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# No cause for celebration: the rise of celebrity news values in the British quality press

By Deirdre O'Neill, Leeds Trinity University College, UK

## Abstract

In their study of news values in the British press Harcup and O'Neill (2001) noted that celebrity was one of the redefinitions of the 'taxonomy of news values for the twenty-first century'. At the time, Harcup and O'Neill made no judgement about the changes in news values in their redefinition, nor did their research focus on the relative importance and potency of certain news values in the hierarchy of news. Using celebrity case studies from recent decades in the British 'quality' press, this article seeks to do just that, demonstrating that the pervasiveness and volume of coverage of celebrity has risen exponentially over 30-plus years. Celebrity/entertainment news values would appear to have risen much higher up the hierarchy of news, guaranteeing extensive coverage if combined with other news values such as surprise and bad news. The findings give rise to a wider debate and concerns about the colonisation of celebrity news and dumbing down in so many areas of British journalism, and the implications for the public and educators.

## Introduction

It could be argued that with declining newspaper print circulations, the role and content of quality newspapers is not such a pressing issue as in the past when there

## were fewer competing news media.

There is no doubt that the role of newspapers has changed – they no longer break news; that’s the prerogative of social media, the internet or 24-hr news. Yet, out of the 10 established national dailies, apart from Scottish daily titles, five could be described - certainly in the past – as ‘quality’ papers. These are the specialist *Financial Times*, aimed at the business community, with a circulation of 297,225 (source: ABC figures June 2012); the more liberal *Independent* has a circulation of 90,001; the right-wing *Daily Telegraph* has the highest circulation out of all the ‘quality’ papers at 573,674; *The Times*, now owned by News International (along with the red-top *The Sun*) has a circulation of 400,120; and the slightly more left of centre *Guardian* has a circulation of 211,511 (all figures from ABC June 2012). October 2010 saw the launch of the *i* newspaper, a snappy, newsy and cheap re-formatted version of the *Independent* aimed at ‘lapsed’ readers of the upmarket titles but, at 20p, selling for considerably less than these titles, which normally sell at around £1. It has shown a steady increase in circulation since its launch and reached sales of around 272,597 by June 2012 (ABC figures).

The two mid-market papers are both right-wing: the *Daily Mail* (circulation 1,939,635) and the *Daily Express* (602,482). Then there are the red-tops: *The Sun* (2,583,552), the *Daily Mirror* (1,081,330) and the *Daily Star* (602,296) (source: ABC figures June 2012). Some, like the *Star* and the *Express* (owned by porn baron Richard Desmond) are more down-market than others. For some journalists, readers, media commentators and academics, there is an acceptance – weary or otherwise - that ‘the tabloids are full of shit.’ (Monck, 2008, p.19). Indeed, various websites exist (*The Sun – Tabloid Lies* <http://the-sun-lies.blogspot.com/>; *Daily Mail Watch* <http://www.mailwatch.co.uk/> and *Express Watch* <http://expresswatch.co.uk/>) to expose the sensationalism, hypocrisy, propaganda, racism and sexism that all too frequently turn up in the likes of *The Sun*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Star* and the *Daily Express*, with their focus on scandal, xenophobia, misogyny, bingo scratch cards and, most of all, celebrity gossip.

Disgusted by what he was required to write, former *Daily Star* reporter Richard Peppiatt made his views about the paper public in a resignation letter to the proprietor Desmond, published in the *Guardian* on 4th March 2011, where he spelt out the depths the paper had sunk to. ‘On the awe-inspiring day millions took to the streets of Egypt to demand freedom, your paper splashed on “Jordan ... the movie.”’

Peppiatt writes about ‘skewed news values’ and the hypocrisy of a paper that pretends it stands up for the working class while attacking workers, and which incites racism and makes stories up to fit its view of the world. ‘If you can’t see that words matter, you should go back to running porn magazines’ is Peppiatt’s advice to Desmond.

Despite this, it is hard to deny that the red-tops are not entertaining, funny and irreverent, or that they never uncover stories in the public interest; moreover, it takes skill to be able to produce the ‘screaming headlines and short, punchy campaigning prose’ (Conboy, 2011, p.119) that are the trademarks of the tabloid style. It is fair to say that tabloid influences are not ‘uniformly negative’ (Conboy, 2011, p.119): McNair (2003) welcomes the ‘less pompous...more human, more vivacious’ styles now adopted by most newspapers, reflecting a ‘more inclusive, even democratic journalism culture’ (Conboy, 2011, p.120) and former *Guardian* editor Peter Preston has championed the style as a ‘means to a disciplined end, a clarity of mind’ (2004, p.51 in Conboy, 2011, p.120). It is hard to argue that there is anything inherently wrong with the tabloid style in itself, as the publication of the *i* newspaper shows.

But whatever their merits or de-merits, the red-tops are not the first port of call for serious and in-depth news and analysis. That job is traditionally done by the quality press.

But for some time now, the boundaries between the popular titles and serious press have been blurring, and not just in terms of the smaller page sizes many have adopted (tabloid for *The Times* and *Independent*, and Berliner size for the *Guardian*). That the British so-called ‘quality’ or ‘elite’ press has taken on board tabloid news values has not gone unnoticed by academics (Franklin, 1997; Harcup and O’Neill, 2001; Barker, 2007).

More recently, almost 70% of the British public said they distrusted red-top tabloids in the wake of the phone-hacking scandal, according to the Edelman Trust Barometer survey. ‘In a study of 2,100 UK adults in January 2012, 68% of respondents said they did not trust red-tops – including the *Daily Star*, the *Daily Mirror* and *The Sun* – “to do what is right” . . . . Edelman’s study suggests that broadcasters including the BBC and Sky News are among the most trusted media organisations, ahead of quality titles such as the *Guardian* and the *Daily Telegraph*.’ (Halliday, guardian.co.uk, 24th January 2012).

But however dispiriting these surveys are, with combined daily red-top sales of around four million copies a day, there is clearly a demand from sections of the British public for this type of product, and they know where to find it.

But what about those who don’t want this sort of ‘news’ diet? On the face of it, there are plenty of other papers to choose from. Yet retaining readership and position in a crowded market is not easy. While he believes that some quality papers have explored an internet strategy that is more coherent than the red-tops, Greenslade is not convinced that all current newspapers will be in existence by 2025, predicting that five national dailies are more likely to remain: *The Sun*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Telegraph*, *The Times* and the *Guardian* (*Telegraph online*, 10th June 2011.)

The problem for those sections of the public who are interested in serious news, comment and analysis, is what will surviving quality papers like the *Daily Telegraph*, *The Times* and *Guardian* have to offer them? A study of news values in the UK national press, taking in the quality press as well as the red-tops, found that stories were included, despite having no serious information for the reader, because of entertainment and celebrity news values (Harcup and O’Neill, 2001, p.274). The increasing influence of the red-tops has seen the quality press embrace more than a punchy and engaging style and design: beyond serious arts coverage, these titles also appear to have embraced the banal, gossipy, celebrity content of the tabloids. A recent study by PR company Clarion Communications confirmed this.

Clarion analysed editions of *The Sun*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Telegraph*, *News of the World*, *Sunday Express* and *The Sunday Times* in July 1986 and July 2011, looking at column inches over the first six pages...

The research concluded that papers across the tabloid-broadsheet spectrum now broadly reported “identical content”...

The main findings were:

“Celebrity and celebrity-related TV, film and music news has rocketed in terms of coverage across all titles, particularly the Sundays, since 1986.

“At the same time, older newspaper story staples such as court reporting have sharply declined, again particularly in Sunday papers.

“International news across all papers receives 25 per cent less coverage across 2011 than it did in 1986 (from 4 to 3 per cent).”

(Pugh, *Press Gazette*, 17th Oct 2011)

If all newspapers insist on relentless scandal and a celebrity-ridden drive downmarket, choice is severely limited, like a gourmet’s choice being restricted to MacDonaldis or Burger King.

As veteran BBC war correspondent Martin Bell says, ‘The culture of celebrity, like an army of ants, has colonized the news pages, both tabloid and broadsheet’ (in Allan, 2004, p.193). It is this ‘colonization’ that deserves attention since it is linked to another crucial element of the quality press, one that could prove their unique selling point in the brave new digital world: the perception that they are ‘more credible and more authoritative than the popular press. In the future, when all straightforward news will be consumed online, the value of credibility will be crucial. Who will people trust to make sense of it?’ (Greenslade, *Telegraph online*, 10th June 2011).

For this reason, this study aims to focus on the up-market UK press, to see to what degree these tabloid celebrity news values have permeated elite newspapers and whether this is driving out

other news, with the resulting implications for the quality and diversity of news available in these papers. Prior to this, it is useful to provide some context by examining some of the literature surrounding the rise of celebrity and tabloidization.

## Review of literature

In examining the origins of celebrity coverage, Marshall (in Allen, 2005) explains that celebrity and human interest reporting ameliorated the sense of disconnection and alienation brought about by industrialisation and migration by introducing identification, familiarity and commonality. With the expansion of consumerism and capitalism, celebrity/human interest reporting fostered aspiration by demonstrating greater possibilities for individuals. Transcending class, race and gender, it served to help people reconnect when the bonds of previous and familiar communities were severed.

A review of literature around the issue of celebrity reveals that many studies have come from the field of cultural studies seeking to deconstruct the celebrity phenomenon, and how it allows for identification and self-actualisation as a way of explaining the peculiar hold that celebrities have over the public (Braudy, 1997; Marshall, 1997; Turner, 1999; Andrews and Jackson, 2001; Cashmore, 2006; Holmes and Redmond, 2006).

The field of journalism and media studies has assessed the impact of 'tabloidisation' on news in general (Franklin, 1997), often focussed on political communication and the implications for citizenship and democracy (Blumler, 1992; Brants, 1998), raising concerns about the fourth estate role of journalism. Other studies have examined TV coverage, whether as popular journalism (Langer, 1998) or the effects on TV news (Winston, 2002). The charge of dumbing down has either not been proved (Brants, 1998; Winston, 2002) or has been criticised for not acknowledging that certain developments in style, formats and content allow for wider participation and engagement with social and political issues, and reflects a less deferential society (McNair, 2000; Temple, 2006), as well as empowering ordinary individuals (Cashmore, 2006, p.4).

In other words, there are two broad perspectives on celebrity culture: the first champions the phenomenon as a populist force for democratisation, representing freedom, the power of the individual, greater equality of opportunity and aspiration, and greater access to and engagement with social and political debates, through reality TV shows or by identifying with the life stories or views of celebrities. The second, however, is a lament for cultural decline, where our media are obsessed with constructing fabricated 'personalities' out of anyone, from runners-up on talent competition TV programme 'X Factor' to our politicians, where all debate and information provision is reduced to the emotive and personal or trivial. Implicit in this view is that the media, including news media, are effectively creating a dumb culture that plays to the lowest common denominator among readers and audiences in the pursuit of profits while undermining - certainly not adding to - our democratic processes. This latter view is supported by American journalist Carl Bernstein who has accused the media of lacking self-reflection in its role of contributing to the 'idiot culture' and to pandering to audiences. (Bernstein, 1992, in Allan, 2004, p.195).

Opponents of this approach argue that throughout history there has been a keen interest in the famous and there was never a golden age when certain individuals became famous on the basis of their honourable achievements alone. Cultural historian Leo Braudy points out that fame has always been bound up in media management to some degree (Braudy 1997, p.9), even before the development of the mass media, central to today's celebrity constructs (Rojek, 2001). Evans and Hesmondhalgh (2005, p.7) state that it is important not to lose sight of continuities between past and present and that representations of present-day celebrity had their precedents in the 19th century. While critics of celebrity culture might argue that there is increased prominence in saturation coverage of celebrity (Turner *et al* 2000; Corner and Pels, 2003; Marshall, 1997), the question is, what period are they comparing this to? As Evans (2005) says, even in previous centuries it was clear that commentators - such as Henry James in 1880 - felt overwhelmed by celebrity media.

In the field of journalism studies, Conboy (2006, p.185) points out that celebrity was one of the redefinitions of the ‘taxonomy of news values for the twenty-first century’ by Harcup and O’Neill (2001) in their study of news values in the British press. At the time, Harcup and O’Neill made no judgement about the changes in news values in their redefinition, nor did their research focus on the relative importance and potency of certain news values in the hierarchy of news. This article seeks to examine and critique the extent and implications of celebrity news values in more detail.

The focus on celebrity in the general news media would appear to have increased. In Britain, it now permeates all aspects of news and current affairs, with the celebrity agenda being embraced by news and current affairs broadcasters, as well as ‘quality’ newspapers. For example, the BBC flagship news programme ‘Newsnight’ ran an interview on 14th December 2009 with Simon Cowell who was suggesting running an ‘X Factor’ talent competition for would-be politicians. When DJ and charity fundraiser Sir Jimmy Savile died, it was the *top* story on BBC R4’s 6pm news on 29 Oct 2011, with the newscaster solemnly intoning Sir Jimmy’s catchphrases, ‘now then, now then’ and ‘howabout that then?’. At 84 years old, his death could not be said to be premature or unexpected, nor had he been in the public eye for years. (Ironically, by October 2012, Savile was again making headlines, with revelations about his sexual exploitation of vulnerable young women – a scandal the press did not uncover, choosing instead to run with the BBC’s ‘Saint Jimmy’ narrative on his death.) On the same day two suicide car bombers carried out one of the deadliest attacks in Kabul for a number of years, killing 13 US soldiers, as well as Afghan civilians, a news item that the BBC deemed secondary to Savile’s demise.

Another trend worth noting is the celebritization of politics, with both celebrities and politicians as commodities to be sold to audiences (Marshall, 1997 in Drake and Higgins, 2006, p.87). Thus we see the spectacle of British politicians reinventing themselves as cuddly personalities on shows that specialise in the celebrity interview (former Prime Minister Gordon Brown interviewed by Piers Morgan in 2010, and Conservative leader and present Prime Minister David Cameron by Alan Titchmarsh, also in 2010). *The Times* TV critic Andrew Billen questioned Brown’s decision to betray his instincts by discussing his children – including the death of his baby daughter – on Morgan’s show. ‘No votes would have been lost had he refused to discuss them.’ (*The Times*, 15th February 2010).

Hand in hand with the rise of the ‘celebrity politician’, Drake and Higgins (2006) identify the ‘political celebrity’, as exemplified by Bono of U2. Journalist Marina Hyde has noted, that celebrity ‘views’ now equals ‘news’, displacing the views of the informed or the experts (‘Newswipe’, BBC 4, 2nd Feb 2010). Thus, as she shows in the programme, we turn to pop star Ginger Spice or actor Jude Law for their assessment of the situation in Afghanistan. ‘Serious political issues become trivialized in the attempt to elevate celebrities to philosopher-celebrities’ (West and Orman, 2003, p.118).

In addition, the ‘quality’ press can sneak in trivia by ‘reporting’ on the antics of the tabloid press coverage of celebrities, while simultaneously holding their noses about the red-tops’ news agendas. And TV channels can ‘fulfil’ their news and current affairs remit by rebranding celebrity pap as ‘news’ or ‘factual’ or ‘current affairs’. Programmes which, in the past, would have been serious documentaries, are increasingly concerned with or presented by celebrities. Writing in the *Guardian* on 26th Sept 2009 about ‘Live From Studio Five’ (Channel Five, daily, 6.30pm), journalist and TV commentator Charlie Brooker highlights this sleight of hand:

Here is a TV show that makes any and all previous accusations of “dumbing down” seem like misplaced phoney-war hysteria. A show providing less mental nourishment than a baby’s rattle. A show with a running order *heat* magazine would consider frighteningly lightweight. A show which, incredibly, boasts Melinda Messenger as its intellectual touchstone. A show dumber than a blank screen and a low hum. .... But the VTs – astoundingly – are, in fact, created by actual news journalists. Live From Studio Five is the product of Sky News. Which makes it part of Five’s news quota. This – in case I haven’t yet repeated the word “news” often enough to hammer it home – is a news programme.

Nevertheless, most people would agree that the press has more than one role: as well as inform-

ing the public and holding those in power to account, it must seek to do so in an engaging or entertaining way. As journalist and academic Tony Harcup (2009, p.116) puts it,

If we do want to teach the public, we won't get very far if nobody reads, watches or listens to our work because we have made the stories too dull. Without an audience there can be no journalism, and we are not likely to gather much of an audience if we do not seek, at least in part, to entertain as well as inform.

But entertainment and engagement with audiences does not have to equate to acres of coverage of the minutiae of the lives of weather girls or former reality TV contestants, nor by going into overdrive about certain celebrity-related events.

It is this pervasiveness, volume and ubiquity that concerns academics (Franklin, 1997; Turner, 2004), with celebrity infusing 'every facet of everyday existence' (Andrews and Jackson, 2001, p.2). In addition, coverage of celebrity seems to make little distinction between the famous and infamous, the self-promoters and the publicity-shy, the talented and talentless.

This also leads on to another serious concern: is this trend towards ubiquity and volume of coverage driving out other more 'serious' news? Brian Winston (2002), in his study of TV news over a 25-year period, did not find evidence of this.

However, this study was nine years ago, and anecdotally at least, it appears that the volume of celebrity coverage has increased. Also, Winston examined TV coverage, which, in Britain, is subject to more stringent regulations than newspapers. Could the same be said of the British quality press, which may have to stake their survival on authoritative and credible content? (Greenslade, *Telegraph online*, 10th June 2011)

## Case study

This study was conceived and carried out before the phone-hacking revelations and the Leveson Inquiry. Already concerned about celebrity trends in 'serious' British newspapers, the study was prompted by the sheer scale of coverage of Michael Jackson's death in the quality press. Bored by the coverage of second-rate celebrities famous only for managing to harness publicity effectively, and overwhelmed by the sheer inescapable *volume* of celebrity coverage – even of celebrities whose achievements and antics chime with many news values and might merit news stories – coverage of Michael Jackson's death seemed to provide a useful case study to examine this trend.

When Jackson died in 2009, not all of the public welcomed the scale of the coverage in the British news media. The *Guardian's* Leigh Holmwood reported on 1st July 2009:

The BBC has received more than 700 complaints about its coverage of Michael Jackson's death, with viewers claiming there was too much across its news programming.....

.....The BBC said today it had received 748 complaints, with one senior source revealing that there were 10 to 15 times more complaints from viewers about Jackson than about BBC executives' expenses, which were published last week.

(Holmwood, *Guardian Online*, 1st July 2009)

Letters of complaint were published by the quality press about the volumes of pages devoted for days on end to this issue. Some readers were later moved to write to the *Guardian* and *The Times* to complain. For example, Stephen Adams from Leeds condemned the *Guardian's* coverage on Jackson, commenting, 'The *Guardian* seems to be confusing fame with importance.' (29th June 2009). The quality press, not just the tabloids, seemed to have lost all sense of proportion.

This presented an opportunity to carry out a study comparing the extent of celebrity coverage now, using Jackson as a case study, with the extent of coverage of similar celebrities in previous decades.

The first problem is to define the term 'celebrity'. Is it anyone who is famous? In which case the term could cover Barack Obama to Katie Price (a consummate self-promoter in the British media

who appears to have become famous on account of having large, silicon-enhanced breasts). Is a renowned stage actor and regular of the Sunday supplements a greater or lesser celebrity and entitled to more or less coverage than the winner of Big Brother? Helen Boaden, Head of BBC News, thinks this is a class issue and she may well be right (talk at Leeds Trinity University College, February 2009).

Nevertheless for the purposes of this study, comparable ‘celebrities’ were needed, people who were famous for similar reasons. Like Jackson, any other subjects would need to have achieved celebrity status by virtue of their talent – preferably in the field of pop music - rather than merely being self-promoting spectacles.

Such a comparison might go some way towards answering the following questions pertinent to the ‘dumbing down’ debate: has celebrity coverage expanded? Where is it situated? Is it driving out more important news? With the red-tops something of a lost cause with regards to celebrity coverage, this study focussed on what was happening in the quality press, and the implications for the public.

## Methodology

The comparison of the coverage of two celebrity deaths – Elvis Presley and Michael Jackson - were chosen as the case study because of certain similarities. The individuals had reached similar levels of fame through their achievements. Both were global pop stars who sold huge amounts of recordings (Presley, then The Beatles, then Jackson are the top selling artists of all time according to verified sales <http://www.top10land.com/top-ten-best-selling-music-artists.html>), though Jackson produced the biggest-selling album of all time, *Thriller*) and both died prematurely as their careers were waning, in rather squalid circumstances. For both singers, the arc of their lives and deaths closely fitted the celebrity ‘fall-from-grace’ narrative.

In other words, both their deaths were major news stories, reflecting many of Harcup and O’Neill’s news values (2001) of Surprise (untimely deaths), Bad news (tragic deaths), but most of all Celebrity (by most people’s definition) and Entertainment, though neither was at their peak when they died. Their deaths spanned four decades, allowing a reasonable period of time to examine how the newspapers changed in their coverage of similar events. The papers chosen were the *Guardian*, *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph* (the *Independent* did not exist at the time of Presley’s death and *The Financial Times* has a specialised circulation to the business community and is one paper not overly preoccupied with celebrity news).

Since their page sizes and pagination have changed over the years, the measurement used to record the volume of print coverage was column inches of print (photos were excluded) on the news pages. The total number of column inches of text on the news pages and the number of column inches of text devoted to each celebrity was recorded and then the amount of celebrity coverage was calculated as a percentage of total news coverage, providing an indication of how the proportion of celebrity news coverage had changed – or not - over the years. Calculating the percentage of column inches of news devoted to each celebrity would also provide an indication of whether this celebrity reporting was driving out other news. Coverage of the celebrities that did not appear on the news pages, such as supplements, features and obituaries, was noted separately but not included in overall percentages of column inches as it was not deemed to be affecting news reporting (though it could be said to be influencing the news agenda).

Initial research at The British Newspaper Library in London indicated that coverage of Jackson’s death peaked on the day he died and for the next two days, though stories about Jackson continued for many weeks, even months, after. Coverage of the death of Presley appeared over two to three days following his death. For this reason, three days’ coverage was examined following each death, starting when news of each death first broke.

In the case of Michael Jackson, all the news articles about him appeared on the domestic news



pages, so the volume of coverage was calculated as a percentage of *domestic* news. On some days, the coverage of Presley only appeared on domestic news pages and was thus also calculated as a percentage of domestic news. But on a couple of days, coverage appeared on both domestic and overseas news pages or just on overseas news pages, in which case the volume of coverage was expressed as a percentage of domestic news and, in addition, of *all* news (the latter in brackets). This is indicated in the table below.

## Findings

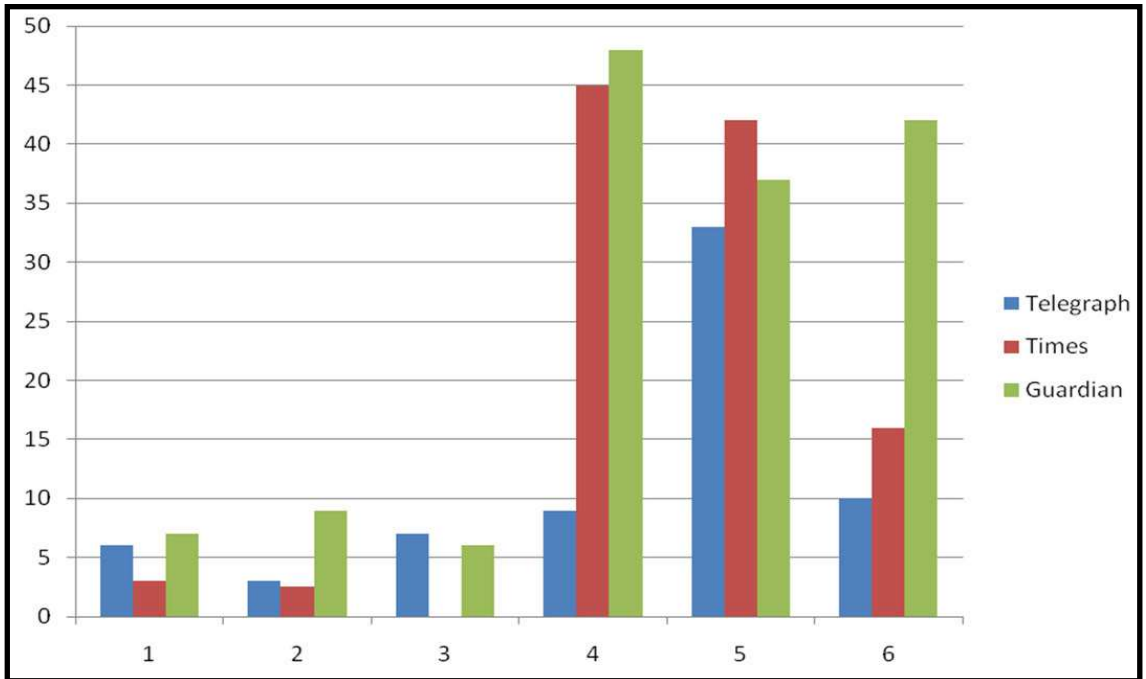
The figures below exclude all pictures, and only deal with text on the domestic news pages. (Percentages are rounded up or down to the nearest whole figure.)

Some context as to what were the main issues in the news for each of the three-day periods in 1977 (Presley’s death) and 2009 (Jackson’s death) is provided.

<b>Presley</b>	<b>Telegraph</b>	<b>Times</b>	<b>Guardian</b>	<b>Summary</b>
17/8/77	6%	3%	7%	
18/8/77	3%	2.5% (2 <sup>nd</sup> article also in OS news. When this article also included and taken as a proportion of <i>all</i> news, 4% ) Plus obituary	9%	
19/8/77	7%	0% (appeared in OS news only; 2% of <i>all</i> news)	6%	Between 2% and 9% over three day period for all papers
<b>Jackson</b>	<b>Telegraph</b>	<b>Times</b>	<b>Guardian</b>	<b>Summary</b>
26/6/09	9%	45% Plus full-page obituary	48% Plus full-page obituary	
27/6/09	33%	42% Plus 1-page obit, and two comment pieces Plus 16-page supplement	37% Plus 2-page obit, plus leader plus comment piece Plus 8-page supplement	
29/6/09	10%	16%	42%	From 9% to 48%, plus supplements, peaking over three days but continuing for months

*The results are represented in a bar chart (below) plotting percentage of domestic news coverage against the three days of coverage of Presley’s death (1-3) and the three days of coverage of Jackson’s death (4-6).*

In mid-August 1977, Britain was experiencing a recession and many industrial disputes: British



Airways workers, air traffic controllers, Jaguar car workers, postal workers, while the Grunwick dispute about newspaper distribution continued. There were student sit-ins at Essex University and there were clashes between the anti-facist left and the racist National Front party. Riots against the NF erupted in Birmingham.

In June 2009, Britain was experiencing the beginnings of the global credit crunch and stockbroker and investment adviser Bernie Madoff was sentenced to 150 years in prison for large-scale fraud. Police tactics in the aftermath of the G20 protests, where a newspaper seller died after being struck by a policeman, were causing concern among MPs. This was a time when swine flu was spreading, and increasing numbers of graduates were facing the dole. It was the tail end of the MPs' expenses' scandal, and, in the wake of the clamour for more transparency in publicly funded institutions, some BBC expenses were revealed and rail bosses' bonuses published.

War in Afghanistan continued, there was unrest in Somalia, Italy's PM Berlusconi was embroiled in an 'escort' scandal, and there were follow-up stories to the Air France plane crash. A leading US Republican Mark Sanford resigned after an affair. But the biggest foreign story was the protests in Iran following elections, and the death of a female protestor (*The Times* made this their full page 3 story on 26/6/09, after devoting the whole of its front page to Michael Jackson's death.) There was plenty going on in Britain and the world that merited coverage at the time of Jackson's death.

The death of US actress Farah Fawcett (from popular 1970s series *Charlie's Angels*) was also prominent, as was reporting of Glastonbury Music Festival (on the news pages in the *The Times*).

In monitoring the papers over the days following Presley's death, it was noted that there were no other celebrity stories on the news pages of any papers. There was coverage of people such as actors and musicians but these appeared on the Features/Arts pages.

The coverage of Jackson's death was not confined to these three days, but continued for months. A further Newsbank search between Jackson's death in June 2009 and 1 January 2010 of lead/first paragraphs in the national press revealed 3162 articles where Michael Jackson was mentioned. This means he appeared in the lead of more stories than the then Home Secretary Alan Johnson (3061) in the same period. Clearly no amount of economic crises, or government initiatives, policies and news management, could beat the draw of a dead pop star.

## Discussion of findings

How times (and *The Times*) have changed. Coverage of a pop star's death (Presley's in 1977) in *The Times*, expressed as a percentage of domestic news coverage, had increased up to 15-fold (day 1) by the time Jackson died in 2009. For the *Guardian* it was a 10-fold increase on day 1; the difference for the *Telegraph* was not so dramatic for day 1 of Presley's death and day 1 of Jackson's death (almost twice as much in 2009). However, on day 2, the *Telegraph* appeared to have panicked about its relatively low coverage, and the percentage of news pages devoted to Jackson jumped to 33%, an 11-fold increase from the coverage of Presley's death on day 2.

Interestingly, both *The Times* and the *Guardian* treated some of the coverage of Presley's death as overseas news and did not give the story much prominence on domestic news pages, unlike 2009 when Jackson, also an American who died in America, was splashed all over the domestic news pages of UK newspapers, up to nearly a *half of all the news* contained on the domestic news pages of the *Guardian* and *The Times* on day 1, and taking up to a third of all news appearing on domestic news pages on day 2 in the *Telegraph*. All of this was in addition to the pages of supplements in *The Times* and *Guardian*.

As noted, the Jackson coverage went on solidly for weeks and more sporadically, but still quite frequently, for months. A cursory 6-month search found Jackson as the leading focus of over 3,000 articles, more than the two most prominent and important government ministers, the Home Secretary and Chancellor of the Exchequer. (Incidentally, Jackson was the main focus of around 40% of the number of articles that focussed on the then prime minister Gordon Brown.) A great deal of coverage was reminiscing or speculation, and not reporting in the strictest sense.

The stark contrast in coverage to similar pop stars' deaths 40 years apart is broadly reflected in two studies of news values almost four decades apart. In the first seminal work on news values by Galtung and Ruge in 1965, the concept of celebrity and entertainment did not even feature in their taxonomy of news values, let alone dominate the news hierarchy. By 2001, the influence of such personalities on news selection, whether famous for their talent or brought into the public eye by the media, had become so prominent that Harcup and O'Neill suggested an additional news value category called 'Celebrity', separate from the notion of a 'Power elite'.

'The "elite people" noted in [our] study were not necessarily the elite people that Galtung and Ruge had in mind. The UK press seems obsessed with celebrities such as soap stars, sports stars, film stars and, of course, royalty.....As it stands, "elite people" is too broad a category to shed much light on what makes news in our current cultural climate.' (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001, p.270-271).

It can be argued from these results that Celebrity and Entertainment have ascended the hierarchy of news and appear to guarantee coverage, particularly if combined with other news values. In addition, there seems to be an unwritten rule that such stories must be given, not just prominence, but saturation coverage.

So how can we explain why Jackson's death merited between 10 and 15 times the amount of coverage than Presley's? It may be worth noting that some of Presley's coverage was confined to the overseas news sections of *The Times*. It is possible to argue that the USA is more culturally familiar today, with an increasing assimilation of American culture and values in Britain since the 1970s, when the USA might have seemed more distant, exotic, unknown and separate. And, unlike Presley, by performing globally, Jackson may have been more readily 'adopted' by other nations, such as Britain.

In addition, the Jackson story certainly contained a great deal of drama and twists and turns, which in turn kept launching new stories within the overall arc of his life. Cashmore (2006, p.155) puts Jackson's longevity on his mutability, morphing from a child star to the pop giant of the MTV generation, then an eccentric man-child with an unwholesome interest in young boys. These changes were accompanied by startling physical changes.

On June 14 2005 he walked free from charges of paedophilia. As Cashmore (2006, p.55) says,

news of his acquittal did not so much define the end of an epoch but the start of a transition. Jackson may have been a broken man facing financial ruin and a career on the decline by the time of his 50th birthday in Sept 2008, but celebrity culture ‘nurtures success from scandal.’ (p.155).

In a study of the media coverage surrounding Jackson’s 2005 acquittal, Garry Whannel (2010) applied his concept of ‘vortextuality’ - ‘the intense, short-lived focus on a single news event’ (p.66). His description of this media phenomenon, whereby journalists are rapidly drawn into the coverage, much like a vortex, and feel compelled to comment, would very much appear to apply to coverage of Jackson’s death. ‘The various media constantly feed off each other in processes of self-preferentiality and intertextuality. In an era of electronic and digital information exchange, the speed at which this happens has become very rapid. Certain super-major events come to dominate the headlines, and it becomes temporarily difficult for columnists and commentators to discuss anything else.’ (Whannel, 2010, p.71). This may certainly explain why the *Telegraph*’s coverage rose on day 2, in line with the amount of coverage allocated by the *Guardian* and *The Times*.

When Presley was at his peak in the 1950s, pop culture was probably less pervasive than when Jackson was in the ascendancy. Subsequent changes and growth in media technology means that middle-aged journalists, most likely to be those in senior editorial posts, will have grown up with the music of Jackson as a frequent soundtrack to their formative years, so that emotions and memories may play a part in their news judgement.

Nevertheless, some media commentators, like columnist Stephen Glover, were taken aback by the coverage:

I acknowledge it was a fascinating story. Jackson had an interesting and sometimes tragic life, and died in mysterious circumstances. He was obviously a hugely talented man.

But was he a great one? One might expect *The Sun* and the *Daily Mirror* [red-top papers] to go over the top, but when the BBC and *The Times* and the *Guardian* respond with the same sense of awed reverence that they displayed nearly 45 years ago when Winston Churchill – a truly great man – died, one begins to fear for our culture.

(Glover, *Independent*, 6th June 2009)

Glover also points out that any increase in sales at the time of Jackson’s death were short-term, and may have occurred anyway, with or without such coverage. Would *Guardian* and *Times* readers really have turned their backs on these papers if they hadn’t carried the column inches and supplements on Jackson’s death that they did? It is doubtful that sales would have dropped significantly if the papers only carried a couple of articles about Jackson. As has been stated, the saturation coverage was not universally popular, with some readers moved to complain.

In defence of today’s papers, it has to be said that examining newspapers from decades ago reveals how far modern newspapers have come in terms of design and layout. They are much more attractive and easy to follow than 30 or 40 years ago. They carry far more pages and photographs, and are also broader in the types of events they cover.

The editor of the *Guardian* reminds of us of this: ‘When older readers speak nostalgically about the “old” *Times* they are yearning for its sober news values, its comprehensiveness and its intelligence of tone. They tend to have forgotten its narrowness, its maleness and its intellectual, social and cultural snobbery.’ (Rushbridger, *Guardian*, 4th November 2000). He warns against generalising about dumbing down and about ‘purging’ the ‘pages of all subject matter that more naturally feel at home in a tabloid.’ (*ibid*).

It is hard to entirely disagree with this, but the opposite is also true. Should serious newspapers such as the *Guardian* or *The Times* be purging nearly half of their content of serious news (48% and 45% respectively of domestic news pages on 26/6/09 was devoted to Jackson, excluding supplements and obituaries)? With this amount of coverage of the death of one pop star, readers are entitled to ask, ‘What important news is being ignored?’

Even allowing for the vastly increased pagination and range of content found in contemporary ‘quality’ UK newspapers, celebrity coverage has become pervasive and has vastly increased in

proportion to other more important news, and expressed as a percentage of domestic news, seems to be driving out other news. The sheer volume and spread into news pages makes celebrity news inescapable; like the persistent drunk at a party, celebrity is in everyone's face.

Rather than being confined to certain publications, celebrity 'news' has gone viral, its creeping tentacles curtailing choice for *all* news consumers. The increasing homogenisation of the press – red-top and quality papers – mirrors the treatment of the British news-consuming public as an homogenous group, despite the fact that news audiences are segmented, and ignoring opportunities for focussed advertising.

## Wider discussion

There is a palpable sense of unease in tackling this issue, stemming from what can only be described as the liberalism and relativism that all too often pervades the debate about celebrity coverage. There is a tendency to embrace cultural and intellectual relativism for fear of being accused of elitism, being a snob or, as Pierre Bourdieu (1996) has argued, being boring.

Unsurprisingly, the former editor of celebrity magazine *heat* embraces these views about critics of celebrity culture. 'There are the snobs that pretend they are not interested in celebrity culture and are too busy listening to Radio 4. I mean they are liars .....

(Sam Delaney, former Editor of *heat* magazine, quoted by Brook, *Guardian*, 18th January 2010). Yet these very charges can be turned against those who champion celebrity culture. The dismissive Delaney, a 34-year-old, former New Labour researcher for Harriet Harman and Gordon Brown, is typical of many top journalists, who themselves are part of an elite: university educated, many through the Oxbridge system, and well connected. A study into the educational backgrounds of leading journalists in June 2006 by The Sutton Trust found that most top journalists went to private schools (54%), were university educated (72% at 13 leading universities, including 40% at Oxford), were mostly male (over 80%), had a London background, and were recruited through personal contacts.

These are the people who condescend to their viewers and readers under the guise of egalitarianism, feeding them sugar rushes of celebrity that make no demands on their audiences, while diverting attention away from knowledge and information that could provide challenges to the very elites that control so many institutions of power and influence, including the media.

Stories are exaggerated and sensationalised, minor transgressions are turned into moral panics, all given the same weight, the same hyperventilating and hyperactive treatments to promote circulations and ratings. The Jonathan Ross/Russell Brand Sachsgate story (October 2008) was one such example, serendipitously serving up newspapers like the *Daily Mail* with a heady brew of moral righteousness mixed with anti-BBC propaganda, a winning recipe that elevated a witless and unpleasant prank to the status of a national TV news lead and which required the Director General of the BBC to make an apology on BBC2's *Newsnight* – a perfect example of a soufflé of hysteria whipped into pseudo-news.

Nevertheless, is the rise of celebrity merely a symptom of a less deferential society, where the public, through the media, are not afraid to criticise the great and the famous, and thus a healthy development in society (McNair, 2000; Temple, 2006)? On closer inspection this argument does not hold up. Contrary to some of the views in favour of celebrity culture (self-actualisation, affirmation, egalitarianism and equality), celebrity news encourages impotence and deference. As Charlie Brooker says, journalists are frequently more deferential and obsequious to celebrities – often accompanied by a team of public relations advisers – than to politicians ('Newswipe', BBC 4, 2nd Feb 2010. Most interviewers obligingly failed to ask pop star Dappy of pop group N-Dubz about allegations of bullying – a line of questioning very much in the public interest since Dappy was spearheading a government-backed, anti-bullying campaign at the time. Minders stepped in to slap the wrists of one journalist who had the temerity to mention it.

This deference echoes Su Holmes' point that celebrity culture, while seemingly aspirational, is

actually rather conservative, with the notion of selfhood bound up in rather traditional ideologies and fixed social strata (2006, p.61). In her examination of the TV programme 'I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!' she suggests that, while working class credentials are often invoked to signify authenticity, background or class cannot be discarded at will .... 'it naturalizes social hierarchies and the imbalance of power on which they are based.' (*ibid*), including the capitalist belief that 'life has its winners and losers and that is only natural' (McDonald, 1995, p.65 cited in Holmes, 2006, p.63).

Cashmore (2006, p.4) argues that the rise of celebrity bestows power on a public who can make or break a celebrity (a dubious ambition in itself). Apart from the fact that this is illusory power, what the press expose celebrities for, and the means by which they do it, are often unethical or, as in the case of phone-hacking, downright illegal.

Journalist and feminist Caitlin Moran highlights the undercurrents of sexism towards women in the public eye, pointing out that they suffer disproportionately because of the focus on their appearance (Moran, 2011, p.262). She argues that coverage of women is 'hugely reductionist and damaging': a female celebrity only has to be photographed without makeup, in a 'bad' dress or having changed body shape to be pilloried. 'I've read more about Oprah Winfrey's arse than I have about the rise of China as an economic superpower.' (*ibid*, p.264). The pernicious message is that half of the population needs to shape up and aspire to the air-brushed, unattainable, manufactured 'ideals' of womanhood constantly reinforced in the media, including the 'serious' news media - hardly a positive or healthy aspiration for young women.

In addition, the media frequently set their sights on vulnerable targets – the young, the ill, or the addicted, such as Britney Spears or Amy Winehouse – and these are all too often the subject of supposedly less deferential treatment. For example, when boxer Frank Bruno was suffering from depression, an early edition of *The Sun* on 23rd September 2003 had the front page headline 'Bonkers Bruno Locked Up', and more recently on 9th November 2009 the same paper started a campaign against former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who is partially blind, for making a mistake in a hand-written letter of condolence to the mother of a soldier killed in Afghanistan, a news agenda many other news outlets, including the BBC, slavishly followed.

However, Harper (2006) argues that coverage of celebrities and their fallibilities, in particular mental illness, offers opportunities for positive discourse, de-stigmatising mental illness and providing consolation, particularly for women. But this is to ignore the unethical methods that sections of the press are prepared to go to, and the damaging psychological effects of such intrusiveness on the individuals targeted.

In her press statement after giving evidence at the Leveson Inquiry, singer Charlotte Church described the devastating effects of being the young subject of 'blackmail, illegal phone interception, 24/7 surveillance and tracking, car chases, door stepping and blagging' as she grew up in the media glare (Church, 10<sup>th</sup> Nov 2011, guardian.co.uk, pp.3-4). While most of her statement was directed at the tabloids, she pointed out that *The Times* was guilty of seriously misrepresenting her comments on 9/11 aged 14, and that the press were determined to portray her as a 'fallen angel'. While there will be a mixture of uses and gratifications on the part of the newspaper-reading public, it should not be forgotten that the true goal of the press in exposing human frailties in celebrities is to boost sales by serving up schadenfreude to the public. As Church put it, 'I feel extremely strongly.... that children and their families – that people - need to be protected from the exploitative, unethical and financially driven practices of the soulless corporations who control the tabloid industry.' (*ibid*, p.13).

The 'fair game' attitude towards press intrusion into the lives of celebrities created a culture whereby immoral and illegal practices were easily extended towards murder victims (7/7 victims) and grieving parents (the McCanns).

It is these ethical issues being highlighted by the Leveson Inquiry that sustain the most damning arguments against the celebrity phenomenon. And the repercussions go beyond the red-tops and beyond celebrity reporting. In his evidence to the inquiry, former *News of the World* Deputy Fea-

tures Editor Paul McMullan described the constant pressure to get celebrity stories, and the £3m budget he had to pay for invading the privacy of the famous. As we now know, a great deal of this went either directly or as payment in kind to the police, for tipping off News International papers with celebrity stories ('How Murdoch Ran Britain', Dispatches, Channel 4, 29th July 2011). John Yates, former Assistant Commissioner for the Metropolitan Police, who was leading the re-opened investigation into phone hacking, was close friends with Neil Wallis, a former senior executive at the *News of the World*, who later became an adviser to the Met. Andy Hayman, former Commissioner at the Met, became a well-paid columnist on *The Times* (*ibid*). In the drive for celebrity sleaze and gossip, newspapers have helped mire the police in allegations of corruption. With the methods for obtaining celebrity 'news' and the elevation of profit over standards now laid bare, the outcome of Leveson threatens press freedom as a whole.

## Why has celebrity coverage increased?

So what is fuelling the ascension of celebrity news and news values? There are a number of reasons.

One is the cross-promotional vested interests of modern media conglomerations. Puzzled by the amount of photos of pop star, footballer's wife and 'X Factor' judge Cheryl Cole in *The Times*, the reasons became clearer when satirical magazine *Private Eye* reported that Murdoch's papers have given her extensive coverage 'without ever finding room to explain that the US show's [X Factor] broadcaster, Fox, is also part of Rupert Murdoch's empire.' (*Private Eye*, 10-23 June 2011, p.11). In the same edition it also pointed out that around the same time the *Sun* (proprietor Rupert Murdoch) devoted three centre page spreads to the film 'X-Men' and its stars, made by no other than Fox film studios.

Editors and journalists involved in the celebrity game frequently claim to be giving the public what they want. But Barker (2007, pp.114-115) argues, 'In an epoch of media saturation, this argument has become disingenuous. Journalism has become the creator as well as a reflector of public taste.' Related to this is the fact that editors seem to be under a misguided belief that in order to attract younger readers, they must liberally sprinkle their pages with the shenanigans of footballers, their wives, TV personalities and pop stars. However, the assumption that all youth are obsessed with celebrity is often over-simplistic or misplaced.

If youngsters seem to know a great deal about celebrities, they are not necessarily leading the demand for this information; rather it is a consequence of the culture that surrounds them, to which the mass media contributes in no small part (Barker, 2007). Rojek defines celebrity as the impact on public consciousness (Rojek, 2001, p.10.) The notorious, the vainglorious, the downright mad and stupid, the renowned, are all given equal space in the mass media. Rojek argues the pervasiveness of the celebrity must be laid at the door of the mass media.

Contrary to perceived wisdom, most children are not driven by celebrity ambitions. A recent survey of nearly 7,000 young people by the National Literacy Trust, found that about 33% of girls aged between 8 and 16 said they just wanted to be happy when they grow up compared with just 3.5% who aspired to celebrity status. Slightly more boys wanted to be famous (5.1%) but again most wanted to be happy. (Sugden, 4<sup>th</sup> May 2011, *The Times*)<sup>1</sup>.

It is not just young people who we may be underestimating with regards to celebrity. Reflecting on the Leveson Inquiry, the editorial director of celebrity magazine *Style* points to another trend:

I spend many evenings with groups of women, researching what they want from their media. For the past few years there has been a growing sense of having gorged on an unhealthy celeb cake that's starting to make them feel guilty and a bit ill.

<sup>1</sup> The survey on Gender and Communication was conducted online in June/July 2010. Overall, 6,865 young people aged 8 to 16 from 47 schools participated in the online survey. 46 were schools from England, one was from Wales. There was an almost equal gender split in the sample, with 51.5% of boys (N = 3,511) and 48.5% of girls (N = 3,309) participating in this survey. [http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0000/8363/Gender\\_communication\\_survey2011.pdf](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0000/8363/Gender_communication_survey2011.pdf)

The falling sales in the celebrity sector reflects scepticism as well as moral doubts...

(Hilton, *The Times*, 28<sup>th</sup> November 2011)

And a recent survey by the *British Journalism Review* and YouGov found that there was clear public opinion about what type of stories merited publication due to the public interest, and what should remain unpublished and private. Furthermore, these attitudes were found to be consistent over the past 10 years (Barnett, 2012a.) 'The British public understand the distinction between watchdog journalism, which holds power to account, and celebrity journalism, which has little public value, even if it is "interesting"', says Steve Barnett, who commissioned the research (2012b, p.3).

This leads onto a couple of other important reasons for the spread of the celebrity virus. Journalists have a symbiotic relationship with what can be broadly termed the PR industry. Rojek makes the point that celebrities are essentially fabrications, concocted by what he describes as "cultural intermediaries" ... the collective term for agents, publicists, marketing personnel, promoters, photographers, fitness trainers, wardrobe staff, cosmetic experts and personal assistants.' (2001, p.13). With many pages to fill, reliance on publicists and public relations professionals make the job quicker and easier, as does the sort of speculation and unsubstantiated gossip that is another key feature of celebrity 'reporting'. This is lazy journalism at best, or PR puff at worst. Journalists are allowing themselves to be manipulated by publicists and minders who dictate the news agenda. Certain questions are off-limits, while books, films, TV programmes and other products are ruthlessly marketed.

The celebrity trivia invasion also appears to stem from the cannibalistic nature of the media, different strands of which feed off each other. Thus TV provides an endless source of cheap fillers for newspapers that blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction, while news broadcasters in turn feed off the press, a trend made more acute by lack of investment in news gathering in recent years.

They also follow each other's news agendas – listeners to BBC Radio 4 were prompted to complain about the BBC following the *Sun's* agenda when the BBC reported on former PM Brown's mistakes in his note to a bereaved mother of a soldier in November 2009. There is a tendency to regard what rivals are reporting on as *de facto* 'news', regardless of its merits, for fear of missing the media bandwagon: journalists are notorious for having a pack mentality. Add to this is the speed of digital media - whereby news can go viral in minutes - and social media's unlimited opportunities for obtaining, echoing and amplifying celebrity views and gossip, the conditions are set for creating the vortex of coverage described by Whannel (2010).

Nevertheless, some trends in journalism are inevitable and welcome: there is no reason for journalism and the media not to change as society and culture changes and evolves, since journalism both shapes and reflects that culture. This is no clarion call for a return to newspapers of old, with their cramped and uninspiring layouts and design, and lack of pictures; this is no argument for dry and narrow content.

But there are certain core values and standards worth defending in any craft or profession. In newspapers this means lively, well-crafted writing, communicating useful information through attractive and easy-to-follow layouts, conveying thought-provoking opinions and analysis to the reader in an engaging way that directly or indirectly helps to hold those in power to account. There will be other things in this mix: reviews, letters, obituaries, features, TV guides, but if truthful and accurate information is omitted, what right have these publications got to call themselves newspapers?

A journalist's job is *both* to inform and entertain. The trick – for journalist and audience alike – is to understand the difference between the two and to understand that if it fails to inform then it ceases to be journalism. (Harcup, 2009, p.122)

In the meantime, it can be argued that news audiences are left with a shrinking public sphere, where the free exchange of information and opinions has been reduced to acres of coverage of lurid celebrity gossip that materially affect most of our lives not one jot, while journalists fail to



expose falsehoods about taking us into war, or warn and campaign against the sharp and disastrous banking practices that plunged us into global recession.

## Conclusion

Too many academics, commentators and journalists are reluctant to criticise the celebrity trend for different reasons: because of misplaced judgements about the democratising force of celebrity culture; or because the debate is wilfully polarised, with critics accused of calling for a return to the newspapers of yesteryear, and opposed to engaging and lively journalism. Too often, those that call for higher professional aspirations and quality journalism are charged with being out of touch, elitist and patronizing, particularly by journalists and proprietors with vested interests in the celebrity circus. Such accusations are ironic, since dishing out pap under the illusion of egalitarianism is the work of those who are truly serve-serving, patronizing and manipulative.

The result is dumbed-down, shallow, poor-quality journalism, full of banality, inaccuracies, rumour and speculation. This can be borne – perhaps even enjoyed – if it is confined to certain parts of the media so that consumers are provided with real choice and diversity. Instead, its pervasiveness and sheer volume means it is permeating every nook and cranny of the media, from serious broadcast news and current affairs programmes to the quality press.

With regards to the UK quality press, this study demonstrates that celebrity is, at times, driving out other news. The public is being ill-served. Those who lament the lack of choice start to believe they are out of step, given the amount of coverage, and left to rail with ‘increasing despair’ (Barker, 2007). The press (often willingly) and the public (often unwittingly) are being manipulated by public relations professionals with vested interests, serving up publicity or propaganda as news, in the pursuit of personal or corporate profit. In the rush to fill column inches, dubious ethical – even illegal – practices have been spawned, and invasions of privacy are commonplace.

..... the real damage of *News of the World*-style journalism had been done well before the exposure of its reporters’ reliance on illegal voicemail interceptions. Though the paper may have expressed “sincere regret” for its hacking activities, it would never consider apologising for a much greater offence – transforming modern popular journalism into little more than a newsprint version of an old-fashioned seaside what-the-butler-saw machine.

(Greenslade, *Guardian*, 2nd May 2011)

The dual filters of distraction and omission are being applied to reporting in our elite newspapers, weakening claims to be acting as a fourth estate and limiting readers’ choice and the public sphere. Important news is being missed in pursuit of cheap gossip, and banal, inflated coverage of personalities.

While there is little doubt that the quality press has made considerable contributions to public, political, social and cultural life in Britain, it is in danger of losing its way. While there may be a market for gossip and prurience, there is also a market for engaging and truly informative news.

One of the fundamental issues that journalism educators require new students to consider is the purpose and role of journalism in a functioning democracy. Central to this is journalism’s capacity to act as a watchdog, to play a central part in the public sphere. News agendas shape public consciousness and wider social and political agendas. As educators, our job is to reveal the agendas – intentional or otherwise – behind the media we consume, to provide our students with a level of media literacy, and to help them understand the power structures in society. Examination of the celebrity phenomenon can help students contribute to the debate about how well modern journalism is fulfilling its fourth estate role.

This study contributes to that debate by arguing there is too much celebrity ‘news’; it argues there is little in the supply of celebrity news that helps any of us to challenge and, more importantly, change and take responsibility for the society we live in. Apart from diverting us away from the important issues of the day, a diet of celebrity news is in danger of starving us of the ability to

understand the complexities, contexts and facts about the world we inhabit. Instead, it promotes emotive, simplistic, and individualistic responses: to condemn or to worship. It is time to debunk the myth that the celebrity phenomenon is empowering, or a social leveller and the representation of democratisation. Much of what passes for journalism in this celebrity-ridden era is the 21st century equivalent of bread and circuses.

So while journalism educators need to understand the rise of celebrity, this does not mean accepting its pervasiveness in all sectors of the press. Its rise and spread needs to be challenged by academia. To argue that celebrity news is both empowering and an economic necessity, led by public demand, especially among younger readers, is both disingenuous and irresponsible: journalism shapes public consciousness as much as it reflects it. In a complex world that needs making sense of, educators and academics should not be endowing celebrity reporting with the same status or moral equivalence as public interest journalism.

But whether this view of celebrity is accepted or not, critiquing celebrity can help develop the critical and analytical skills that graduates need. And a detailed examination of celebrity can be a springboard from which to raise many ethical issues around journalistic practice, such as the complex debate around privacy, the public interest and press regulation. Celebrity coverage is also central to any discussion about the future direction of journalism and the press. This makes the celebrity phenomenon a fruitful field of study for educators and students alike, while this study offers a methodological model for future studies on the march of celebrity.

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