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Celebrity Capital: Redefining Celebrity Using Field Theory

Olivier Driessens

Abstract

This article proposes to redefine celebrity as a kind of capital, thereby extending Bourdieu's field theory. This redefinition is necessary, it is argued, because one of the main limitations shared by current definitions of celebrity is their lack of explanatory power of the convertibility of celebrity into other resources, such as economic or political capital. Celebrity capital, or broadly recognizability, is conceptualized as accumulated media visibility which results from recurrent media representations. In that sense, it is a substantial kind of capital and not a subset or special category of social or symbolic capital, the latter being defined as legitimate recognition by other agents in a social field. Rather than adding another definition of celebrity next to many others, the proposed notion of celebrity capital should be seen as an attempt to integrate the existing approaches of celebrity into one comprehensive conceptualization which can enable us to better grasp this societal and cultural phenomenon.

Celebrity, definition, field theory, Bourdieu, symbolic capital, media

Celebrity Capital: Redefining Celebrity Using Field Theory

Introduction

It is a platitude to point out that celebrity has become an essential characteristic and dynamic of our contemporary (Western) cultures and societies, that they have become 'celebritized' (van Krieken 2012). In multiple social fields, such as the political, cultural, or economic field, celebrity has become a valued power resource. Indeed, following 'the myth of the mediated centre' (Couldry 2003b), or the assumption that the media are the privileged gatekeepers and access points to the imagined social centre, the categorical distinction between 'media people' and 'ordinary people' is essentially hierarchical in nature. In other words, this myth implies that being in the media lends a person perceived importance compared with those outside the media. The abundance of reality TV and talent shows illustrates that many 'ordinary' people yearn for fame, while the number of fan communities is countless. Next to that, it can be observed that numerous media and entertainment celebrities (try to) enter the political, literary, or journalistic field using their celebrity status, respectively as candidates, authors, and (guest) editors of newspapers and magazines.

This deep embedding of celebrity in society and culture and its meanings, production and reception have attracted increasing attention by scholars, resulting today in a very rich body of literature. Early traces of this, albeit not always in terms of celebrity, can be found in the work on charismatic leadership by one of sociology's founding fathers, Max Weber (1948), in Charles Wright Mills' (2000[1956]) work on elites, devoting a full chapter on celebrities (see also Alberoni 1972), or in Richard Sennett's (1976) *The Fall of Public Man* in which he started from charisma to explore the star system. The attention for stars became more systematic with the development of star studies, within which French sociologist Edgar Morin (1972[1957]) and Richard Dyer (2007[1979]) are among the spearheads. This was recently complemented by the rapid rise of celebrity studies as a distinct field, which was fanned by monographs by Joshua Gamson (1994), P. David Marshall (1997), Chris Rojek (2001), and Graeme Turner (2004), to name but a few.

This diversity and cross-fertilization of different approaches and traditions into what can be called the field of celebrity studies resonates in its conceptual diversity but also in its definitional vagueness. First, regarding the conceptual diversity, terms such as hero, star, superstar, celebrity, television personality, idol, or icon are often used by contrast to define well-known individuals (Epstein 2005, p. 12; Holmes and Redmond 2006). A correlation could possibly be found between the field in which the famous persons originate and the label they receive. In general and whilst ignoring some nuances, it could be argued that (super)stars predominantly belong to sports, film, and music, or the broader cultural field. Most of them thus catch people's attention by exploiting a certain talent, or by achieving something, which also applies to heroes. Idols and icons are usually related to pop music, whereas celebrity seems not strictly related to a specific field, but could be said to have as a central quality its media generated fame. Or, according to Marshall (1997, p. 7), "[c]elebrity can be thought of as the

general and encompassing term, whereas concepts of hero, star, and leader are more specific categories of the public individual that relate to specific functions in the public sphere.” Given the wide-ranging and thorough mediatization of society and culture—which means, generally, the co-articulation of media-communicative and societal and cultural change (e.g., Lundby 2009; Hepp 2012)—we could follow Marshall and accept celebrity here as the general and common concept to denote well-knownness, regardless of the way it has been acquired (see also Holmes and Redmond 2006, pp. 10-12). In other words, celebrity can be *attained* through family relationships (royals), *achieved* through talent and accomplishments (e.g., musicians, sports stars, or criminals), and predominantly *attributed* via the media (reality TV-participants or so-called socialites as Paris Hilton) (Rojek 2001, 2012). Or as Giles (2000, p. 5) describes it: “The brutal reality of the modern age is that all famous people are treated like celebrities by the mass media, whether they be a great political figure, a worthy campaigner, an artist ‘touched by genius’, a serial killer, or Maureen of *Driving School*.”

Second, regarding the vagueness of celebrity studies’ conceptual framework, it is noteworthy that the core concept, celebrity, has been defined in countless ways already. This presents us with an essential problem for the mutual understanding in the field, for its further theoretical and empirical analysis, and for its explanatory power. Cashmore and Parker (2003, p. 215) put their finger on the spot by arguing that “[c]elebrity is a slippery concept that has eluded any real sense of definition to date.” Hence, a major task lies ahead of us and this article aims to contribute to that endeavor in two ways. To start with, I want to present a tentative mapping—taxonomy would be too big a word for the exercise presented here—of some of the definitions that are currently available in the literature. The aim is by no means to provide a complete overview of the literature, but to structure the definitions in such a way that we gain insight into the main angles from which celebrity has been defined and what the important merits and shortcomings are of these definitions.

Next, starting from these shortcomings, especially the relative lack of explanatory power of current definitions to grasp the convertibility of celebrity, this article proposes to redefine celebrity as a form of capital, namely celebrity capital. Whilst the notion of celebrity capital has been used in the literature several times already (e.g., Collins 2007; van Krieken 2012), it has not yet been developed in-depth. I will take up this challenge and conceptualize it more profoundly within social theory, specifically Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory.

A tentative mapping of celebrity definitions

The aforementioned distinction between achievement-based stardom and attributed celebrity (by the media) (see Rojek 2001, 2012; King 2010) has given the notion of celebrity a negative connotation; by many it is perceived as superficial and meaningless. Its “derogatory use” (Redmond and Holmes 2007, p. 8) is most clearly expressed in Daniel Boorstin’s (1992[1961], p. 57) often used tautology that a “celebrity is a person who is known for his (sic) well-knownness.” He specified that a celebrity is a human pseudo-event, “neither good nor bad, great nor pretty,” in lack of any qualities (Boorstin 1992[1961], p. 57).

While there is a quite stable upper tier of internationally renowned celebrities who generate (media) attention for years or even decades, underneath there is much more renewal and instability (van de Rijt et al. 2013). Rojek's (2001, p. 20) "celetoid" is the critical articulation of the celebrity as disposable commodity: today in the media, tomorrow already forgotten about and replaced by a new celetoid. "Celebrity," Kurzman et al. (2007, p. 363) said, "is status on speed." This trend of both the rapid turnover of celebrities in the media and its relatively easy attainability, or even its desirability among large shares of the population, was summarized in the notion of "demotic turn" by Turner (2006, p. 156).

In this article, the negative connotation or contempt of celebrity will be largely neglected. By this I do not imply ignorance for the possible implications that the different routes to celebrity might have for its power, convertibility, effects or affective relations with its audiences—acquiring notoriety (or infamy) through school shootings has clearly different implications than becoming famous as a painter—, only that a negative appreciation is not productive for thinking conceptually about the definition of celebrity. Instead, the focus is on celebrity as a social category that captures a position of well-knownness of an individual, however little time it lasts and regardless of the ways it was attained. The purpose here is to examine its ontology and how it can be clarified.

In the literature, we find a rich diversity of definitions of celebrity. In order to organize these, I will take as a starting point the building blocks of the celebrity apparatus, which enables to meaningfully categorize most definitions. Dyer's (2004[1986]) seminal work on the (ideological) construction of stars is very instructive for this. Even though his analysis concentrated on the star's meaning and image-making, his distinction between the star, Hollywood, and the audience gives us valuable insights. Gamson (1994) rightly transposed this as the triangle celebrity text, industry, and audiences, but Marshall (1997, p. 12) derived from Dyer that the celebrity is "an area of negotiation among the public, the media, and the celebrity." Instead of Hollywood, or the celebrity industry, Marshall preferred the media. However, Dyer (2004[1986], p. 4) seemed rather ambiguous on Hollywood's relation with the media and whether we should see it as distinct or not. In Dyer's view, Hollywood is the dominant player dictating the other agencies and media industries, although he acknowledges that they sometimes have conflicting interests and compete each other. Although I agree with Turner (2010, p. 16) that the media and the promotional and publicity industries are both structurally embedded into a media economy, I want to argue that analytically it is still useful to separate the media and the celebrity industry. The celebrity industry, which is populated by all kinds of managers, press, and booking agents (see Gamson 1994, pp. 46-59; Rein et al. 2006[1997]), is, in my view, better seen as an 'independent' industry (at least in political economic terms) from the media because the agents within it have not as their primary target to attain high audience ratings or circulation figures and sell advertisements (in case of commercial media). Instead they are interested in selling the celebrity image and all its related commodities, which may indeed conflict with the media's interests or their agenda. Celebrities are in a huge competition for the media's attention and only few can be selected. Obviously this does not exclude mutual interests between the media and the celebrity industry, nor should we ignore that the media are eager to use and promote celebrities, for example to increase their audience ratings and revenues.

Summarizing and applying to celebrity, it could be argued that the building blocks of the celebrity apparatus are the celebrity, the media, the public and the celebrity industry (see also Driessens 2010). These four components can be used to categorize current definitions of celebrity according to their emphasis on one of these components.

1. Celebrity

The relatively small proportion of definitions that accentuate the individuality, the celebrity as a person, often refer to its innate qualities, skills, authenticity, star quality or charisma (see Rojek 2001, p. 5). For example, in referring to Weber, Ferris (2007, pp. 372-373) characterized a celebrity as “the site of a surplus of contemporary society’s charisma—by its very nature it involves individuals with special qualities.” These qualities include being a great singer, a gifted actress, being photogenic or extraordinarily beautiful. Notwithstanding their extraordinariness, celebrities are at the same time ‘ordinary people’, living a spectacular as well as an everyday life, making them essentially paradoxical (Dyer 2007[1979], p. 35). New media and especially the Internet have given ordinary people greater access to platforms where they could become a celebrity—although we should not overestimate this potential (see Driessens in press). These self-made celebrities are called Do It Yourself or DIY celebrities (Turner 2006). Justin Bieber, for instance, knocked at the gates of stardom on YouTube, where his videos were very successful. Eventually this resulted in a contract with Island Records that further polished his celebrity image.

Indeed, while these approaches usefully highlight the agency of celebrities in their construction, it is necessary to include more structural aspects as well. As Dyer (2004[1986], p. 5) remarked, film stars have a hand in their moulding process and their commodification, but they are only one element of a long assembly line: “they are both labour and the thing that labour produces.” The celebrity consists of a body, certain skills, and a psychology, and these are the basis for the celebrity’s image, which is co-produced by the celebrity industry that further consummates the looks and appearance, for example (Gamson 1992).

2. Celebrity industry

It is a common approach to discuss celebrity as a product of the celebrity industry, or as a commodity. This approach echoes Marxist theory and the writings of Adorno and Horkheimer (1989) on the culture industry. A celebrity is understood as a product, a thing that is produced and that can be consumed, worshipped, and adored (Cashmore and Parker 2003, p. 215). “Celebrity is clearly, then, an established commercial enterprise, made up of highly developed and institutionally linked professions and subindustries (...). As carriers of the central commodity (attention-getting capacity), celebrity performers are themselves products” (Gamson 1994, p. 64). Sue Collins (2007, p. 183) added that the “celebrity can also be thought of as an audience-gathering mechanism critical to the project of commercial popular cultural production.” Importantly, celebrities create not only audiences and markets for themselves, but also for all the commodities and brand images attached to them. We can see, for example, that celebrity endorsers are a very popular marketing strategy, both in the profit and in the not-for-profit industries (Pringle 2004). Hence, celebrities are perceived as

both products of capitalism and as embodiments or vehicles of its ideology (Dyer 2007[1979]; Marshall 1997).

A by now almost standard response to these critical approaches to culture and its industries is that overall they downplay the importance of the audience. The central argument in the literature is that the celebrity industries cannot simply or directly impose a celebrity (image) on the markets. Audiences judge the authenticity of stars and the possible tensions between their private and public lives (Dyer 2004[1986]). Or, as Alberoni (1972) contended, the industries can fabricate celebrities and put them on the shelves to be bought and consumed, but it is eventually the customers who pick their favorite celebrities and determine whether they will have successful careers and how long these will last. Before going into detail on celebrity as defined from the perspective of the customer or the public, let us focus on the ‘shelves’ first, the media.

3. Media

Many authors accorded a central role to the media¹ in explaining celebrity. Celebrity is “essentially a media production” (Giles 2000, p. 3; italics removed); it is “the consequence of the attribution of qualities to a particular individual through the mass media” (Rojek 2001, p. 7), and as such “less a property of specific individuals” (Holmes and Redmond 2006, p. 12), but constituted discursively (Turner et al. 2000, p. 11). According to Boorstin (1992[1961], p. 61), “[t]he hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media.” Whereas these definitions hold a general view on the role of the media, Turner (2004, p. 8) was more specific. He argued that “the precise moment a public figure becomes a celebrity (...) occurs at the point at which media interest in their activities is transferred from reporting on their public role (...) to investigating the details of their private lives.” Although it is certainly correct that interest in the private lives of celebrities can sustain and further increase their well-knownness (see for example reality star Kim Kardashian), the argument raises several questions. Apart from the vagueness about the cut-off point and its seemingly binarity and irreversibility, there are obviously many individuals who can be regarded as celebrities even though the press still mainly focuses on their public lives, or individuals who try to limit exposure of their private lives, such as actor Tom Hanks. One can also think of some politicians, for example, who may be eager to accept invitations for talk shows and media events, yet without disclosing (many) private details. Instead, they can be seen to present a humorous or easy-going image, but still as public figure. Therefore, it may be useful to consider not only the celebration of the private, but also the ‘popular persona’ as a possible route to celebrity (cf. Driessens et al. 2010).

Instead of suggesting a criterion or cut-off point, Evans (2005, p. 19; italics in original) emphasized the role of the media as a process: “[i]f celebrities are the few, known by the many, then people can only become celebrities through the transmission of their image: celebrity *by definition* requires mediation.” Yet, this

¹ Media are generally understood here as mass media, or the “*central* media (primarily television, radio and the press, but sometimes film and music, and increasingly also computer-mediated communication via the Internet)” (Couldry 2003b, p. 2). Still, it is important not to exclude other types of media such as portraiture or photography, especially when studying historical celebrities (see van Krieken 2012).

truism is not illuminating to critically assess the importance of media and their actual operations that lead to the production and reproduction of celebrity.

4. Public

Finally, some authors focused on the role of the public in examining celebrity. Turner et al. (2000, p. 9), for instance, noted that “[t]here is a syllogistic logic lurking behind discussions of celebrity: celebrities are people the public is interested in; if the public is interested in this person, they are a celebrity; therefore, anyone the public is interested in is a celebrity.” Of course, this raises the question what is exactly the public and what kind of interest is necessary to speak of a celebrity. Kerry Ferris (2004) suggested we should think of this in terms of recognizability, although she stretches this very far by including pastors and professors as well because they are recognizable by more persons than they know themselves. Also Evans (2005, p. 19), as quoted above, supported this view by describing celebrities as “the few, known by the many.” These kinds of definitions are clearly not satisfactory for clarifying the ontology of the celebrity since they could apply to any person in the public domain and do not seem to involve any media(tion), which is crucial however. Yet, the examples by Ferris suggest that the public should not be seen as all-encompassing, but instead as a multitude of different groups. This is only a small step away from arguing that celebrity is primarily located in different and specific spaces (such as sports or fashion, or as I will suggest, in social fields).

To conclude this overview, what do we learn about the current definitional state of the field? First, most definitions hold a dynamic view of celebrity and perceive it as a process rather than a static position. Second, although the definitions can vary significantly, they are not necessarily incompatible. Hence, if we want a comprehensive definition of celebrity, the challenge is to integrate these different perspectives instead of juxtaposing them. Third, apart from the specific shortcomings or possible problems of each of the four perspectives on celebrity, which limitations do they have in common? One limitation I want to highlight here is that many definitions and approaches cannot sufficiently explain the possible but common convertibility or interchangeability of celebrity. As has been mentioned in the introduction, celebrity is a kind of power and it can render one economic profit (by selling one’s name to a product, for example), also an expanded social network (for instance by meeting powerful people), and possibilities to enter new domains, such as politics, based on one’s well-knownness. Actor Arnold Schwarzenegger became governor of California, musician Gilberto Gil was minister of culture in Brazil and numerous other examples from across the globe could be summed up. What happens in these last examples, from an analytical point of view, is that these celebrities transfer their celebrity to another field than that in which they became famous and convert their fame into political power. Current definitions fail to explain this ‘migration’ of celebrity (cf. Driessens, in press) and more generally the interchangeability of celebrity with other power resources. Therefore, I want to advance an understanding of celebrity in terms of capital, thereby using Bourdieu’s field theory as underlying theoretical framework.

Celebrity capital

The concept of ‘celebrity capital’ is certainly not new; on the contrary, it is increasingly being used in the literature. Whilst several authors just mentioned it without giving any further details (e.g., Kerrigan et al. 2011; McCurdy 2010; Negra 2010; Tyler and Bennett 2010; Weaver 2011), few authors have provided more detailed accounts. To begin with, van Krieken (2012, p. 54) interestingly described a celebrity as the “embodiment of a more abstract kind of capital – attention.” He explained this through the Matthew effect at work in academia, whereby Nobel Laureates or people who have established a name in the field receive far greater attention than their lesser known colleagues even though they often perform at a similar level. Celebrity is in his view “primarily a matter of the accumulation and distribution of attention” (van Krieken 2012, p. 55).

Next, Hunter et al. (2009, p. 140) defined celebrity capital as celebrities’ “public awareness, their favorability, their personality, reputation, and the public’s knowledge of past behaviors.” They saw celebrity capital as a specific kind of reputational capital that can be used by new ventures as a strategic asset to increase their perceived trustworthiness, credibility, reliability, responsibility, and accountability. Celebrities can be employed as endorsers for the venture or brand and also as entrepreneurs, by being involved as (part) owner, initiator or manager. Examples are pop star Justin Timberlake as a big investor in social media (among which MySpace, where he is also creative director) and Oprah Winfrey, who launched her own network, named after herself, The Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN).

Hunter et al.’s account has the advantage of proposing a detailed and multidimensional definition and operationalization of celebrity capital which helps explain celebrities’ involvement in and its possible consequences for business. Yet this last aspect also points towards a limitation of their approach: it is tailored to fit management and business studies and it is difficult to see how it can clarify celebrities’ ontology and thus provide a general definition of celebrity which encompasses both attained, achieved and attributed celebrity. For example, they interpreted celebrity capital mainly instrumentally, as a resource to increase businesses’ reputations, market shares, and profits, not as a concept to capture fame as such. Also, by including *favorability* as a dimension of celebrity capital, their definition comprises evaluative elements which go beyond the being of a celebrity.

In three works we can find celebrity capital implicitly or explicitly embedded in Bourdieu’s field theory. Implicitly, Cronin and Shaw (2002) related celebrity capital, which they understood as the accumulation of media visibility, to the symbolic capital of academics, in the form of distinctions, reputation, and prizes. Explicitly, and in accordance with Cronin and Shaw (2002), French sociologist Nathalie Heinich (2012) also stressed visibility as the source of celebrity, but instead of using the term celebrity capital, she preferred “*capital de visibilité*” (visibility capital) next to social, economic, cultural, and symbolic capital (see below). Next, and most interestingly, Collins (2007, p. 191) has been the first author to introduce the concept of celebrity capital as part of Bourdieu’s field theory. She defined it as “a particular configuration of symbolic capital that is required (among the other forms of capital) to inhabit and operate successfully as

a cultural commodity within the field of entertainment” (Collins 2007, p. 191). This formulation is quite strict, however. First, Collins limited celebrity capital to the field of entertainment, but, as we have seen, celebrity can be a means of power in many fields today. Although it is often produced within the cultural industries, reducing it to a commodity might be somewhat limited and it accentuates its economic rather than its symbolic value. Second, she described celebrity capital as a specific kind of symbolic capital, a view that is not supported here. Indeed, in line with both Cronin and Shaw (2002) and Heinich (2012), this article proposes that celebrity capital finds its material basis in recurrent media representations, or accumulated media visibility. In this sense, it is a specific kind of attention-generating capacity (see Gamson 1994; van Krieken 2012) which, importantly, cannot be reduced to symbolic capital. I will explain this in the next paragraphs.

Celebrity capital is not a kind of symbolic capital

Symbolic capital is one of the core concepts of Bourdieu’s field theory and explaining how it differs exactly from celebrity capital necessitates a slight detour to explain his theory. Bourdieu (1993) conceived of modern differentiated societies as social spaces, which consist of a plurality of specialized and semi-autonomous social fields, whose boundaries are not sharply drawn because these are objects of continuous struggle (Swartz 1997, p. 121). Examples are the fields of journalism, politics, social science, religion, or cultural production.

The position of individuals in society and in fields depends to a large extent on their volume and configuration of capital. The two most important forms of capital, which have already been mentioned, are economic and cultural capital. Economic capital “is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights” (Bourdieu 1986, p. 242), whereas cultural capital can exist only in the embodied, objectified, and institutionalized state. Embodied cultural capital means “in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body” (Bourdieu 1986, p. 242), it can be objectified as cultural products (books, movies, instruments, etc.), and institutionalized as academic qualifications, for example.

More difficult to define are social and symbolic capital. Social capital is “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu 1986, p. 286). The volume of social capital thus depends on the number of people that can be mobilized in an individual’s network. Related to social capital is symbolic capital, since the latter can be seen as a possible effect of having the former, as recognition by one’s social network. Symbolic capital is the most important one for this article, but it is also the most ambiguous one. Not only has Bourdieu himself defined it in different ways, subsequent interpretations by other authors have often increased confusion. In a more strict sense, Bourdieu presented symbolic capital as the recognition or legitimation of especially economic and cultural capital in a certain field. For instance, he wrote that we should understand symbolic capital as “nothing other than economic or cultural capital when it is known and recognized, when it is known through the categories of perception that it imposes” (Bourdieu 1989, p. 21). In other works, Bourdieu detached symbolic capital from economic

and cultural capital and depicted it as a separate form of capital which can thus be accumulated by a person:

Symbolic capital – another name for distinction – is nothing other than capital, of whatever kind, when it is perceived by an agent endowed with categories of perception arising from the incorporation of the structure of its distribution, i.e. when it is known and recognized as self-evident (Bourdieu 1991, p. 238).

Swartz (2013, pp. 101-104) elaborated on this last point by clarifying that in Bourdieu's theory, symbolic capital takes shape not merely when it is recognized as self-evident, but also when it is misrecognized as capital and accepted as legitimate. Hence we should understand symbolic capital specifically as *legitimate* recognition, or “publically recognized authority” (Swartz 2013, p. 84). Bourdieu's description of symbolic capital as “the *recognition*, institutionalized or not, that they receive from a group” (Bourdieu 1991, p. 72) was interpreted by John B. Thompson in his introduction to Bourdieu's (1991, p. 7; italics in original) *Language and Symbolic Power* as “the degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity, consecration, or honor and is founded on a dialectic of knowledge (*connaissance*) and recognition (*reconnaissance*).” In contrast, I want to argue that it is necessary and much more fruitful to analytically separate celebrity from symbolic capital: celebrity capital or *recognizability* resulting from media visibility is not tantamount or reducible to symbolic capital, or *recognition*. Consequently, whereas symbolic capital is usually field-specific capital, celebrity capital can work across social fields. This view contrasts with Thompson (2005, p. 49) where he stated that “[t]o achieve visibility through the media is to gain a kind of presence or recognition in the public space, which can help to call attention to one's situation or to advance one's cause.” However, an agent can realize a certain amount of celebrity capital, but this does not automatically imply its recognition, when other forms of capital are more important in that particular field, for instance. I can already refer here to the example elaborated upon more in-depth at the end of the text on a Belgian academostar, or celebrity professor. He gained celebrity capital through circulation in entertainment media, which gave him symbolic capital within the media field as praise for him being an eloquent and funny presenter, while at the same time this did not result in symbolic capital in his original and main field, academia, where his media performances were largely considered irrelevant.

The essential point of broadly defining celebrity capital as recognizability, or as accumulated media visibility which results from recurrent media representations, needs further clarification. Of major importance here is social theorist Andrea Brighenti's (2007) insightful analysis of visibility. He saw mass media as places with high visibility that have the capacity to confer visibility to its visitors. This process is both instant and extended in time, which can be compared with a flash and a halo. “The flash is pointed on a person in a given place, but at the same time it weakens, or even removes, the perception of the context” (Brighenti 2007, p. 332). As such, media visibility needs renewal and repetition, hence celebrity capital is founded on *recurrent* media representations, otherwise it quickly fades. This sheds light on the demographics of celebrity culture: because of visibility's contradictory forces, namely the need for renewal as well as the scarce public's attention, there is only a small core of celebrities with longstanding careers and

international allure, next to a mass of temporary and disposable “celetoids” (Rojek 2001) and celebrities (Brighenti 2007, p. 334; van de Rijt et al. 2013).

Furthermore, visibility has a Janus face (Brighenti 2007, p. 335): on the one hand, it fosters control and surveillance, less subtly as privacy intrusions and more subtly through a Foucauldian disciplinary control of one’s own behavior—the awareness of being observed and controlled can already influence one’s social practices. A more extreme example of the potentially disempowering effects of visibility is (political) scandal (Thompson 2000), for instance when morally transgressing practices that were kept invisible are revealed. “What made their strength is now their most implacable enemy: concentrations of visibility-as-power always attract their highly visible nemesis of downgrading and ‘fall’” (Brighenti 2007, p. 335). On the other hand, visibility can be empowering by offering recognizability and potentially also more recognition. In the current age of high media visibility, this empowerment results in struggles for visibility (Thompson 2005, pp. 48-49): politicians, but also lawyers, fashion designers, chefs, CEO’s, and to varying degrees also academics, to name only a few, face fierce competition in the attention economy and many of them strive to gather celebrity capital, or aim to be ‘celebrified’.

This raises several issues. First, celebrity capital is distributed not necessarily equally and can be seen as a hierarchy based on social exclusion since only a minority of people directly participates in media production (Couldry 2001, p. 229). As McDonald (1995, quoted in Holmes and Redmond 2006, p. 14) summarized: “Fame, like power, could never be evenly distributed, for even if it were possible that we could all be famous, if everyone were famous then no one would be famous.” Second, it is possible that one or a limited number of agents with large amounts of celebrity capital dominate and even distort a certain field. We can think of Steve Jobs, the late CEO and figurehead of Apple, who can be described as a celebrity CEO (Littler 2007). The recurring question “What would Steve do?” as a guideline for thinking about the future of the computer and music industry is illustrative for his huge impact in this field. Third, another example of the possibly commanding effects of celebrity capital in a certain social field is the “migration” of (entertainment) celebrities into another field, say the charity industry. These celebrities could change the reference points for the specialist actors in the field. Bob Geldof, a celebrity diplomat (Cooper 2008), shouted to the camera and the people during his 1985 Live Aid charity media event (Driessens et al. 2012): “There are people dying now, so give me the money!” In consequence, he had a huge impact on the discourse of the charity industry and government’s development aid programs. Fourth, when agents possess celebrity capital, it can cause other agents in their respective fields to be dragged into the competition for media visibility because possessing a certain amount of celebrity capital is a requirement or necessity to be successful. We can think of literary authors here, who often have to invest large amounts of time and energy in the talk show and lecturing circuit in order to turn their newly released novels into a success. In other words, and more generally, social fields are ‘celebritized’ when celebrity capital becomes a competitive resource for the agents in that particular field (Driessens in print).

Yet, what needs further explanation is the differential recognition and importance of celebrity capital depending on the social field in which the agents are active. Or

how and why does celebrity capital potentially have cross-field effects whereas symbolic capital is usually field-specific?

Celebrity capital, media meta-capital, and media(-related) capital

Since celebrity capital is defined as accumulated media visibility through recurrent media representations, the answer to these last questions can be found in Nick Couldry's (2003a) media meta-capital concept. He introduced this concept to explain media as both a semi-autonomous field and a symbolic (or definitional) power exerting influence in other social fields. He derived the notion of 'meta-capital' from Bourdieu's later work on the state, in which the latter suggested that the state as a field of power has meta-capital which allows "to wield a power over the different fields and over the various forms of capital that circulate in them" (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 114). Analogously, then, Couldry (2003a, pp. 667-668) convincingly argued that also the media can be considered as having this meta-capital. Unlike Davis (2010; Davis and Seymour 2010), however, Couldry (2012, p. 140) stressed that media meta-capital operates at the macro-institutional level and thus cannot be realized by an individual agent in a certain field.

The media's meta-capital, he continued, probably influences social fields and social space as a whole in a threefold manner: first, the media provide discursive regimes that frame social issues, they influence agendas, and legitimate representations of the social world. Second, media can influence "what counts as symbolic capital in particular fields through its increasing monopoly over the sites of social prestige" (Couldry 2003a, p. 668). Third, and consequently, media possibly influence the exchange rate between forms of capital (Couldry 2003a, p. 669), for instance when celebrity capital results in more symbolic capital and as a result can be converted into additional economic capital (see below). In other words, media meta-capital, or media's influence, can potentially materialize in celebrity capital and its value (or recognition) and exchange rate are influenced by media across social space. Still, depending on the characteristics of the social field, celebrity capital results to varying extents in symbolic capital.

Next to media meta-capital, the literature mentions other forms of capital related to media and for the purpose of conceptual clarity it is necessary to differentiate these from celebrity capital. In his most recent work, Couldry (2012) suggested that media meta-capital can result in what he calls media-related capital or media-based symbolic capital in specific fields. However, are these one and the same? It is not clear what is exactly this 'media-based symbolic capital': it is a specific kind of symbolic capital, but it remains vague if this should be thought of as a symbolic capital in the non-substantial or substantial sense and how it relates to the general notion of symbolic capital. A likely understanding is that media-based symbolic capital is that part of one's symbolic capital that has been generated through media exposure. For example, a television gardener can increase his symbolic capital among his peers by being authoritatively recognized for clearly explaining good gardening practices on television (see also Couldry 2003a).

Couldry (2012, p. 143) also explicitly related media-related capital to celebrity: "celebrities are people who have acquired large amounts of media-related capital

through their appearance in media.” Yet it has not been specified what is the difference between media-related capital and celebrity. Moreover, Couldry (2012, p. 142; italics in original) wondered “under what conditions will the influence of media over symbolic capital in more and more fields lead to the increasing *convertibility* of media-related symbolic capital across social space as a whole, generating a new form of prestige or capital (truly called ‘media capital’)?” Here Couldry seems to suggest that ‘media capital’ includes celebrity, thereby stepping away from Patrick Champagne’s (1990, p. 244) original proposition of media capital as the power to organize journalistic or media events and to influence public opinion. As a possible way forward, Couldry’s term ‘media-related capital’ is here taken for the subset of cultural capital that relates to the media, including, amongst others, being media-savvy, having good interview skills and the ability to speak in sound bites, or being a talented singer or actor. Media-related capital can thus be beneficial or even a condition to acquire celebrity capital.

The convertibility of celebrity capital

In the above discussion on the current definitions of celebrity, it has been argued that a major shortcoming is their lack of explanatory power for the convertibility of celebrity into other (power) resources. The alternative definition suggested here, of celebrity as capital, can easily resolve this problem.

Bourdieu has written at length about the convertibility of capital, especially economic capital into social and cultural capital. For example, in his challenging account on domination, Bourdieu (1998, p. 34) elucidated that we should not see this as the direct coercive action by certain agents, but as “the indirect effect of a complex set of actions engendered within the network of intersecting constraints which each of the dominants (...) endures on behalf of all the others.” One important constraint is that those who take dominant positions within certain fields regulate or transform the exchange rate between different forms of capital. He illustrated this by administrative measures which affect the scarcity of academic titles that grant access to dominant positions. Typically, economic capital is converted into other forms of capital, such as cultural and social capital (see also Swartz 1997, pp. 80-81). Examples of the inverse are social capital resulting in economic capital (or practically, when belonging to a musician’s fan club results in free concert tickets), or cultural capital engendering economic capital (selling one’s music, for instance).

The same applies more or less to celebrity capital: it can be converted into economic capital as money (e.g., through merchandising), into social capital as valuable contacts (e.g., through increased access to previously closed networks), into symbolic capital as recognition (e.g., when one’s fame is recognized in a specific social field) or into political capital as political power (e.g., by being an elected official). However, it is important to account for the exchange rate here, and particularly for the possible costs that these conversions may imply. The conversion of celebrity capital into another kind of capital does not always go unnoticed or without resistance since it can disrupt the relative value of the different kinds of capital and the corresponding power dynamics within social fields. Think for instance of the legitimation crises or lack of authority of entertainment celebrities entering the political field as candidates, or inversely, of the harsh criticism on politicians gaining and validating celebrity capital (Corner

and Pels 2003; Street 2004). Some celebrities fail to get elected, so the conversion of celebrity capital into political or other forms of capital can also fail and is not necessarily successful.

Illustration: Rik Torfs

Finally, a concrete example can further clarify this conversion of capital and more generally the above presented theoretical framework and definition of celebrity as capital. I take as a case Rik Torfs, a Belgian academic turned television personality and later senator. Torfs, born 1956, is Professor canon law at the University of Leuven. It could be said that his academic expertise (cultural capital), with which he makes a living (economic capital), is internationally recognized (symbolic capital), for example through citations of his publications, visiting positions at Stellenbosch and Paris, or his membership of the board of experts of the International Religious Liberty Association. Through these visiting positions, memberships of international organizations, and conferences, Torfs has also integrated into academic social networks that may be beneficial to him (social capital).

It was also because of his cultural capital that Torfs has been interviewed in the news several times, for example on the papal conclave, or the pedophile and other scandals that have hit the Catholic Church. Whether his expert interventions in the media also resulted in additional recognition by his peers (as media-based symbolic capital) is unclear, especially because his media repertoire quickly expanded to lighter genres since around 2002, such as regular appearances in several talk shows and weekly columns in quality newspapers. In these media performances, Torfs proved himself as an excellent speaker and writer with a much appreciated sense of humor (embodied cultural capital, cf. Couldry's media-related capital) (see also Benson 1998, p. 473).

Because Torfs seemed so media-savvy and sharp-witted, he was also appointed jury member from 2006 until 2009 in the very popular late night television quiz *De Slimste Mens* (*The Smartest Man*) on the main public channel *één* (VRT), which earned him significant and long-lasting media exposure among large audiences (celebrity capital) and turned him into an 'academostar' (Moran 1998). During that same period, he also had his own program *Nooitgedacht* on public channel *Canvas* (VRT) in which for three seasons he interviewed more than 30 nationally and internationally renowned politicians, artists, authors, and sports people. He further increased his celebrity capital for instance through being godfather of one of the candidates in the Miss Belgian Beauty contest (2006), while almost any details about his private life have been made public. Torfs also co-presented a pre-electoral television show and debating program (VRT) in anticipation of the 2009 regional and European elections.

This last aspect was no surprise given the wide range of Torf's public reflections about political and societal issues. Even more so, after already being solicited by several political parties (which signals also the conversion of his celebrity capital into social capital), late 2009 he announced that he was considering to start his own political movement which could later be transformed into a political party. In the end, his plan was not realized and instead he joined the Christian-Democrats (CD&V), who offered him the second place on the Senate list for the 2010 federal

elections. He was elected with 143.603 preference votes, thus (at least partly) converting his celebrity capital into political capital. His celebrity capital has also been converted into economic capital, for instance through publishing contracts for collections of his newspaper columns and other manuscripts.

However, his celebrity capital proved to be not only a strategic asset, but also a serious handicap. In 2005, he ran as candidate rector at the University of Leuven. Yet he lost the highly mediatized election by only twenty votes: the students publicly and explicitly refused to support Torfs exactly because of his wide range of media performances and his celebrity capital. In other words, in the academic field, his celebrity capital did not or only to a limited extent generate symbolic capital. This negative effect of celebrity capital should not be permanent, however, which is demonstrated by his successful second attempt at becoming rector in 2013, after having ended his political career and diminished his (entertainment) media performances.

Conclusion

This article has proposed to rethink celebrity by embedding it more firmly into social theory, particularly Pierre Bourdieu's field theory. By extending field theory with the notion of celebrity capital, understood as accumulated media visibility through recurrent media representations, or broadly as recognizability, we are better able to grasp some of media's effects, specifically media meta-capital's effects, both for individual agents (celebrification) and for social fields (celebritization). Media meta-capital not only influences the definition of capital and the rules of play in many social fields, the circulation of media representations can also materialize in a distinct form of capital—in celebrity capital, so it has been argued here. Consequently, given our scarcity of attention and the possible power resulting from visibility, celebrity capital can become important next to other forms of capital and influence the fields' internal dynamics and workings. However, celebrity capital is not by definition and not in every field authoritatively recognized by other agents, or translated into symbolic capital, certainly not in the case of infamy. Hence, it is necessary to strictly separate celebrity capital and symbolic capital. Celebrity (capital) is not, as is sometimes (implicitly) suggested in the literature, a subset or special category of symbolic capital, but a substantially different form of capital.

Notwithstanding its substantial character, celebrity has been identified as a largely unstable category (see also the necessity of *recurrent* media representations), as something that can change overnight. Most definitions of celebrity also hold a dynamic and processual view. Still, current definitions strongly vary in their way of approaching celebrity and they often stress quite different dimensions. This article has aimed to categorize definitions of celebrity in order to attain more insight into the literature and its understanding of celebrity, using the building blocks of the celebrity apparatus. Four building blocks have been discerned: the celebrity, the celebrity industry, the media, and the public. Importantly, by conceptualizing celebrity as a form of capital, it is possible to integrate rather than juxtapose these four definitional angles or even add another angle. First, it is the individual agent who accumulates capital through recurrent media representations and who competes with other agents for celebrity capital and its recognition by other agents and institutions in the field of production. Consequently, the

suggested theory of celebrity capital partly breaks with Holmes' and Redmond's (2006) position that celebrity is less the property of an individual, as celebrity capital is in the hands of individual agents, but indeed not completely autonomously as it depends on media attention. Second, these individuals aiming to gain celebrity capital have to be prepared to play the game of the celebrity industry (e.g., participants in reality TV have no other option than to follow the rules). Also, as cultural commodities (generating other cultural commodities), agents possessing celebrity capital are generally close to the heteronomous (or economically-driven) pole in social fields, which can create certain tensions. Third, media are obviously essential in understanding celebrity capital nowadays: we can refer here for example to the role of media meta-capital or the necessity of recurrent media representations for the establishment of celebrity capital. Fourth, it is through the recognition of celebrity capital by others (the public) and through its conversion into symbolic capital or other forms of capital that it can be valuable within a certain social field.

This brings us to one of the main advantages of defining celebrity as capital, namely that it provides a fruitful conceptual framework to analyze the conversion of celebrity into other kinds of capital—which has been identified as a major shortcoming of current definitions. Yet the conversion of celebrity capital into other kinds of capital still needs much more analysis to fully understand how it operates, how it works differently depending on the social field and how this can be explained, what exactly the exchange rate is and who determines it, how celebrities can (actively) influence the exchange rate or prevent certain costs in migrating from one social field to another, what is the importance of the amount of cultural capital one possesses (cf. achievement-based fame or not) for successfully converting celebrity capital, and so on. Specific examples that could be studied are entertainment celebrities engaging (as commodities) in disruptive or counter-hegemonic activism, celebrities entering politics (as endorser or political candidate), the consequences of the different trajectories in accumulating celebrity capital and the social fields one belongs to for its conversion, celebrities becoming guest editor of newspapers and magazines, the relationship between non-media-based and media-based symbolic capital of academics, or the relationship between symbolic capital and the celebrity capital of celebrity CEO's, chefs, politicians, and so on. Still, we must be cautious not to constrict celebrity capital's societal and cultural importance to its legitimate recognition or its convertibility into other kinds of capital. This would be a too functionalist interpretation that neglects its important symbolic value and its centrality in our mediatised societies and cultures.

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