them, and potential legislation. Rojek (2001) states that politicians use staged celebrity (pseudo-events) as a way to brand themselves to the public and ultimately gain political power through public support for the individual and their policies. In the lead-up to the 2003 U.S.- and U.K.-led invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration successfully used news media to celebritize the threat of then Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. They won both media attention and public support, at least in the beginning, which illustrates that not only do politicians celebritize politics, many in the public are informed largely on their narratives.

One strategy utilized by U.S. President Donald Trump is his almost exclusive focus on celebrification rather than celebritization, even during various staged pseudo-events. He often prefers to comment on personal characteristics of himself or others, rather than concentrate on the specifics of policy. For instance, when remarking on his historic meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Singapore, Trump emphasized in the press the respect Kim enjoys among North Koreans. Most of all, Trump uses Twitter on a daily basis to self-promote and praise or criticize others.

Non-politician celebrities commonly use their celebrity status to celebritize political and social issues (Barron, 2015). Famously, Jane Fonda became an antiwar activist during the Vietnam War. Charlton Heston served as president of the National Rifle Association for five years. Many celebrities including Lena Horne and Harry Belafonte fought for civil rights. More recently, celebrities have advocated with the #metoo and #timesup movements to shed light on the abuse of power and gendered policies in Hollywood and beyond. Celebrities as activists can be influential in raising awareness, public support, and monetary funds for various causes; nevertheless, they also symbolize and maintain the status quo of economic inequalities through their wealth and celebrity power.

Digital media technologies have changed celebrity culture and celebrity journalism. Celebrities no longer need a gatekeeper to communicate with the public, but can easily do so directly via social media platforms. For example, celebrities make official statements, clapback at haters, troll, post personal images, interact with fans, and celebritize issues important to them. As in the case of Trump, journalists monitor celebrities' social media use and highlight it in their coverage. The TV show *Roseanne* was cancelled because of public attention to Barr's social media use. If she had made the same racial slur privately, her show most likely would have continued.

Visual digital platforms such as YouTube or Instagram have especially been the conduit for celebrity creation. These celebrities are sometimes referred to as micro-celebrities (Turner, 2014a), or social media influencers. Otherwise non-celebrities can also garner intense public attention via viral videos. The Chewbacca Mom, Charlie Bit My Finger, or Keyboard Cat have all been viewed and shared by millions. Many others intentionally seek fame and careers through constant self-promotion via social media, with the most popular ones usually also appearing in traditional mass media. YouTube persona Miranda Sings had a two-season show on Netflix. Social media influencer Cameron Dallas has also appeared on Netflix, as well as in movies. Backpack Kid had a large Instagram following before appearing on *Saturday Night Live* with Katy Perry. Social media are also major outlets for reality stars

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to maintain their status. The Kardashian/Jenner family has some of the most highly followed accounts on Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat.

Celebrity journalism has flourished with the use of digital technologies through websites, blogs, amateur content, social media, and so on. The instant nature of online means that sources like *TMZ* and Perez Hilton often break celebrity news stories. Their sometimes intrusive approaches have been criticized, yet they are still used as sources in celebrity journalism, especially if celebrities give statements when ambushed. This illustrates that just as with previous media advancements, digital technology has not replaced mass mediation of celebrity culture, but rather transformed our access to it.

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SEE ALSO: Personalization of News; Commodification of News; Tabloid Journalism; Arts, Culture, and Entertainment Coverage; Lifestyle Coverage; Viral Content; Paparazzi; Pseudo-Events and Photo Opportunities; Visual Social Media

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Further reading

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with a special emphasis on gender. She has largely focused on how sexual violence against women is portrayed in traditional and new media. Her work on celebrity scandals involving sexual assault has been featured in *Journalism Studies*, *Sociology*, and *Feminist Media Studies*.

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ABSTRACT

Celebrity coverage is defined as mediated attention provided to well-known individuals who through their state of fame become newsworthy. Coverage of celebrities ranges from stories about famous people in categories such as Hollywood, sports, politics, and music as well as celebrities who become famous through digital media. Celebrity journalism focuses on the process of becoming famous, known as the celebrification of individuals, and the influence celebrities have on politics, culture, and activism known as celebritization. Through an increasing interest in its content, celebrity coverage has turned into an economic good for media organizations. While celebrities continue to rely on mass media channels, digital media have changed not only celebrity culture, but also celebrity journalism.

KEYWORDS

celebrification; celebritization; celebrity journalism; digital media; mass media; politics; tabloidization

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