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# CELEBRITY, THE TABLOID AND THE DEMOCRATIC PUBLIC SPHERE

### Introduction

**T**HE INFLUENCE OF CELEBRITY has been especially pronounced on certain kinds of media product. In television, it has become an increasingly significant component of news and current affairs programming. It is fundamental to the format of network talk shows such as *Oprah* and an increasingly important objective for guests appearing on talk and confession shows such as *Jerry Springer*, *Trisha* and *Ricki Lake* as well as reality TV game-show hybrids like *Big Brother*. The internet is littered with celebrity pictorial sites, ranging from the official and the anodyne to the mischievous and scandalous and finally to the pornographic. In the print media, celebrity journalism has completely dominated the tabloid newspaper market in the UK, as well as the 'supermarket tabloids' such as the *National Enquirer* and the *Globe* in the US. It has also dramatically reinvented the mass market women's magazine. In the US, the UK, Europe, Australia and Canada (at least), since the late 1980s, such magazines have revised their editorial mixes in response to falling circulation and the competition from the new local celebrity weeklies and the international glossy monthlies. While still retaining their traditional interest in fashion, domestic advice and 'beauty', the mass market women's magazines have progressively increased their focus on 'celebrity culture' (Gough-Yates, 2003: 136).

Cultural and media studies accounts of these developments have attempted to interpret the social and political implications of the increasing interest in celebrity. The spectrum of views is wide. On the one hand there are those who regard this trend as a lamentable example of the dumbing-down of the public sphere, as 'proper' news is replaced by gossip (see Langer, 1998). On the other hand, there are those who welcome the mass media's emancipation from its obsession with the public, the institutional and the masculine (see Lumby, 1997). Those who take this latter view regard what is now routinely described as the 'tabloidisation' of the public sphere as

providing an opportunity for some democratisation of media access; as new, hitherto marginalised and often usefully undisciplined voices are being heard. In this chapter, I want to first review the establishment of celebrity in the area most conventionally regarded as the heartland of this form of media content: mass market magazines. I will then address the broader 'tabloidisation' debate – the arguments between those who perceive a democratic potential in current media developments and those who don't – before looking at the application of this debate to the production of celebrity.

### Celebrity, mass market magazines and the tabloids

The key provocation to the late 1980s to early 1990s change in the content of the mass market women's magazines, according to Anna Gough-Yates' (2003) account of the British market, was the competition from the celebrity weeklies. In many other markets, the threat may not have been quite as direct, but the outcomes were similar as even the market leaders revised their editorial mix towards a much greater proportion of celebrity stories. In Holland, in fact, the trend began much earlier, with the 'gossip magazine' developing into a distinct genre incorporating practical advice and horoscopes alongside articles about celebrities, television stars and royalty during the 1970s (Hermes, 1995: 119). There, and elsewhere, while the traditional components of the mass market women's magazine may have remained in place – the beauty hints, the fashion, the horoscopes, the advice columns and so on – they lost their prominence among the screamers on the front cover to the latest gossip from national television and Hollywood. Increasingly, too, the mass market women's magazines took on the need to represent their own cultural identities in a more aggressive and coherent fashion; an attempt to construct 'the personality' of the magazine as well as the identity of the readers (Gough-Yates, 2003: 20). Such a strategy certainly helped the women's magazines to modernise and survive: in Australia, it took them to new heights of circulation for almost a decade. It also helped the modernisation of mass market magazines for young girls: *Dolly* and *Sugar*, for example, are thoroughly dependent upon celebrity content today. However, the incorporation of this strategy into these sectors of the magazine market could not hold off the development of what became a new genre of mass-market magazine, the celebrity gossip and news weekly.

There is now a whole segment of the market devoted to these magazines and, while much of their content is in fact local (national sports or television stars, for instance, or Euro-trash royals for *Hello!* and its parent, *Hola!*), they have a major international presence as well. *Hello!* and *OK!* are ubiquitous in news outlets around the western world as are the more downmarket US variants such as *Us* and the *National Enquirer*. In the large markets such as the UK and the US there is quite a spectrum available. At one end we have the sleazy nudie magazines that come and go, bearing names like *Celebrity Flesh*; their content is primarily nude or topless paparazzi shots and production or video capture stills from screen performances. Slightly above them in the market (but much more stable commercially) come the shock and sensation weeklies such as the *Star* or the *National Enquirer*. Similar to these, but slightly less scandalous in their news values, are the gossip news weeklies such as *Who* (Australia), *People* (USA) or *Now* (UK), where the stories come with an occasional coating of scepticism and the photos can be used to set celebrities up as objects of ridicule as well

as admiration. In this lower end of the market, the magazine's commercial alignment with the interests of the publicity industries varies considerably. A weekly such as the *National Enquirer* has only a limited dependence on celebrity gossip but the gossip it does print tends to be scandalous, salacious and potentially damaging for its subjects. By no means does all of its news involve celebrities, however, and at various times it will deal with (and, as the O.J. Simpson case revealed, sometimes even break) major political stories. Most crucially, though, the *National Enquirer* (perhaps surprisingly) prides itself on its accuracy and this clearly limits the extent to which it could ever be fully incorporated into the publicity agenda of the major agencies (see Bird, 2002). With *Now*, however, and the American version of *People*, despite their trade in paparazzi images and constant excitement over minor celebrity scandals, there is some commercial alignment between their news items and the promotional needs of the major entertainment industry organisations.

These industrial links are even more evident in the central sector of the crowded UK celebrity magazine market where the market leaders *OK*, *Heat* and *Hello!* (among many others) woo their readers by offering positive pictures and gossip features about celebrities. While the *National Enquirer* may not care to enter into ongoing relationships with the publicity industry, *Hello!* and *OK* certainly do. These magazines deal with almost nothing but celebrity<sup>1</sup> and thus they must be tightly articulated to the industry and its promotional needs if they want a reliable supply of pictures and stories. As result, *Hello!* publishes uniformly appreciative features about celebrities' new marriages/houses/babies, recoveries from tragedy/divorce/career setbacks – clearly in collaboration with the celebrities concerned. *OK* is slightly less respectful of the celebrities it promotes, adopting a more populist and cheeky tone in its journalism, but none the less the magazine presents an overwhelmingly friendly view of the celebrities' lives to the reader. Both are highly respectable magazines. (*Hello!* is particularly so, going for glamour rather than sex, giving any whiff of scandal a fairly wide berth, and peppering its pages with respectful coverage of the activities of obscure Euro-royals.) Both share a curiously parochial and middle class perspective (Conboy, 2002: 149) and despite their international circulation they are a world away from the chic cosmopolitanism of the American glossies.

In recent years, these two magazines have been upstaged by a new competitor, the slightly trashier *Heat*. *Heat* is cheekier, less sophisticated and more news-oriented (that is, gossip) rather than feature-oriented (that is, staged promotions). It does not go in for the classic *Hello!* multi-page photo-spread on the celebrity at home – and so it does not carry so many signs of commercial collaboration with the celebrity industry – but its treatment of the celebrity is still very positive and sympathetic. The cover price is lower and its target market younger and less middle-class;<sup>2</sup> with a contemporary music-mag look, it has more street credibility than either competitor. The precise significance of its circulation figures at the time I researched them (2002) were in some dispute, but there was no doubt that *Heat* was taking readers from both of its competitors. Some indication of the concern this engendered was revealed when *OK* launched a spoiler campaign by including a *Heat* look-alike (called *Hot Stars*) as a giveaway with each issue of *OK*; *Hot Stars* shamelessly mimicked *Heat*'s layout, format and overall look.

To complete the spectrum I have been sketching out, there are probably two more layers. First, is the international movie/television magazine typified by *Premiere*, which

exists solely to promote the industry's latest productions, with interviews, reviews, previews and so on. Given their relation to the industry, this is not the place to find the cheeky, the sceptical or anything that might threaten the commercial success of the projects it promotes. In terms of circulation, this is not a large sector of the market, it has to be said, and could be classified as belonging to the 'special interests' section of the magazine market. More commercially important is what I would regard as the final layer: the top end of the market – the international (or probably more accurately, the 'glocal') quality glossy, ranging from, say, *FHM* to *Vanity Fair*. While these magazines may observe more independent editorial policies than the movie magazines, it is important to note how thoroughly the transnational entertainment and media industries coordinate their interests with those of the high quality international glossies. We have already referred to Toby Young's account of his experience of working for *Vanity Fair* in New York, where he expressed alarm at how much power the entertainment industry agents and publicists enjoyed in determining what would be published about their clients in the magazine. His experiences would seem indicative of the broader relationship between such magazines and the celebrity industry. In fact, it would seem that the commercialisation of this relationship is deepening. Upmarket international magazines dealing with fashion, consumption, the arts, style, and other popular cultural topics (such as *Vanity Fair*, *Harpers Bazaar* and *Vogue*), have accorded celebrity news and features an ever more prominent position in their editorial mix. Stories on Nicole Kidman or Kylie Minogue are as likely to appear at this end of the market as they are to turn up in *Heat* or *People* – and they will likely be almost as anodyne and commercially helpful there as they would be in *OK*. It is important to emphasise this fact because criticisms of the effect of the promotion of celebrities upon the contemporary practice of journalism often assume that this is at its most active at the 'tabloid' end of the print media. My research on mass market magazines would suggest the reverse; that the alignment of the commercial interests of the magazine and the celebrity is at its most seamless at the higher end of the market.

Nevertheless, to assume that it is all the tabloids' fault would be an understandable error to make in the circumstances. There is, after all, significant convergence between the editorial content in certain sectors of the magazine market and the mainstream newspaper market. This is especially the case in the UK, where the tabloid newspapers (the so-called 'red-tops') long ago hitched their wagon to the popular appetite for celebrity stories. Indeed, Bromley and Cushion quote the editor of the *Mirror* in London saying that he thought the future of newspapers lay in *Big Brother* until September 11 (temporarily) revived his readers' interest in news (2002: 166). Certainly, the British tabloids have almost categorically redefined what qualifies for them as news, so that tabloid news is now utterly personalised and dominated by the actions of well-known people – politicians, public officials, sportsmen and women, celebrities, soon-to-be celebrities and wannabe celebrities. (The broadsheets' weekend colour supplements are devoted, to news background and lifestyle features, but the *Mirror* and the *Express* devote their weekend colour supplements entirely to celebrities.) Celebrity gossip achieves front-page status regularly and the whole sector has been influenced by the *News of the World's* dogged pioneering of what has since been called 'bonk journalism' (that is, 'who's doing it with whom'). This mode of journalism is deliberately salacious and careless of its effect on the persons concerned. Celebrities are clearly fair game. At one point, the *News of the World* was offering a

prize of £3,000 to any reader who could provide them with their personal 'account of adulterous sex with a reasonably well known personality' (Horrie and Nathan, 1999: 57).

As such strategies would lead you to expect, these papers have a highly fraught relationship to the celebrity industry. From one point of view, they are simply predators, keen to exploit any item of scandalous news to the full and at whatever cost to those concerned. From another point of view, their commercial power makes them almost irresistible as the quickest route to the public. They pitch so tirelessly to the consumer of celebrity that they offer an extraordinary commercial opportunity to anyone who can use them successfully. Consequently, the tabloids deal with the celebrity industries through a see-sawing pattern of scandalous exposures and negotiated exclusives – at one point threatening the professional survival of the celebrities they expose, and at another point contracting to provide them with unparalleled personal visibility. Little wonder that their mode of representation routinely works over the ambiguous territory between admiration and derision.

### The 'tabloidisation' debate

This brings us to the issue of what is called the 'tabloidisation' of the media – the critical domain within which the production of celebrity is most often discussed. As a phenomenon, 'tabloidisation'<sup>3</sup> is most definitively located in sections of the British daily press, but the term has been extended to refer to a broad range of television formats as well. In the US it includes muck-raking current affairs programs such as *A Current Affair*, 'reality TV' programmes such as *Cops* and afternoon talk-confession shows such as *Oprah* and *Ricki Lake*. By its critics, the process of tabloidisation is usually considered to sacrifice information for entertainment, accuracy for sensation and to employ tactics of representation which entrap and exploit its subjects (the hidden camera, the reconstruction, the surprise talk-show guests). What are considered to be among its constitutive discourses range from the explicitly playful or self-conscious (the staged family conflicts, for instance set up in *Ricki Lake*), to the self-important but bogus *gravitas* of the journalist exposing an issue of 'public interest' (a politician's sex life, for instance). In practice, however, tabloidisation seems continually to expand as a category; it moves beyond the description of a particular kind of journalism to become a portmanteau description for what is regarded as the trivialisation of media content in general. As a term that accurately describes media formats and content, it is far too baggy, imprecise and value-laden to be useful as an analytic concept, in my view. However, it is a widely accepted label for a set of established debates about contemporary shifts in media content, production and consumption. As such, the production of celebrity through the media can be seen to fall under its ambit. I want to keep using the term tabloidisation in what follows, then, as a convenient means of labelling those concerns that are conventionally collected under it.

Concern about tabloidisation is a routine topic for media commentators and pundits of all political persuasions. Customarily, tabloidisation is framed as a broad-based cultural movement, mostly visible in certain media forms, which is made possible by the increasing commercialisation of modern life and a corresponding decline in 'traditional values'. While this would suggest that the concept of tabloidisation

expresses a conservative hostility to popular culture as a domain, it must be said that it also generates concern on the political left and among many with a professional interest in the media and popular culture. Todd Gitlin, for example, criticises the 'trivialisation of public affairs, the usurpation of public discourse by soap opera, the apparent breakdown of mechanisms for forming a public will and making it effective'. For him, 'trivialisation – infotainment and the like – works against the principled right and left alike' (1997: 35). His concern is echoed by the doyen of American communications scholars, James Carey:

In recent years, journalism has been sold, to a significant degree, to the entertainment and information industries which market commodities globally that are central to the world economy of the twenty-first century. This condition cannot be allowed to persist . . . The reform of journalism will only occur when the news organisations are disengaged from the global entertainment industries that increasingly contain them.

(2002: 89)

The angry tone of Carey's piece indicates there is a moral or political dimension to his critique: it is not merely motivated by concern at shifts in the formal attributes of contemporary journalism. This is characteristic of critiques of tabloidisation (see Saltzman, 1999, for instance).

Alternative views have in turn attacked the moralistic nature of criticisms such as those outlined above, as well as their origin in elite conceptions of the public sphere. Ian Connell was severe on what he saw as the snobbery behind the criticism of tabloid journalism and rejected the accusation that such journalism diverted us from more important political and social issues. Indeed, he argued that the tabloid's personalisation of news actually provided a more effective means of demonstrating the importance of the political:

Contrary to what has often been claimed about the tabloid press, they are every bit as preoccupied with social differences and the tensions which arise from them as serious journalists or for that matter academic sociologists. The focus on personality and privilege is one of the ways in which these differences and tensions are represented as concrete and recognizable rather than as remote, abstract categories.

(1992: 82)

It would have to be admitted that many of the concerns expressed about the influence of tabloidisation are grounded in a conventional and longstanding hostility to popular culture itself. Cultural studies has a rich tradition of revealing and challenging such a position. John Hartley's *Popular Reality* (1996) repeatedly attacks the class- and gender-based binarism that places information against entertainment, hard news against soft news, the public sphere against private lifestyles and public service media against the commercial media. As Hartley says, such binarism has a long history as 'the common sense' of the media industry and among policy-makers, but that 'doesn't make it any the less prejudicial as a mental map of modern media':

Not only do such binaries reinforce a systematic bias against popular, screen and commercial media, but they also tend to reinforce other prejudices, principally the one which considers many of the [denigrated terms in the opposition] as 'women's issues', with the (silent but inescapable) implication that serious politics and the public sphere is men's stuff.

(1996: 27)

One of the key locations for what might be regarded as a moral panic about tabloidisation, and a location most directly associated with 'women's stuff', is the daytime television talk show. While some might condemn its 'Oprahfication' of America (see Shattuc, 1997: 86), others 'champion daytime talk shows as a new public sphere or a counter public sphere' (ibid.: 93). Far from stripping politics from the public arena, these are 'highly popular programs that depend on social topics and the participation of average citizens' (ibid.: 86). It is the access of such citizens to public debate that is so important in accounts of the television talk show; crucially, these are people who have not hitherto enjoyed access to the television audience and whose voices have been silenced or ignored. As a result, Jane Shattuc claims that certain power structures are challenged by this form of television:

The shows not only promote conversation but do away with the distance between audience and stage. They do not depend on the power of expertise or bourgeois education. They elicit common sense and everyday experience as the mark of truth. They confound the distinction between the public and the private.

(1997: 93)

Shattuc does not make excessively liberatory claims for this form of entertainment. Ultimately, she concedes, these shows are neither intrinsically progressive nor intrinsically regressive. However, in their capacity to replicate the operation of the town meeting – the model she uses to explain their politics and their human dynamics – they offer a mode of participation that is implicitly democratic (ibid.: 94). It is this implicitly democratic function I want to turn to next, more directly in relation to the construction of celebrity through the media.

### 'Democratainment'

[...] the proliferation of opportunities for fame has been seen by some as a fundamentally liberatory development for the media in modern societies. The rise to media prominence of ordinary people such as the contestants in *Big Brother* or the stars of the webcam sites can be described as a new form of freedom. Leo Braudy directly compares modern celebrity with the forms of prominence or visibility that preceded it:

[T]he longing for old standards of 'true' fame reflect a feeling of loss and nostalgia for a mythical world where communal support for achievement could flourish. But in such societies that did exist, it was always only

certain social groups who had an exclusive right to call the tunes of glory, and other visual and verbal media were in the hands of a few.

(1986: 585)

The older patterns of class and privilege have thus lost their power, he argues, and in its place is a new media democracy, where ordinary people now have greater access to media representation.

Furthermore, the consumers of celebrity are now able to play a part in the production of cultural visibility. According to Charles Leadbetter (2000), Princess Diana was 'created in part by her consumers': 'she was jointly owned by the people who consumed her image, the readers of *Hello!* magazine, the media and Diana herself' (2000: 25). Such an image is not employed in the unproblematic way assumed by the myths of earlier versions of 'true' fame. Instead, Gary Whannel suggests, public figures of 'spectacular celebritydom seem precisely to offer' their audiences 'modes of public exchange in which moral and political positionalities can be rehearsed' (2002: 214).

The most developed version of this kind of position is found in John Hartley's work, particularly in his *Uses of Television* (1999). Here Hartley presents an optimistic account of the popular media as it increasingly informs the construction of cultural identities through its performance of 'transmodern teaching': 'using "domestic discourses" to teach vast, unknowable, "lay" audiences modes of "citizenship" and knowledge based on culture and identity within a virtualized community of unparalleled size and diversity' (1999: 41).

That such a pedagogic practice should occur largely through the provision of entertainment is no impediment to its productive capacity. Breaking decisively with the paternalistic model of media provision identified with Reithian regimes of public broadcasting, the newly heterogeneous commercial media sphere offers the possibility of 'DIY citizenship': the construction of cultural identity through the operation of motivated media consumption. The DIY citizen has a multiplicity of choices available – identities through which they might construct their own. Hartley calls this process 'semiotic self-determination'. Informed by Hartley's principled rejection of elitist assumptions that might allocate aesthetic or moral values to particular media forms or genres of content, this is the world of 'democrataintment'. There, the process of selection and choice in media consumption structurally replicates the choices available to the free citizen in a democratic society. The evidence for such a possibility is found, with characteristic but pleasing perversity, precisely in the tabloidised forms so pilloried by other media commentators: television talk shows, fashion magazines and the semiotic furniture of suburbia.'

It seems widely accepted in media and cultural studies that the more dispersed possibilities of production and distribution in the contemporary media – and not only through new technologies such as the internet – do imply the potential to achieve a 'different, less unequal vision of the mediated public sphere' (Couldry, 2003: 140) than seemed possible even a decade ago. Such a position is consistent with Braudy's (1986) much earlier description of the proliferation of celebrity and the disarticulation of fame from achievement as an intrinsically democratising force. More recently, it is also consistent with the defence of television talk shows, which argues that these formats have brought new, previously marginalised, voices into the public sphere



(Lumby, 1997; Masciarotte, 1991). This new diversity, in turn, argues Chris Rojek, results in the 'recognition and celebration of lifestyles, beliefs and forms of life previously unrecognised or repressed' (2001: 191). Hence, there is a significant line of argument which suggests that, far from constituting an 'unrecognised threat to liberal democracy' (Schickel, 1985: 311), the media formats in question are a democratising force. And from one point of view, this would seem entirely self-evident. The celebrity offered to contestants through reality TV, contestants defined for us by their ordinariness, would certainly seem to constitute a more democratic phenomenon than a celebrity based on social, economic, religious or cultural hierarchies.

Frances Bonner, however, argues that there are limits to how 'ordinary' such people can be and thus to what extent we can see the spread of reality TV in particular as part of a democratising process. Even in TV's representation of the ordinary, there must be hierarchies. She points out that the contestants on game shows, reality TV and so on are exceptional in specific ways: television seeks those who can 'project a personality on television' and therefore some 'are more usefully ordinary than others' (2003: 53). Like a number of writers (for instance, Couldry, 2003), she reminds us that such shows employ a process of selection that has produced a particular, and motivated, construction of ordinariness for us to watch. It is in television's interest to mask and disavow this process. In its place, Bonner suggests (after Robert Stam) that television serves its 'inbuilt need to flatter the audience', by suggesting through the representation of ordinariness that they, too, belong on television. However, in fact, 'the people who appear ordinary on television' are 'just a little better looking, a little more articulate, a little luckier' (2003: 97) than the 'ordinary' we experience away from television.

Television's construction of the 'ordinary' is itself a category worth examining. Nick Couldry takes this next step in reference to *Popstars*:

The ordinariness of these shows' contestants has a double significance in ritual terms: first, their 'ordinariness' confirms the 'reality' of what is shown (once their early performance strategies have, we assume, been stripped away by the continuous presence of the camera) and, second, that 'ordinariness' is the status from which the contestants compete to escape into another ritually distinct category, celebrity . . . [this is] special, higher than the ordinary world.

(2003: 107)

Couldry argues that there are in fact two kinds of people – 'media people' (those who are visible through the media) and 'ordinary people' – and that the distinction is hierarchical. The great value of celebrity is that it enables the 'ordinary' person to make the transition to being a 'media' person: that this is seen as an achievement – or a spectacular ritual in Couldry's terms – only reinforces the hierarchical structure which separates media people from ordinary people:

So, in *Big Brother* and elsewhere, media rituals which seem to affirm the shared significance of an individual's transition to celebrity in fact entrench further the working division between 'media people' and 'ordinary people'. Heavily ritualised processes such as media events which

seem to affirm the shared significance of media institutions' picture of the world in fact insist upon the hierarchy of that picture over any possible other.

(2003: 143)

Such arguments would suggest that the mere presence of the ordinary – a presence that has undeniably increased and is now firmly entrenched in programming formats on television – cannot be taken at face value.

Similarly, there are those who insist that the proliferation of social, gendered and ethnicised identities in the media generally cannot be seen as a democratising force, if only because of the larger ideological frame within which they are contained. Dovey claims that displays of deviance, such as those we might witness in a day-time talk show, 'actually serve to reinforce social norms by the individual pathologising of the speaker by the judging audience' (2002: 13), while Conboy argues that the characteristic action of the tabloid media in general is to 'close down into reaction' rather than open up 'into contestation' (2002: 149). It is possible to argue, on the other hand, that the relentlessness of this process has weakened significantly over the last couple of decades and that the trends Hartley notices would constitute convincing evidence of the declining recalcitrance of these mechanisms of control and containment.

In his discussion of Hartley's *Uses of Television*, Couldry makes what seems to me a more telling criticism of the limits of the democratisation thesis. He acknowledges the justice of Hartley's proposition that the contemporary media, 'in its dispersed, and often ironic, form', sustain 'a public space in which the terms of public and private discourse are open to negotiation beyond formal political control' (Couldry, 2003: 18). That much, at least, seems to be conceded as a fair and reasonable account of the political possibilities released by the current configuration of the contemporary media, and it operates as a solid rebuttal to most aspects of the tabloidisation thesis. However, Couldry poses a fundamental question to Hartley, which defers the question about the effectivity of the DIY consumer by redirecting the debate towards the symbolic economy of the media itself. Hartley never addresses, Couldry says, the 'implications' for the democratisation thesis 'of the massive concentration of symbolic power in media institutions':

How does this affect our interpretation of the social 'uses' of television? Unless we rely on the jaded rhetoric of market liberalism, we can know nothing about the actual impacts, positive or negative, of contemporary media without considering, for example, the uneven symbolic landscape in which popular talk shows address their viewers and also their participants.

(2003: 18)

It's a familiar debate within cultural studies, of course, issues of agency and determination recirculate continually. But it also reminds us of another familiar debate – between cultural studies and political economy – in that it insists the discussion of processes of consumption must first consider the conditions of production that determined what choices are actually on offer in the first place.

The final qualification I want to raise in relation to democratization is the connection it implies between the proliferation of celebrity, the widening of access, and the liberation of 'the ordinary', with the principles of democracy. I have argued this question in more detail elsewhere (Turner, 2001), but the simple version can be put quite briefly. Those who argue that the last decade or so has witnessed the opening up of media access to women, to people of colour and to a wider array of class positions, are certainly right. However, this is more correctly seen as a demotic, rather than a democratic, development. There is no necessary connection between demographic changes in the pattern of access to media representation and a democratic politics. At the empirical level, for every Oprah Winfrey, there is a Rush Limbaugh. At the structural level, no-one has yet even attempted to properly argue such a connection – it has simply been assumed. Or more correctly, there is a degree of theoretical slippage as the notion of semiotic self-determination mutates into a more explicitly political version of self-determination. Diversity, it would seem, must be intrinsically democratic.

### The demotic turn

Thus far I have been emphasising the pervasiveness of the influence of celebrity throughout the media, as well as the proliferation of the production of celebrity throughout the various media industries. To some extent, this is a story of the convergence of market strategies – with television, print and the Internet, in particular, all milking the market opportunities available to them through the production, distribution and marketing of celebrity in one form or another. However, the multiplication of outlets, of formats and of the numbers of people subject to the discursive processes of 'celebrification', suggests a competing narrative: that of the opportunity of celebrity spreading beyond elites of one kind or another and into the expectations of the population in general. In conjunction with what seems like a widening of opportunity in this area, there is the proliferation of new sites of media production as well as the consolidation of non-traditional systems of delivery for media content – from cable television to mobile telephony. Both have encouraged optimism about possible changes to the current concentration of ownership for major media forms. DIY production technologies are springing up to service DIY consumer-citizens, it would seem. As a result, it is not surprising that cultural studies researchers should suggest that increased powers of self-determination are now in the hands of media consumers – hence the democratic political possibilities read into the 'demotic turn'.

That there is a demotic turn seems to me beyond dispute. The media discourses used to represent 'ordinariness' edge closer every day to the lived experience of 'the ordinary'. Ordinary people have never been more visible in the media, nor have their own utterances ever been reproduced with the faithfulness, respect and accuracy they are today (Couldry, 2003: 102). The talk and confession genre of television delivers us raw, inflamed and spectacular performances of the ordinary every afternoon, while game shows spend millions trying to reproduce it. What constitutes the ordinary in the media, too, has been opened up dramatically to offer us multiple versions of class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity. At the same time, the range of media material now available for ordinary individuals to consume, assimilate and use is probably

unparalleled. But the objective of this explosion of the ordinary does seem to me, as Couldry suggests and at least to some extent, an attempt to turn the representation of the ordinary into a kind of media ritual. What informs this is not what I would regard as the positive byproducts – the openness, the accessibility, the diversity, the recognition of marginalised citizens' rights to media representation. Rather, what motivates the media's mining of the ordinary seems to be its capacity to generate the performance of endless and unmotivated diversity for its own sake. If this judgement is warranted, then the 'democratic' part of the 'democratisation' neologism is an accidental consequence of the 'entertainment' part and its least convincing component. It is important to remember that celebrity remains an hierarchical and exclusive phenomenon, no matter how much it proliferates. It is in the interests of those who operate this hierarchy in the contemporary context, however, to disavow its exclusivity; maybe what we are watching in the demotic turn is the celebrity industries' improved capacity to do this convincingly through the media.

For the individual celebrity, it might be possible to argue that, in the end, more opportunities are still more opportunities. Ordinary people can wind up on *Big Brother* or a network soap opera, just by the luck of the draw, and that possibility does have its liberatory dimension. One would want to move, though, to the examination of specific cases to think about what actually occurs. In the work that Frances Bonner, David Marshall and I did on celebrity in Australia, we found that the less connected the achievement of celebrity was to some training, performance background or the like – in fact, the more arbitrary it was – the less equipped the person concerned was to handle the inevitable discovery that their fame had nothing to do with them and that it could disappear overnight. The housemates on *Big Brother*, by and large, will not generate careers in the public eye; the young soap stars on *Neighbours*, by and large, will drift out of the industry as they are unable to find roles in anything more rewarding than regional British Christmas pantomimes. In such a situation, we felt, a key issue was the level of responsibility accepted by the promotions and publicity personnel who represented these celebrities and who traded their commodity status while it had value. Many of those personnel shared that view and expressed concern about the destructive cycle of discovery, exploitation and disposal that was fundamental to the way their industries used the individual star.

The reason for such a cycle is the pursuit of profit by large internationalised media conglomerates who, despite the demotic turn in representation and consumption, still control the symbolic economy. Notwithstanding the webcam girls, the trading of music on the internet, the availability of digital production technologies in all kinds of media forms, this is still in the same hands it has always been. It might be seductive to think of the internet as an alternative, counter-public sphere and in many ways its chaotic contents would support such a view. But, it is still a system that is dominated by white, middle class, American men and increasingly integrated into the major corporate structures of the traditional media conglomerates.

What does seem new, however – what Hartley's DIY citizenship also alludes to – is that we seem to be witnessing a new process of identity formation as media content mutates. Celebrity is playing an increasingly important role in this mutation as well as, I would argue, in these new modes of production of cultural identity. As it plays this role, celebrity itself begins to mutate: from being an elite and magical condition to being an almost reasonable expectation from everyday life. Certainly, the consumption

of celebrity has become a part of everyday life in the twenty-first century, and so it is not surprising if it now turns up as part of young people's life plans. It is important to understand this shift.

In most respects my personal sympathies lie with the more optimistic and populist accounts of shifts in popular culture; when one sees who is presenting the more conservative case, it makes one suspect the interests it might serve. However, it is important to recognise that it is easy to overstate the democratic potential of the new media systems and formats. Reality TV has presented us with some interesting moments in media performance and the spectacle of 'everyday life', no matter how it is produced, can make for some compelling television. However, the industrial cycle of use and disposal mentioned above does seem to have radically accelerated in response to the demand created by new media forms. This suggests the activity of a process of increased commodification rather than enhanced political enfranchisement. As David Marshall demonstrates in such detail in *Celebrity and Power*, the interests served are first of all those of capital.

That said, it is all too easy to slide into a moralising political critique of the forms of celebrity, of the artificiality of the cultural status it appears to confer and of the media forms that carry its related products. To do this, I absolutely accept, would be to greatly underestimate the complexity of these forms and products as well as the varied cultural and social functions they might perform. Further, it would divert us from discussing what I would regard as the more important and interesting aspects of the modern phenomenon of celebrity. It is not the perceived triviality of the talk show or the celebrity magazine, nor even the extraordinary range of media forms the production of celebrity has adopted, that attracts *my* central interest. Rather it is the fact that celebrity now occupies an increasingly significant role in the process through which we construct our cultural identities.

## Notes

- 1 Like many of the celebrity weeklies, *Hello!* retains remnants of the traditional women's magazine: beauty hints, recipes and fashion.
- 2 *Hello!* is particularly interesting in this regard. Far more respectable than any of its counterparts in the US, for instance, it offers an attractive reader demographic to advertisers. According to its website, it is the only mass circulation women's magazine (that is the category into which the circulation survey places it, and indeed 80 per cent of its readers are women) with nearly one third of its readers falling into the upmarket AB demographic.
- 3 This is the increasingly accepted way of describing a global media product that conforms to a branded international format, but is localised in terms of its specific content. So the various national editions of *Elle* or *Vogue* may represent the franchising of the brand but each may contain substantially different editorial content from the other.
- 4 The discussion of tabloidisation in this section draws heavily upon Turner (1999) where some of these arguments were first developed and where some of the complications unable to be integrated into this account are discussed at greater length.

- 5 The ordinary person who becomes a celebrity is perhaps the epitome of what can be achieved through this semiotic self-determination (although this is achieved through gaining access to the processes of production rather than merely those of consumption).