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978-0-521-79486-2 - Fame Games: The Production of Celebrity in Australia

Graeme Turner, Frances Bonner and P. David Marshall

Excerpt

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Chapter 1

Celebrity and the Media

It's the fame game

The name game

It's such a crying shame

Just tell me what's to blame?

Van Morrison, 'New Biography', Back on Top

This book examines a major shift in how the Australian media now operates. The activities of the publicity and promotions industries have been comprehensively incorporated into all aspects of media production: the celebrity story on the news, the preview of the hot new film on *60 Minutes*, the exclusive deals between people in the news and the media outlets who buy the rights to their stories, the advertorials in lifestyle and children's programs, the devotion of whole magazines to circulating 'a little gossip', the alleged agreements on positive media treatment for the Sydney Olympic bid committee. The steady progress of this trend has not gone unnoticed. Those committed to the function of the 'fourth estate' – the media's role as democratic watchdog – have expressed alarm at what appears to be a retreat from the fundamental responsibility of the press to inform and a corresponding increase in the proportion of stories aimed merely at diverting or entertaining their consumers. Whether that is the appropriate way to understand it or not – and we will deal directly with that issue in this book – it is clear that the media's function and its mode of operation have undergone a major redefinition.

It is important to recognise that this is not simply a cyclical shift in patterns of media consumption, a change in fashion affecting what media

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 *Fame Games*

audiences want to read in the newspapers or hear on the radio or watch on television. It is also a change in the system of production: this means that we may need to reassess our assumptions about how stories get into the media, and about how those stories which *do* 'get a run' are represented by the media.

A fundamental factor in this redefinition has been the importance of stories about celebrities – and, increasingly, about Australian celebrities. In Australia, celebrity stories dominate the women's mass-market magazines, they constitute a significant proportion of the content of television news, current affairs and magazine programs, and the rate of their appearance in newspapers has increased dramatically over the last twenty years. There is now an Australian celebrity industry. Where once our celebrity material was overwhelmingly dependent upon Hollywood, or perhaps British entertainment industry organisations like J. C. Williamson's or Rank, now we have our own publicity and promotional industry which supplies media outlets with their staple diet of stories on Australian celebrities, day in and day out. It is time we understood more about this publicity industry: how it works, in whose interests, and what its development might mean for the social function of the media in Australia. That is the objective of this book.

Flashpoints, the everyday, and 'junk journalism'

We used to have great access to great events and report them with Lippmannesque certitude. Now our goal is to tell stories that connect with the way we live. We want to know about the debates happening around the dinner table rather than the Senate committee tables.

Walter Isaacson, Time

It would be hard to exaggerate the pervasiveness of celebrity in the contemporary media. It has been growing for years, and every year brings another reminder of the emotional power of people's connections to figures they know only through their representations in the media. While the generation now in their forties or fifties may be somewhat bemused by the media frenzy around the deaths of Michael Hutchence or Kurt Cobain, they are just as likely to have strong personal memories of the deaths of Buddy Holly or Marilyn Monroe or Elvis Presley or Janis Joplin or John Lennon. It has been clear for many years that our everyday lives can be indelibly marked by celebrity events – deaths, births, marriages, disasters, accidents. The power of a globalised media to saturate all media forms and outlets with the top international story, and the relatively recent but now fundamental importance of the everyday celebrity story for contemporary media producers

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[More information](#)

and consumers, have dramatically enhanced that emotional potential in recent years.

Increasingly, we encounter 'flashpoints' in contemporary culture, where a particular celebrity completely dominates media coverage, producing an excessively focused global public. The death of the Princess of Wales in 1997 was such a flashpoint: the story's exorbitant visibility broke out of all the available classifications. It was simply uncontainable as news, as obituary, as identity politics, as entertainment, as myth or narrative, or as gossip. It dominated the 'quality' newspapers as well as the mass-market magazines and tabloids. Through all these avenues, the images which had created Diana's highly public life – the cover girl, the tabloid telephoto revelations, the official royal video footage, the romances – were replayed and reinterpreted. While many still argue about what it all 'meant', it is undeniable that the live broadcast of the funeral through television networks around the world generated an extraordinary international outpouring of emotion. For a short time, the shrine of flowers at the Kensington Palace gates became as recognisable an international marker of location for television reporters as the White House or 10 Downing Street.

Its almost perfectly symmetrical US counterpart came in 1999: the death of the favourite son of an American 'royal' family, John F. Kennedy Jr, in an airplane crash. Again, coverage on the cable news networks went wall-to-wall; newspapers within the United States and the rest of the world focused with an extraordinary concentration on the assassinated president's only son. In an echo effect of JFK's death over thirty-five years before, the Kennedy family's significance to American public life was retold through a tragic narrative of service and shocking death that was played out in editorials, in a massive number of magazine features and probably most immediately in the television coverage of the four-day search for the plane and the bodies in the waters off Martha's Vineyard. The image of 'John-John' as a 3-year-old saluting at his father's grave was repeated in print and on television in order to reinforce the sentimental significance of his death. Combined with the representation of his wife, Caroline Bessette (also killed in the crash), as, the *Australian* intoned, the 'modern day Garbo',¹ the tragedy was further connected to a thwarted mythic fantasy: the accession of American political royalty to a future presidential throne. Understandable within the United States, one might think, but even in Australia the emotional register of the newspaper and television coverage eschewed any pretence at objectivity in favour of a frank sentimentality.

Most analysts of these flashpoint events would describe them as extraordinary and it would be difficult to disagree. That is their point. It is their disproportionate nature that makes them so important: the scale of their visibility, their overwhelmingly excessive demonstration of the power of the relationship between mass-mediated celebrities and the consumers

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 *Fame Games*

of popular culture. They are also unusual in that, while they were of international interest because they concerned a public persona which had been built through years of careful media management, they were themselves unpredictable, eruptive events which suddenly broke free of this form of management to become 'real' or uncontrolled events – for many, genuinely moving events – within our everyday lives. In such flashpoints, the potential of the modern audience's relationship with a person they know solely through their media representations, but who nevertheless plays a part in their lives, is made vividly, if bewilderingly, apparent.

Of course, most of the time, the celebrity participates in our everyday lives in much more mundane ways than this. Furthermore, and under ordinary circumstances, our access to information about celebrities is strategically regulated in the service of interests which are those of the agent, the promoter, the publicist, the media outlet or the celebrity themselves, rather than those of the consumer. Some examples of the publicity surrounding local celebrities make this clear. In late 1998, Mimi Macpherson, sister of supermodel Elle Macpherson but best known for running a whale-watching business in southern Queensland, appears wearing lingerie in a group cover image for the first issue of the Australian version of British men's magazine *FHM*. This image appears months after her first hosting job on Australian television has ended. In August 1999, the final Stanley Kubrick film, *Eyes Wide Shut*, starring Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman, is released in Australia. During the period preceding its opening, Cruise is photographed watching the South Sydney rugby league team and is the subject of numerous gossip items (dropping into the Balmain pub for a spot of pool with the boys); Kidman appears on more than nine magazine covers, from *Vogue* to *New Idea*, as well as in countless features in newspapers and on television; and the two of them wind up on the cover of *Time* magazine (the film was a Time-Warner production). She laments publicly that 'I'm even sick of seeing me' staring back at her throughout the promotional tour of Australia.

This form of media visibility is in a sense the reverse of the flashpoint, although its cumulative effect is what gives the flashpoints their potential and cultural power. It is a form that is anything but unpredictable and eruptive; it is the product of an incredible amount of energy and resources, all devoted to making such stories appear – in the right place, at the right time, and preferably without costing a cent. How, and in whose interests, such stories appear does vary. The Mimi Macpherson story is the product of a system of publicity that is focused on the professional interests of the personality rather than those of an organisation, such as the network screening Mimi's television series. The *Eyes Wide Shut* stories, in comparison, are evidence of the deployment of an established celebrity in the service of a specific product – the film – and thus in the interests of the producers and distributors rather than, at least in the first instance, those of the stars themselves. Enabling

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[More information](#)

each of these examples, though, is an industrial structure: a professional articulation between the news and entertainment media and the sources of publicity and promotion.

How does the production of celebrity work in Australia? How are celebrity stories generated and placed? What is the function of the agents and managers who orchestrate the kinds of images and stories that *are* placed? What is involved in deciding which personality ultimately makes the cover of *Women's Weekly* or appears exclusively on *60 Minutes* or *A Current Affair*? The answers to these questions reveal a complex and important support industry, filled with media buyers, editors, writers, agents, publicists, managers and promoters who produce the blend of national and international celebrity stories that has become familiar to us all. Through the operations of the 'fame games' in Australia, this cadre of largely unseen workers – in actual fact, an industry within an industry – determines an increasing proportion of our media content.

There are standard points of view within the academy and among media commentators (although there is very little research and almost no information) on the developments examined in this book. The approach taken here can be distinguished both from the conventional lament for the decline of journalism and from usual assumptions about the function of celebrity journalism for its consumers and producers. Our view is that there is a common element which links the flashpoint moments with an industry that supports itself by producing celebrity for everyday consumption. That element is the appeal of the celebrity for media audiences.

The promotion of celebrity has been widely represented – even within the media which depends upon it – as the epitome of the trivialisation of the media, of the duping of contemporary consumers into pathetic relationships with fantasy figures peddled to them through the tabloid press. It has become commonplace for criticism of the news media to deplore the amount and intensity of attention given to the personal lives of celebrities. Bob Franklin's *Newszak and News Media*, for instance, laments the triumph of 'the trivial over the weighty', as the 'intimate relationships of celebrities from soap operas, the world of sport or the royal family are judged more "newsworthy" than the reporting of significant issues and events of international consequence'.² Coverage of celebrities within news and current affairs is widely cited as evidence of a decline in 'hard' news values, the ascendancy of infotainment, and the decline of the press as an independent source of information.

Some of these criticisms express taste preferences which are generally hostile to popular cultural forms, or gender biases which regard the masculine staples of institutional and political news as the most fundamentally important components of the news agenda. Others, however, have significant ethical concerns. Julianne Schultz's *Reviving the Fourth Estate* reports

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 *Fame Games*

findings which indicate that a large number of journalists remain committed to the ideals of 'watchdog journalism', to the media as a fundamental support for the democratic state. Among the factors that journalists perceive as significant threats to these ideals, however, are the rise of what Sylvia Lawson calls 'junk journalism' ('screaming headlines, titillation and pseudo-crises'); the melting of journalists' ethical standards under the heat of competition, and the consequent decline in public respect for the profession (the evidence here includes the popular assumption of the paparazzi's complicity in Diana's death); and the capturing of the industry by promotions and public relations (the role of 'news management').³

Although some of this comment is just as applicable to other commercial spheres (it could be said of business journalism, in general), all of these factors are implicated in the rise of celebrity journalism. The importance of the industry which produces celebrity is directly addressed by Schultz's claim that many journalists have found themselves 'unwitting agents for the distribution of commercially prepared information', while others do little more than simply 'recycle press releases'. Changes within the media industries over a number of years have made certain sectors – the mass-market women's magazines, for instance – structurally dependent on what Schultz calls 'information management',⁴ or what is often (but, as we shall see in Chapter 2, imprecisely) referred to as 'public relations'. Clara Zawawi, too, has published research which tracks the take-up rate of press releases through the media and finds that their success rate is sufficiently high to challenge our assumptions about the role of journalism, rather than that of publicity or public relations, in generating and selecting media content.⁵

These are legitimate considerations, which will be directly addressed in the following chapters. However, there are countervailing views which are especially pertinent to the cultural role played by celebrities in this changing media environment. Catharine Lumby, McKenzie Wark, David Marshall and John Hartley all suggest that there is more to this trend than simply an opportunistic, ethically relaxed response to an increased intensity in competition. Rather, they see it as evidence of a change in the function of the media generally, as it moves away from a primary role of providing information to that of more directly and fundamentally participating in the cultural construction of social identity. Hartley, in particular, has proposed that the popular media has created a 'postmodern public sphere' which challenges traditional definitions of what constitutes useful or appropriate knowledge about public affairs. In their place are new 'ways of forming the public, and of communicating and sustaining what it means to be the public'.⁶ The source of these new kinds of knowledges is not the experts or the social elites, but the popular media.

This leads us, briefly, into a slightly specialised group of debates. Hartley's critique of a 'traditional public sphere' – where public debate is dominated by

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Celebrity and the Media* 7

social, cultural or institutional elites – is a response to Jurgen Habermas' account of the structure of public debate in England during a golden period in the eighteenth century.⁷ Centred around a culturally homogeneous group of Enlightenment intellectuals committed to the process of rational debate, their ideas circulating among a limited but influential public, Habermas' ideal public sphere offers us a snapshot of what can happen when cultural leadership is comfortably vested in an educated and privileged elite. Hartley argues that Habermas' advocacy of this ideal, beguiling as it is, radically overplays the extent to which the Enlightenment public sphere was in fact 'achieved as an institutional and socially pervasive reality'.⁸ Others, too, have noted its exclusive social structure and coterie status within a society where literacy was not universal and where women were not admitted to public debate.⁹

Most damaging, for Hartley, the elitist idealism which underpins nostalgia for this eighteenth century version of the public sphere is particularly disabling for understanding the popular cultural forms of today. It has proven, he says, 'to be an impediment to understanding the role that the popular media do play in producing and distributing knowledge'.¹⁰ To misunderstand the role of the popular media is to ignore the fact that the 'major contemporary political issues' of today (environmental, ethnic, sexual and youth movements, for instance) all arose outside the traditional public sphere. Instead of being generated through intellectual, social or political elites, they were 'informed, shaped, developed and contested within the privatised public sphere of suburban media consumerism'.¹¹

There are others who also defend the contribution of the suburban media consumer. Drawing on feminist cultural studies approaches, Lumby contests the view that we are witnessing the breakdown of serious debate in the media and culture because of, for instance, the contemporary 'cult of celebrity' identified with the mass or tabloid media.¹² Instead, we are witnessing a redefinition of what counts as interesting to media consumers, which reclaims the importance of the domestic, the feminine, the private and the personal. As a result,

[the] past few decades have seen an overwhelming democratisation of the media – a diversification not only of voices, but of ways of speaking about personal, social and political life ... Contrary to the common view that the global mass media has suppressed political speech and replaced it with commercially viable drivel, I argue that the contemporary media sphere constitutes a highly diverse and inclusive forum in which a host of important social issues once deemed apolitical, trivial or personal are now being aired.¹³

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 *Fame Games*

Using Ruth Barcan's essay from the *Planet Diana* collection,¹⁴ Lumby argues that an event such as Diana's death and the 'global mourning' it occasioned demonstrates that there has been a significant change in the structure of the popular 'media sphere'. The whole point of Diana's appeal is that it was 'grounded in the way her image transgressed the split between the public and the private, the highbrow and the lowbrow, the quality press and the tabloid weeklies'.¹⁵ The global character of the mass media event, and the apparent 'reality' of so many people's response to the death of a woman they had never met, suggested that other structures were losing their definition as well:

Rather than seeing the massive response to Diana's death as an extension of 'real life' or local emotions to a figure known only via the global media, we can also see it is as a sign of a subtle but important reversal of the relationship between these two zones [the global and the local]. In a world where our sense of reality is constantly filtered and informed by the media, media celebrities come to seem literally larger than life. As one man said in a radio talkback session, 'I didn't cry this much when my wife died'. His remark illustrates a strange possibility: that the vast media coverage of Diana rendered her more real to many people than real life itself.¹⁶

More than those who tend to write off such details merely as symptoms of media consumers' stupidity, Lumby's work asks us to take fresh angles of approach to the significance of celebrity gossip, public confessionals and the emergence of media populism – 'life in a tabloid world', as she calls it – that at least poses the possibility that the media is serving a different function for us now than it did twenty years ago. The connection between celebrities and the personal identities of consumers is one of the provocations that she offers for considering such a possibility.

If such readings of the contemporary function of the media are at all suggestive – and we think they are – then it becomes extremely important to closely consider what kinds of cultural functions media representations of celebrities might be serving.

The meaning and significance of celebrity

All around me were women who seemed to be wanting gossip; they wanted to know more about Elvis, and his first grandchild, and Elizabeth Taylor, and Hazel Hawke, weddings on *A Country Practice* ... nothing nasty; not the horror stuff.

Nene King, Woman's Day

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

The concept of celebrity is a little slippery, partly because its constitutive discourses have leaked into such a wide range of media formats and practices (not to mention everyday life: the best soccer player in the local under-10s is widely referred to as 'a legend', while his 10-year-old sister wins a shopping centre competition for a Spice Girl look-alike by lip-synching to 'Do You Wanna Be My Lover'). Today, we hardly notice the high degree of personalisation that is used routinely within media reports as a means of producing drama. Further, given that news necessarily individuates its subjects, foregrounding the major players in all kinds of stories (perfectly ordinary businessmen, for instance, become 'corporate raiders' whose dealings are injected with personality), it can be difficult to satisfactorily determine what is a celebrity story and what is not. There is a syllogistic logic lurking behind discussions of celebrity: celebrities are people the public is interested in; if the public is interested in this person, they are a celebrity; therefore, anyone the public is interested in is a celebrity. Alberoni's well-known account of 'stars' reads a little like that when he claims that they are especially remarkable, not because they possess a particular level of economic, political or religious power but because 'their doings and ways of life arouse considerable interest'.¹⁷ While they enjoy some of the social privileges of an elite, however, Alberoni argues that they are, institutionally, a 'powerless elite'. Celebrities, to some extent then, are the objects of an interest over which they have no control.

Control, of course, is exactly what the celebrity industry aims to achieve. And it is possible to see the discourses of celebrity – the visual, verbal and rhetorical means of signifying celebrity in the media – as accessing power, not surrendering it. John Langer has implied precisely that by pointing out that even those who *do* possess institutional power can – and do – choose to represent themselves through the modes used to represent celebrities. Politicians are surrounded by party press officers, or 'spin doctors', intent on massaging the political message reaching the electorate. At the same time, the press officers are concerned with constructing the politician's personal image. Especially where it concerns the representation of political leaders, the construction of the political image – as distinct from the marketing of political policies – is indistinguishable from the marketing of the latest film or CD. The promotion of former premier Jeff Kennett, through the jeff.com celebrity website during the 1999 Victorian election, is a precise demonstration of this point. As his fate in that election also demonstrates, however, the deployment of practices used within the celebrity industry, while thoroughly integrated into the contemporary performance of politics, does not necessarily guarantee success in terms of either votes or consumption. Federal politicians Amanda Vanstone and Natasha Stott Despoja have both promoted themselves through, for instance, appearances on *Good News Week*, but only Stott Despoja is a celebrity.

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[More information](#)



Newsagency windows advertising magazines, using posters of their covers dominated by famous faces