Two or Three Things I Know about Celebrity Journalism

A presentation by film critic John Powers to the
Celebrity, Politics & Public Life seminar

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OPENING REMARKS FROM JOHN POWERS

Introduction: The Heisenberg-Ciccone Principle of Celebrity

Just to bring the subject home, Powers mentioned that all of us would behave very differently if George Clooney were sitting at the table. The presence of a celebrity has a warping effect that no one, not even a celebrity journalist, can escape. Compounding the problem is the fact that celebrities submit to interviews for contractual reasons – they usually have no interest in revealing their souls to interviewers. Typically, the celebrity creates a persona appropriate for the movie they’re promoting, or for their own publicity purposes – something that will fit the narrative arc that their publicists have concocted for them. The journalist must negotiate this terrain with care: while a good interview usually uncovers something “authentic” about the celebrity – something revealing and true – the journalist must avoid any line of questioning that would make the celebrity uncomfortable. Journalists who make celebrities uncomfortable are dispensable.

The Creation of Celebrity: A brief history of celebrity journalism from centripetal sideshow to centrifugal main attractions (or is it the other way around?)

Powers ventured to say that Oscar Wilde may have been the first definitive celebrity (or was it Byron? Napoleon? Jesus?) Whoever it may have been, celebrity became a big business in the 20th century. The studio system churned them out, and the Walter Winchells (with an audience of 50 million each week) covered them. Fellini’s La Dolce Vita gave a name to the phenomenon: paparazzi. Liz Smith was the first journalist to pay for an exclusive, and Tina Brown drove the rates up for celebrity interviewers by taking celebrity coverage to places it had never been before, including The New Yorker. Celebrity coverage has reached an apotheosis of sorts in In Style, which has become the
perfect vehicle for celebrities and their publicists. A celebrity profile in *In Style* usually involves no interview at all – just lots of very flattering pictures.

**Lost in the Supermarket: The material conditions**

The proliferation of media markets has created a demand for filler: all of these magazines and TV networks need *something* to focus on and celebrities have proven to attract eyeballs. Celebrities have found their way into every media form, even usurping models on fashion magazine covers. The media market has become so intensely competitive that publications tend to think only in the short-term – day to day, if that’s their publication schedule. Vertical integration has spawned complex cross-promotional machines, but Powers argues that the sheer abundance of celebrities, each one of whom fits in a particular niche, has caused the collapse of our common culture. There are no Bob Hopes – someone known and loved by all – these days.

**Frank Sinatra No Longer Has a Cold: The actual process**

Powers described the nitty-gritty details of a typical celebrity interview. A few high (low?) points:

- The interviewer is thoroughly vetted by the publicist, and verboten topics are often identified beforehand.
- All power rests with the celebrity, who may whimsically change the date, time, and place of an interview.
- The meeting almost inevitably takes place in a hotel room or at a restaurant, providing the journalist with no access to the celebrity’s private sphere.
- The publicist is often present at the interview.
- Fact checking is often impossible, especially with personal anecdotes. Despite the fact that these tantalizing bits cannot be substantiated, they will most likely make it into the profile, and they will eventually show up in celebrity biographies down the line.
- Authentic moments are extremely rare.
- Editors will often manipulate the interview to “match” the accompanying images in the final spread.

**The Psychopathology of Everyday Celebrity Journalism**

The low-level journalist on a junket may be star-struck by celebrities and feel empowered simply by being in the same room with them. Others suffer a deep self-hatred for their fawning coverage. But the money is so good, journalists often find a way to convince themselves that what they’re doing is not rubbish but real reportage.
So why do people want to read this stuff? Do they experience vicarious pleasure from celebrity excesses? Do they feel vindictive enjoyment when celebrities get in trouble? Powers was not exactly sure.

**Irrational Rationality:** *Celebrity journalism as a mirror of capitalism (communism?)*

The result, unfortunately, is a market situation where celebrities are required to grace the pages of magazines, though they themselves are often uninterested in doing so, and the journalists who cover them do not necessarily believe that this reportage is worthwhile. However, the money is so good, that both celebrities and journalists are willing to continue to play the game.

**The Wisdom of Al Pacino**

Powers described his interview with Pacino as one of his most difficult. But in the final moments, Pacino hit on something. He told Powers that he was afraid the interview was unsuccessful because there’s no way to express who he really is in such an artificial setting. He was hopeful, though, that Powers could find one moment of truth in their hours together, because it’s the small things that turn out to be true.

**REMARKS FROM OUR RESPONDENT, MARC COOPER**

After gamely chiding Powers for his shameless name-dropping, Cooper described his venture into entertainment reporting. A fully researched feature in the *LA Weekly* may earn a journalist $1K, but a quick celebrity profile can easily earn you $15K. Back in the 80s, Cooper fancied himself a radical outlaw, but he couldn’t resist an opportunity to spend a week in the Hamptons interviewing Oliver Stone (all-expenses paid, of course). The money and the perks are seductive, but Cooper found it impossible to play the role of a full-time show-biz reporter. Describing it as the single worst experience of his life, Cooper took a job that required that he subscribe to *Variety*. Its “giddy nervousness” he found unbearable, and he was shocked to find that people in the entertainment industry were by far the toughest, nastiest people he had ever dealt with.

Cooper thought that Powers had explained well why we have so many “mini celebrities” now, opposed to the iconic Bogarts and Bacalls of the past. Cooper asked Powers to weigh in on the moral dimension of this cultural shift: was there something lost when our celebrity culture changed forty years ago? Despite the fact that Bogart was a fully manufactured icon, was there something redeeming about having icons? Do we need common points for our national narrative, a kind of national commons? What do we lose with the accelerated fragmentation of celebrity culture?
GROUP DISCUSSION

Powers started by saying he really wasn’t sure whether icons like Bogart brought the culture together in a meaningful way. Presumably the “national narrative” that was created around these iconic celebrities served some people well and disenfranchised others.

English Professor Leo Braudy said that we could see this evolution either as a grim narrative of fragmentation and emptiness or as a democratizing impulse in our culture. The question would be, what’s the trend toward?

Martin Krieger, Professor of Policy, Planning and development, pointed out that even the world of science has been corrupted by this acceleration in celebrity culture. Instant fame can be granted to scientists who fit the media needs of a University PR Department. The press service can decide who becomes famous, and as a result, whose work may have a greater impact on our world.

History Professor Steven Ross was very troubled by Powers’ description of the total alienation that both the celebrity and the journalist feel toward their work. Commodification has taken over both sides. However, having just reviewed the Hedda Hopper papers, Ross argued that we should feel no nostalgia for the good old days – Hopper’s reportage was completely controlled by the studios. In fact, Ross wondered why “authenticity” is something we should even discuss in the context of celebrity journalism. Powers agreed with Ross’ larger point, but he suggested that there was a time, between 1964 and 1974, when celebrity reportage was more honest than in Hopper’s time or our own.

Cooper quipped that none of us should expect a “reform movement” to come down the pike. After all, people don’t really care whether a celebrity interview is accurate or not – the stakes are relatively low. As Neil Postman argues, everyone knows it’s phony, sort of like wrestling. However, this mode of image production has become a paradigm for all other businesses. For instance, the same points that Powers made about celebrity journalism also could be made about political journalism.

Martin Kaplan, director of the Norman Lear Center (which studies how entertainment has invaded every aspect of civilized society, for better or worse), brought up the example of Jiminy Glick, the grotesque celebrity interviewer played by Martin Short. The “authenticity” of Short’s depiction is that the celebrity interview is a cesspool of self-interest and fakery. Would the corollary in political journalism be the McLaughlin Group? Is that where we see an accurate image of the political process?

Cooper agreed that you know you’re watching a circus when you tune into Hard Ball or The McLaughlin Group. The food fight is staged, but authentic. Cooper
went on to guesstimate that political reportage is not as openly debased as celebrity journalism, but it’s about 60% there.

Professor Braudy pointed out that phoniness and inauthenticity are a matter of degrees – sometimes there’s less, sometimes more. In the case of entertainers and politicians, we can see similarities in the way they try to create “false intimacy” with their public. Perhaps the difference is simply a matter of style.

Cinema-Television Professor Dana Polan asked Powers to discuss why it is that celebrity interviewers and publicists have become famous themselves: a case in point, the New Yorker’s recent profile of publicist Bumble Ward. Powers agreed that this process is in full swing and that it might come from the desire to take people further and further behind the scenes. Profiling the manipulators behind the curtain is a way of making people feel as if they have “access” to the truth.

Cooper mentioned how celebrity has become the validator in our culture. Anthropology Professor Nancy Lutkehaus fully agreed: the problem is not that this celebrity culture exists, but that entertainment values have been applied to other parts of our lives, parts that do not respond well to the imperatives of entertainment. Powers agreed and felt that the most dangerous aspect of this phenomenon is that it validates a cruel binary that defines the entertainment industry: either something is a hit or it’s nothing. This is a devastating cultural metaphor.

Cinema-Television Professor Mary Jensen suggested that the pathology of the celebrity interview can be extrapolated to all social discourse. Aren’t we all putting on masks all the time? Isn’t everyone in the business of creating the right persona for the moment?

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