

MAMAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

Stars in their Eyes: Magazines and Celebrity Content

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The hero was distinguished by his achievement; the celebrity by his image or trademark. The hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media. The hero was a big man; the celebrity is a big name (Boorstin 61).

Introduction

Evidence of North America's cultural obsession with celebrity is as close as your local newsstand. Across display racks, magazine covers feature photos and stories about celebrities. In today's highly competitive and increasingly segmented marketplace, there are seemingly as many magazine covers available as there are famous faces to fill them. Conceived and packaged as a consumable product that is dependent upon, but also shapes, the tastes of its readers, magazines have long been recognized as "more selective of their audience and content, more 'packaged,' more worldly" than other print media due to their well-established use of readership surveys and other market research tools as a means to deliver material that not only interests readers, but also attracts advertisers (Coyle 41). Through this

process, the magazine “shapes habitual audiences around common needs and interests” (Ohmann 4).

The purpose of this research paper is to examine the celebrity phenomenon as it relates to consumer magazines produced in the United States. Boorstin’s definition of the term celebrity is a broad one, encompassing all persons who are known simply for their “well-knownness,” regardless of vocation (Boorstin 57). For the purposes of this paper, this classification will be abridged, focussing solely on well-known persons or celebrities engaged in the dramatic arts. George Simmel, a first generation German sociologist whose work has had a seminal influence on the development of modern philosophy and sociology, addresses the role of the actor in shaping public opinion and, in turn, reality. More recently, scholars across a diversity of fields from sociology to film studies, such as Alberoni, Dyer, Gamson, Kellner, and Moran, have examined the influence of celebrities on societal values and culture. Film critic Richard Schickel has gone so far as to call celebrity “possibly the – most vital shaping (that is to say, distorting force) in our society” (xi).

Drawing on the work of these celebrity theorists and literature in the field of magazine and communication studies, the intent of this analysis is to explore the following research questions: (i) Why do magazines feature celebrities?; and (ii) What imprint does this celebrity coverage leave on culture?

In answering the research questions posed above, this paper will focus primarily on three consumer magazines aimed at distinct audiences: *Gentlemen's Quarterly (GQ)*, *Marie Claire*, and *Vanity Fair*. Billed as “the authority on men’s style and fashion,” GQ is a monthly men’s publication targeting “affluent successful men who care about style and design who want to engage the world” (Condé Nast). *Marie Claire* is a monthly women’s publication geared to “the woman of substance with an eye for style” featuring articles on fashion and beauty alongside coverage of global women’s issues (Hearst Magazines). *Vanity Fair* purports to capture “the people, places and ideas that are defining modern culture” (Condé Nast) and is classified by the Standard Rate and Data Service (SRDS), the agency that provides media rates and data to media planners and publishers in the United States, as a “general editorial” magazine. Based on this information alone, it would appear that these magazines have very little in common. However, despite their diverse audiences, all three often feature photographs and articles about celebrities as a major selling point. It can be argued that these magazines have utilized celebrity to great success – all three publications have paid circulations of more than 800,000 copies (Audit Bureau of Circulations).

As magazines of varying genres attempt to differentiate themselves from their competitors through the provision of editorial content designed to appeal to a distinct readership, they are often drawn toward the proven selling power of

celebrity related subject matter. Regardless of whether they attribute journalistic value to such content, editors who want their magazines to be competitive must embrace celebrity in their magazines or face potentially dire economic consequences. While on the surface the shift toward celebrity coverage in magazines appears to have been brought about solely by economic necessity, it can also be seen as the product of technological and societal changes that have resulted in an increasingly fragmented media audience. In this context, celebrities have emerged as a bridge or link, serving to consolidate audiences around common themes while at the same time boosting the economic fortunes of magazine publishers and marketers.

With so many magazines vying for celebrity-related material, the marketers and public relations practitioners whose job is to promote and control the public representations of the famous and their associated endeavours – such as films, consumer goods, or the image of the celebrity as a product in itself – are placed in a position of power. If one publication is unwilling to meet their demands with regard to how their clients will be portrayed in a magazine's photos and text, another will surely acquiesce. In this environment editors are at a disadvantage, their notions of journalistic integrity subject to the whims of the public relations industry in their quest to obtain the celebrity content needed to attract readers and advertisers to their publications.

While it is apparent that both marketers and editors are trafficking in celebrity as a means to sell products, what is it about celebrities that keeps readers buying month after month? As I will argue, it is not the promotional aspects of celebrity profiles and photo spreads that sustain the interest of readers, but the highly personalized elements these texts contain. Through the pages of magazines, readers are provided with a glimpse into the lives of the famous, revealing information that can be applied to their own lives and in their social interactions with others. It can be argued that through their exemplary status, celebrities provide insight into broader cultural and societal values while at the same time providing a model of success for audiences to contemplate and emulate. In this way, the interplay between celebrities and magazines can be seen to have far-reaching societal effects. According to Schmidt, it is “through this delicate interrelationship, of the reader, the word, and the world of economic and political reality, the function of magazines as accurate imprints of American culture is validated” (648). Abrahamson and Kitch develop this concept further, emphasizing the social functions of journalism to unify “readers into communities and nations, articulating and affirming group values and identity, and drawing on and building collective memory” (Kitch 2003). These notions of the broader cultural function of magazines raise the following question: If celebrity-saturated magazines are indeed imprints of American culture, what is their legacy?

A Recent History of Magazines

In order to understand the U.S. magazine industry as it exists today, it is necessary to examine the economic and social developments that have contributed to the explosion not only in the volume of celebrity-focussed coverage, but also in the number of magazines available and the diverse readerships they serve. Readers of American consumer magazines have a vast array of publications to choose from in an increasingly segmented media marketplace containing magazines devoted to virtually every interest and vocation. In the last decade alone, the number of consumer magazines produced in the United States has increased by close to 3,000. In 2004, the total number of consumer titles available approached 19,000 (Magazine Publishers of America). While this bodes well for consumers, it has resulted in a highly competitive environment where magazine producers strive to cultivate a distinct readership as a means to secure a stable source of circulation and advertising generated revenue.

The trend toward specialization in the U.S. magazine industry has its roots in the post-war era, with the rise of television. Audiences of the time had a new source of entertainment and information available to them in their homes, resulting in increased competition among media producers for both attention spans and advertising dollars. According to magazine historians such as Tebbel and Zuckerman, it was the increasingly hostile economic climate of the

1950s brought about by television and compounded by rising production costs that resulted in the eventual demise of *Collier's*, *Ladies Home Journal*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*, previously successful publications that had served as models for countless other magazines. In this hostile economic environment, editors and publishers had to develop new means of securing reader and advertiser allegiance, in some cases resorting to lowering cover prices to expand their circulation. As Abrahamson points out in his study of the post-war periodical, this strategy based on the faulty logic of "ever-increasing circulation," served only to worsen the situation by focussing on enlarging readership (and hence production costs) rather than optimizing per-issue advertising revenue (19). A new approach was required, one that departed from traditional mass audience-based models. It came in the form of niche-based or special interest publications that were aimed at securing a specific rather than mass audience. In this way, specialized publications were able to maximize their appeal to advertisers seeking to reach a select demographic group with their messages. This, coupled with advances in printing technologies, allowed magazines to cap their circulations and lower their production costs while at the same time increasing profit margins. While Tebbel and Zuckerman focus their attentions on the economic factors that transformed the post-war magazine industry, Abrahamson suggests that cultural aspects also played a part in the demise of the general interest magazine giants of the 1950s. He argues that their

success hinged largely “on their capacity to underscore the mainstream values of their time” serving as consensus builders and enforcers of the cultural status quo, a mandate that ran against the grain of the freewheeling sociocultural climate of the 1960s (Abrahamson 16).

The reinvention of *Cosmopolitan* in 1965 provides an example of how this new cultural outlook shaped the development of magazines. Previously a staid publication known for its serialized fiction, the first revamped edition of the magazine under the tutelage of new editor Helen Gurley Brown featured a bosomy model on its cover and articles relating to self-help and sexuality targeted to an audience of young, single career women. “Brown’s mix worked, perhaps appealing more to women’s imaginations than to the way they actually ran their lives” and increased the then-faltering magazine’s circulation by two million over the next fifteen years (Zuckerman 225). It was an approach that would spawn many imitators and in some aspects continues to shape women’s magazines today. The permissive cultural atmosphere of the 1960s, coupled with Americans increasing disposable income and leisure time, also set the stage for the debut of new publications such as *Car and Driver* and *Popular Photography*. These periodicals were aimed at providing readers with specialized information on various hobbies and pursuits, an abrupt departure from the general interest fare found in mass audience oriented publications.

The trend toward specialization in the magazine industry is reflected in the explosion of new titles that occurred between 1950 and 1980. According to Compaine, during this period the total number of periodicals (both consumer and trade) published in the United States increased by 56 per cent (8). Between 1973 and 1980, periodical publishing represented the fastest growing segment of the print media industry with magazines accounting for one quarter of all print media shipments (Compaine 7). While this period represented unprecedented growth for periodicals aimed at niche audiences, it also marked the departure or restructuring of magazines such as *Look* and *Life*, publications that in their heyday appeared destined for long-term success.

In an age when the media audience was fragmenting, switching to television or publications geared to more specific interests, an unlikely candidate emerged as the magazine success story of the decade. *People*, a weekly publication “as mass as they came,” focussing on celebrities, popular culture, and other general interest fare, launched in 1974 with widespread success (Powers 76). The magazine’s sample run of 1.4 million copies (featuring actor Mia Farrow on the cover) sold an unprecedented 85 per cent based on the strength of newsstand sales alone. While audiences snapped up *People*’s irreverent mix of lifestyle and celebrity focussed content, the “derision came thick and fast” from media pundits (Powers 76). One *New York Times* columnist went so far as to call the new magazine “an insult to mass

audiences" (Angeletti 372). But while industry insiders were quick to ridicule the publication's content, its balance sheet was no cause for disdain. *People* earned a profit within 18 months of its launch and by October of 1975 the magazine was selling more than a million copies a week, circulation generated almost entirely from newsstand sales. In the following four years, circulation increased to 2.5 million and the magazine's profits more than quadrupled to \$17 million, a level comparable to established publications such as *Sports Illustrated* (Angeletti 375).

When asked to define the factors that contributed to *People*'s success, founding editor Richard Stolley partially attributed it to the vacuum created in the industry following the departure of *Life* and *Look*. These had been "picture magazines" that relied heavily on photographic content, a *People* staple from the beginning. Stolley went further to suggest that the magazine's personality driven content provided an alternative to the issue-oriented coverage common in many American magazines of the day and in some aspects tapped into an emerging zeitgeist. "There was a sociological, psychological climate that worked for us. This was the real beginning of the Me Decade" (Angeletti 376). The personality journalism that was *People*'s trademark complimented this trend, covering issues such as religion, finances, and sexuality through the framework of famous people's personal lives. As Stolley points out, "The counterpart of the Me Decade was the You Decade, and that meant more and

more curiosity about other people and their lives” (Angeletti 376). In this way, cultural factors set the stage for the success of magazines organized around the provision of celebrity photos and profile articles, which offer a steady stream of personalized content to satisfy the voyeuristic cravings of the audience.

While Stolley attributed *People*’s popularity to good timing, in the following decades other editors replicated his success using publications with seemingly disparate audiences and mandates as their vehicles. Tina Brown is credited with rejuvenating the flagging fortunes of *Vanity Fair* in the 1980s, following its lacklustre re-launch in 1983 as a high-brow literary magazine which featured illustrations by popular artists or portraits of authors such as Italo Calvino, Francine du Plessix Gray, and Susan Sontag on its covers. Under Brown’s tutelage the magazine switched focus, placing Hollywood celebrities front and centre. Her first restructured issue featured a cover shot of actor Darryl Hannah blindfolded and holding two Oscar statuettes. During Brown’s eight years as editor, *Vanity Fair*’s circulation more than doubled from 400,000 to 1.2 million, making it one of the most popular magazines of the decade. In 1992, Brown was called upon to work her magic again, this time to boost the fortunes of *The New Yorker*, “a great cultural institution, but one that was defiantly anachronistic.” A repository of elite culture and urban sophistication, it was a publication celebrated for its devotion to the written word and its unwillingness to bend to the demands of the “age of image and sound bite” as

a means to pander to profitable mainstream tastes (Douglas B7). Brown's appointment as editor incensed academics and industry insiders alike, who expressed concern that the content of the publication would suffer at the cost of increased circulation and ad revenue (Weintraub 22). During her tenure, the magazine placed a new emphasis on shorter stories and more pictures and introduced advertorial-based content that tested editorial guidelines set by the American Society of Magazine Editors (Coyle 40). Old-guard *New Yorker* readers were not sorry to see her leave the editor's post in 1998, claiming "under Brown's leadership, the magazine succumbed to the cult of celebrity" (Douglas B7).

While Brown is associated with the "celebritization" of magazine content in the 1980s and early 1990s, more recently Bonnie Fuller has assumed that mantle. Fuller, who replaced Gurley Brown at the helm of *Cosmopolitan* in 1996, is known for making over magazines by using a mixture of "more visuals, and fewer words, more celebrities and fewer serious articles," a technique called the "Fuller effect" (Davidowitz 51). Fuller has employed this strategy with great success at *Glamour*, *Marie Claire*, and *YM*, boosting circulation and advertising revenue in the process. Fuller's first issue of *Glamour* (January 1999) sold 16.2 per cent more than the same issue a year earlier, becoming the magazine's best overall seller in nearly three years. Of particular note is Fuller's penchant for celebrity photos. Her second issue as *Glamour's* editor

featured more than twice as many pictures of celebrities as the same issue a year earlier (Davidowitz 51).

Not to be left behind, publications aimed at a male audience began embracing the trend of increased celebrity content and less serious journalism. It should be noted that gender played a major role in shaping the magazine industry in the 1990s. A ten-year longitudinal study of 300 magazines (a follow-up to a similar study conducted ten years earlier) found that 80 per cent of publications were targeted to either a predominantly male or female audience. While ten years earlier the circulation of women's publications was 50 per cent more than their male counterparts, the gap closed significantly in the 1990s, with male readership rising by nearly 50 million (Abrahamson 2003). Crewe examines the burgeoning market for men's magazines in Britain and the explosion of "lad culture" with the launch of publications such as *loaded*, *FHM*, *Maxim*, and *Men's Health*. These magazines, aimed at a young urban audience, are characterized by their promotion of highly sexualized images of starlets and the assertion of "masculine heterosexual scripts" seeking to "lay bare the myth of the sensitive caring, emotionally balanced, non-sexist, non-aggressive New Man" and replace him with "a New Man who can't quite shake off his outmoded, but snug fitting laddishness" (Crewe 12). This "new man" and the publications that cater to him have been a boon to the

industry, creating a vehicle for advertisers to reach a previously unreachable young male demographic.

The success of British men's magazines such as *Maxim* was a phenomenon later replicated in the United States with the release of American versions of these titles. Lambaise and Reichart examine the influence of these publications on the U.S. market in their study of the so-called "*Maxim* effect." Based on the results of a content analysis of the covers of *GQ*, *Details*, *Esquire*, and *Rolling Stone* before and after the arrival of the British import, they argue that since *Maxim*'s American debut these publications have adopted the magazine's cover formula of "one part image of a vaguely familiar B-list actor, sexually dressed and posed; and one part text, both sensational and salacious" in an attempt to match *Maxim*'s success. The authors admit that the changes observed in the four publications cannot be attributed to *Maxim* alone and that "complex economic factors, cultural trends, and editorial personalities" all play a role in shaping any magazine's content and marketing strategies (Lambaise 9).

One factor greatly affecting the content of magazines is the public relations industry whose efforts focus primarily on using the mass media as a tool for manufacturing the buzz around a product or person. In his look at celebrity in contemporary America, Joshua Gamson identifies the early 1970s as the period in which "outlets for publicity...exploded with the success of

magazine and newspaper writing about 'people' and 'personality' and more recently, broadcast 'infotainment'" (43). This potent combination of mass media and advertising as a means to sell a product draws strong parallels to Adorno and Horkheimer's theory of the culture industry. In *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*, they use the term "culture industry" to refer to the production of mass culture that occurs in twentieth-century capitalist societies. Building on the theory of reification developed by Georg Lukács (which concerns itself with the process whereby social relationships become commodified) they argue that the culture industry, through its use of mass media and advertising, has transformed the use-value of culture commodities (the particular usefulness consumers derive from them) into a product that is manufactured by the capitalist system in contemporary society. In this way, the culture industry is seen to transcend the promotion of individual products and act as an endorsement for the entire capitalist lifestyle itself. Through the machinery of the culture industry, "the public is catered for with a hierarchical range of mass-produced products of varying quality, thus advancing the rule of complete quantification" (Horkheimer 123). Though catering to consumers of different types, these cultural products take on a kind of sameness that serves to reinforce and reflect positively on capitalist society. In this way, Horkheimer and Adorno claim there exists an "agreement – or at least the determination of all executive authorities not to produce or sanction anything that in any way

differs from their own rules, their own ideas about consumers, or above all themselves" (122). In this case, the product, specifically the glamorous celebrity lifestyle, can be seen as an example of capitalist success. Gamson's analysis, however, makes an interesting detour from these tried and true paths, suggesting that the modern public relations industry has moved beyond promotion of celebrities themselves as products, and rather, "what is developed and sold is the capacity to command attention" (Gamson 58). A service industry of sorts has developed to provide media outlets with the celebrity content they need to draw readers. In this "puppet master-controlled planet of celebrity journalism," celebrity publicists hold all the cards, often willingly handed to them by editors who will do whatever it takes (including sacrificing journalistic integrity) to secure a sales-boosting celebrity for their magazine (Seipp 22).

The brief history presented here provides possible explanations for the rise of celebrity coverage in magazines. The fragmenting landscape of the industry and widespread reader interest in stories about the lives of public figures, coupled with the success of titles such as *People* and the efforts of the public relations industry to capitalize on the trend, combined to create a climate conducive to increased celebrity coverage by magazines. In the sections to follow, the celebrity/magazine phenomenon will be examined as it applies to three current consumer publications, using textual analysis as a means to

further investigate the impetus behind the steady production of heavily “celebritized” magazines and the basis of readers’ enduring interest in publications carrying this type of content. This line of investigation is valuable for the study of celebrities and their use by magazines, as it addresses not only the motives of marketers and editors, but also the possible audience gratifications that are obtained through the consumption of celebrity-based content.

The Drawing Power of Celebrities

A host of scholars, including Gitlin, Kellner, and Postman, decry soft journalistic coverage of lifestyle, celebrity, and service issues as the so-called “kudzu of content,” choking off “hard,” issue-oriented coverage and eroding journalistic content (Coyle 37). Others, such as noted sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and author David Gritten, argue that such coverage is, in many cases, intrinsic to the profession of modern journalism and culture as a whole. In his study of the celebrity phenomenon, Gritten suggests that the spread of personality journalism of the type featured in magazines such as *People* can be attributed to a prevailing tendency across all media “to reduce all areas of life to their ‘human interest’ and entertainment value” (10). Bourdieu, writing nearly a decade earlier on the influence of television, goes so far as to suggest that we live in “a world ruled by fear of being boring and anxiety about being

amusing at all costs.” In this culture, real information and analysis lose out to coverage of entertaining subject matter that places few, if any, demands on the audience and above all, is as inclusive as possible (Bourdieu, *Television* 3): “Everybody knows the ‘law,’ that if a newspaper or other news vehicle wants to reach a broad public, it has to dispense with sharp edges and anything that might divide or exclude readers (just think about *Paris-Match*, or, in the U.S., *Life* magazine)” (Bourdieu, *Television* 44).

The modern magazine enjoys dual status as a consumer product that relies on the same audience whose taste it shapes. In recounting the recent history of magazines, it is obvious that the trend toward increased celebrity coverage has left its mark on the industry. But what imprint, if any, does it leave on the audience or culture as a whole? As suggested by Schmidt, any attempt to discern the impression celebrity coverage leaves on culture would be incomplete without an attempt to assess the rationale of the audience, the individual magazine reader, for consuming this type of content. Intrinsic to discussions of the reader is an examination of the celebrity-focussed subject matter routinely featured in many of today’s popular magazines. A thorough analysis of the thousands of consumer publications available to North American readers for all traces of celebrity coverage would be an exhausting if not impossible task. For the sake of time and clarity, I must narrow the field. Hence, this paper looks at the January and February 2005 issues of three

popular monthly magazines, *Gentlemen's Quarterly* (GQ), *Marie Claire*, and *Vanity Fair*. As noted previously, *Vanity Fair* is categorized by the Standard Rate and Data Service (SRDS) as a "general interest magazine," while GQ is defined as a "men's magazine" and *Marie Claire* as a "women's magazine," respectively (Audit Bureau of Circulations). *Marie Claire* attracts the youngest demographic segment (median age 30.1), while *Vanity Fair* attracts the oldest (median age 38.6). *Vanity Fair* appeals to readers with the highest household income (average \$76,422) and GQ attracts readers with the lowest (median income \$65,450) (Condé Nast, Hearst Magazines).

In their lofty mission statements, each of these magazines conveys a desire to connect to a global audience through their coverage of fashion, style, ideas, and issues. None expressly mention the coverage of contemporary celebrities, most commonly drawn from the fields of entertainment (specifically film and television) as intrinsic to their goals. *Vanity Fair* comes closest with its mention of people and their role in defining modern culture. Editor Carter's explicit use of the term biography also alludes to a distinctly human focus. It should be noted here that in its coverage of modern culture *Vanity Fair* is known for its decidedly low/high-brow content, a carryover from its 1980s reinvention. Stories about politics, world affairs, and art routinely appear alongside articles on the latest releases in popular music and cinema. In this way, *Vanity Fair* "has been extremely influential in bringing some of the

elements of entertainment celebrity into the sphere of high culture” (Moran 43). What is important in the selection of *GQ*, *Marie Claire*, and *Vanity Fair* as texts for analysis is that, unlike magazines such as *People* and *InStyle*, these publications do not claim celebrity coverage as part of their editorial mandates yet feature it prominently on a regular basis. In the case of *Marie Claire*, for example, the magazine’s media kit (used primarily as a tool to attract advertisers) lists “lifestyle and entertainment” as comprising only four per cent of the publication’s editorial mix (Hearst Magazines). An examination of *GQ*, *Marie Claire*, and *Vanity Fair*, publications that carry diverse subject matter catering to different genders, interests, and social classes, can show how celebrity content has become an integral part of magazines, regardless of a publication’s editorial classification or mandate, while illustrating the different approaches employed by magazines in the presentation of this material.

From Cover to Cover

As demonstrated by the success of magazines such as *People*, coverage of celebrities can be a highly profitable enterprise, acting as a means to attract readers and, in turn, the money of advertisers who will pay for the opportunity to reach those readers by purchasing magazine advertising space. Condé Nast-owned *Lucky*, “the magazine about shopping,” provides a more recent example of this phenomenon. The magazine achieved respectable circulation numbers soon after its debut in 2000, opting to feature models

rather than celebrities in an attempt to differentiate itself from *InStyle*, a shopping/fashion hybrid which religiously features famous faces in keeping with its mandate to report on “celebrity style.” As an aside, these types of shopping-oriented publications have faced widespread criticism in the industry, with one journalist going so far as to refer to the meteoric rise of these titles as symptomatic of the “soul death” of American culture (Fine S7). Despite *Lucky*’s already widespread success, the magazine’s editors abruptly revised their “models only” cover policy in 2003. Within a year, circulation broke the one million barrier and newsstand sales rose 20 per cent. What accounts for the success of such a strategy? Notes one *Lucky* editor, “I think the right celebrity on your cover can attract readers who’ve never picked up your magazine before” (Lackie L4).

A celebrity-dependent cover strategy is one that many magazines are adopting as a means of attracting readers. A content analysis of 130 consumer publications published between January and December 2004 revealed that 39.6 per cent featured entertainment or celebrity related content on their covers. Of this percentage, nearly half (46.5 per cent) were cinema notables, followed by famous television and radio personalities (27.7 per cent) and celebrities from the fields of music and dance (21.5 per cent). A miscellany of content labelled as “other” (12.9 per cent) and covers related to business and industry (7.8 per cent) rounded out the top three cover subjects for the year (Hall’s

Magazine Reports Inc.). With so many publications vying for famous faces, acquiring celebrity cache can come at the cost of editorial integrity. In her behind-the-scenes look at celebrity journalism, Catherine Seipp describes a world in which editorial decisions on the content of stories and photos no longer rest with editors, but with celebrity publicists intent on controlling every aspect of famous clients' images to ensure they are presented in the best light possible. Often this authority is not forcibly taken but willingly given by an editor who will sacrifice anything (even journalistic standards) to have a circulation-boosting celebrity on the cover of a magazine. Through this process, the editor is recast in the role of marketer, "breaching the church-state wall" that has traditionally separated editorial functions from the business aspects of publishing (Coyle 38). Kathleen Valley, an associate professor at the Harvard Business School who has engaged in participant observation studies of newsrooms, suggests that this breach is the result of the emergence of a new marketing-oriented model that is challenging traditional journalistic models: "The traditional journalism model tells people what they need to know. The new marketing model tells people what they think they want to know" (Coyle 38). Rather than relying on traditional journalistic standards of newsworthiness as a means to decide what to publish, editors concentrate on discerning the wants and needs of advertisers and readers through surveys and other market

research methods and then shape content accordingly to conform to those requirements.

The emergence of this new model, which some would argue is not new at all, can also be seen as the natural progression of an already established relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners. According to Gamson, "As the daily practices and interests of PR operatives and journalists, aligned since the 1920s, moved closer...arenas traditionally perceived as non-entertainment (news in particular) have come to depend on the practices of the entertainment industry and celebrity in particular" (42).

Regardless of the exact origins of the symbiotic relationship that currently exists between journalists and public relations practitioners, it is apparent that they each have a role in determining the photos and stories that are featured in the pages of many current magazines. In the case of celebrities, the traditional function of the publicist has also been usurped, replaced by the celebrity caster "a rapidly growing – and lucrative – niche occupation for a world gone mad for famous people" (Lackie L4). Agencies have sprung up that specialize in nothing but celebrity casting for magazines and fashion houses, matching famous faces with the designers and editors who desire them as tools to attract both the attention and dollars of readers. It is the job of casters to meet with editors to discuss the "personality" of a magazine and the celebrities that best embody the image a publication would like to project. The caster then

researches a celebrity's upcoming schedule of film releases and other ventures, looking for a synergistic match that will serve both the interests of the star and the publication, before contacting the celebrity's publicist. Previously it was customary for editors to wrangle cover subjects themselves; now they often have no contact with a celebrity prior to a photo shoot or event. Among the famous faces credited with helping to sell the most magazines in 2004 are the so-called "Super 8," actors and singers Jennifer Aniston, Beyoncé, Angelina Jolie, Nicole Kidman, Jennifer Lopez, Gwyneth Paltrow, Julia Roberts, and Britney Spears. The secret of their success is their "appeal to the widest audience. They sell to women of all age categories, men, different ethnic groups" (Lackie L4).

GQ, *Marie Claire*, and *Vanity Fair*, the magazines chosen for this study, are no exception to the celebrity-only cover trend. While none of the consecutive issues selected for analysis feature members of the "Super 8" on their covers, the majority depict actors known primarily for their cinematic work. In covers that feature one individual rather than a group (as is the case for all the *GQ* and *Marie Claire* issues), female subjects predominate. The January 2005 issue of *GQ* showcases an image of film actor Kate Bosworth in a bath tub, a somewhat incongruous cover choice for a magazine that purports to be about men's style and fashion but in keeping with Lambaise and Reichert's analysis of the *Maxim* effect. In contrast, the following issue of *GQ* features a male cover

subject, Jamie Foxx, a thirty-something comedian/actor who has garnered recent acclaim for his dramatic cinematic roles. Despite the notable absence of any mention of celebrities in the magazine's editorial statement, the cover of the January issue of *Marie Claire* depicts Mischa Barton, an actor known for her role in a popular television series. The following month, actor Jennifer Garner (also primarily recognized for her work in television, but also in film) is featured on *Marie Claire*'s cover.

As the first thing they see, the images and text customarily featured on the covers of magazines play a key role in enticing readers to choose one publication over another in today's crowded print landscape. Visually, the covers of the selected issues of both *GQ* and *Marie Claire* provide textbook examples of the design template favoured by the magazine industry. All feature striking images that have an almost "poster like appearance" and are closely cropped, showing little if any background, to create an almost immediate feeling of intimacy with readers. This sense of familiarity is enhanced by the positioning of the cover subject in such a way as to create the illusion of direct eye contact with the potential consumer, a method often employed with great success by fashion magazines (Johanek 117). The use of striking language and bold type complements images of people "to create a personal connection with readers" (Williams 39). In the case of *Marie Claire*, a coloured background in a tone contrasting or complimenting the masthead, headline type, and cover

subject's outfit, stands in for the realistic backgrounds featured in GQ. In this way, the actors shown on the *Marie Claire* covers appear to inhabit a multicoloured netherworld, while the GQ cover subjects are firmly rooted in this world, pictured lounging against a stucco wall or behind bubbles in a bath tub.

Vanity Fair takes a somewhat different approach. The covers of both issues feature photos by famed celebrity portraitist Annie Leibovitz, whose work has been the focus of numerous art gallery exhibitions and books. Her role as photographer is given prime billing. It is listed in bold type after the name of the journalist responsible for the January cover story and even before the name of the author of the February feature article. The uncharacteristic attention given to the photographer is intentional. Leibovitz's photos have become a trademark of the publication and her status as a renowned photographer is in keeping with the highbrow image the magazine strives to cultivate. The January edition of the magazine showcases a photo of Arnold Schwarzenegger and wife Maria Shriver, identified only by their first names in the accompanying text. Readers are expected to be familiar with Schwarzenegger based on his cinematic exploits or his more recent political career as governor of California. Shriver is acknowledged as the niece of U.S. president John Kennedy and for her work as a television news correspondent. The two are shown seated on a motorcycle in an outdoor beachside setting. The February issue of *Vanity Fair* features a four-page foldout cover depicting the creator of *Star Wars*, filmmaker

George Lucas, surrounded by twenty-one assorted creatures and cast members who appear in the films. The outer panel of the photo is without a cut line and the audience is expected to identify Lucas et al. on the strength of the image alone. For the uninformed, a caption on the innermost cover panel lists their names.

While readers familiar with North American popular culture should have no difficulty identifying the celebrities portrayed on the covers of these magazines, the exact nature of the subject matter contained in the related articles inside the magazine is less obvious given the content of the accompanying cover headlines. For example, while the January GQ headline, "Kate Bosworth cleans up real nice," identifies the actor by name and is a play on the accompanying image of her in a bubble bath, it says little about the type of Bosworth-related material readers will find within the pages of the magazine. The headline of the February issue takes a similar approach, simply stating, "Jamie Foxx takes over." *Marie Claire* employs an even more cryptic headline style in its January edition, posing the question, "Mischa Barton: What's she doing with a newborn baby?" – despite the fact the actor is not pictured with a child or any other signifiers of motherhood. The February issue follows up with the statement, "I'm loving my life right now," set in quotation marks below Jennifer Garner's name, suggesting the quote can be attributed to the actor herself.

Vanity Fair makes use of a similar style in the headline of its January issue, setting the words “Arnold & Maria” in large bold type above a quotation attributed to an unidentified source which reads, “After all of these years we are still engaged with each other, hot for each other, into each other.” The February edition of the magazine hypes “Special Collector’s Edition,” “Exclusive: *Star Wars* spectacular!” and “Bonus historic 4-page foldout cover with all the *Star Wars* greats!” While the idea of a four-panel photo is easy to grasp in its physicality, a reader may be left wondering what exactly constitutes a “spectacular.” According to Gabler, the use of such elevated adjectives in the cover lines of magazines is characteristic of the transitory nature of celebrity as an entity that has “constantly to be renewed, reinvigorated, made relevant. As a consequence, almost every *Vanity Fair* subject [is] cast in terms of superlatives” (150). Although secondary to the cover photo, the drawing power of these headlines cannot be taken lightly. Magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* have gone so far as to devote entire surveys to the topic, asking readers to identify which cover lines would increase, decrease, or have no effect on their decision to read the magazine (iVillage.com).

The covers of all three magazines, with their emphasis on image versus clarity of text, lend support to Gamson’s claim that the product being sold is not the celebrities themselves but rather their ability to command the attention of audiences by appearance alone. In the case of the magazines analyzed here,

the primary undertaking of the celebrity cover photo is to attract readers, a task that is not delegated to the puzzling headlines or obscure photo captions. The value placed on a celebrity's image by magazine producers can be seen as evidence of their considerable symbolic capital, a term used by Bourdieu to describe the accumulated prestige acquired by individuals which serves to elevate them to higher social strata. Unlike economically derived modes of social hierarchy, symbolic capital "is founded on the dialectic of knowledge and recognition" (Bourdieu, *Cultural* 7). Rather than a measure of what an individual owns, symbolic capital is the sum of how well a person is known. As it relates to celebrities, this concept is best expressed in social critic and pioneering celebrity theorist Daniel Boorstin's oft-quoted phrase, "the celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness" (57). According to Moran, the mass audience's attraction to select individuals is symptomatic of a wider pattern that can be applied across media industries "in which the response of consumers [to a product] is stabilized and standardized through the 'name recognition' of certain prominent figures." It is through this process, argues Moran, that "celebrity acts as a market mechanism for monopoly capitalism" (40), schooling the audience in the consumption of products, such as magazines, which are produced and promoted in a consistent manner. James Autry, former editor of *Better Homes and Gardens*, presents the argument from the magazine producer's point of view:

Look at the magazines that have started up to do nothing but celebrity journalism...then consider other magazines like *Ladies' Home Journal*. We have to find "who's hot." Is it going to be Elizabeth Taylor? Is it going to be Princess Di? Kevin Costner? All this has to do with selling magazines. Interestingly enough, very little of *Ladies' Home Journal* has to do with anything other than service, advice about personal issues, relationships and parenting, as well as fashions and foods and other things that go into service magazines. But we're always going to have at least one feature on a celebrity and that celebrity is going to be on the cover. Because that magazine is competing on a newsstand with all the other magazines that have celebrities on the cover (Johnson 342).

Beyond the Image

As has been pointed out by Dyer, Gamson, Moran, and others, Boorstin's depiction of celebrities as essentially one-dimensional entities created by the public relations industry, disseminated by media, and consumed whole by the audience, fails to take into account the content of star images themselves. This simplistic approach, or "manipulation thesis" (14) as Dyer labels it, is reminiscent of early communications models such as the magic bullet or the hypodermic needle, which surmised that audience exposure to media messages could be counted on to produce a direct and uniform effect. An analysis of this type also brings to mind the theory of the culture industry articulated by Adorno and Horkheimer, which has been roundly criticized for placing the audience in the role of "cultural dupe" open to the manipulations of mass media and unable to absorb content in any manner other than what is expressly put forth by cultural producers. While these theories provide a framework for understanding the economic motivations

behind the use of celebrities by magazine producers as a means to cultivate and stabilize demand for their products, they say little, if anything, about their possible uses by consumers or their broader cultural connotations. In this view, “not only are [celebrities] not a phenomenon of consumption (in the sense of demand); they do not have substance or meaning” (Dyer 14). In this vein, Gamson asks: “If celebrities are artificial creations, why should an audience remain attached and lavish attention on their fabricated lives?” (48). The following section will attempt to examine this question, moving past the photographic image on the magazine cover to the journalistic text of the celebrity profile contained within.

According to Martha Nelson, managing editor of *People* magazine, “celebrities have become the friends we all share.” Nelson maintains that her magazine’s focus on celebrities satisfies a deep need among readers, creating a sense of community in a society that has become increasingly segregated with celebrities serving as “our neighbours in an electronic world.” This theme of isolation is explored in the work of sociologist Francesco Alberoni, who maintains that the development of modern industry, coupled with increases in population, urbanization, and mass communication “tends to break down traditional social relationships” creating a complex and differentiated society where commonly held viewpoints are increasingly hard to come by (95). Evidence of this trend can be seen in the magazine industry,

which in the past fifty years has evolved from a mass-oriented audience model to one that is focussed on attracting a multiplicity of readerships, each with their own specific needs and interests. In a world that has become integrated through technologies such as electronic mail and the Internet, while at the same time segregated into disconnected special interest-focussed social units, celebrities provide a common reference point.

The basis of a celebrity's appeal to magazine readers can be found in the relationship that is initiated between the two through the efforts of the media and the public relations industry. Through the medium of the magazine, readers are provided with a window into the private lives of the famous. As noted by Horton and Wohl, the standard techniques employed by fan magazines and publicity pushers alike "is not to make the private life (of a celebrity) an absolute secret – for the interest of the audience cannot be ignored – but to create an acceptable façade of private life as well, a more or less contrived private image of the life behind the contrived public image" (200). Schickel describes the celebrity profile as "the equivalent of a photo in words, an image or emblem by other means" (77). Scanning the celebrity profiles featured in *GQ*, *Marie Claire*, and *Vanity Fair*, the reader is presented with a myriad of details, which can then be combined or discarded at will to create an overall portrait of a particular well-known individual that goes beyond the physical image presented on the covers of these magazines. This process of

absorbing the details of a celebrity's life via the printed page can create the impression among readers that they actually "know" the celebrities they are reading about. It is this link which forms the basis of what Horton and Wohl term the "para-social relationship" between audience and celebrity that "is based upon the implicit agreement between the performer and the viewer that they will pretend the relationship is not mediated – that it will be carried on as though it were a face-to-face encounter" (185). Gamson contends that the creation of an "illusion of intimacy" between celebrities and audiences has accelerated in recent years, owing to the tremendous repetition of celebrity content in media texts such as magazines, which serves to foster increased familiarity between audience and subject.

The profile of actor Jamie Foxx in the February 2005 issue of *GQ* provides an example of the manner in which magazine profiles of the famous balance carefully constructed conceptions of public and private to create an illusion of familiarity. As Dyer notes, "a star image is made out of media texts that can be grouped together as promotion, publicity, films and commentaries/criticism" (68). The *GQ* profile accomplishes this image-building function through the provision of a few well-chosen details designed to create a sense of Foxx's pre-fame days and his current life outside the movie studio, while at the same time maintaining a strict focus on the film he is currently promoting. This tension is evident even before the article formally

begins. A headline screams, “The biggest playboy in Hollywood,” while the accompanying sub-head asks: “How did a former choirboy and highschool quarterback from Terrell, Texas, become the talk of L.A. and the most exciting actor in years?” (DePaulo 110). The first paragraph of the profile manages to elaborate on the hard-knock life of “the former Eric Bishop,” Foxx’s pre-fame identity, while at the same time proffering a well-placed advertisement for the actor’s movie of the moment, a biography of musician Ray Charles. Throughout the story, the author employs vignettes that are descriptive but vague in their overall detail, designed to juxtapose Foxx’s humble beginnings in the “dusty, gritty, stubborn little town of Terrell, Texas” with his new life “in a place far, far away from Terrell – which is to say L.A. – [where] Foxx is doing what everyone in Hollywood dreams of doing, but few ever can: being the next big thing” (DePaulo 112). Details such as Foxx’s birth name, the seminal influence of his grandmother Estelle Marie Talley (identified not only as the woman who raised him but who insisted on piano lessons, “the skill that landed him the lead role in *Ray*”) provide a window into his pre-star existence, a life he can no longer resume “without being mobbed” by fans (DePaulo 112). These niceties blend together to create a sketchy map of Foxx’s life while at the same time advancing a story of a different sort – the industry buzz around Foxx’s new movie and the accompanying pressures of newly found fame. In such texts, the writer is

placed in the role of guide “to help uncover the person underneath” the mediated mantle of celebrity (Gamson 48).

According to Gamson, the growth of celebrity saturated infotainment in the 1970s and 1980s has resulted in an audience that is schooled not only in the process of discerning (through the consumption of media texts) what it believes to be the authentic self behind the image, but also in the elements that comprise the star-making apparatus. Like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, the contemporary audience has been provided with a peek behind the wizard's curtain to reveal the machinations that thrust individuals from relative obscurity to the forefront of popular culture. As a result, magazine profiles of celebrities have taken on “an ironic, winking tone” in the late twentieth century, providing readers with a combination of “inside dope and mockery” (Gamson 49). This style of reportage is evident in GQ's profile of starlet Kate Bosworth. When pressed about the details of her widely scrutinized relationship with actor Orlando Bloom, Bosworth skirts the topic, preferring to discuss her dog. The writer attributes the young actor's reticence to discuss her famous boyfriend to their respective publicists behind the scenes: “She is not supposed to talk about Orlando, whether because of the publicists or because of him or because of her or because of some combination that sealed the deal.” The writer continues on this route, suggesting that Bosworth's evasiveness “makes you worry about her, like maybe there's a team of coaches somewhere telling

her how she's supposed to talk" (Laskas 95). Counting on the pop culture savvy of the magazine's young male demographic, the article further displays the not-so mysterious machinery behind the celebrity mystique with the quip: "You [Bosworth] cannot be the Julia Roberts of your generation if you're out there doing a J.Lo with your famous boyfriend – who himself has a career to protect, a fantasy to project" (Laskas 95). "Doing a J.Lo" is meant to refer to parading the details of a personal relationship before a seemingly insatiable public that has had its fill. This culturally loaded reference is telling in that it openly acknowledges the behind-the-scenes manoeuvring that goes into the creation of a modern celebrity, as well as the public's power to assign fame or withhold it from those deemed unworthy. In this way, "the audience has been invited to take its power further with a new, cynical distance from production of celebrity and celebrity images" (Gamson 49), lending credence to the theory that contemporary audiences play an active rather than passive role in the creation of celebrity. These ideas fly in the face of Bourdieu's assertion that in the field of cultural production, power is gained primarily through covert means in keeping with "the law of this universe, whereby the less visible the investment, the more productive is it symbolically, means that promotion exercises, which in the business world take the overt form of publicity, must be euphemized" (Bourdieu, *Cultural* 77). In the case of the contemporary celebrity profile, the underlying power structure is revealed for all to see, actually

becoming part of the process that harnesses the symbolic capital of the famous as a means to sell a cultural product, in this case, a magazine.

This underlying power structure is evident in *Vanity Fair's* profile of actor-cum-politician Arnold Schwarzenegger. In describing his transformation from action star to governor of California, the writer draws strong parallels between Schwarzenegger's former and current occupations. In his new role as governor, the former actor travels the state delivering his political platform to voters. "The audiences of his 'events,' as he calls them, are carefully culled, and Schwarzenegger's speeches are thoroughly rehearsed. The events are designed like movie promotions, with a flotilla of advance men and a tacit ban on questions from the press" (Brenner 163). Once again, readers are made aware of the type of preparation that goes into a life lived in the spotlight, be it political or otherwise. In his examination of contemporary society, Neal Gabler argues that such highly stylized performances have come to displace established cultural modes by converting the so-called "real life" of celebrities into a form of entertainment. These life performances or "lifies – movies written in the medium of life, projected on the screen of life and exhibited in the multiplexes of the traditional media which are increasingly dependent on the life medium"(5) have, argues Gabler, come to saturate the collective conscious to such an extent that life itself "has become art, so that the two are now indistinguishable from each other"(4). The reader is provided with evidence of

this phenomenon, as it applies to Schwarzenegger's life, with the disclosure that "long before entering politics, Schwarzenegger capitalized on his own story, tamping down any negative publicity with canny strategies such as buying up photos of shoots with nude women he had done when he was very young" (Brenner 160).

This openly rehearsed and manipulated approach to celebrity is quite different from previous models, which stressed innate talent and charisma as prerequisites for fame. In this paradigm, stars are not made they are born. While this narrative has perhaps waned in popularity as audiences become increasingly aware of more artificially constructed notions of fame, it continues to exist. *Vanity Fair's Star Wars* spectacular opens with the story of "a skinny, little-known 27-year-old film maker named George Lucas [who] took a No. 2 pencil and some blue-and green-lined loose-leaf notebook paper and started writing a story" (Windolf 110). The story, of course, was *Star Wars* that spawned a series of films that have entertained moviegoers for nearly thirty years. It should be noted here that *Vanity Fair's* coverage coincided with the imminent release of what is being called the final instalment of the series and that while the movie's stars were given prominence on the magazine's glossy four-panel cover, none were interviewed during the course of the accompanying story. Instead, the profile concentrates largely on the efforts of filmmaker George Lucas, with his staff of costumers, set builders, and animation wizards

relegated to a secondary role. While the stars are used for their drawing power, it appears they have no place in the so-called “inside story.” Throughout the profile, Lucas is portrayed as a gifted writer and director (despite the censure of his fellow directors and critics), a self-styled mogul who has managed to turn his humble story into a multi-billion dollar empire. While Lucas himself “has long claimed that he ended up a mogul only by accident” (Windolf 114), from the very beginning readers are schooled in a narrative that stresses what Moran terms the “charismatic illusion.” This expression encapsulates the notion of the “author or artist as a person with special gifts or qualities” which propel them into the spotlight (5).

Models of Conduct

Vanity Fair’s treatments of the actor turned politician and the talented young filmmaker guided by a dream illustrate the tension that exists in the production-consumption dialectic of modern celebrity. On one hand, celebrities are “seen in terms of their function in the economy of Hollywood, including, crucially, their role in the manipulation of Hollywood’s market, the audience,” while, on the other, they are accounted for in terms of “the special magic” that they alone possess (Dyer 10). While Schwarzenegger has been cast in the role of marketer, Lucas and, to some extent, Foxx, have been portrayed as mythical heroes whose function is to “remind people that they can succeed, that they can achieve greatness” (Lule 23). In his book *Daily News, Eternal*

Stories, Jack Lule examines the role of myth as it is embodied in the contemporary news story. Lule defines myth as “a sacred, societal story that draws from archetypal figures and forms to offer exemplary models for human life” (15) and argues that, while on the surface journalistic news stories may appear to be vastly different from their mythic counterparts, they share an emphasis on reality-based narratives, a tradition of public storytelling, and function to both instruct and inform their audience (20). He identifies seven recurring myths in news coverage which serve to dramatize and characterize core cultural values in the personas of the victim, the scapegoat, the hero, the good mother, the trickster, and situations defined as “other worldly” or calamitous (24). An analysis of *GQ*, *Marie Claire*, and *Vanity Fair* demonstrates the existence of these myths in the contemporary celebrity profile. The inclusion of details pertaining to actor Jamie Foxx and filmmaker George Lucas’s origins as unknowns from small towns far from the bright lights of Hollywood casts them in the role of the hero. Born into humble circumstances and propelled by talent, hard work, and persistence, they initiate their quest for cinematic greatness. Enduring the trials of the film industry, they emerge triumphant, providing a model for success for others to follow. In contrast to Boorstin’s argument that the hero has no place in a modern society dominated by superficial celebrities, Lule sees celebrity status as a prerequisite to modern heroism. For Lule, who grounds his argument in analysis of sports reporting,

“contemporary life, the source of confusion, must also be the source of contemporary heroes” (101).

Mythical underpinnings are also apparent in *Marie Claire*'s coverage of actors Mischa Barton and Jennifer Garner. Both profiles are set in somewhat incongruous venues (a maternity ward and a shelter for former teenage prostitutes) to draw attention to “global women's issues,” while at the same providing a summary of the actors' personal and professional endeavours. In the case of the Garner profile in the magazine's February issue, the shelter residents substitute for the journalist, asking the actor questions about her personal life as she assists them in completing an arts and crafts project. The accompanying headline announces: “Yes, life is good for Jennifer Garner, but it doesn't keep her from helping others” (Ginsberg 64). Throughout the profile, the author inserts various asides designed to highlight Garner's philanthropic leanings and concludes with the admission: “It's a lot to ask of such an A-list star, but you'd never know it: Garner looks like she'd be happy to stay all day” (Ginsberg 65). The magazine's profile of Barton is constructed in a similar manner. Personal details about her life are revealed as she chats with new mothers in “Hollywood's famous maternity ward,” St. John's Hospital. Tackling the hard side of life in the spotlight (which is attributed largely to the intrusions of the press), the article notes the “upside of Barton's new fame is the fact that her name and participation can help raise much needed funds for deserving

organizations, like St. John's" (Hensley 43). In their unconventional formats, both *Marie Claire* profiles cast the celebrities they feature in the role of the good mother, embodying the mythical characteristics of charity, compassion, and self-sacrifice (Lule 120).

In his discussion of what constitutes news, Postman offers two possible reasons why audiences are interested in stories about celebrities. On the one hand, these types of stories could be seen as diverting; they help viewers escape temporarily from their own dramas and serve as a type of escapist entertainment. On the other hand, "it has also been said that whether entertaining or not, stories about the lives of celebrities should be included because they are instructive; they reveal a great deal about our society – its mores, values, ideals" (Postman 21). Moreover, these types of stories, which stress universal themes of human experience, are "the kind of story that stays news, and that is why it must be given prominence" (Postman 22). Similar to Lule's analysis of news using myth, the celebrity profile can be seen as a means to utilize the famous as instructive models that serve to highlight societal values. Dyer takes this argument one step further, suggesting that celebrity images not only embody societal beliefs and values but also "function crucially in relation to contradictions within and between ideologies, which they seek variously to 'manage' or resolve" (38). Rather than reinforcing dominant values, celebrities can serve to subvert them in some way. To illustrate this

point, Dyer cites research that points to the proclivity for intense celebrity attachments amongst adolescents and women, as well as the importance of celebrities in gay culture: "These groups all share a peculiarly intense degree of role/identity conflict and pressure, and an (albeit partial) exclusion from the dominant articulation of, respectively, adult, male, heterosexual culture" (37). This brings to mind Hall's communication model, which proposes that producers of mass media encode their products with particular meanings that are in turn decoded by the audience in a manner that does not necessarily correspond with the producer's intended meaning.

While it can be said that celebrity is a product of the dominant culture, "produced by a commodity system of cultural production . . . with the intentions of leading and/or representing" (Marshall 47), one cannot ignore the possibility that the audience does not always consume celebrity in the manner anticipated by cultural producers. In the case of magazines, celebrities are often used as a means to entice consumers to purchase a publication or other product. In terms of media economics, what the audience actually does with a publication is immaterial, so long as the primary aims of producers (that is, to sell as many magazines as possible) and marketers (to keep their celebrity clients in the spotlight and create interest in their films and associated projects) are met. The result of the interplay between these often incongruous intentions is a concerted effort on the part of the audience, as Marshall explains, to "make

sense” of the cultural product they have been offered. In order to do so, audience members must actively work on the media’s representations of celebrity, to make it fit into their everyday experiences (Marshall 47). This can take the form of a para-social relationship that satisfies an interpersonal or social need or as an evaluative function that assists in the collection of information about a culture and the individual’s place in it. It is in this way “the celebrity (acts as) a ‘channeling’ device for the negotiation of cultural space and position for the entire culture” (Marshall 49). A third factor can be added to the list of audience aims, that of celebrities as a means of bridging interpersonal and cultural gaps and forging connections with others on the basis of a shared celebrity consciousness.

The Question of the Audience

The foregoing discussion suggests a few of the possible uses of celebrities by consumers. However, these hypotheses largely fall flat without an active engagement with the audience using ethnographic techniques or empirical research methods to gather data and insight into an audience’s relationship with celebrities. As Dyer points out, “how one conceptualizes the audience – is fundamental to every assumption one can make about how stars...work” (182). Coupled with this lack of audience awareness, is an ignorance of the journalistic and economic factors that contribute to the production of media texts. Current magazine research often does not “give us

any indication of the strength of the relationship readers may have with magazines or what needs readers seek to fulfill when turning to magazines to aid them in their own environments" (Popovich 32). While magazine readership and the number of magazines available to the North American reading public continue to increase, scholarly research on magazines and their audiences has remained fairly static. A 1987 study found that between 1964 and 1983 articles related to the study of magazines accounted for only 6 per cent of the research articles appearing in *Journalism Quarterly* (Gerlach 179). A similar survey of *Communication Abstracts* conducted in 1992 found that articles about magazines accounted for less than one per cent of the contents, compared to five per cent for articles about newspapers and 20 per cent for articles about television (Abrahamson 1992). Of the material that is available, a large number of articles utilize content analysis techniques to quantitatively measure various aspects of magazine content, and the majority focus on publications that are produced in the United States for a North American audience.

In his review of quantitative magazine studies over the ten-year period 1982 to 1993, Popovich found only two studies concerned solely with magazine effects on readers and subscribers: Towers's examination of the gratifications of magazines readers as compared to television, newspaper, and radio audiences; and Payne and Severn's look at the "use motives" of magazine readers. Towers's oft-cited study utilizes a random sample of 543 adults who

were interviewed regarding their overall media usage in tandem with fourteen gratification statements related to their use of magazines. The statements used were borrowed from previous uses and gratifications studies of television, newspaper, and radio audiences which found that audiences generally utilized media to learn about their environment (surveillance), as a way to pass the time (diversion), or as a means of obtaining information to pass along to others (interaction). The study found that diversion was the most stable grouping across all media, while surveillance and interaction varied by media type. News magazines were found to emphasize surveillance and interaction factors more than newspapers, while readers of consumer magazines highlighted their diversionary and interactive aspects. The study found that all three gratifications perspectives were supported by the responses of study participants, demonstrating that “magazines are appropriately compelling and personal to encourage study of gratifications in relation to their purchase and readership” (Towers 50). In conclusion, Towers suggested future research examining magazines designed to appeal to readers engaged in a particular hobby or vocation as a means to better understand how the uses and gratifications of magazine readers apply to specialized audiences.

Payne and Severn’s research picks up where Towers left off, examining the “use motives” of audiences in consuming various media as they apply to

magazine readers. In a method similar to that employed in the Towers study, the authors employ the user motivations of surveillance, diversion, and interaction established in previous uses and gratifications research of other media and apply them to readers of a trade publication and a consumer magazine. The purpose of the study is to discern whether the user motivations evident in other forms of media differ when applied to different types of magazines. The researchers found that users of consumer magazines had higher scores in the diversion scale than readers of trade publications (they were more likely to read a magazine as a form of entertainment/distraction). However, readers of trade magazines had higher interaction scores and were therefore more likely to read trade publications as a means of obtaining information in preparation for conversations with others. Readers of trade magazines were also found to have higher surveillance scores than readers of consumer magazines, turning to these publications for information about their environment as a means to confirm, reinforce, or modify existing views about their surroundings. Payne and Severn concluded that while their findings "offer support for the view that uses of particular media types can be predicted from the content of a medium," they noted that the role of demographics in the formation of use motives by audiences is an area not currently addressed by uses and gratifications research (913).

Conclusion

In her examination of magazines and celebrity culture, Johnson predicts “a continuation of ‘accessible escapism’ through celebrity journalism” in the next decade with the rise of magazines such as *O: The Oprah Magazine* and *Martha Stewart Living*. As publications built around an individual celebrity, *O* and *Martha Stewart Living* embody an entirely new approach to magazine development (Johnson 2002).

In attempting to discern why magazines feature celebrities, this paper has sought to move beyond simple economics and the interests of producers to shed light on the motivations of the audience – the individual reader – in consuming celebrity magazine content with the intent of applying these findings in a broader cultural context. Through examination of magazines such as *GQ*, *Marie Claire*, and *Vanity Fair*, diverse publications that share the use of celebrities, it is possible to discern how media culture, through its use of celebrities, can serve as a unifying force in today’s increasingly disconnected society, creating an illusion of intimacy between celebrities and audiences that, in turn, is reflected at an interpersonal level. Details gleaned from celebrity profiles and photos in magazines of all editorial strata can serve as a type of cultural common ground for individuals, allowing them to forge new bonds in their personal interactions. This claim contrasts starkly with the aims of marketers who use celebrity as a tool to sell products, cultural or otherwise,

and those of editors who use coverage of famous people as a means to entice readers into purchasing their magazines month after month.

When discussing the motivations of magazine readers and producers, it is imperative that future research moves beyond notions of the audience or producer as a single mass that can be counted on to act in a uniform and systemic way. As Hall points out, production and reception of media messages are not identical, but they are related as “differentiated moments within the totality formed by the social relations of the communicative process as a whole” (130). To fully understand the conventions of the relationship between marketers, editors, celebrities, and readers requires a thorough investigation of the methods and motives of all parties involved, an approach that is missing from this analysis and much of the recent scholarly work on both magazines and celebrities.

Attempts to support or disprove the theories of Alberoni, Dyer, Gamson, Horton and Wohl, as they relate to audience consumption of celebrities through media texts such as magazines, requires research of an ethnographic nature as a means to test the theories against everyday patterns of media and celebrity usage. In addition to participant observation studies aimed at observing reader behaviour as it relates to the consumption of celebrity content in magazines, methods such as survey research or focus group interviewing provide an alternate approach for understanding how magazine readers make

use of (or alternately shun) celebrity content. Do they obtain information about celebrities from magazines as a means to forge commonalities in their relationships with others? Are celebrities considered by readers as a type of modern-day mythical hero, embodying widely held cultural values and exemplary attributes? Or do they, as Dyer suggests, serve as a means to not only identify but also subvert commonly held cultural beliefs? Empirical data on patterns of mainstream magazine consumption and the characteristics of readers could prove helpful in answering these and other questions.

Participant observation, survey or interview methods could also be used to examine the manner in which alternative media forms such as “zines” and websites embrace or avoid celebrity content and the ways in which audiences orient themselves toward or away from celebrity narratives contained in media texts.

Future participant observation studies could focus not only on magazine consumers but also on producers, specifically, the decisions of media and marketing professionals, which result in celebrity content in magazines. How do journalists and editors interact with public relations practitioners and advertisers? What role, if any, does the intervention of senior management structures within media organizations have on magazine content? What is the impact of extra-organizational forces such as the marketplace and the broader cultural milieu on their respective roles? Observing and documenting the work

of journalists and public relations practitioners provides a method for uncovering the policies, customs, and values that shape their professional practices and, in turn, the content of magazines.

An exploration of the relationship between consumers and producers of celebrity content using traditional mass communication research methods provides a model for collecting field data that can be used to test not only theoretical notions of celebrity, but also those concerning the broader cultural role of magazines as put forth by Abrahamson, Kitch and others.

Abrahamson's theory of "magazine exceptionalism" encapsulates the idea that magazines are different from other media forms in that they "not only reflect or are a product of the social reality of the times, but they also serve a larger and more pro-active function – that they can also be a catalyst, shaping the very social reality of their moment" (Abrahamson 2002). Do magazines shape social reality? The validity of such theories cannot be confirmed without a sustained and direct investigation of the role magazines play in the lives of audiences, and in turn, culture as a whole.

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