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Celebrity Culture

Are Americans Too Focused on Celebrities?

Howard Altman


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Martha's out of prison, begins house arrest
FULL COVERAGE, PAGES 2-3

Billionaire lifestyle entrepreneur Martha Stewart received heavy media coverage after her release from a West Virginia prison on March 4, 2005. The media say they cover celebrities heavily because of strong reader and viewer interest, but critics say excessive coverage of celebrities diverts attention from more serious journalistic pursuits and gives younger readers a distorted view of reality.

From *CQ Researcher*, March 18, 2005.

Martha is everywhere. For days before and after her release from prison, she is the blazing star around which television, the Internet, newspapers and magazines revolve. There she is, newly svelte and smiling sweetly, leaving prison. Waving girlishly and bussing the pilot on the cheek as she boards a private jet to return to her upstate New York estate. Joking with reporters about not getting cappuccino in prison and missing fresh lemons. Lovingly stroking her handsome horses over the pasture fence. Addressing adoring employees at Martha Stewart OmniMedia and showing off the shawl crocheted for her by a fellow inmate.

Domestic diva, media magnate, hero, outcast, convict, comeback kid and soon-to-be-star of her own reality show — Martha Stewart is among the few people on Earth (along with Jennifer Aniston and Brad Pitt) capable of diverting the media from the all-consuming feeding frenzy of the Michael Jackson child-molestation trial.

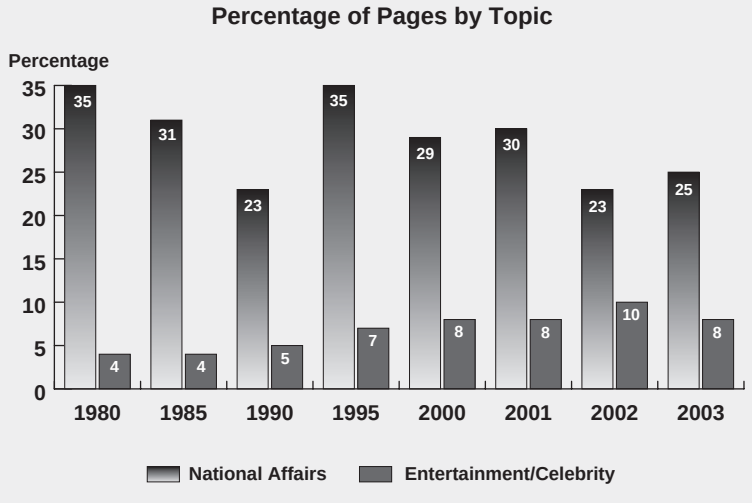
In short, Martha is the essence of celebrity — and we can't take our eyes off her.

On a very basic, biological basis, scientists say we humans are hardwired to be fascinated with celebrity, and that our brains receive pleasurable chemical stimuli when we see familiar faces.

"Celebrity journalism has never been hotter," says *Washington Post* media critic Howard Kurtz. "What used to be the realm of *People* magazine and "Entertainment Tonight" now has a foothold in every part of the media business. That's why there are 1,000 journalists camped out in California for the Michael Jackson trial. That's why magazines and newspaper gossip columns breathlessly

Celebrity Coverage Doubled in News Magazines

The percentage of pages in news magazines dedicated to celebrities and entertainment doubled from 1980 to 2003, while coverage of national affairs dropped from 35 percent of all pages to 25 percent.



Sources: Time, Newsweek and Hall's Reports

chronicle every breakup by Ben [Affleck] and Jen [Garner], every Britney marriage, every birth to a remotely famous B actress."

Fascination with celebrity has been fueled by an explosion in the number of Internet sites and cable television channels, including 24-hour news shows. As the number of shows and Web sites increased, so did competition for audiences and ad dollars. In turn, that raised the demand for more cheap content, such as the latest celebrity gossip, to fill the burgeoning amounts of broadcast airtime.

"Television, more than any other cultural development, has radically changed our experience of celebrity," says David Blake, a professor of English at the College of New Jersey, in Ewing. "Television has made celebrities both prevalent and ubiquitous, and with the rise of television came a whole new branch of the public relations industry. Public relations once focused on preparing accomplished individuals for the interest and scrutiny that had come to them. Now it involves manufacturing celebrities to meet the culture's seemingly insatiable desire for them."

The constant barrage of celebrity has led more and more people to risk their dignity, and even their lives in some cases, for the crack-like high of their "15 minutes of fame," as artist Andy Warhol famously put it.

Moreover, some researchers argue that as the media dishes out an increasingly rich diet of celebrity hype, less and less attention is paid to informing citizens about government and the world around them — undercutting a cornerstone of a democratic society. Many trace the new emphasis on celebrities to the massive consolidation of the mass media industry, which began in the 1990s when newspapers faced layoffs and drops in circulation and profits. Media companies were gobbled up by mega corporations with a greater commitment to stockholder proftis than to maintaining large, traditionally money-losing news departments.

In many cases, newspapers and broadcast stations owned by family dynasties — with traditionally strong commitments to the local community and relatively low profits — were replaced by huge corporations demanding that news departments produce double-digit profits. As a result, government and foreign news coverage was slashed and often replaced by cheaper-to-produce celebrity gossip, media critics say.

The squeeze on news departments became even more intense when online news outlets began to produce even more competition for viewers' attention.[1]

Yet, as media organizations scale back coverage of government and world events — even the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan — there seems no shortage of resources available for celebrity doings. Celebrity "news" magazine shows have sprouted like mushrooms after a rainstorm. One even devotes a half-hour each day to celebrities' legal problems. Indeed, even as the small army of journalists camps outside the courthouse in California where Michael Jackson is being tried, ABC is debating replacing Ted Koppel's celebrated news show, "Nightline," with more celebrity fluff.

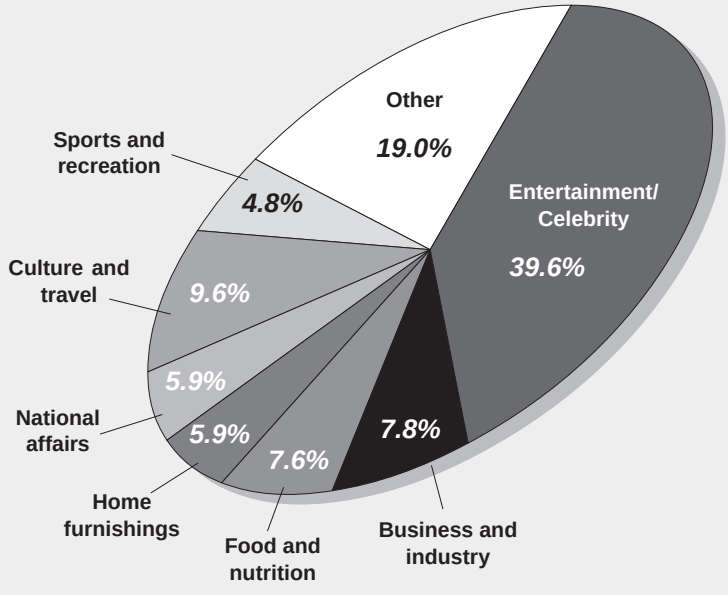
Part of modern celebrity is the money showered upon true stars. In the eyes of many, Alex Rodriguez, the New York Yankees' third baseman, took on the aura of a Donald Trump when he signed a 10-year, $252 million contract in 2001. Some movie stars make that by working in a few films.

But the fascination with celebrities and their stratospheric earnings has taken its toll. More American teenagers can name the Three Stooges than the three branches of government; more kids know who won the "Battle of the Network Stars" than the Civil War, says comedian and pop-culture commentator Mo Rocca.

Celebrity culture is having other negative impacts on society. According to British researcher Satoshi Kanazawa, of The London School of Economics and Science, children's mental health suffers the more they believe that happiness comes from money, fame and beauty. He found that the human brain was not designed to handle the constant bombardment of celebrity-based stimuli and that we are losing touch with our friends and family as a result. Meanwhile, a study conducted in the United States shows that we are all just a few stressors short of becoming celebrity stalkers.[2] And more and more Americans are seeking plastic surgery, the direct result of people either wanting to look like celebrities or feeling pressured to look younger and better because of the very high beauty bar set by celebrities, says New York plastic surgeon Z. Paul Lorenc.

Celebrities Dominate Magazine Covers

Entertainers and other celebrities appeared on the covers of nearly 40 percent of all American magazines in 2004. The next largest category, culture and travel, came in at almost 10 percent, while only 6 percent of covers were related to national affairs.



Note: Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding.

Source: Hall's Reports

The outlook for our celebrity-saturated culture, say many media watchers and social scientists, is bleak. "It's already all-Paris-Hilton-all-the-time, or nearly so," says Marty Kaplan, dean of the Annenberg School for Communications at the University of Southern California, "so you don't have to extrapolate that pathology very much to see the future.

"News coverage will continue to shrink; traditional hard news (like politics) will package and present itself even more aggressively as entertainment in order to get attention," Kaplan continues. " 'Journalism' will become an even more important profit center for entertainment conglomerates."

As the amount of news decreases, citizens' ability to stay informed — and thus participate responsibly in democracy — also will diminish, says David T.Z. Mindich, an associate professor of journalism and mass communication at Saint Michael's College, in Colchester, Vt.

As pundits, social scientists and media watchdog groups examine the celebrity culture phenomenon, here are some of the questions they are debating:

Is America's fascination with celebrity bad for society?

Every day, from living-room TVs to supermarket checkout counters, the mass media bombard Americans with

AFP Photo/Robyn Beck

Pop star Michael Jackson arrives at his child-molestation trial in Santa Maria, Calif., being covered by hundreds of media representatives. An explosion in cable television outlets competing for audiences and ad dollars has helped fuel the demand for celebrity news, which is a relatively inexpensive way to fill airtime.

images of celebrities and their rarified lives. But experts have differing opinions on whether it is a good or a bad thing for Americans to be inundated with news about the rich and famous — not only accounts of their privileged lives but also their battles with weight loss, criminal charges, sexual dalliances, drug abuse, broken marriages and problem children.

Perhaps the most obvious downside of celebrity culture is how it has changed whom Americans idolize, says Al Tompkins, group leader for broadcast and online journalism at the Poynter Institute, in St. Petersburg, Fla.* "Celebrity has taken the place of heroes," he says. "When I ask college and high school students who their heroes are, they usually name celebrities, such as athletes or movie stars, not names that did something heroic or noteworthy."

But Lorenc worries about the danger posed by the impact on people's self-image. "There is tremendous danger" in unchecked celebrity worship, Lorenc says. "A perfect example, is 'I Want A Famous Face' — the MTV television show in which patients come into a doctor's office and say, 'I want to look like Britney Spears,' or 'I want to look like so and so.'

"That shouldn't happen," insists Lorenc, author of *A Little Work: Behind the Doors of a Park Avenue Plastic Surgeon.* "No one should aspire to look like someone else. If I have a patient with a photograph who says, 'I want to look like that,' they don't need me, they need a therapy session. It's very unhealthy to perpetuate that. I won't operate on them."

The danger, he says, is not just that people want to look like specific celebrities but that it perpetuates a worship of youthfulness, and increasingly, Americans are turning to plastic surgery to capture the youth and glamour associated with celebrities. According to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, the number of plastic surgery procedures performed in America increased fourfold from 1997 to 2003 — from slightly more than 2 million to more than 8 million.[3]

"Even celebrities are in a bind," Lorenc says. "They have an image they have to upkeep and are forced to do that with Botox [a botulism neurotoxin injected to eliminate wrinkles]. They have to maintain an image and a lifestyle and an income. Do they influence people? Of course. Patients want to look younger, feel better about themselves."

The youth culture even influences the power elite, he says. "A lot of men from Wall Street say, 'I am competing against men half my age, who are working for a quarter of my price.' We are a youth-oriented culture."

Psychologist James Houran, of Irving, Texas, says celebrity worship is more than skin deep. It is a "gateway drug toward stalking," he cautions.

Houran is the co-creator of the Celebrity Worship Scale, which measures an individual's level of interest in

* The nonprofit Poynter Institute owns Congressional Quarterly Inc., the parent company of CQ Press, publisher of the *CQ Researcher.*

celebrities. "Celebrity worship starts off with normal, healthy behavior," he says. "But it can be transformed into more dysfunctional expressions," where people feel a connection to a celebrity that does not exist.

Houran, along with other British and U.S. researchers, found that one-third of Americans suffer from some form of "celebrity worship syndrome" in a study published in February 2002. In its most innocuous form, the condition manifests itself as a sense of emptiness, but the study found it can progress to obsessive thinking and, in rare cases, worsen into behavior — like stalking — that is driven by delusions.[4]

Houran recalls a teenage girl who began injuring herself after learning that punk singer Marilyn Manson, her favorite celebrity, was getting married. "She cut her arms, neck and legs. She was rushed to the hospital. She wanted to be the one to change him. When she was discharged, she realized what she did was extreme. But she still rationalized her obsession, saying, 'I just want him to be happy. If he is happy, I am happy. He is the only person I connect with.' "

Everyone, says Houran, is susceptible. "You don't have to be a stalker to have this [affect] your life, negatively and intensely. Those extreme celebrity worshippers don't start off that way, but the bad news is that it implies there is a stalker in all of us, given the right set of variables."

But not all studies have shown that celebrity worship has a decidedly negative impact. In a study published in March 2004, a group of British researchers found that gossiping about celebrities took up most of the social time of nearly one-third of a sample of 191 English youngsters ages 11 to 16. But these young people were far from being isolated; in fact, researchers found the gossiping children had a stronger network of close friends than their peers who were less interested in celebrities.[5]

The Harvard-educated Rocca, who appears frequently on CNN's "American Morning," believes saturation celebrity coverage has had an inoculating effect on society, particularly young people, and has made college students, in particular, extremely media savvy.

"There is an overwhelming appetite for celebrity and pop culture news across the board in America right now and on campus in particular," Rocca says. "But I have a strange faith in college students. They are both more optimistic and skeptical than everyone else.

"It sounds like a strange contradiction, but they consume all this celebrity news with tongue planted firmly in cheek, I think," Rocca continues. "Nobody is wide-eyed any longer when it comes to celebrity news. When I see college students devouring *Us Weekly*, they know it is all a joke. There is a hunger for something else. When I go to campuses and talk about my interest in presidential history, while a lot of students may not know much, they are hungry for something more substantive than the latest news on the Olsen twins."

Growing up in a celebrity-saturated culture helps turn college students today into experts on how the media work, Rocca says. "I am constantly amazed at how much the average student knows about what goes into making a TV show. Everyone has deconstructed the media, understands the ingredients and understands how the artifice is created. Essentially, students know it is all BS — the work of celebrity publicists and stories they are fed. The students revel in the cheesiness of it."

Conversely, Rocca believes that people who did not grow up with constant celebrity news are more apt to take celebrity news at face value. "I am betting older people were more engrossed by the Laci Peterson [murder] story," he says. "That was essentially tabloid trash. It had no relevance to people's lives. College kids . . . can draw a distinction between legitimate news, say the tsunami or Iraq, and soap operas that masquerade as news, like the Laci Peterson story."

Moreover, says Dan Kennedy, media critic at the *Boston Phoenix*, some heavily played celebrity stories can help make this a better country. "The coverage of the O. J. Simpson murder trial actually helped foster a national conversation about race and celebrity that otherwise would not have taken place, totally apart from the fact that he got away with murder," Kennedy says.

In fact, Kennedy thinks that today's media consumers are more sophisticated than in the past, and thus less obsessed with celebrity. "Large segments of society have always lived vicariously through celebrities," Kennedy observes. "It's not healthy, but it's ever been thus. In the 1860s, the wedding of Charles Stratton and Lavinia Warren — better known as General and Mrs. Tom Thumb — was one of the great media spectacles of the age, with the couple even dropping by the White House for a heavily publicized visit with the Lincolns.

"And I'm not sure that anything we've seen today exceeds the bizarre devotion to Rudolph Valentino in the 1920s," he continues. "For that matter, the media

Reality TV Rarely Leads to Lasting Fame

Reality TV shows have introduced the viewing public to instant celebrities like "The Bachelorette" lovebirds Trista and Ryan, "The Apprentice" villain Omarosa and "Survivor" schemer Richard Hatch.

The unscripted programs have given all-too-fleeting fame to thousands of average Janes and Joes who helped provide casting directors with the many stereotypes that make up reality television, including the hypersensitive minority, the big-city neophyte, the sex siren.

"The vast majority of people on reality TV believe that it is not only going to bring a bachelor that they can marry or $1 million for surviving life on an island, but also that it's the beginning of a career that will make them celebrities," says Robert Thompson, founding director of the Center for Popular Television at Syracuse University.

But most reality alums soon learn that their celebrity has a short shelf life — six months for most, Thompson says.

"Now that we've had years to map this out — five since the first 'Survivor' in the summer of 2000 and 13 since the first 'Real World' aired in 1992 — the votes are in," Thompson says, "and the chances of making a long career in show business from a reality show are very, very small."

But there are a few exceptions. "Survivor" alumna Elizabeth Hasselbeck is now one of five hosts of "The View." And London "Real World" alum Jacinda Barrett recently had substantial roles in the films "Ladder 49" and "Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason."

"American Idol" stars Kelly Clarkson and Clay Aiken also have found mainstream stardom, but that is largely because 'American Idol' is really a talent show, Thompson says.

But for every success story, there are hundreds of cast members who have tried and failed to extend their 15 minutes of fame.

"It's a letdown 99 percent of the time for most people," said Brian Brady, a talent booker for the casts of "Survivor," "The Apprentice" and other reality shows.[1]

"I get 10 calls a day from cast members trying to get some kind of work," Brady says. "You can hear it in their voices; they're desperate. They're trying to milk their show for anything."

Jamie Murray was 22 when he appeared as one of the roommates on the ninth season of the "Real World" in New Orleans. Now 27, Murray has spent much of the last five years using his reality experience to book college appearances, which pay about $2,000 each. He has also appeared on two MTV "Challenges," which bring back cast members from past seasons of "Real World" and "Road Rules" to compete in events like raft building and bungee jumping for plastic rings. With a little luck, he says, he won both challenges, earning $80,000 and two cars.

Murray says that was the only compensation he's received from his celebrity. "My financial situation has been less than stellar during the last few years because I've been living off the scraps of the 'Real World,' " Murray says. "All my high

today may be less celebrity-obsessed than that of 100 years ago — at least in terms of the [print] press."

Does the media's attention to celebrities lead to poor coverage of more important issues?

The performance of the American media in covering the run-up to the war in Iraq has come in for scathing criticism from press critics — and the press itself. Many media critics, including *New York Press* columnist Matt Taibbi, castigated the so-called mainstream media for failing to adequately challenge the Bush administration's rationale for going to war.[6]

And an editorial in *The New York Times* acknowledged that mistakes in the *Times*' coverage were made. "The world little noted, but at some point late last year the American search for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq ended," the *Times* commented. "We will, however, long remember the doomsday warnings from the Bush administration about mushroom clouds and sinister aluminum tubes; the breathless reports from TV correspondents when the invasion began, speculating on when the 'smoking gun' would be unearthed; our own failures to deconstruct all the spin and faulty intelligence."[7]

There are many reasons, critics argue, why the U.S. media have failed to pay more attention to world events or even to cover important events closer to home. It is "much easier to land 'event'-oriented coverage (such as spot news, crime news, announcements or events that occur, scheduled and unscheduled," argues Tompkins, of the Poynter Institute.

school and college friends are doing big-time, corporate jobs, and I'm still making money off appearing at some bar night in Austin, Texas."

But someone is getting rich off Jamie's MTV appearances. "Viacom has a multimillion-dollar syndication deal for 'Real World,' and not a dime was thrown down to the people on the show," Murray explains. "We signed our rights away."

It's harsh, Thompson says, but potential cast members know that if they don't sign, there are thousands of others willing to do so.

Getty Images/Frank Micelotta

MTV's "Real World" is considered the first modern reality TV program. Launched in 1992, it follows the lives of seven young strangers living in a house together. Above, the show's Paris cast visits New York City.

Jon Murray, a co-creator of "Real World," understands that it's difficult for his cast members to have empty pockets when they are recognized on the street. "It's hard for any of us who haven't . . . gone on a reality show, to understand what it's like to be famous for being yourself, but not necessarily having a lot of money that goes with fame," Murray said.[2]

Unfortunately for most reality show stars, they rarely have skills that can take them beyond reality TV, Thompson says. "Jerri Manthey from the first 'Survivor' would love to be a big star, but she's not a great singer or a great actress. She isn't a great anything that makes you a celebrity," Thompson says.

Even for those who are great at something, reality TV is no guarantee of success. It can even hurt wannabe stars by typecasting them and showing them in a negative light, Brady says. "A lot of these people end up bartending and waitressing, and, hopefully, they're counting up nice tips because the patrons of the restaurant or bar recognize them," he says.

But without the talent to keep them in the limelight, most reality stars quickly slide into obscurity, Thompson says. "It's celebrity built on the foundation of sand, and it blows away."

— Kate Templin

[1] www.concertideas.com.

[2] Kate Aurthur, "Reality Stars Keep on Going and Going," *The New York Times*, Oct. 10, 2004, p. B22.

Taibbi is less charitable. "In the run-up to the war," he writes, "every major daily and television network in the country parroted the White House's asinine WMD claims for months on end . . . "Justice would seem to demand that a roughly equivalent amount of coverage be given to the truth, now that we know it (and we can officially call it the truth now, because even Bush admits it; previously the truth was just a gigantic, unendorsed pile of plainly obvious evidence). But that isn't the way things work in America.

"We only cover things around the clock every day for four or five straight months when it's fun," and "fun" boils down to covering celebrities at the expense of all else, Taibbi argues.[8]

On the other hand, the Annenberg School's Kaplan blames the shrinking "news hole," or the amount of space devoted to hard-news coverage. For example, the percentage of pages in news magazines dedicated to celebrities and entertainment doubled from 1980 to 2003, while coverage of national affairs dropped from 35 percent of all pages to 25 percent. (*See graph, p. 2.*)

"The smaller the hole for hard news, the less likely that people will find out what they need to know about their communities, their country and their world," Kaplan says. "Celebrity news attracts eyeballs. We can't help it. Fame is mesmerizing. The challenge for responsible media is to make the [more] important [stories] interesting."

Competing with celebrity news is a tall order, says *The Washington Post's* Kurtz. Celebrity news is "cheap and easy to cover, easier, say, than unraveling the president's budget cuts or Social Security proposal," Kurtz

Are You Celebrity Obsessed?

A test developed by a group of American and British psychologists ranks interest in celebrities from harmless escapism to obsessive thinking that — in rare cases — may lead to delusion-driven behavior like stalking.

Answer yes or no to the following statements:

Yes	No	
☐	☐	1. I often feel compelled to learn the personal habits of my favorite celebrity.
☐	☐	2. I love to talk with others who admire my favorite celebrity.
☐	☐	3. When something happens to my favorite celebrity, I feel like it happened to me.
☐	☐	4. I enjoy watching, reading or listening to my favorite celebrity because it means a good time.
☐	☐	5. I have pictures and/or souvenirs of my favorite celebrity, which I always keep in exactly the same place.
☐	☐	6. When my favorite celebrity dies, I will feel like dying, too.

Celebrity Attitude Scale

If you answered "Yes" to:

Nos. 2 and 4 — Your celebrity attitudes are on the Entertainment-Social level; they are undisruptive and focused on the entertainment abilities of celebrities.

Nos. 1 and 5 — Your celebrity attitudes are on Intense-Personal level; attitudes about celebrity are more intimate and obsessive and can have a negative effect on mood and behavior.

Nos. 3 and 6 — Your celebrity attitudes are on the Borderline-Pathological level; attitudes and behaviors are dangerous, troublesome and anti-social.

Source: Lynn McCutcheon, et al., "Conceptualization and Measurement of Celebrity Worship," British Journal of Psychology, Feb. 1, 2002

says. "It's the O. J. syndrome as a permanent feature of our journalistic culture. Martha Stewart, convicted felon, is about to get a television show. Need I say more?"

But Dennis McCafferty, who covers celebrities as senior writer for *USA Today Weekend*, says our fascination with celebrities does not mean the death of hard news.

Is journalism in trouble? McCafferty asks. "I'm sure a response of 'Yes! Mercy yes!' would come from the sanctimonious types who incessantly write letters saying that anything resembling hard news journalism is coming to an end," McCafferty says. "But I don't believe it for a minute. The last time I checked, *USA Today* and *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal* and the other usual suspects are still doing some pretty darn good hard-news stories. And my local *Fairfax Journal* is still staying on top of how local politicos are spending my tax dollars.

"I also notice that *USA Today's* "Life" section — that's supposed to be the fluffy one — devotes as many pages to health, science and other related topics as it does to Hollywood. The "Style" section [of *The Post*] still devotes 80-inch features to newsmakers, as opposed to star machinery."

While there has been a tremendous increase in time and space devoted to celebrity coverage, McCafferty says, the advent of cable and the Internet means that there is a huge appetite for all kinds of content — including hard news.

"Has there been a huge increase in celebrity-devoted magazines, cable shows and the like? Of course," says McCafferty. "There's also been a huge increase in business magazines and 24/7 financial cable shows. There are countless niches within the business-magazine industry. If you want to read about small business, you have a choice of several competing titles.

"The same with mutual funds, personal finance, venture capitalists, CEOs, and, for all I know, administrative assistants and the guys who change purified water jugs in the office everyday.

"The same massive increase in ongoing coverage is also reflected in what's available when it comes to sports, health, parenting, community, religion and every single other subject that affects our lives. Celebrity news is hardly crowding that out. There's simply more of all kinds of news, period, and that includes hard news."

Weekly magazines like *People, Us Weekly, In Touch* and *Star* reel in readers with gossip, interviews and paparazzi photographs of their favorite celebrities. Jennifer Lopez was the most featured celeb in 2004, appearing on 29 covers published by the four magazines. Jennifer Aniston, alone or with estranged husband Brad Pitt, came in second with 26 covers. The February 2005 Aniston-Pitt breakup sparked a celebrity magazine feeding frenzy, with *Us Weekly* featuring the couple on its cover for five consecutive weeks, the longest for a single news story.

Kennedy, of the *Boston Phoenix*, agrees. "I'm not so sure that the media *per se* are obsessed with celebrity," he says." Our culture is obsessed with celebrity, and the media are a reflection of that, although it's complicated, because celebrity wouldn't be possible without the media.

"So you've got a non-virtuous circle: The media cover celebrities because that's what a large swath of the public wants; and then, in response to public demand, the media end up covering celebrities even more. . . . I consider my own tastes to be fairly heavily oriented toward real news, yet even I would rather read about Ozzie Osbourne's latest stint in rehab than Social Security reform."

BACKGROUND

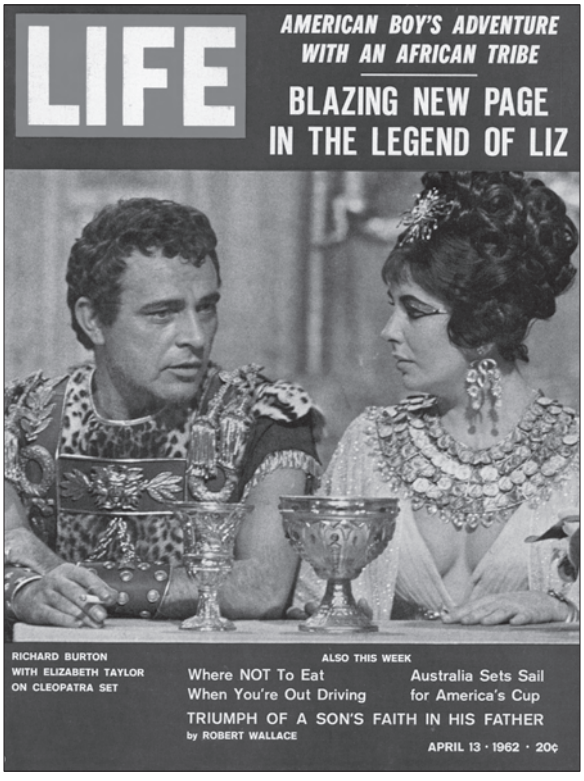
'Star' Gladiators

Fame and celebrity are nothing new to human civilization. As humans progressed from spending all their time hunting and gathering, those who excelled at war, sports, politics and the arts captured the imagination, says Blake at the College of New Jersey.

"Many scholars find it useful to distinguish between fame and celebrity, connecting fame to the kind of renown people achieve for extraordinary talents or achievements, and celebrity for the kind of meretricious notoriety that is so prevalent today and so frequently criticized — the state of being known for being known," notes Blake.

"I'm inclined to see fluidity between these two terms, to see them as having differences in degree rather than kind," Blake continues. "For someone like Alexander the Great, or Caesar, fame was an important, motivating force. Ovid compared fame to a spur, propelling men to greater accomplishments.

"Being a celebrity adds a new dimension to this immortality, for it suggests that one is actively celebrated by the crowd. The original Latin meaning of celebrity is "to be thronged." Along with this comes a sense of visibility, a sense of being widely recognized and known. How frequently are you seen? How visible is your face? As one wag put it, God may be famous, but Jesus is the celebrity."



Getty Images/Paul Schutzer

The mainstream media have long been fascinated by celebrities, as shown by this 1962 *Life* cover featuring superstars Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton during the filming of "Cleopatra."

The first celebrities may have been the cave dwellers who began leaving their artistic marks some 40,000 years ago, but there are no records identifying any of them. The first *known* celebrities probably were the Pharaohs, such as the first "power couple," Akhenaten and his beautiful wife Nefertiti, who lived 3,500 years ago.

The Golden Era of Greece, about five centuries before the birth of Christ, produced great thinkers like the mathematician Pythagoras and the philosopher Socrates.

Perhaps not surprisingly, one of the earliest celebrities was an athlete: Milo of Kroton, a five-time Olympic wrestling champion whose fame was at its height between 532 and 516 B.C. Hans van Wees, a lecturer in ancient Greek history at University College, London, says such athletes were accorded the same high status enjoyed by today's superstars.[9]

"They were not only widely talked about but also given red-carpet treatment," van Wees says. When they returned home, for instance, part of the city wall was demolished so they did not have to use the gates like "ordinary mortals," he says.

The athletes also won the lifelong right to free meals and would advertise their fame by commissioning hymns of praise from famous poets that would be performed in their honor — probably "the next best thing to appearing on TV," van Wees says.[10]

During the Roman Empire, other "athletes" — including the slaves who became gladiators — achieved fame. And Greeks were followed by the context of their celebrity, which speaks volumes about the political and social order of the day.

By 65 B.C., as Caesar was pitting 320 pairs of gladiators against each other in an amphitheater at one time, news of gladiators' battles spread by word of mouth.[11] Boys idolized them, often taking lessons at gladiator schools, while women were known to have affairs with them.[12]

A year later, Cleopatra, history's enduring icon of sex, beauty and political intrigue, was born. She lived for 39 years before famously committing suicide by raising an asp to her breast.

One of the first writers to win fame and celebrity was the Roman historian Tacitus (55-120 A.D.). His seminal work, *The Annals*, chronicled the nexus between fame and power in Rome.

Tacitus' description of Roman consul Caius Petronius, for instance, sounds like a precursor of the recent TV show, "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous:" "His days he passed in sleep, his nights in the business and pleasures of life. Indolence had raised him to fame, as energy raises others, and he was reckoned not a debauchee and spendthrift, like most of those who squander their substance, but a man of refined luxury."[13]

Tacitus' nuanced examination of Petronius is just one of many instances where the writer investigated the machinations and foibles of the power players of his day. "The love of fame is the last weakness which even the wise resign," he observed.[14]

In the ensuing centuries, artists, athletes, writers, rulers, discoverers and conquerors became celebrities — until the nature of celebrity changed drastically.

Modern Celebrity

By the time William Shakespeare arrived on the scene in the mid-16th century, times were changing. England had a very

CHRONOLOGY

1880s-1930s *First modern power-generating station is invented, followed by movies, radio and television.*

1879 First radio is developed.

1910s Hollywood develops the star system . . . *Photoplay*, *Motion Picture Stories* and other fan magazines begin publishing, ushering in the age of celebrity worship.

1920s Silent-film comedian Fatty Arbuckle is charged with murder, becoming one of the first victims of the celebrity gossip machine . . . Gossip columnist Walter Winchell reaches more than 50 million homes with his radio show and newspaper column.

1922 First public radio broadcasting station opens in Pittsburgh.

1939 Television is introduced at the World's Fair in Flushing Meadows, N.Y.

1960s-1980s *Scientists conceive of the Internet, but mass communications is dominated by newspapers, a few television channels and radio.*

1966 Former movie star Ronald Reagan is elected governor of California. He is re-elected in 1970.

1972 U.S. computer experts unveil the ARPANET, forerunner of the Internet.

1974 *People* magazine is launched by Time Inc., paving the way for the delayed explosion, two decades later, of innumerable imitators.

1980 Reagan is elected president.

1990s *Widespread use of the Internet revolutionizes mass communication; media organizations begin filing news continuously on the Web. Traditional media are gobbled up by megacorporations.*

January 1990 Warner Communications and Time Inc. complete $14.1 billion merger, creating world's biggest media conglomerate.

1992 "Real World" debuts as the first reality TV show.

September 1993 New York Times Co. buys Affiliated Publications Inc. (*The Boston Globe*) for $1.1 billion — biggest takeover in U.S. newspaper history.

1994 Viacom buys video rental chain Blockbuster Entertainment Corp. in August for $8 billion. . . . In July Viacom buys Paramount Communications, a movie, publishing and sports company, for $10 billion.

1996 Walt Disney Co. buys Capital Cities/ABC for $19 billion in February, creating a movie, television and publishing conglomerate . . . In October Time Warner and Turner Broadcasting System complete $7.6 billion merger.

September 1999 Viacom buys CBS for $34.5 billion in the biggest media marriage ever.

2000s *Technological advancements continue to change the way people think of news. Reality TV becomes major phenomenon.*

2000 "Survivor" airs and becomes a huge hit, triggering a deluge of reality TV shows that produce hundreds of instant celebrities. . . . In the largest corporate merger in history, AOL acquires Time Warner in a stock swap valued at $166 billion.

2002 *Forbes* magazine names Jennifer Aniston the nation's top celebrity.

2003 Arnold Schwarzenegger sworn in as governor of California.

March 5, 2004 Martha Stewart is convicted of four counts of lying to investigators and obstructing justice in connection with a well-timed sale of stock.

Oct. 8, 2004 Stewart begins her five-month sentence, eluding photographers and cameramen staking out the federal prison in Alderson, W.Va.

2005 Jennifer Aniston and Brad Pitt announce they are separating on Jan. 7. . . . Michael Jackson's trial on child-molestation charges begins on Feb. 28. . . . Martha Stewart gets out of prison on March 5.

Riding Celebrity Into Politics

Twenty years ago, when "The Terminator" took moviegoers by storm, who could have predicted that the bodybuilder playing the indestructible cyborg would one day run the most populous state in the nation?

But in today's celebrity-obsessed society, no one was surprised when Arnold Schwarzenegger announced his candidacy for governor of California — and, in true celebrity fashion, did it on the "The Tonight Show With Jay Leno."

It was the latest in a growing trend toward cross-pollination between celebrity and politics. "The lines between politician and celebrity have become increasingly obscured in the past 30-40 years," says David Blake, a professor of English at the College of New Jersey, in Ewing. "I think we are only now beginning to see the consequences of that blurring."

Darrell West, director of the Taubman Center for Public Policy at Brown University and author of *Celebrity Politics*, says that when celebrities run for office, they often win by impressive margins, even though voters make fun of them initially, saying they know nothing about politics.

In fact, elected officials and celebrities need similar skills: connecting with an audience, developing a loyal fan base and cultivating the "it" factor that transcends a résumé.

Indeed, politicians have learned that showmanship and charisma can help win elections. Conversely, as the public grows increasingly skeptical of career politicians, lacking a political pedigree can be a plus. Voters are often drawn to celebrities and other political-outsiders, such as actor Clint Eastwood (former mayor of Carmel, Calif.), singer Sonny Bono (the late congressman from California) and pro wrestler Jesse Ventura (former governor of Minnesota). In a *USA Today* poll taken shortly before California's 2003 gubernatorial election, 34 percent of likely voters said Schwarzenegger's lack of experience actually made them more likely to vote for him.[1]

"Celebrities bring a special credibility that career politicians don't have," West says. "They haven't spent their lifetimes cutting deals and doing things the public doesn't like."

Moreover, celebrity politicians operate differently than their professional peers. For instance, because celebrities are less entrenched in the political establishment, West says, they are often more likely to take risks, trust their gut instincts and support ambitious programs.

Jack Kemp, former quarterback for the Buffalo Bills, took his athletic enthusiasm with him when he went into politics, advocating enterprise zones that encouraged entrepreneurship and job creation in urban America. After serving in Congress, Kemp went on to become a Cabinet member under the first President George Bush and eventually the Republican vice presidential nominee in 1996. "Having been a quarterback, I had a quarterback mentality," he said. "In a huddle, you can't have everybody talking . . . and you're willing to throw a long ball on third and one or on fourth and one. Which I was always willing to do."[2]

Likewise, in 2004, Schwarzenegger broke with the Republican Party to endorse stem-cell research, which California voters supported last November. And when President Ronald Reagan couldn't get Congress to support

famous woman — Elizabeth I — making history, and dramatic shifts in science, religion and culture were occurring.

The Elizabethan era saw popular theater become a major source of entertainment for the masses. The clergy and scholars may have disapproved of such "corrupt" entertainment, but it turned Shakespeare into London's most celebrated playwright.

Other writers gained recognition as literacy rates improved.[15] And the more people read, the more they wanted to know about the writers.

"Celebrity, as we know the term, begins to appear in the 18th century with the increasing importance of the public sphere," Blake says. "As people came to recognize the public as an entity separate from the government and the church, as newspapers began to turn their attention to items of public interest, a new class of people emerged as the recipients of widespread attention."

Although these individuals, were most frequently known for their exceptional skill — Alexander Pope, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Lord Byron — people were frequently interested in their private lives and their personalities, Blake says. By the middle of the 19th century, the notion of celebrity had grown to embrace well-known people in society who were glamorous or fashionable. During a trip

his economic program, he used his charisma to get grassroots supporters to inundate Congress with letters and phone calls. Congress eventually passed the plan.

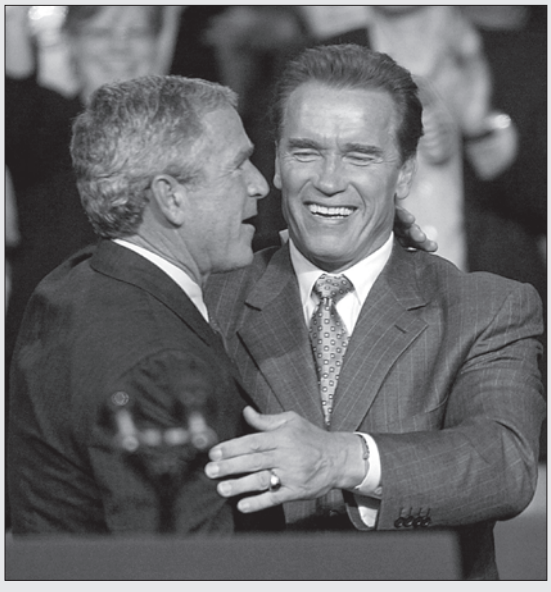
But celebrities aren't magicians, cautioned Marty Kaplan, dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California, which studies the impact of entertainment on society. "Only magicians can make things like red ink disappear by waving a wand," he said after Schwarzenegger's election. "People had the mistaken impression that all our problems got solved now that we have a famous superhero in place. In truth, that was just the beginning."[3]

Celebrity politicians also can have trouble adapting to the snail-like pace of the political world, and their role within that world, West says. After his 1998 election, Ventura grew weary of the mundane realities — and the heavy responsibilities — that came with the job; he did not run for re-election in 2002.

Lawyer-turned-actor-turned-senator Fred Thompson also retired from politics in 2002 to return to acting on NBC's popular "Law and Order."

"After two years in Washington," Thompson quipped, "I often long for the realism and sincerity of Hollywood."

America probably has not seen the last of the celebrity candidate, Blake says. Actor Ben Affleck seems to be laying the groundwork for a political run, making appearances on Capitol Hill to support an increase in the minimum wage, a proposal supported by his friend Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass. Affleck also was seen as a ubiquitous wonk during the Democratic National Convention in 2004, when he stumped for presidential candidate Sen. John Kerry.



AFP Photo/Stephen Jaffe

President George Bush greets California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, the latest celebrity to combine popularity and politics.

"We're seeing more and more athletes and actors winning elections," West says. "And sometimes they even turn out to be good governors."

— Kate Templin

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[1] Susan Page, "Lack of Political Resume Can Actually Boost Newcomers," *USA Today*, Sept. 29, 2003, p. 1A.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] John Broder, "Even Celebrity Has Its Limits," *The New York Times*, July 25, 2004, p. D5.

to England, for example, American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson described meeting "celebrities of wealth and fashion."

Inventors Nikola Tesla and Thomas Edison amped up the public's newfound fascination with the private lives of the well-known. Tesla, who made alternating current usable, and Edison, whose inventions included the phonograph and moving images, gave the masses the sounds and images of the famous or the soon-to-be famous.

The increasing popularity of moving pictures in the second decade of the 20th century proved pivotal in making celebrities ubiquitous in American society.

Star System

In 1910, producer Carl Laemmle triggered the rise of the American movie-star phenomenon by creating the first movie star through a massive publicity campaign. Now forgotten, Florence Lawrence was known coast to coast as the "Vitagraph Girl."[16]

That same year, film companies began to move to the area later known as Hollywood, and director D. W. Griffith and Biograph Studios released "In Old California," the first film made in Hollywood.

In 1911 *Photoplay*, the first, true movie fan magazine debuted and gave rise to the whole idea of a celebrity

AFP Photo/Jorge Uzon

Singer Britney Spears is a popular magazine subject as much for her marriages and peccadilloes as for her talent and glamorous appearance.

culture. Soon afterward, *Motion Picture Stories*, *The Moving Picture World* and *The Motion Picture News* also offered interviews and gossipy columns about the personal lives and careers of the stars.[17]

Fascination with the private lives of public figures fueled a feverish interest in the 1921 arrest and subsequent trials of silent-film comedian Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, presaging today's media frenzy over Michael Jackson. Arbuckle was charged with the rape and murder of actress Virginia Rappe during a wild party in San Francisco. Tabloids sensationalized the crime and concocted stories about Arbuckle's "bottle party." Although he was acquitted in multiple manslaughter trials, Arbuckle saw his career end, while Hollywood was forever linked in the public's view as wild and scandalous.[18]

In the wake of the Arbuckle scandal, efforts were made to police the industry, including the creation of the Hays Office, designed to clean up Hollywood through censorship and public relations.

Inevitably, the nation's fascination with Hollywood doings gave rise to Walter Winchell, the Jazz Era's most famous, and influential, gossip columnist. Each week he wrote six fast-paced columns that appeared in nearly 2,000 newspapers. In the 1930s he added Sunday radio broadcasts. With his columns and his distinctive, staccato radio voice, he reached 50 million homes.

"Feeding the public's craving for scandal and gossip, he became the most powerful — and feared — journalist of his time," wrote biographer Ralph D. Gardner. "His articles were loaded with snappy, acerbic banter. Broadcasts were slangy, narrated with machine-gun rapidity, a telegraph key clicking in the background. 'Good evening Mr. and Mrs. North and South America and all ships at sea,' his programs began, Let's go to press!' "[19]

Winchell helped foster the rise of such modern, gossipy publications as *People* magazine, launched in 1974. But it was the unveiling of a technological marvel at the 1939 World's Fair that almost single-handedly ushered in a whole new world of celebrity culture. The future rival to radio and film — television — was formally introduced to the world when the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) displayed the first TV sets for sale to the American public.[20]

Kanazawa, at the London School of Economics and Science, says TV had a profound influence on society. Kanazawa studied television's role in creating "imaginary friends" — celebrities who are seen increasingly as replacements for real friends.

"The major change in the history of celebrity worship was the invention, and then subsequent spread, of television," he says. "Before TV, the only way for people to have 'imaginary friends' was to watch a movie, or read a magazine. So the effect of the exposure to "imaginary friends" was minimal. TV changed all that. It is in your living room, you can watch it every day, and, nowadays, 24 hours a day. So we should feel a lot closer to our imaginary friends than we used to before the spread of TV."

Communications Revolution

Today's celebrity culture is largely possible because of changes in how we communicate. The printing press

helped spread The Word, as well as a love of words. In 1776, it helped spread a revolution in Colonial America. A century later, the development of electrification begat the modern era of movies, radio, television and, ultimately, the Internet.

But even as recently as the late 1960s, the world of communications was a very different place from what it is today. In every major city, there were usually at least two daily newspapers, three networks and no cable or Internet. The big story of the day did not have to fight for attention with myriad other media outlets, argues David T. Z. Mindich, an associate professor of journalism and mass communication at Saint Michael's College, in Colchester, Vt.

"On Feb. 27, 1968, when [CBS anchorman] Walter Cronkite made his famous remark that 'we are mired in the stalemate of Vietnam,' he was competing against two or three other news and public-affairs shows, two movies and a couple of sitcoms — 'F-Troop' and 'I Love Lucy,'" Mindich says. "There were seven TV stations in New York City at the time, four of them devoted to news and public affairs, three to entertainment. Today, much less of the TV universe is devoted to news and public affairs, so it is much more possible to watch television all day long, and not get any news."

"The problem is that Americans have grown too fond of sweets, both on their tables and in their newspapers. And the new tabloids, such as the Tribune Company's *RedEye,* that are aimed at the youth market seem geared to the attention of a mayfly."

— Evan Cornog, Publisher,
Columbia Journalism Review

CURRENT SITUATION

Big Business

Brad and Jen. They are so big that movie fans know them simply by their first names. Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston have long been in the pantheon of celebrity newsmakers. And the amount of press coverage devoted to the recent breakup of their marriage is a textbook example of the economics of celebrity.

People, *Us Weekly* and *In Touch Weekly* took the unprecedented step of rushing out a second issue in less than a week to splash the split-up on their covers. "We're in a far more competitive environment than ever," said *People* Deputy Managing Editor Larry Hackett, explaining why his magazine could not afford to wait another week."[21]

The breakup has created a cottage industry, including the first-ever instant book from the publishers of *Us Weekly* — *Brad & Jen: The Rise and Fall of Hollywood's Golden Couple.* When grainy, long-lens photos of Aniston kissing friend Vince Vaughn, surfaced recently, they prompted a bidding war between upstart celebrity magazine *Life & Style* and *Us*. "Kissing Brad Goodbye?" asked a recent *Life & Style* cover, while the cover of *Us Weekly* wondered, "Dating Already?"

Indeed, during the breakup brouhaha, *Us* featured the couple on its cover for five consecutive weeks, the longest run ever for a single news story. The Feb. 7 issue, with a cover article, "How Jen Found Out," was the magazine's highest-selling issue, with 1.25 million copies. *People*, which has an exclusive first photo this week of Julia Roberts' twins on the cover, also includes a mug of Pitt with the teaser "Brad & Angelina: Their Movie Wedding!"[22]

"Anything involving hope that they might get back together or signs that either of them is moving on is fascinating to our readers and the world," says Sheryl Berk, editor-in-chief of *Life & Style.* The Johnny-come-lately among the nation's highly competitive celebrity magazines has featured Aniston on the cover four times since the split.

However, as popular as the celebrity world's preeminent couple have been of late, they were second-rate in 2004 — at least in terms of how many covers they graced. A recent *Daily News* tally showed that Jennifer Lopez, either alone or with Affleck or husband Marc Anthony, led all celebrities in 2004, as the dominant subject on a total of 29 covers published by *People*, *Us*, *Star* and *In Touch.* Aniston, alone or with Pitt, was a close second, on 26 covers.[23]

And there seems to be no end in sight when it comes to feeding the voracious celebrity media beast. In 2004, there were 1,006 launches of new magazines, many focused on celebrities, according to Samir Husni's *Guide to New Magazines.*[24]

AT ISSUE

Do the media devote too much attention to celebrities?

YES

James Houran, Ph.D.
Coauthor, "Celebrity Worship Scale"

Written for *The CQ Researcher,* March 2005

Unequivocally yes. Having idols and heroes is a natural part of identity development, but it's indicative of a problem when individuals shower attention and affection onto people whom they do not even know — and essentially can never know personally. This trend strongly suggests that we're a media- and entertainment-saturated culture that treats celebrities akin to religious icons. The media give celebrities a powerful pulpit and encourage the public's fascination and preoccupation with celebrities.

Undoubtedly, celebrities are more accessible than ever before due to the advent of the Internet, the myriad "real life" stories about celebrities shown on entertainment news programs and even in the mainstream press. We even have reality shows that turn normal people into stars, and these mass-produced "celebrities" are also given inordinate amounts of media attention. The media are clearly giving the public "what it wants," but in doing so the media are exacerbating the problem.

This media attention does two counterproductive things. First, it reinforces the status and prestige of celebrity in our society, even as it objectifies and trivializes celebrities themselves. People no longer need special talents or abilities to be famous — they only need to do something that gains the media's attention. Also, devoting too much space to celebrities arguably undermines the credibility or relevancy of the media outlets. The private and professional lives of celebrities are not legitimate news topics, unless their actions affect society in a meaningful way, as in the case of Arnold Schwarzenegger running for and winning political office.

What constitutes a "meaningful" story is clearly a subjective standard, but it should be a red flag when media are reporting on a person simply because of his or her celebrity. That resembles voyeurism, not journalism.

Second, overzealous coverage of celebrities decreases the psychological "distance" between fans and celebrities. This reinforces the false and unhealthy notion that the public can really come to know stars — that we can establish real, personal relationships with them. The media are often a vanguard that informs us of significant occurrences that have real implications for society.

But the news media can also act like a drug dealer, devoting far too much space to superficial stories about the rich and famous — information that has little real value but that has tremendous power to reinforce society's addiction to celebrities.

NO

Dennis McCafferty
Senior writer, USA WEEKEND magazine

Written for *The CQ Researcher,* March 2005

As a confessed newsy newspaper writer turned celebrity scribe, I hear this question quite often. Now, the response that any self-respecting journalist is supposed to give is, 'Heavens! Mercy yes!' At least that's the one that I can only imagine that 99 percent of this fine publication's readership would give.

When it comes to hard news versus celeb fluff, I've been hearing the "sky is falling" uproar for some time now. But I don't buy it for an instant.

Newspapers and other media outlets are certainly cutting budgets, along with, unfortunately, a shockingly large number of both "designated award winner" hard-news staffers as well as the incredibly undervalued grunts who deliver the nuts and bolts of day-to-day news gathering as a career calling. (By the way, I have no doubt that readers and audiences place far more value in the latter kind of coverage rather than the former. As humor columnist Dave Barry put it, those notebook-emptying newspaper series presentations should come with a warning to readers: "Caution! Journalism prize entry!"

This budgeting trend is sad to see and, unfortunately, does not appear to be reversible anytime in the near future. But that said: I'm still completely unconvinced that hard news is falling victim to celebrity coverage. The last time I checked, *USA Today, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal* and the other usual suspects continue to produce some pretty darn good hard-news stories.

If anything, reporters have more tools than ever to produce serious news on a daily basis, thanks to modern technology. And let's face it — most reporters early in their careers gravitate toward hard news. That's where you make a reputation. You show the older veterans that you can dig it out with the best of them, and then you move on to the (hopefully) more lucrative and less taxing "lighter" stuff.

Oh, and let's not forget sports, either. Why, Tony Kornheiser alone represents a vast media industry unto himself, with his *Washington Post* column and radio and TV gigs.

The same, massive increase in ongoing coverage is also reflected in what's available when it comes to health, parenting, community, religion and every single other subject that affects our lives. Celebrity news is hardly crowding that out. There's simply more of all kinds of news, period, and that includes hard news.

While it's more fashionable to wring our hands about the mass of celebrity news, I view it as part of a larger, expanding appetite for content in general. What's wrong with that?

Celebrities are hot, said Husni, a professor of journalism at the University of Mississippi. Hotter, even, than sex, which once was the leading subject among new magazines, especially fast, cheap, new magazines. Now sex doesn't dent the top 10 categories, Husni said. "In 1997, sex was the No. 1 category, with 110 start-ups. Last year, there were only 20 new entries [focusing on sex].

"Celebrities are becoming the sex of the 21st century," according to Husni, a self-proclaimed magazine junkie who has been tallying launches since 1985 and is known in the industry as Mr. Magazine.[25] And while that may be good news for magazines, it's bad news for broadcast television, he says.

"TV is surrendering its mass audience," Husni said. "With cable and satellite, [broadcast] TV has been converted to a narrowcast medium."[26]

In broadcast television — where the networks have seen steadily diminished ratings — the influence of celebrity culture can be summed up with the debate over the future of Ted Koppel's "Nightline," which has seemed almost sacrosanct since its launch during the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis.

"ABC News last week shot a pilot for one possible 'Nightline' replacement, a freewheeling show hosted by Washington reporter Jake Tapper and Bill Weir, the co-anchor of the weekend edition of 'Good Morning America,' two network insiders reported recently. "One of the pilot's top stories was about the Michael Jackson child-molestation trial — exactly the kind of tabloid-friendly fodder that the generally sober-minded 'Nightline' has tended to avoid."[27]

At the Associated Press Managing Editors convention in Louisville, Ky., last fall, much of the discussion was about the decline in newspaper readers. As recently as 1997, 39 percent of Americans ages 18 to 34 were reading papers regularly, writes Evan Cornog, publisher of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, but by 2001 the number had dropped to 26 percent. Similar declines have been reported in TV news viewing.[28]

Cornog says many editors pursue celebrity coverage not just because readers want it, but because they see it as a way to regain new, younger readers. Nonetheless, one of the convention sessions focused on "Celebrity Coverage — Where's the Line…And Have We Crossed It?"

"It is a common lament of newsrooms that readers often skip over the long, thoughtful series on important topics in their haste to read the latest on the Hilton sisters

Getty Images/Arnaldo Magnani

British actress Kate Beckinsale, who starred recently in the "The Aviator," greets fans in New York after appearing on the "Late Show with David Letterman" on Dec. 16, 2004.

or the specs on the best high-end cappuccino makers," Cornog writes. "Still, why not include some of that fluff? The occasional confection is fine as long as one eats a healthy, balanced diet.

"The problem is that Americans have grown too fond of sweets, both on their tables and in their newspapers. And the new tabloids, such as the Tribune Company's *RedEye*, that are aimed at the youth market seem geared to the attention of a mayfly."[29]

Science of Celebrity

Humans have a biological predisposition to celebrity interest, according to James Bailey, a research fellow at

the Center for the Study of Learning at George Washington University, in Washington, D.C.

"There are two factors at work in our 'biological' reaction to celebrities," he says. "The first is the 'beauty' factor. Simply put, celebrities tend to be physically attractive, and there is a whole host of literature showing that physically attractive people are at an advantage in virtually every avenue of life."

When exposed to an attractive face, he says, the so-called pleasure centers of the brain — those associated with the release of adrenaline, epinephrine and other endorphins — "light up." That reaction to beauty, he says, has been consistent over time, even as the concept of what is beautiful has changed.

Although beauty is culturally conditioned and changes over time, there seem to be certain "golden proportions" — such as from hips to bust to shoulders, or from the eyes to the forehead, mouth and nose — that transcend both culture and time. "I guarantee that Paris Hilton's face and figure are described by a mathematical equation that could also model Mozart's music," Bailey says.

In addition, he says, the repeated exposure to celebrities' faces can also have an organic effect on the human brain. "Basically, if a person is exposed to a stimulus over and over again, that stimulus becomes familiar, and familiarity triggers those same pleasure centers," he says. "It's as if being exposed digs a neurochemical groove in the brain, that when activated, triggers a biochemical cascade that's experienced as pleasurable. That's why we like seeing things we've seen before.

"It's been postulated that there is a survival instinct behind 'liking' things that are familiar, because the familiar is safer than the unknown," he says.

But researcher Kanazawa, at the London Institute for Science and Economics, worries that the constant celebrity images bombarding our brains may be harmful.

"Celebrity interest didn't evolve; it is an exaptation," says Kanazawa, who studies evolutionary psychology. "In other words, the adaptation, the evolved trait, was our genuine interest in friends and family. When artificial images of photographs, films, TV, video and DVDs were invented, our adaptation was co-opted by these evolutionarily familiar stimuli, and our interest in celebrity was born. Now we cannot tell the difference between our 'real' friends and family, and 'imaginary' friends and family."

The result, he says, is that "We are living in an entirely evolutionarily novel, strange place, which our human brain — adapted to the conditions of the African savanna 50,000 years ago — cannot comprehend."

Studying Celebrity

Some college courses are trying to help students understand, and deal with, the reality of celebrity culture.

At Central Michigan University in Mt. Pleasant, Lorrie Lynch, an editor at *USA Weekend*, is teaching a course in celebrity journalism this fall. The advanced course is aimed at students already proficient in journalism who want to learn how to cover celebrities. They'll learn how to cover big events, like Oscar night, report on the business of entertainment, conduct a celebrity interview and write a celebrity profile.

Lynch says she will cover celebrity journalism ranging from staged events to uncovering scandal, including figuring out how celebrities' publicity operations work and meeting stars' demands without abandoning journalistic integrity.

"Rather than texts, I plan to have the students reading the news and entertainment magazines, columns on the Web and looking at entertainment-oriented TV shows so they immerse themselves in this niche of the profession and get very familiar with what's out there," Lynch says.

"We'll have weekly discussions about how big stories are handled," she says. "For example, the week of the Brad Pitt/Jennifer Aniston breakup we would talk about the timing of their announcement, how each publication played it, who had the best stuff. We might analyze the coverage looking for fairness and accuracy."

Lynch's course is among a growing number of university-level offerings focusing on celebrities and celebrity journalism, from England's University of Gloucestershire to Australia's University of Queensland, whose Centre for Critical and Cultural Studies examines celebrity culture in depth.

At the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, Charles Kurzman, an associate professor of sociology, is teaching a course called Celebrity Status, which examines whether celebrities constitute a "status group" in the sense described by Max Weber, a founder of modern sociology.

"It may be that celebrities usurp honor, command authority, engage in a distinctive lifestyle and pass along their status (sometimes in diminished form) to their children, just like the aristocratic elites whom Weber analyzed

a century ago," Kurzman writes in his course description. "At the same time, celebrity may be unlike Weberian status in other ways."

Kurzman wants his students to understand the historical and anthropological context of celebrity status. "Celebrities appear to play a role in today's society similar in some ways to the role that the aristocracy played in earlier eras," he says. "Ordinary folks treat them with awe and exaggerated rituals of respect when they come across a celebrity in person. We peons take a bizarre interest in the mythologized details of their lives, and we willingly grant them a portion of our harvest, as it were, in the form of movie tickets, CDs, live shows and products associated — even if only contractually — with this modern aristocracy."

OUTLOOK

Diminishing Democracy?

Media pundits and social scientists, already concerned about the proliferation of celebrity, worry about the future.

"Thomas Jefferson said that democracy's strength depends on an informed electorate," says the Annenberg School's Kaplan. "Public education and quality journalism are essential channels for delivering that information. In both those enterprises, need-to-know has taken a back seat to need-to-make-dough. If that continues, the prospects for robust democracy will diminish, and the opportunities for demagoguery, which depends on mass ignorance, will increase."

Given current trends, the long march toward diminishing democracy is very likely to continue, he says. As the news hole continues to shrink, he says, traditional hard news will have to present itself as entertainment so "journalism" can become an even bigger profit center for entertainment conglomerates.

Washington Post media critic Kurtz agrees. "Given past trends," he says, "I wouldn't be surprised if there was a Celebrity Channel on TV — several of them, actually — not to mention even more magazines and Web sites devoted to the pointlessly famous."

Social scientists say rapid advances in technology will only make matters worse. "I don't think celebrity worship will ever abate," says psychologist Houran, coauthor of the Celebrity Worship Scale. "We're a media- and entertainment-saturated society, so I predict that we'll become increasingly obsessed with celebrity culture over time as technology advances further and allows us to feed more efficiently the addiction — and false sense of connection — we have to celebrities."

Moreover, says George Washington University's Bailey, "Hollywood, advertisers and others in the selling game are gaining a greater understanding of brain functioning, which means that their persuasive attempts will be all the more effective and compelling."

In addition, he notes, "the communication media are part and parcel of modern life — the Internet, digital on-demand programming, portable entertainment — I-pods, miniature DVD players and so forth. Hence, there will be a greater probability of encountering these increasingly sophisticated and clever messages and imagery."

But not everyone worries that America's flourishing celebrity culture will hurt our democracy, or others. English Professor Blake at College of New Jersey, says the election of Arnold Schwarzenegger, one of the world's most popular celebrities, actually spread hope around the world. "In what we might think of as our peer democracies, there was comic disbelief that the Terminator had won" election as governor of California, Blake says. "This did not seem to portend well for American democracy."

But, in several developing countries, the recall process that resulted in Schwarzenegger's election signaled the openness of our democracy, he says. "Newspapers in Swaziland, Zambia and the Philippines saw in his victory a lesson for their own political situations," Blake says. "Some compared his campaign to that of their own celebrities — the pop singers, soccer players and beauty queens — who were trying to channel their fame into public service. The 'meaning' of Arnold Schwarzenegger was open to broad interpretation.

"In the next 15 years, the importance of those varying interpretations will only grow in significance."

NOTES

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For More Information

Center for the Study of Popular Television, S. I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY 13244; (315) 443-4077; www.newhouse.syr.edu/research/poptv. Studies the role of entertainment television in shaping popular culture.

Hall's Reports, 733 Summer St., Suite 503, Stamford, CT 06901; (203) 363-0455; www.hallsreports.com. A leading provider of editorial content analysis for magazines.

Norman Lear Center, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA 90089; (213) 821-1343; www.learcenter.org. A multidisciplinary research and public policy center "exploring implications of the convergence of entertainment, commerce and society."

Poynter Institute, 801 Third St. South, St. Petersburg, FL 33701; (888) 769-6837; www.poynter.org. A school for journalists, future journalists and teachers of journalists. The nonprofit institute owns the St. Petersburg Times as well as Congressional Quarterly and CQ Press.

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