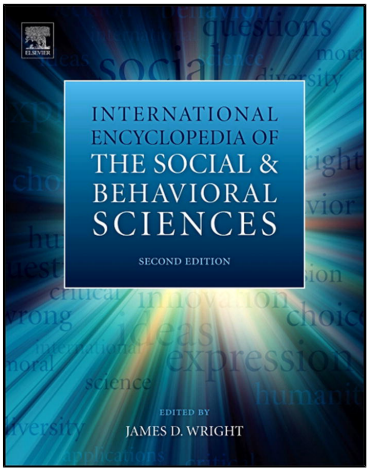

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Celebrity

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Abstract

Modern celebrity culture emerged as a focus of inquiry and critique in the mid-twentieth century, and has blossomed in recent years into a vibrant field of study. Critics have pointed to the role of celebrities as mass-produced commodities and celebrity as ideological support for consumer capitalism, and to the disconnection between notoriety and merit. Scholars have approached celebrities as symbolic entities, mediating a tension between egalitarian and aristocratic cultural tropes, and embodying cultural anxieties about the relationship between media images and lived realities; documented the economic, social, and political structures in which celebrity has been produced, noting the significance of the Hollywood star system, and the recent transformations brought by reality television and new media technologies; and studied celebrity fans and fandom, shedding light on forms of fan engagement with celebrity culture, fan–celebrity encounters, and the uses of celebrity images by marginalized groups.

In popular usage, 'celebrity' typically refers simply to the famous or notorious person, whose existence and activities are known to an audience that is unknown to him or her personally, or to the condition of such notoriety. Theory and research on the topic, while often focusing also on individual celebrities, have tended to work from a broader definition of 'celebrity' (or, occasionally, 'celebrityhood' or 'celebritydom'): as a social and cultural phenomenon, in which large-scale knownness and public visibility become important sources, measures, and currencies of social, economic, and sometimes political standing. Celebrities are generally defined as distinctly contemporary versions of famous people, and celebrity a distinctly contemporary form of fame. Their distinction is found in their relationship to modern, industrialized, commercial communications media, which makes it possible to achieve notoriety without benefit of extraordinary action or achievement. The celebrity is thus famous for the media-disseminated image of himself or herself; in Daniel Boorstin's (1961) well-known phrasing, he or she is "well known for his [or her] well knownness." Celebrities are, moreover, a specific kind of social elite or status group, characterized by both extraordinary privilege and uncertain boundaries, and whose members occupy positions that are both socially central and easily lost (Kurzman et al., 2007; see also Milner, 2005). They are, as Italian sociologist Francesco Alberoni (1972) put it, a 'powerless elite' – or more accurately, an elite with high status and visibility but limited institutional power – commanding a high level of interest unrelated to the consequences of their activity. The study of celebrity, which has emerged within both humanities and social science disciplines, has run along several overlapping tracks. Beginning with critics of mass culture, analysis has focused on the distinctive characteristics and symbolic functions of celebrity in contemporary Western societies; more structurally focused studies have considered the political, economic, and social organization of celebrity, especially as it has become industrialized in the entertainment business, spread across a variety of institutional settings, and undergone changes due to new media genres and technologies; and, more recently, researchers have investigated the interpretations, uses, pleasures, and sources of engagement for audiences or fans of celebrities and celebrity.

Celebrity and Critiques of Mass Culture

The term 'celebrity' in its modern meanings began to be used in the nineteenth century, but the study of the phenomenon began in earnest with the rise of mass-produced culture, and in particular with the elaboration of an industrialized Hollywood film 'star system' in the early decades of the twentieth century. (For an excellent history of fame and fame discourse from ancient times to the near-present, see Braudy, 1986.) It first emerged as a sustained focus of inquiry through mid-twentieth-century criticism of mass culture, from both the left and the right. Although these works were rarely based on empirical research, and were filled with unsupported assertions about those creating and receiving celebrity images, they called attention to the mass production and management of celebrities, and to the question of the social impact of industrialized celebrity culture.

The Celebrity and Capitalist Ideology

Early perspectives on celebrity were largely theoretical, emerging as part of Marxist-influenced Frankfurt School cultural criticism of 'mass culture,' 'mass society,' and the 'culture industry.' Celebrities were seen as mass-produced, standardized commodities posing as unique human individuals, and celebrity discourse as a major ideological support beam for consumer capitalism. In the 1940s, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1977), for instance, saw celebrities as the products of 'the culture industry,' the cultural apparatus of mass society; Hollywood stars serve as distractions from the dissatisfactions created by industrial capitalism, and to manipulate 'the masses' into capitalism's false promises of both choice (standardized, mass-produced celebrities appear to be different individuals) and universal success (celebrities appear to demonstrate the rewards available to all).

Leo Lowenthal (1968), also writing in the 1940s, researched changes in 'mass idols' in popular magazines, charting the move from 'idols of production' (business and politics) to 'idols of consumption' (entertainment and sports); he too suggested that these popular culture heroes perpetuated the myth of an open social system, such that the existing social

International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences, Second Edition, 2015, 274–278

system is celebrated along with the star. C. Wright Mills (1956: p. 71) wrote in the 1950s of the professional celebrity as a summary of American capitalist society's promotion of competition and winning; as "the crowning result of the star system in a society that makes a fetish of competition," the celebrity shows that rewards go to those who win, regardless of the content of the competition.

The definition of celebrities as mass-produced distractions, and their ideological role in promoting consumption, competition, individualism, and the myth of open opportunity, has continued in much contemporary cultural criticism and analysis. For example, P. David Marshall (1997: p. x), has argued that the celebrity, as a "public individual who participates openly as a marketable commodity," embodies and legitimates the linked ideologies of market capitalism and individualism; Chris Rojek (2001: p. 90) has located celebrities within 'the culture of distraction today,' as human commodities who fill the void left by 'the death of God and the decline of the church'; Ellis Cashmore (2006: p. 269) has concluded that "celebrity culture's most basic imperative is material: it encourages consumption at every level of society"; and Karen Sternheimer (2011: p. 24) has suggested that celebrity culture "reflects and reinforces the ever changing notion of what it means to achieve the American Dream."

Celebrity vs Heroism

For more conservative cultural critics from the 1950s onward, the role of the celebrity system as an ideological support for capitalism was less important than its reflection of a large-scale disconnection between notoriety and merit. Such a view crystallized in the 1960s with the publication of Daniel Boorstin's *The Image* (1961), which distinguished celebrity from heroism. In an argument that presaged more recent postmodernist theory on 'simulation and simulacra' and the implosion of artifice and reality (see Baudrillard, 1988), Boorstin argued that, with the growth of mass media, public relations, and electronic communication, it was possible to produce fame without any necessary relationship to outstanding action or achievement. Thus, the hero, whose fame is the result of distinctive action or exceptional, meritorious character, has been superseded by the celebrity, whose notoriety is manufactured by mass media without regard for character or achievement; the signs of greatness are mistaken for its presence. In Boorstin's definition, the celebrity is a 'human pseudoevent.' The phenomenon of celebrity is a symptom of a media-driven culture in which artifice has displaced reality, and in which merit and attention have become uncoupled. Although as Leo Braudy (1986) has shown, the oppositions between pure, 'real' fame and inauthentic 'artificial' celebrity do not fully hold up – historically, fame and merit have never been firmly and exclusively coupled – the conservative critical approach to celebrities as false, vulgarized heroes has pointed toward historically new features. Modern media, through the increasingly sophisticated creation, management, and reproduction of images, have an unprecedented capacity to place a person on the cultural radar screen, quickly and with no necessary reliance on the person's publicly celebrated actions or character. Thus the modern celebrity system does not require of celebrities that they be extraordinary in terms of achievement, talent, or character – some celebrity is 'acquired' and some 'achieved' (Rojek, 2001: pp. 16–18) – only that they provide engaging narratives, starring in what Neal Gabler (2001: p. 5) calls the 'life movie.'

Celebrities as Symbolic Entities

The interest shown by cultural critics in what the workings of contemporary celebrity tell us about the culture that makes it so central has been taken up in many humanities-based approaches to stars and stardom, which tend to consider the symbolic activity that takes place in and through celebrity discourse. Who gets attention, the logic goes, tells us much about the core values, or ideological contradictions, of the society giving the attention. In addition to the theme, noted above, that celebrities serve as ideological supports for capitalism and consumerism, two other themes have been particularly pervasive: the tension between egalitarian and aristocratic cultural strands; and the pursuit of the authentic self.

Celebrities as a Democratic Aristocracy

One striking feature of contemporary Western celebrity discourse is the way celebrities are treated to a cultural status that is simultaneously 'above' the rest of the populace and 'of' that populace. Celebrities are culturally constructed as a sort of elected aristocracy, both elevated and brought down by the watching crowds; the celebrity has become one symbolic means through which the population of the unfamous declares its own power to shape the public sphere (Marshall, 1997). Moreover, while celebrity culture certifies some people as more deserving of attention and rewards because of their difference from the rest of the population, it also continually demonstrates that such people are ordinary, just like everyone else (Braudy, 1986). Thus, popular celebrity discourse embodies ambivalence about hierarchy in Western democracies: celebrities are celebrated for being better than, but no better than, those who watch them.

The Search for the 'Real' Self

A second outstanding feature of contemporary celebrity discourse is the thematic emphasis on getting 'behind' celebrity images to the 'true' or 'real' self. Celebrity discourse, as Richard Dyer (1991: p. 135) has demonstrated, involves a 'rhetoric of authenticity': the question of what a celebrity is 'really like,' what kind of self actually resides behind the celebrity image, is a constant, whether in the form of tabloid exposés, behind-the-scenes reporting, celebrity profiles, or fan activities such as autograph seeking. In part, this is because celebrities have the unique characteristic of appearing to audiences only in media texts, while also living in the world as actual human beings – they are images, but are "carried in the person of people who do go on living away from their appearances in the media" (Dyer, 1991: p. 135). In part, the theme of realness is the result of the increasing visibility over time of celebrity production mechanisms, raising the question of whether the celebrity image has been manufactured to attract an audience, or

whether it reflects a true, deserving self (Gamson, 1994). Celebrity discourse, with its heavy rhetorical emphasis on authenticity, thus manifests a larger cultural anxiety about the relationship between media images and lived realities. This dynamic has been reworked and advanced in recent years through the genre of 'reality television,' in which celebrities purportedly show that they are real through the filming of their 'everyday lives,' and noncelebrities become famous for living their 'real lives' in front of the cameras (Grindstaff, 2010). Here, the exposure of the ordinary self – offered as a demonstration of authenticity – itself becomes a means to celebrity.

The Political Economy of Celebrity

While many of the attempts to grapple with the unique symbolic or ideological features of contemporary celebrity have been either entirely speculative or based exclusively on textual analysis, much of the empirical research on the topic has focused on celebrity as an economic and social system. Influenced by the strategies of political economists and organizational sociologists, this research has investigated not so much the cultural meaning of celebrity as the internal organization and economic logic of the celebrity system. In contrast to approaches that assume that film stars are popularly selected for attention, for instance, such analysts tend to see celebrity as the result of "the exigencies of controlling the production and marketing of films" (King, 1986: p. 155). Although celebrities increasingly emerge in other social domains (politics, academia, etc.), most attention has been given to the major celebrity production center, the entertainment industry (Currid-Halkett, 2010).

The Hollywood Star System and Beyond

The pursuit of celebrity, especially in the entertainment business, became highly routinized, rationalized, and industrialized over the course of the twentieth century, with the development of industries, such as public relations, specifically devoted to the generation and management of public visibility. Celebrities are, in this context, marketing tools. In the notoriously risky entertainment business, which requires high capital investment for most of its products, a star is an insurance policy against audience disinterest, used primarily to minimize the risk of financial loss. Thus, star images are typically managed in accordance with the needs of the financiers of the vehicle with which a celebrity is associated – with film stars, for instance, a movie studio. The key nexus is not so much the celebrity and his or her audience, but the celebrity's backers, who pursue publicity, and journalists, editors, and producers, who provide it (Gamson, 1994).

The structure of the star system has changed significantly over its brief lifetime. The early studio star system involved tight control of the production, exhibition, and distribution of films and their associated film-star images by several major studios; stars were under studio contracts, and studio publicity operations were responsible for producing and disseminating celebrity stories and images. When the studio oligopoly was broken up by a US Supreme Court decision in the 1950s, many more parties with a financial interest in celebrities' careers became involved in the management of celebrity images – personal publicists, managers, agents, in addition to the celebrity himself or herself, joined studio publicists in battling for control of the process. With the growth of television since the 1950s, the explosion of celebrity-driven media outlets since the 1970s, and the development and expansion of reality television since the 1980s and the Internet since the 1990s, moreover, it has become both easier to build celebrity and more difficult to retain it – hence Andy Warhol's famous declaration that eventually everyone will be world famous for 15 minutes. While Hollywood movie studios still generate a large proportion of American and international celebrities, celebrity has become less centralized, and the logic of celebrity has taken hold within a wider range of social spheres, including the worlds of literature (Moran, 2000), sports (Smart, 2005), politics (West and Orman, 2002), art, business, and academia, each with its own somewhat distinction celebrity production practices (Turner, 2004).

Celebrity Production in the Twenty-First Century

Recent history has seen some major changes in celebrity production apparatuses. Reality television, which developed in the 1980s in response to changing economic conditions in the television industry as a cheaper, quicker alternative to scripted programming (Collins, 2008), transformed celebrity production: no specialized training or prior experience was needed to enter the celebrity field, and celebrity became 'an outcome of a programming strategy' (Turner, 2004: p. 53). In addition, although in many ways the Internet simply extended the reach of existing entertainment industry organizations, it has also rapidly changed the dynamics of celebrity production, especially through Web 2.0 phenomena such as YouTube, Myspace, Twitter, and Facebook (Gamson, 2011; see also Rojek, 2012). As "the tools of self-publicity are increasingly available to ordinary people" (Bennett and Holmes, 2010: p. 76), barriers to entry to celebrity are reduced, and access to potential audiences does not require industry gatekeepers, celebrity production has become partly autonomous from the centralized, tightly controlled celebrity industry. The result of these changes was a large influx of 'civilians' into the celebrity field; forms of celebrity that are more fleeting, dispensable, and difficult to sustain than earlier ones (Collins, 2008; Currid-Halkett, 2010; Rojek, 2012), and the emergence of new celebrity types, such as the anticelebrity viral star (celebrated for being unlike conventional celebrities), the do-it-yourself celebrity (who has pursued fame outside the established celebrity system), and the microcelebrity (famous to a small community of fans) (Gamson, 2011).

Fandom and the Reception of Celebrity

Analyses of the social and economic organization of celebrity tend to bracket questions of its cultural meanings, and textual analyses of celebrity tend to operate with untested assumptions or assertions about the meaning and impact of celebrity for audiences. Methodologically, both have tended to exclude empirical research into the meaning of celebrities and celebrity in the everyday lives of the fans or audiences encountering

them. As the study of culture in general began, in the 1980s, to take more of a methodological turn toward audience research, audience-related aspects of celebrity have also come more sharply into focus. This territory remains, however, under-investigated, in part because the study of audiences is both methodologically cumbersome and costly.

Considerable thought, and a small but growing body of research, has been devoted to the question of the fans' or audiences' relationship to celebrities. One early theory, for instance, proposed that mass media such as television facilitate a 'parasocial relationship' between performers and audience members, in which the spectator comes to relate to the celebrity as if they were in a face-to-face relationship, with the 'illusion of intimacy' (Horton and Wohl, 1956). Since then, largely through psychoanalytic film theory, discussions have focused on the processes by which audience members identify with celebrities, especially film stars (Tudor, 1974; Stacey, 1991). Various typologies of identification have been set forth, emphasizing quite a range of activities, uses, and types of attachment developed by audiences in their encounters with celebrities (Marshall, 1997), with particular attention to celebrity gossip activities as 'fantasies of belonging' to a 'moral community' (Hermes, 1995: p. 132).

This has been especially important in challenging the assumption that 'the audience' for celebrity is a homogenous mass, and that celebrities mean the same thing for all of its members. Parasocial identification and celebrity hero worship, for instance, both appear to be common stances; but ironic, playful, and irreverent interpretations of celebrity images also appear to be prevalent, especially as the pursuit of celebrity itself has become a more common focus of public discussion (Gamson, 1994). Particular attention has been paid to the ways groups marginalized on the basis of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, or age make use of celebrity images for their own purposes: building group solidarity or expressing rebelliousness and alienation, for example, through the celebration of particular types of stars (strong women, for example, or stars from their own ethnic group) (Stacey, 1991). Finally, recent empirical work has detailed the meanings made by fans of particular celebrities (Vannini, 2004), celebrity fandom online (Soukup, 2006), teenagers' attitudes toward fame (Halpern, 2008), and interactional dynamics of encounters between celebrities and fans (Ferris and Harris, 2011).

The Future of Celebrity

While there is considerable consensus on certain distinctive features of contemporary celebrity, including its recent transformations, quite a bit of room remains for empirical investigations of the contours of celebrity as a socially organized system of meaning, status, identification, and pleasure; even with the growth of the 'celebrity studies' field in recent years, theory and speculation on the phenomenon remains more developed than empirical research. Considerable room remains, in fact, for a synthesis of the theoretical conceptualizations and explanations of celebrity culture, and subsequently for theory-driven empirical research that tests and refines those theories. Several areas in particular are likely to prove fruitful for future mixed-methods research. First, audience research can continue not only to document the range and types of audience positions vis-à-vis celebrities, but also to examine various possible explanations for the variance – audience characteristics, for instance, or qualities of different celebrity domains, genres, and types. Second, the process by which the logic of celebrity can and does spread to spheres other than entertainment, and how it may operate differently in those realms, is still not well understood. More systematic panel-data allowing comparisons across institutional domains are needed. Third, it remains the case that nearly all of the literature on celebrity has emerged from, and focused on, the United States and the United Kingdom. Cross-cultural comparative research is a very promising, and almost entirely untapped, source of insight into the cultural, economic, political, and social logic of celebrity. Finally, while it is clear that celebrity production has been transformed by digital technologies and new media – and presumably along with it the experience of celebrity for those encountering it – the contours and impact of these changes have yet to be fully documented, studied, and understood.

See also: Audiences, Media; Entertainment; Film and Video Industry; Hegemony and Cultural Resistance; Journalism; Mass Media and Cultural Identity; Mass Media, Political Economy of; Mass Media, Representations In; Media Effects; Public Sphere and the Media; Reputation; Social Media; Television: General; Television: History.

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