

**Sofia Johansson**

Communication and Media Research Institute  
University of Westminster

There is little doubt about the significance of celebrity to modern life, with the media providing varied outlets for fame. Celebrity is prominent in the news, it dominates sections of the magazine market and reality TV pervades schedules around the world. As Graeme Turner has recently noted, the industry around celebrity 'creates highly visible products that most of us buy at one time or another and which play a significant part of our everyday lives' (2004, 26).

With the ubiquity of celebrity as a contemporary cultural and economic phenomenon, the last decade has seen an expansion in academic interest in the subject. Indeed, it can currently be said to be undergoing a 'boom'.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on canonical texts on stardom (e.g. Boorstin 1971; Alberoni 1972; Dyer 1979), which focused on representations of stars and on aspects of the Hollywood star system, more recent analyses within media and cultural studies (e.g. Gamson 1994; Marshall 1997; Giles 2000; Turner, Marshall and Bonner 2000; Rojek 2001; Turner 2004) have instead dealt with the idea of a pervasive, contemporary, 'celebrity culture'. Here, fame and its constituencies are conceived of as a broader social process, connected to widespread economic, political, technological and cultural developments.

The topic of celebrity culture raises controversial issues for debate. From one perspective, it has been seen as part of a process of 'tabloidization': the (news) media as turning to sensationalism, entertainment and the realm of private affairs (see Sparks 2000, for a full discussion of this term). A critical claim here is that the media's focus on the lives of famous people is part of a move away from issues deemed of public interest, thus constituting a weakening of democratic processes. Bob Franklin exemplifies this viewpoint when he writes that today, 'the intimate relations of celebrities from soap operas, the world of sport or the royal family are judged more "newsworthy" than the reporting of significant issues and events of international consequence' (1997, 4). Such a wide-sweeping statement is not

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necessarily representative of the full debate about celebrity and tabloidization, but concerns about the personalisation of news, the commodification of the private, and the emphasis on individual as opposed to collective action reverberate through these debates.

Another, more recent strand of the controversy around celebrity culture concerns the mechanisms of entry into fame. Who becomes famous, and why? The proliferation of 'ordinary people' on reality TV has led to criticisms that contemporary fame is divorced from talent or achievement. However, it has also been claimed that this is breaking down traditional hierarchies of influence; as a representation of increased social mobility and through potentially providing more people with a chance of 'making it' as a celebrity. As such, 'new' discourses on celebrity have been seen as indicative of a meritocratic system which rewards individual drive irrespective of social hierarchies (see Biressi and Nunn 2004). But as pointed out by Jo Littler (2004), such optimism may be tempered by contrasting mediated discourses on meritocracy with actual exacerbations of divisions between wealth in different societies. Littler argues contrarily that celebrity culture should be understood 'in the context of economic and social disempowerment: in terms of unequal access to material resources and social mobility' (Ibid, 10).

Interspersing both of these areas of discussion are ideas about the cultural functions of celebrity: its linkages with other popular narratives and its meanings for audiences. Here, celebrity has for instance been analysed as a resource for social interaction and community building (Bird 1992; Hermes 1995), as performing mythic and spiritual functions (Langer 1998; Frow 1998; Rojek 2001, 51-99) and as functioning as a basis for individual and cultural identities (e.g. Dyer 1979; 1986). Corresponding with Littler's point above, it can also be suggested that aspects of contemporary fame which foregrounds media 'punishment' of the rich, famous and powerful, on a reception level works to symbolically attack social privilege – again raising questions about social class and social hierarchies in relation to celebrity culture (see Connell 1992; and Johansson, forthcoming 2006).

Then, existing analyses of celebrity open up a wide scope for continued study of a phenomenon at the centre of controversies around cultural values, media standards and social change. This third issue of WPCC is a contribution to the ongoing dialogue within the growing academic literature in the field, and reflects the broader debates discussed here. The articles in the collection focus on the media as the primary site of celebrity, but approach this subject from a range of perspectives and from within different national contexts.

The first three authors write from within a UK perspective, dealing with the development and characteristics of contemporary celebrity. Revisiting canonical texts on stardom and relating these to ideas of celebrity culture, Su Holmes starts off by problematising the notion of change, calling for greater self-reflexivity by academics in the field and a closer examination of connections with the past. Next, Anthony McNicholas engages with such an historical shift. He examines the promotion by BBC of the *Eastenders* soap stars in the early 1980s, illustrating how this process contributed to the construction of a kind of celebrity that drew on strong notions of familiarity and ordinariness. These aspects of contemporary fame are also noted in Gareth Palmer's discussion of the 'D-list', which Palmer sees as a conceptual space where lessons are offered about 'knowing one's place' in the social structure. Rather than accepting that the celebritisation of the ordinary is a sign of democratisation of culture, he points to the limited roles available to ordinary people in the celebrity machinery, and the particular susceptibility of these to the journalistic venom aimed at those deemed 'D-listers'.

Moving beyond the UK, the next two articles deploy celebrity as a framework for analysing the performance and reporting of contemporary politics. Kathie Muir, firstly, raises questions about the degree to which the personalisation of politics puts political leaders at risk of accusations of valuing style over substance. Using the career of Australian Democrat leader Natasha Stott Despoja as a case study, Muir argues that within the increasingly mediated nature of politics this is a particular risk for female politicians. This conceptual tension between celebrity marketing on the one hand and political 'substance' on the other is also the focus of Jeremy Hockett's semiotic analysis of the branding of George W Bush. Hockett is interested in the imagery and marketing of the celebrity politician, rather than in the reporting of political events or characters. Tracing the 'Brand W' campaign merchandise, he takes the polemic view that the extent to which branding plays a part in the political process in the U.S. results in a 'dysfunctional and strategically divisive democratic process'.

The last article deals with the relatively under-researched topic of audiences for celebrity texts. Maria Claudia Coelho uses a study of fans of Brazilian telenovela stars as a basis for discussing what she considers an incongruity at the core of our relationship with celebrities: the emphasis on individualism and the collective experience of mass media products. Situating this contradiction in relation to Brazilian culture, she shows that such an analysis is fruitful for understanding how the essentially Western trend of celebrity is integrated in a non-Western society, and for how the study of fame can reflect on the media's role in shaping modernity.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As an indication of the growing interest in the field, a recent interdisciplinary conference on the topic of celebrity culture (University of Paisley, 2005) drew together nearly seventy presentations from a variety of academic disciplines. See also Su Holmes' overview of celebrity theory in this issue, where she discusses what she considers a 'boom period' of the field.

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