

## P. David Marshall

### INTIMATELY INTERTWINED IN THE MOST PUBLIC WAY Celebrity and journalism

**A**LTHOUGH THE CELEBRITY AND journalism have been twinned for most of the past 200 years, their intertwining has regularly betrayed the less noble side of journalistic practice. Both journalism and celebrity articulate a changing public sphere and a different constitution of engagement and significance by any nation's citizenry. That transformation of significance has been linked to the emergence of democratic politics and political debate; the transformation has also been aligned with the emergence of an elaborate entertainment industry and the panoply of information that fuels its cultural forms. This chapter investigates the way that journalism and celebrity intersect and how their alliance has produced very specific forms of presentation and writing practices that have become not only standard in the features section of newspapers but populate the organization of information throughout the news.

To begin this investigation, it must be understood that celebrity-inspired journalism has become so routinized in papers that its origins are no longer easily identifiable. For example, a 13 May 2004 *New York Times* article (Bumiller 2004) on Donald Rumsfeld, the Secretary of Defence in President Bush's administration was designed as a 'profile' of the man during a particularly vigorous scandal over abuse and atrocities committed by Americans on their Iraqi prisoners. The headline 'Stolid Rumsfeld Soldiers on, But Weighs Ability to Serve' encapsulates the tone of the article: discerning the state of mind and psychological condition of a man under siege. Thus we learn the personal details of his daily life including that he 'spent last Sunday in the backyard of his elegant Washington home, poring over documents piled 10 inches high in his lap'. And that the visiting friend indicated 'that at least he was sitting outside – it was a beautiful day. That's a good thing if you are under a lot of pressure'. The article continues to provide personal background details about the man: that he had the president and his wife Laura Bush (along with Alan Greenspan) over to dinner at his home 'in the graceful, old-world Kalorama section of Washington' on the day the scandal broke and that 'everyone appeared relaxed in each other's company'; that

'despite Mr. Rumsfeld's ferocious exterior, he is a principled man' who with his wife regularly visited wounded soldiers on Sundays and stopped by three times a week to visit a high school friend, 'who was dying of brain cancer' even though at the time Rumsfeld was preoccupied with the war in Afghanistan. We also discover he is a relentless worker and finds 'stability in his normal workaholic routine'. The investigative element to the story was whether Rumsfeld would resign; but the kinds of information generated were classically derived from celebrity journalistic practice of finding out what the famous person is *really* like. Although the story is in the front section of the newspaper surrounded by other sobering articles about the occupation in Iraq, the Rumsfeld profile stylistically resembled what one would regularly find in the features section of the newspaper. In contemporary newswriting and presentation these delineations are no longer in play. To actually produce such an article, the reporter has to ensure access to the various sources. As a result, what sometimes emerges from celebrity journalism is a further convergence with the practices of public relations and promotion. In this particular instance, the author, Elisabeth Bumiller, had to build some sort of trust with friends of Rumsfeld to obtain the personal details and to gain these sources' consent to speak publicly about him. The building of trust ensured that the story would take on a more positive reading of Rumsfeld. The result: a story that crosses between a fluff personality profile and the underlying story of possible resignation.

### Origins

Why this kind of reportage on the personality of the famous emerged in the nineteenth century along with the development of mass circulation newspapers is intriguing. The celebrity as a social category developed from a number of changes in the political and cultural landscape in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. First among them is a shift in participation in what has later been described as the public sphere. The concept of the celebrity articulates a distinct engagement by the famous individual with the public that is differentiated from the way royalty and significant leaders of the Church may have represented themselves. Celebrity is an acknowledgement of the public's power – indeed, the celebrity is in many ways the embodiment of the collective power of an invested audience in a particular person (Marshall 1997). Thus, the way to understand the emergence of the celebrity in the nineteenth century is its close affinity with democracy and the new forms of power it expressed. Images of heads of state may have been statically and ceremoniously replicated in coinage and other representations of power but with the expansion of democratic power a new kind of public identity developed that was dependent on the emerging power of the crowd and the masses. The celebrity embodied that contradiction of being individually elevated and thus relatively unique, but dependent on a new system of 'democratically inspired' value that was derived from popular audiences.

Journalism, although born from the origins of business reporting as much as political tracts and proclamations, has had a similar history in its association with the development of democracy. The expansion of newspapers and other print publications was partially dependent on a different organization of power. Combined with the expanded political enfranchisement and general literacy in the nineteenth

century, the newspaper's debate about political issues shifted to a mass subscription of advertisers interested in countries at least symbolic to the populace. American newspapers like Joseph Pulitzer and William Allen White's story that acknowledged that newspapers cater to what was believed to be the everyday lives of this country emerged alongside the dramatic stories and muckraking tales of the course of the nineteenth century. Studies of public moments in lives and how that interests work has revealed, celebrity journalism, from the nineteenth century, from reporter people to direct interview (Leon 2002).

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century, the newspaper transformed into the key site for information and popular debate about political issues in countries such as the US, France and UK. With the shift to a mass subscriber base for income and profits (through selling space to advertisers interested in reaching this wider audience), some newspapers in these countries at least symbolically came to represent the interests and desires of the populace. American newspaper magnates of the late nineteenth century such as Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst built their empires on a brand of news story that acknowledged a wider proportion of the population and attempted to cater to what was believed to be their interests and desires. Typically called yellow journalism, reporters developed stories that were both sensational and closer to the everyday lives of this new urban readership. Profiles of celebrated individuals emerged alongside the development of what were perceived to be more salacious stories and muckraking to discover scandal. These profiles of famous people over the course of the nineteenth century began to change from carefully choreographed studies of public moments involving these people to revelations about their private lives and how that intersected with their public lives. As Charles Ponce de Leon's work has revealed, celebrity journalism changed, from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, from reporters piecing together stories from people who knew famous people to direct interviews with famous people in their private homes (Ponce de Leon 2002).

There were a number of reasons for the emergence and expansion of celebrity journalism from the nineteenth century into the twentieth century. First of all, the stories articulated a celebration of individuality that intersected with the ideologies of the self that had been advancing since the renaissance. Celebrities represented heightened examples of individual achievement and transformation and thereby challenged the rigidity of class-based societies by presenting the potential to transcend these categories.

The kind of individuality that celebrities embodied also intersected with the expansion of consumer capitalism enabling the populace to use consumption as a means of self-actualization and transformation. Consumer culture, through advertisements, department stores and the actual expanded range of products and services, presented a diverse array of possibilities for modern individuals to make themselves anew. Celebrities provided a refracted form of knowledge of the modern self that became another resource in the developing choices of consumer culture.

Celebrity journalism also worked to fulfil other rising apparent needs of contemporary culture. Emile Durkheim used the term 'anomie' to describe the isolating condition of urban social life that was ubiquitous (Durkheim 1964). In the mid-twentieth century David Reisman coined the term and title 'the lonely crowd' to express a similar sense of distance in mass society (Reisman 1950). The processes of industrialization, the migration of workforces to cities and internationally to new centres of manufacturing, and the general sense of disconnection and dislocation that had enveloped the architecture and organization of cities, helped create a sense of both anonymity and alienation. Profiles of celebrities provided a constellation of recognizable and familiar people who filled the gap and provided points of commonality for people to reconnect both with celebrities and with each other. Instead of a discourse that highlighted the distance and aura of the celebrity, celebrity journalism worked to make the famous more real and worked to provide a greater intimacy with their

everyday lives. Celebrities, via these journalistic profiles, became better known for their ordinariness along with their extraordinariness as these stories worked to connect individually with the mass audience. Audiences in turn would have a degree of 'affective investment' (Marshall 1997) in particular celebrities because of the amount of personal background that was provided about them in newspapers and magazines.

As much as celebrity journalism appeared to be fulfilling a particular need in the cultural fabric of contemporary life, it was also clearly an instrument of the various political and cultural industries. Tom Mole's study of the emergence of literary celebrities is particularly revealing of some of the changed conditions that were connected to the mass production of cultural commodities. Mole's study found that as writing became less anonymous (anonymous attribution had been standard in the eighteenth century) publishers became more focused on differentiating their lists from others'. The most effective way to ensure the distinctiveness of a publisher's list was to invest in making the authors more visible and in many senses more real to the audience. Thus Byron was not only a literary figure; he was known for his personal life and became a widely known popular figure who had a clearly developed public persona. Mole also links this transformation to the need to connect to the newly distanced mass audience. The personal connection brought the material to life more by providing the massive reading public with the author's background (Mole 2004).

In the development of the mass circulation newspaper, owners and journalists alike were also developing techniques and discourses that pulled often disparate audiences together. In the US, the newspapers worked very hard at making stories that appealed across class and ethnic lines. Entertainment reporting over many decades gradually served as one of the principal sites for such a crossover. More popular arts were featured and reviewed by newspapers to appeal to the working class and their leisure interests; at the same time, this reportage on vaudeville and cinema worked to legitimize the 'artistic' merit of these newer cultural forms and thereby made them more acceptable as sources of stories for the middle class. Celebrity profiles of film actors and musical stars eventually were stories that transcended clear class differences quite acceptably by the 1920s and 1930s (Ponce de Leon 2002, 206–40).

In the wider dimensions of cultural activity, celebrity journalism functioned as a technique for simplifying the representational dimension of the public sphere. It helped focus attention on particular individuals above others and provided a constellation of the famous for the public's attention. In the US, this kind of construction was closely connected with the emergence of national markets and national politics. In the mid-nineteenth century P. T. Barnum, the ultimate huckster, tried to ensure that profiles of his individual stars, such as Jenny Lind, were in the local papers before his travelling show arrived in a particular community. He discovered that these background pieces added to the star quality and attracted the public to his events. Through this advanced publicity, national markets for entertainment were developed and buttressed by the press who also realized the value in creating celebrated individuals for the selling of their papers and magazines.

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### The subjective quality of celebrity journalism: its connection with press agency and publicity

One of the most important reasons for studying celebrity journalism is that it often illustrates the particular dependencies journalistic practice has on its sources and what is considered news value. Celebrity status simplifies the determination of news value precisely because the level of fame of the person *a priori* establishes its newsworthiness. Whereas other news events may not produce the same effect of attracting readers, celebrity guarantees a certain high level of interest.

Parallel professions to journalism developed in the nineteenth century and flourished in the twentieth century to organize, contain and foster this interest in particular personalities. Press agency was generally seen as the practice of ensuring the appearance of individuals and events in the newspaper in the most favourable light. P. T. Barnum's work in this area was seen to be seminal. Much like advertising, press agency was involved in puffery and exaggeration of the significance of a particular event or personality for its greater impact on the public. Press agents were thus employed in the expanding entertainment industries both by individuals and corporations. A large element of their positions in Hollywood from the 1920s onwards in fact involved maintaining correspondence relationships with fans on behalf of the star. Public relations – as it was formulated in the early twentieth century – was established as a more legitimate profession in clear contradistinction to the practices of the press agent. Working on behalf of corporations and individuals, public relations specialists were expert at producing copy that resembled the manner that journalists would formulate for newspapers. The press release, as common for companies trying to control a potentially negative event as they were for entertainers and politicians trying to provide advance publicity about their respective tours, was the invention of public relations, which has been instrumental in shifting the balance of editorial content of newspapers throughout the twentieth century.

In certain areas of journalistic coverage, the work of press agency, publicity and promotion became normalized into the structure of stories. Entertainment journalism, like other forms of journalism, has had to adapt to the cycle of news and events of its particular industry and 'beat'. Film releases, music releases, or the opening of a particular play or concert tour has demanded a certain close relationship with the press for mutual success. Publicity and promotion departments have been expert at controlling access to the stars for such releases. Thus, the press junket has become standard for the interview of movie stars in advance of the release of the film. With promotion predating the film, the junket might be in an on-location setting. As a film is released internationally, the stars may be part of the film's local premiere and the interviews are organized around such an event. Along with the critical review, most major films are twinned with this form of advance publicity where a feature interview of one of the stars appears in newspapers and on principal television networks. The elaborate press kit provides background information for the journalists to complete their story. With more expensive productions, an 'electronic' press kit is provided: clips of the film are compiled along with an 'interview' with the star that can be used by local stations with the local interviewer asking the stock questions provided.

### The development of the official and authentic story

The system of publicity is designed to provide an insider's role for the journalist. Through general cooperation between the entertainment industry and the journalist, it is tacitly agreed that having 'contact' with the star ensures a positive spin in the story. The system has produced what have now become standard structures and motifs for the celebrity profile or feature interview in a large newspaper or mainstream magazine that can be summarized in series as follows:

- A. The meeting of journalist and star in either domestic setting or café.
- B. The description of the casual dress and demeanour of the star.
- C. The discussion of their current work – which is essentially the anchor for why the story is newsworthy.
- D. The revelation of something that is against the grain of what is generally perceived to be the star's persona – something that is anecdotal but is revealing of the star's true nature.

(Adapted from G. Baum, 1998)

This pattern has developed since the mid-1920s. It is a structure that is non-threatening, generally flattering and a celebration of the idiosyncratic self. Celebrity profiles possess, then, a combination of the reporter's obsequiousness around the creativity and uniqueness of the individual and an effort to reveal something that is normally hidden, to uncover the 'true self' (Dyer 1979) of the celebrity.

The magazine industry has perhaps relied on the celebrity profile to a greater degree than newspapers. The magazine cover and the cover story function as the principal advertising mechanisms for magazine sales. Choosing a particular celebrity as the cover image, then, is as much a marketing strategy for the magazine as a news event. Thus, there have been moments where a particular celebrity has blanketed the covers of a wide range of magazines. At the time of the release of *Titanic* in 1997, it was difficult to find a magazine that did not have a cover image of Leonardo di Caprio: his image graced the covers of teen, news, gossip, entertainment and women's magazines. Being on the cover of many magazines was not a source of income for the star; rather it often meant some sort of editorial control of the content (Turner *et al.* 2000). Some of the most famous celebrity covers – for example, the naked and pregnant body-painted image of Demi Moore on the cover of *Vanity Fair* in 1991 – have been designed to help reposition a star's persona as much as to make a publicity flashpoint for the magazine.

Certain magazines have based their principal editorial content on celebrities. Andy Warhol's *Interview* was simply an oversized magazine devoted to fawning and often vacuous discussions with famous people. Historically, pictorial magazines such as *Life* and *Look* have organized their content periodically around profiles of celebrity figures. More recently, the American *People* magazine was built from the 'People' section of *Time* magazine and became a separate publication in 1974. It was designed to be a showcase for celebrities to give their side of any story. Exclusive interviews have been used by the Australian *People* franchise, *Who*, to not only sell magazines but also to ensure that the magazine's writers would have access to the private and domestic life of the celebrity (Turner *et al.* 2000: 132–5). The exclusive interview is also a way to

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ensure news values for the particular magazine; exclusive interviews are often the way in which a celebrity attempts to counteract bad press coverage around a scandal.

Exclusivity of a celebrity profile can become a bidding war as well as a source of some tension and rivalry among magazines and television networks in each national market. For instance, *OK!* magazine won exclusive rights to publish official photographs of the wedding of Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones in 2000 for \$1.6 million. Three days before the publication of the wedding by *OK!*, *Hello*, a competitor, had published some unauthorized paparazzi wedding photos. Douglas, Zeta-Jones and *OK!* sued successfully for damages and won a very modest legal fees settlement. Exclusive interviews of Michael Jackson or O. J. Simpson have been hotly contested in the American market among the major television networks and, when landed, they are often located in the flagship newsmagazine programmes for each network. Indeed, journalistic careers have been built through the journalist's capacity to allow famous personalities to speak on their programmes. In the US, Barbara Walters became a celebrity profiler and interviewer during and after a successful career as a television journalist and anchorwoman. David Frost and Clive James have built similar television careers as interviewers of the famed and infamous in the UK. Oprah Winfrey, in her occasional move from afternoon talk show host to prime time, became the interviewer of choice of Michael Jackson and Michael Jordan in the 1990s. In the United States, Katie Couric and Diane Sawyer have continued this tradition of providing a sympathetic platform for celebrities to address their massive audiences.

### Scandal, celebrity and news reporting

Where official versions of stories have made journalistic practice veer closely to the role of publicists and public relations, reporting celebrity scandals places journalists in adversarial roles with regard to the entertainment publicity machines. The American-based *National Enquirer* had a reputation for its stories of aliens and other hard-to-believe accounts of human freaks along with photos of celebrities caught in clearly unsanctioned, private moments. Nonetheless, its relentless pursuit of the O. J. Simpson murder investigation netted some tangible evidence that linked Simpson to the murder of his ex wife and her boyfriend. What was more remarkable was that other newspapers and magazines reported the findings of the *National Enquirer* and for a short period in the mid 1990s, the supermarket tabloid had achieved a new version of the journalistic high ground. Without the usual restrictions that have limited the muck raking of other established press institutions, the *National Enquirer* not only led with discovered facts in the O. J. Simpson case – it has also been the first to reveal Jesse Jackson's love child. Its greatest claims to fame are the series of celebrity images, whether it is an unflattering picture of Elizabeth Taylor or a clearly disturbed photo of Whitney Houston, that have populated its four decades of 'reporting'. There is no question that the fall of any celebrity is a major news story. Although this may be the primary content of tabloids, it has become an element of the most highbrow of newspapers. Treading the fine line between scandal and official story are the television programmes, which have spawned another layer of celebrity journalism. *Entertainment Tonight*, which began as a syndicated early evening nightly programme in the 1980s, has become the standard in the American television industry for reporting both gossip

and officially sanctioned information about stars and their current projects. Variations of *Entertainment Tonight* have appeared in many countries throughout the world. Modelled on the evening newscast, it presents the entertainment news as standard news fare – with the added dimension of greater amounts of smiling by the news anchors.

Celebrity scandal has the potential to transform news values quite dramatically. Certainly the O. J. Simpson murder trial became front-page news beyond all proportion to what would be perceived as normal news values. The death of Diana, Princess of Wales, allegedly as a result of a car chase with paparazzi, generated an overwhelming amount of coverage in all media forms and dwarfed any other news event for weeks. Michael Jackson's arrest and trial connected with the alleged sexual assault of minors has similarly produced an inordinate amount of news coverage. From blanket coverage of Jackson's arrest to speculative reporting on his changing support and defence team, Jackson's latest scandal has maintained a media circus that allows some journalists to work full time on the story. When particular scandals with this kind of potency emerge they bleed from the entertainment sections of the newspapers towards the front pages. Celebrities have become focal points for the discussion of a wide range of issues and concerns. In a peculiarly contemporary way, celebrities, via journalistic reportage, have become the effective conduit for discourses about the personal: celebrities have become the discursive talking points for the political dimensions of a host of formerly private and personal concerns.

### The all-encompassing celebrity system: journalist as celebrity

As much as journalists present the ideal profile of chronicler, which maintains a certain neutrality from their subjects, it is clear that journalism itself has become part of the celebrity system in its own power hierarchies. Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, bylines have been increasingly used in newspapers and magazines (with perhaps *The Economist* one of the few exceptions in the English language). This practice has intensified the identification of the individual journalist and a celebration of particularly successful journalists. Similarly, from the emergence of television in the 1950s, there has been a cultivation of the broadcast news star. Walter Cronkite, anchor for more than two decades of the *CBS Evening News*, became a news star and remains an iconic figure of celebrity status in television journalism. Geraldo Rivera, an American talk-show host and confrontational journalist has become well known in the US more as a celebrity than for his journalistic expertise. In urban markets throughout the US, the local news anchor has developed lesser versions of the star quality of Cronkite. In print, journalists strive to move from the simple byline to columnist status. As a columnist, the journalist becomes more equal to the celebrated individuals that he or she may cover in politics, entertainment or sport.

This general transmogrification of journalist into celebrity has pushed certain individuals towards fabrication of their stories. It was discovered in 2004 that the *US Today's* star reporter, Jack Kelley, built part of his 20-year reputation on spectacular stories and images that were works of fiction built on coached informants who were not even present at the news events covered. Similarly, in 2003 the *New York Times* dealt with Jayson Blair's efforts at constructing fictional news stories in an effort to build his reputation. Perhaps one could link these developments to the

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new celebrity status of the Internet muckraker Matt Drudge and his *Drudge Report* as the related phenomenon of an industry that relies on celebrity status as much as politics and entertainment.

## Conclusion

It is difficult to separate the histories of journalism and the emergence of the contemporary celebrity system. Journalism has been instrumental in proselytizing a new public sphere and celebrities have been a foundational means and method for the expansion of key elements of that new public sphere. In that convergence, journalism has expanded its 'coverage' of entertainment and sports by developing features on personalities. It has also used techniques developed in writing about entertainment stars for its coverage of the famed and notorious in politics and many other domains. The coverage of entertainment has expanded massively and has become a major component of information and news reporting in all media. With the celebrity reporting that has accompanied this expansion of coverage, there has been a naturalization and normalization of the close connection between the sources of information and journalistic practice; in other words, celebrity journalism is one of the key locations for the convergence of publicity, promotion and journalism in terms of the generated editorial content. Celebrity journalism has also been instrumental in the exploration of a different form of cultural politics that is an investigation of the self, the private and the intimate. Through celebrity profiles, the investigation of scandals in all their sordid details and the psychotherapeutic ramblings published in celebrity interviews, celebrity journalism is the location for the exploration of the 'politics of the personal' in our transformed and shifting public sphere.