

Blinding Lights:
The Negative Effects of the Media on Celebrities

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I. Introduction

“Celebrity breakdowns” may have existed as long as the star system but are now investigated and exposed to a degree arguably considered excessive. In this digital era, it is not difficult to find information about celebrities, no matter how personal; private addresses of stars have been posted in both gossip columns and traditional media outlets like USA Today (Freydkin 3). And now, thanks to uncensored Weblogs like that of celebrity-basher Perez Hilton, those in the spotlight suffer the humiliation and disgrace of having statements about them – true or untrue – broadcast for millions to find.

The extent and quality of celebrity news in the media appears especially inordinate today, multiplying and intensifying at such a rate that “legitimate” news has fallen in precedence (Brown 31). Whether it likes it or not, the public knows more about Britney Spears and how many pills she swallowed than about many political issues.

Mainstream media content is most likely increasing in sensationalism due to competition with celebrity news sources, particularly those online. As said by marketing author David Giles, “The defining characteristic of a celebrity is that it is essentially a *media production*, and its usage is largely confined to the twentieth century” (3). More than ever, news, according to New York University sociology professor Todd Gitlin, can be defined as “anything that happens to newsworthy people” (qtd. in Rockwell 40).

The word “celebrity” is derived from the word “celebrate,” in that a person is supposedly famous because the community celebrates him or her (Rockwell 20). The Greek “phanai” highlights the idea that a celebrity is spoken about and takes on a fable-like mantle as the general public is drawn into the fate of the person in whom it is invested. And for a celebrity, being spoken of may impact how he or she lives in the world, often resulting in negative effects.

The purpose of the project was to examine how the extent and quality of American celebrity coverage in the media, both mainstream and entertainment-focused, may negatively affect celebrity behavior and psyches in the United States. In doing so, research investigated the sensationalism of mainstream media as compared with that of blogs and other online sources of celebrity news. In this vein, analyzing the content presented by mainstream news outlets, as well as celebrity-news Weblogs and other online sources, offered the clearest method by which to examine how entertainment news is covered and publicized. Researching articles on the major, relevant topics of media ethics, the role of celebrity news in American society, credibility among the public of various media forms, and the psychology of “celebrity breakdowns” was also instrumental in gaining a better understanding of the subject matter. More emphasis was placed on researching relevant topics, as it is difficult if not impossible to determine the exact effects of media coverage of celebrities through a study or direct observation.

II. Review of Literature

Entertainment-news Online

There are several publications solely about celebrities, complete with gossip, pictures and juicy information. And they have grown extremely popular, mainstays in salons and grocery stores alike. As a result, some celebrity magazines have found it appropriate to hike up the cost of each issue; in October 2007, the price of an OK magazine increased from \$1.99 to \$2.99 in December, and People, “the champion of celebrity magazines” that has “arguably kicked off the modern celeb media craze in 1974” (Fine 34), also increased from \$3.49 to \$3.99 (Ives 34). While the heightened price may put downward pressure on circulation numbers, Ives reports that publishers will likely benefit from increased circulation revenue (34.)

However, Ives also indicated that magazines still have to compete with celebrity-news Web sites, which offer the public updated celebrity news for no price (Ives 34). TMZ, a constantly updated source of “entertainment news, celebrity gossip and Hollywood rumors,” is chock-full of the latest on celebrities regardless if they are on the A-list or D-list (34). With sections such as “Star Catcher,” “Obsessions,” “Paparazzi Uncensored” and “Voyeur Pleasure,” a viewer could find more than they may wish to know about a star.

The TMZ Web site is also a widely syndicated television show that serves the same purpose John Rash, a senior vice president at the advertising agency Campbell Mithun, describes as “deconstructing Hollywood equal several [shows] aimed at building it up” (qtd. in Fine 110). When it premiered in September 2007, “TMZ” was the top-rated new show in syndication by a large percentage, according to Nielsen Media Research, with a 1.7 household rating that translates to about two million viewers (Stelter 1).

A sort of template and marketing force for the television show, the TMZ Web site is a joint venture of AOL and the Telepictures Productions division of Warner Brothers, which are both subsidiaries of the same Time Warner that owns People magazine (Stelter 1). In September 2007, TMZ.com had 10.5 million new U.S. viewers – much more than other online entertainment-news sources – making it No. 5 of all news sites, and trumping all nonportal news Web sites except CNN and MSNBC (Fine 110). In an article in The New York Times on TMZ, its Web site anchor and managing editor Harvey Levin said, “We work as hard at breaking a Britney Spears story as NBC would work on breaking a President Bush piece” (Weiner C1).

Another example ComScore Media Metrix, the Internet tracking firm, lists as one of the top 10 entertainment-news Web sites is the blog named after the former struggling actor who refers to himself as Perez Hilton. In July, The New York Times reported the site attracts 1.7 million different viewers every month from the United States alone – 2.6 million visitors worldwide (Navarro ST.1); the number increased to 7 million daily in November, according to Rolling Stone (Hedegaard 66).

According to Henry Copeland of Blogads.com, Perezhilton.com’s advertising sales representative, an ad on the site can cost as much as \$9,000, and \$45,000 for the most expensive ad package. In addition, Hilton, whose given name is Mario Lavandeira, has expanded his site into a family affair, hiring his sister as his first assistant; his 53-year-old mother moved from Miami to Hollywood to help as well (ST.1).

Hilton's claim to fame are his scribbles and crude comments upon celebrity photos, as well as his uninhibited, brazen ridicule of the stars on his frequent television appearances; "he pushes the envelope, just as he relentlessly markets himself, because outrageousness translates into more eyeballs and contributors to his site" (Navarro ST.1). A publicist for A-list celebrities said, "He can and does print the most outrageous things without a kernel of truth to them... It debases all the real P.R. people that some feed him tips. They're just feeding the beast" (qtd. in Navarro ST.1).

The first episode of his VH1 television show "What Perez Sez," which included Hilton teaching "sweetie-pie" singer and actress Mandy Moore how to grind on a stripper pole, boosted ratings among 18 to 49-year-olds 112 percent (Hedegaard 66). As Hilton said of himself, "I'm like Madonna, I'm not afraid to offend" (qtd. in Navarro ST.1).

However, the more antipathy he engenders, the more opportunities arise for him (Navarro ST.1). His infamy helped him secure his television show. The demographics of visitors to his Web site – mostly females with an average age of 26 – draw in advertisements from well-known clothes and spirits companies. These are in addition to the free clothes and other gifts he receives from businesses wishing to win his favor (ST.1).

Tyler Gray, a senior editor at the entertainment Web site Radaronline.com, admitted he was jealous of Hilton's success and said, "Perez Hilton obviously found a great formula," then added, "So did Robert Oppenheimer (the American physicist credited for his role in the World War II effort to develop nuclear weapons). It doesn't mean it's good for the public" (qtd. in Navarro ST.1).

During his July 2007 appearance on "The View," co-host Joy Behar asked Hilton if he was ever made fun of as a child (Navarro ST.1). While Hilton, the oldest of two siblings in a working-class Cuban-American family, asserted he was taunted while a student at a Miami all-boys Catholic school for his heavysset build and homosexuality, he denied he launched his blog in delayed retaliation against the rich and famous (ST.1).

Sensationalism and Celebrity-news Influence

Generally, celebrity news and appearances are growing all the time in popularity, putting the pressure on mainstream media. According to the Nielsen ratings, the highest-rated show among 18 to 49-year-olds Jan. 3, 2008 was "Celebrity Apprentice" with 11 million viewers – nearly 2 million more than the show had the season before (Toff 8). The celebrity-news television show "Entertainment Tonight" drew 7.4 million viewers on average in November 2007 – more than the 6.7 million viewers of "CBS Evening News" that month (Stelter 1).

News media increasingly shares sensationalistic characteristics with tabloid outlets like the National Enquirer, according to L. Brent Bozell, president of the Media Research Center; in fact, "the circulation of that particular tabloid far outpaces those of the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times and the Washington Post" (qtd. in Dobbs 48). The search engine Lycos reported the notorious costume mishap of Janet Jackson in the 2004 Super Bowl Halftime Show was searched three times more than the 2000 election and 25 times more than the Mars Rover; it was also the most replayed moment on TiVo ever. As CNN anchor Lou Dobbs said, "The news media, as an industry, can't afford to be dull" (48).

Several studies have indicated trends toward more sensationalism in television news (Scott & Gobetz, 1992; Slattery, Doremus & Marcus, 2001; Wittebols, 2003). In the study by Slattery, Doremus and Marcus on changes in the level of embedded sensationalism over time, it was found that in 1968, 10.7 percent of news time devoted to U.S. non-election government coverage contained elements of embedded sensationalism – violence, crime, accidents, disasters, sex, suicide, scandal, outrageous behavior, etc. (297). The percentage increased to 29.7 percent in 1996. In 1970, both ABC and CBS included more than 20 minutes of news stories in their 30-minute broadcasts, CBS averaging more 22 minutes, but both networks reduced the amount of time for news stories so by 2000, ABC averaged just more than 18 minutes and CBS 18:30 of news time per half hour (Wittebols 24).

The pressure that entertainment-news Web sites and television shows, such as those of TMZ Productions Inc., place on mainstream media push such outlets to establish celebrity news online ventures as well. The New York Post joined “Access Hollywood” and “Entertainment Tonight” in setting up a celebrity gossip Web site, Page Six, in December 2007 (Stelter 1). The site features celebrity photos, gossip and face-offs in which visitors vote on such issues as “Who’s Hotter?”

Weblog Precedence and Credibility

Over the years, blogs have grown in popularity, increasing from an estimated 30,000 in 1998 to at least three million by the beginning of 2004, according to Pew Internet and American Life Project (Thomas 622).

Weblog readers consider blogs to be the most credible media form as well; 73.6 percent of Weblog readers view blogs as moderately to very credible, and only 3.5 percent consider them “not at all” or “not very credible” (Johnson 630). Nearly 50 percent of respondents rated printed newspapers to be moderately to very credible sources, news magazines 43.7 percent. However, only 42.7 percent rate online newspapers as “moderately” or “very” credible, while 47.4 percent rate online cable television similarly (630).

A benefit of blogs that entertainment Web sites capitalize on is their capability to be efficiently updated. The revamped version of “Access Hollywood” online, which was introduced in January 2008 and facilitated navigation and video watching, demonstrates the acknowledgment of the importance of immediacy to online success (Stelter 1). Perez Hilton posts updates to his site dozens of times a day. “People just want a lot of content,” Hilton said. “There’s this insatiable thirst, this appetite for celebrity news. So I feed it well” (qtd. in Stelter 1).

Additionally, blogs are considered credible both by readers and researchers. Pew Internet and American Life Project reported in 2006, while a fraction of Internet users post on blogs, 39 percent of those who go online read blogs (Banning 451). In addition to “traditional journalistic writing styles,” the peer-review process involved in blogging increases credibility of blogs; readers trust in the fact that corrections can be made to anything posted on a blog (452).

A study into the “so-called cyperbole and exaggerated claims of blogs being a medium of increased personalization and thereby potentially influential medium” found that there were few differences when comparing blogs with more traditional media

(Trammell 975). The third-person effect is not mediated by source attribution, regardless of other factors such as social distance or credibility.

Introduction of Weblogs in Traditional Media

Blogs especially are so influential in society today that television shows have taken to using them to boost revenue. “Access Hollywood” uses its blog to tease exclusive television stories. Linda Bell Blue, executive producer of “Entertainment Tonight,” said, “Online is just one of the ways we continue to grow the ‘ET’ brand” (Stelter 1).

According to Dan Gillmore, former columnist for the San Jose Mercury News, “the emergence of blogs as a citizen journalist device has prompted some news organizations to adopt this commentary, “diary-like” approach to news, and integrate blogs in their online offerings” (qtd. in Banning 451). The Houston Chronicle is one of the newspapers aiming to expand coverage and draw traffic by posting the work of local bloggers on its Web site. The New York Times began including blogs on its Web site, NYTimes.com, in 2003 with op-ed columnist Nick Kristof’s “Kristof Responds;” staff writers have also written other blogs for special news events (Beeson 19). The Washington Post added a sponsored blog roll, which is a directory of links to blogs specializing in topics like travel, technology and health; more than 100 bloggers have signed up.

According to Robert Niles, editor of the Online Journalism Review published by the USC Annenberg School of Communication, “Any new information source is a potential competitor to a local newspaper. Smart newspapers are figuring out they don’t have to fight with those competitors – they can make alliances with them” (Semuels C.3).

Weblogs and the Law

Blogs and other Web sites are still subject to legal issues, including libel. Hilton is currently being sued for \$20 million by DJ Samantha Ronson because he called her a “toxic, no-good” friend to Lindsay Lohan and claimed Ronson had kept Lohan’s cocaine in her pants pocket (Navarro ST.1).

Newspapers can legally act as good Samaritans by protecting their readers; Kinsey Wilson, executive editor of USA Today, said the publication removes from its Web site “anything brought to our attention that violates our terms of use, including personal attacks, hate speech, obscenities, plagiarism, as well as potentially libelous or defamatory material” (qtd. in Semuels C.3).

However, the laws of the World Wide Web do not require fact-checking (C.3). Nonetheless, this seems to have little effect on credibility of media sources for readers. In the Johnson/Kaye study on Weblog credibility, 38.4 percent of respondents considered blogs moderately or very fair while 22.7 found them not at all or not very fair (Johnson 629). As far as accuracy, 49.8 percent found blogs moderately to very accurate, 39.8 percent somewhat accurate.

Newspapers have the power to monitor what is written in the blogs featured on their Web sites. According to David Ardia, director of the Citizen Media Law Project at Harvard Law School’s Berkman Center for Internet & Society, newspapers should make a

distinction for their readers between material written by staff and that by outside bloggers (Semuels C.3). However, Web site owners can usually protect themselves under federal law from postings by its users, so long as the newspaper employees are not associated with the blogger's work.

Ethics Online

Scholars and industry professionals have developed various forms of ethics codes for bloggers, including Martin Kuhn, a doctoral fellow researching media law at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Kuhn, who has a fellowship with the U.S. Department of Justice, considers an ethical code "as not only a philosophically based, moral code but also as an ideal mode of behavior that we must strive to achieve" (qtd. in News & Observer A24). Jonathan Dube, MSNBC.com managing producer and publisher of the media convergence and technology Web site Cyberjournalist.net, generated the "Blogger's Code of Ethics" by altering the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics for the blogosphere (Beeson 18).

According to Bob Steele, director of the Poynter Institute's ethics program, "Codes are good in articulating the principles that guide us, principles that give us moral compass and moral gyroscope for our behavior" (qtd. in Beeson 18). However, he added, "Professional codes set the boundaries, but they are not the end all, be all" (18). While formalized blogging codes of ethics have been generated, they cannot preclude behavior not prohibited by law.

Former Sacramento Bee editor J.D. Lasica believes norms such as passionate blogging, honesty, trust in readers and integrity in one's reputation are beginning to emerge in the blogosphere, and bloggers are more honest than mainstream news organizations, especially about admitting mistakes and biases (Beeson 19). However, he thinks bloggers act like journalists, but not always; thus, they should be held to stricter ethical standards. "I think an 'ethics code' is something that bloggers will never accept. While journalism has decades of tradition as a craft, during which certain norms and practices came into being before being codified into a code, blogs aren't at that point yet" (qtd. in Beeson 19).

There is little legally restraining blog writers from writing what they please online. Rebecca Blood, the author of "The Weblog Handbook: Practical Advice on Creating and Maintaining Your Blog" who began blogging in April 1999, disagrees with such formalized codes, saying, "I think it's unrealistic for the blogger to uphold journalistic standards. Most of us aren't interested in being a journalist" (qtd. in Beeson 19).

The Nature of Celebrity News Online

The Internet has changed the nature of obtaining celebrity news. Tame encounters with celebrities can be especially blown out of proportion online, said Michael Joseph Gross, author of "Starstruck: When a Fan Gets Close to Fame" (Freydkin 3). The rapidity and ease with which updates can be posted online has had an effect; rather than send it to a gossip columnist, average citizens can post information themselves, including home addresses, which USA Today has been known to post. According to author Maureen

Orth, “A hallmark of the 21st century is going to be a complete breakdown of privacy, absolutely. Technology guarantees it” (3).

Legally, if a celebrity is in public, the media is welcome to photograph or approach. According to Daniel Solove, author and law professor at George Washington University, “The law deems you have no expectation of privacy” (qtd. in Freydkin 3).

Public Interest in Celebrity News

Fred Brown, former Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) president and current co-chairman of the SPJ Ethics Committee, considers the celebrity pursuit to be “a form of addiction” (31). “We know it's not good for us – or for our audiences – but we can't seem to help ourselves. We justify it by saying we're only giving readers what they crave” (31). Brown said despite the fact polls show the public itself thinks the media pays too much attention to celebrities, circulation figures and ratings suggest the public is interested in the subject.

It has been suggested that the public's interest in certain celebrity figures may be the result of a “parasocial relationship” with them (Giles 68). For instance, an audience member may begin such a relationship with an actor or actress at the inception of a TV show. It starts when the general public is “invited across the great divide between public space and media space, to take part in television shows, not just as an invisible studio audience, but as the starring role” (68). The relationship continues as the season progresses and the characters develop enough for the audience member to be interested in their exploits. Soon the interest expands to the celebrity's outside life, even after he or she has left a show.

As put curtly by “American Idol” judge Simon Cowell, “There is a fame epidemic!” (Rockwell 40).

Increased Public Attention on Celebrities

Hirschorn said the wisest celebrities understand “poking fun at the artifice of celebrity is now a prerequisite for being one” (176). Justin Timberlake, formerly of the '90s boy band *NSYNC, is considered “the only truly bankable star of the blogger era;” even after being duped on actor Ashton Kutcher's reality show “Punk'd,” he rendered himself “blogger-proof” by poking fun back at Kutcher on “Saturday Night Live” in addition to playing in an “unrelenting parody of precisely the kind of boy-band pablum Timberlake once inflicted on the public” (176). His self-satire has saved him from much censure online and on television.

Many celebrities, however, do not escape so much criticism and extreme interest – particularly the “Big Three” of 2007: Britney Spears, Lindsay Lohan and Paris Hilton, “the Beatles, Stones and Dylan of party-tardism” who have “achieved whole new levels of probation-flouting, tabloid-humping and career-throttling” (Sheffield 30).

Britney Spears has especially come under intense scrutiny, in light of the loss of custody of her children, her sporadic shaving of her hair and her repeated visits to rehab – all in 2007. According to News of the World, she swallowed 100 pills in 36 hours; a Hollywood gossip Web site reportedly garnered an all-time record of 10,089,428 hits in 24 hours after posting the story (Preston 28). An incident in which she “attacked” a



Figure 1. Britney Spears “attacking” an SUV outside ex-husband’s home Feb. 22, 2007. (Photo courtesy purseblog.com.)

paparazzi’s SUV outside her ex-husband’s home was recorded on video and uploaded to YouTube, where it was viewed more than 753,000 times and received two video responses and more than 600 comments (see Figure 1).

Peter Preston, editor and columnist of the Guardian, compared Spears to past female singers, including Billie Holiday, Dusty Springfield, and Judy Garland in her “marital disaster, extreme dieting, drugs and drink” (28). According to Preston, their stories weren’t all the same, “but the grip they exercised on the imagination had one thing in common: they seemed to destroy somebody we thought we knew. Not an actress spouting somebody else’s lines, but a performer relying on her talent, and thus her own personality, for survival” (28).

The difference between Spears and her female singer predecessors, according to Preston, is that today, celebrities are stalked in their final days as figures of pity, and celebrity stories are worth millions while being chronicled on mainstream television news; OK! Magazine bought the story of

Spears’ 16-year-old sister’s pregnancy for \$1 million and sold a record \$2 million copies of the issue (28). “We have wandered, by many digital and media paths, into an era of new cruelty that would have horrified us even two decades ago. We are more routinely, ubiquitously callous” (28).

In an attempt to explain Spears’ head shave, marketing author Mark Stevens described the action as rejecting celebrity culture by publicly stripping herself of her sexuality (Stevens 15). “Few gestures are as symbolically rich as the shaving of the head,” Stevens said, comparing the act to monks shaving their heads in dedicating themselves to the spirit, snubbing the mundane (15).

Psychiatric evaluations on Spears have shown she may have bipolar disease or genetically inherited depression – or she may have taken too much Clenbuterol (Preston 28). It is also possible to blame the celebrities themselves for entering the spotlight in the first place, news corporation CEO and media mogul Rupert Murdoch, or bloggers.

However, Preston blames the public for “pushing the remote buttons of distress,” saying of Spears, “A deluded 26-year-old has lost her bearings and her two small children. And we’re queuing up for a peek and a snigger” (qtd. in Preston 28). In other words, “It means mental illness as the new spectator sport” (qtd. in 28).

The Psychology of Celebrity Breakdowns

According to Michael Hirschorn, executive vice president of original programming and production for VH1, “there has not been a more embarrassing time for celebrities” (171). Many celebrities, both youth and adults, have been arrested with many others well on their way. “The public — still enamored of famous people, but now looking down at them instead of up, or at least sideways — picks over the hideous fashion choices, the delicious quotes, the overdoses, and the suicide attempts with the relish of hyenas tearing apart a wildebeest” (173). Hirschorn also said, because paparazzi and bloggers can easily exploit reality, “the digital era demands 100 percent authenticity... The public now is too sophisticated, too cynical, to take a face at face value” (176).

Many pressures rest on the shoulders of today’s celebrities, including “the need to maintain a consistent presentation of self in every public context... Letting your mask slip can be a costly business” (qtd. in Giles 142). “Image is essential to the celebrity because the public judges him by what it sees – his public posture as distinguished by his public person,” author and historian Barbara Goldsmith said (80).

The constant pressure of maintaining a particular public image can result in anxiety disorders, such as phobias and panic attacks (Rockwell 25). Chronic stress may also ensue, the symptoms of which include eating disorders, body aches, insomnia, anxiety, anger and depression. Also, in attempting to maintain a perfect image, celebrities often repress rage, fear or sadness caused by negative or excessive media coverage, which may lead to psychological and physical damage.

The media does well to increase the stress of maintaining an image. “...Celebrities are the lifeblood of the media,” said Dr. David Giles, senior lecturer in psychology at the University of Winchester (137). The media and stars co-exist in a “twisted symbiosis, typified by the ‘build ‘em up and knock ‘em down’ cliché.”

As an outside force, the media makes it difficult for celebrities to feel in control of their public image. Having an external locus of control, in which one has little feeling of control over life events, may result in deteriorated health and an injurious mindset; in a study of emetophobiacs – those with a fear of vomiting – it was shown that those with a lower locus of control were actually more prone to vomiting as a result of an underlying fear of losing control (Davidson 31).

There is also the fear of stalkers and legal action by paparazzi for things said and done in defense of privacy. An extreme example of stalking is Jon Hinckley Jr., who attempted to murder Ronald Reagan in his infatuation with actress Jodi Foster (Giles 144). By shooting Reagan, Hinckley hoped to gain the attention of Foster, saying in a letter to her, “I feel very good about the fact that you at least know my name and how I feel about you. And by hanging around your dormitory I’ve come to realize that I’m the topic of more than a little conversation, however full of ridicule it may be. At least you know that I’ll always love you” (qtd. in 144).

Sometimes a celebrity may feel apart from him or herself, such as singer Bob Seger, who, after completing a song and receiving applause, felt that the response was for him rather than the music, and felt distanced from himself (Rockwell 17). This may occur

whenever a celebrity appears in public. In losing touch with one's being, a condition may develop that Cornell University Professor Robert Millman, M.D. labels as Acquired Situational Narcissism, or ASN (Rockwell 75).

Furthermore, if this condition is not treated properly – as it is not in 1 percent of the general population, and 2 to 16 percent of the clinical population – characteristics of Narcissistic Personality Disorder, or NPD, may emerge (Rockwell 77). The most distinguishable feature of this disorder is a sense of grandiosity, “a desperate attempt to convince the self of its own existence” (77). With this condition, an enriched inner life becomes impossible.

Other characteristics of NPD, as listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, include “fantasies of unlimited power and success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love” and an air of superiority with the expectation of being recognized as such (APA 658). This pressures family members to mirror this neediness, making it difficult to have a healthy relationship with the celebrity. Impaired relationships and feelings of emptiness are common in those suffering from NPD, who are 50 to 75 percent male.

On a “Nightline” interview, rock star Bruce Springsteen revealed he had sought psychotherapy to cope with existential issues, saying, “I think all artists and musicians... have the big ego and the narcissism, and the self-involvement, and maybe that comes with the turf... And I've always had, and had, all those things, and I try to keep an eye on them so they don't get out of check *too* much” (Rockwell 78).

A drastic – but not uncommon – result of the pressures of fame is suicide. The rate of suicide among celebrities is 4.4 percent while only 1.0 percent for “non-famous individuals” (Morin 1). A well-known example of this is singer Kurt Cobain, who ended his life after attempting to solve his existential dilemmas with drugs but failing to cope with the feeling he had lost his authenticity and lived his life as a fraud. In his suicide note, Cobain said, “I feel guilty beyond words about these things – for example, when we're backstage and the lights go out and the roar of the crowd begins, it doesn't affect me in the way in which it did for Freddie Mercury, who seemed to love and relish the love and admiration of the crowd” (qtd. in Rockwell 67).

While mere exposure of a celebrity to the public may result in negative psychological conditions, cruelty in the intentions of media sources may further the effects (Daly 341). Excessive cruelty may result in anxiety, depression and psychosomatic symptoms such as ulcers, headache, and diarrhea. In another study, it was shown that repressed humiliation and bottled rage can lead to depression, anorexia, cancer and even insanity (Miller).

The frequency of media coverage alone may negatively affect one's well-being, as suggested by a study of community stress level in Hong Kong following the 2004 tsunami (Lau 675). Frequency of coverage was a strong predictor of stressful responses to the tsunami, and had strong associations with the outcomes of the highest stress, which included 16 percent of the 51 percent who experienced high levels of stress following the tsunami.

There are arguments that excessive attention to celebrities can be beneficial; for instance, excessive coverage can be news itself (Brown 31). Also, through in-depth inquiry, one may find cultural or societal context, no matter how “fluffy” the story is, so long as only significant developments are covered; professionals may investigate

celebrity behavior to find who today's role models are, why celebrities command such attention, and how to raise children in light of how stars have developed. Lessons in life and morality can be formed and discovered (31).

The Los Angeles Times makes an effort to report news involving celebrities because, California Desk Supervisor David Lauter said, "A great news organization ought to be able to do more than one thing at a time, and we do" (Readers' Representative Journal). "The goal is to hold a mirror up to daily life in all its splendid diversity." Additionally, the publication defended its decision to include information concerning Britney Spears' custody case because it was newsworthy, having taken place in Los Angeles, and involved law enforcement and the court system. "We are different from the people who follow her 24/7," said Megan Garvey, a morning assignment editor on duty the day the article was written. "We don't camp outside her house" (Readers').

According to Brown, in order to make ethical decisions, the ethical problem – such as excessive celebrity coverage – needs to be acknowledged (31). Next comes a thorough discussion of how to deal with the problem; this is dependent of the various media outlets and writers.

III. Methodology

This project investigated how the extent and quality of American celebrity coverage in the media, mainstream and entertainment-focused, may negatively affect celebrity behavior and psyches in the United States. To achieve this, it was important to research several relevant topics, as well as analyze the content of various entertainment-based and more-traditional media sources, in order to understand the forces that may affect celebrities.

Research on the following topics was necessary for better understanding of the facts concerning how media coverage of celebrities may affect their behavior and mindsets:

- The role of celebrity news in American society - To comprehend the extent to which Americans value entertainment news was helpful in understanding its presence in the media and its impact on the public. Also, knowing why the public is so engrossed with celebrity news was important in comprehending the ways in which the media reports it.
- Media sensationalism – Any transformation of mainstream media content toward sensationalism was researched so as to realize how drastic the influence of entertainment news may be. It was important to investigate the sensationalism of mainstream media, compared with that of blogs and other online sources of celebrity news, to understand the potential role of competition between the two types of media in escalating coverage of celebrity news.
- Credibility among the public of various media forms – Recognizing how the public views different forms of media could have shown how viable a source considers itself, and how viable it considers itself compared to other forms. If the public viewed Weblogs and other online news sources as credible, then mainstream media sources such as television and newspapers may have felt more pressure to compete for the positions they held before.
- Media law – Investigating the legal barriers to excessive and extreme celebrity-news coverage could have proved helpful in understanding how and why it is generated.
- Media ethics – Likewise, understanding moral impediments to posting undue amounts of invasive celebrity news could have aided in measuring the value of entertainment in American society.
- Psychology of “celebrity breakdowns” – It was vital to get a grasp on the human psychology of stress, fear and narcissism to recognize how celebrities may be affected by excessive and invasive news coverage, as these are potential results of such coverage. How cruelty and extreme attention affects the human psyche was researched as well, for these may present in the creation or broadcasting of entertainment-news.

Content Analysis

Analyzing the content presented by mainstream news outlets, in addition to celebrity-news Weblogs and other online sources, offered the most useful and feasible method by which to examine the effects of the media on negative celebrity behavior. Content analysis can be defined as “an empirically grounded method, exploratory in process, and predictive or inferential in intent” (Kriffendorff xvii). Unlike researchers who use other empirical techniques, or those of experience or experiment, content analysts “examine data, printed matter, images, or sounds—texts—in order to understand what they mean to people, what they enable or prevent, and what the information conveyed by them does” (xx). Analysts objectively scrutinize sources to discover their meanings to both the creator and audience.

This function of content analysis in said context was valuable to the goals of this paper because the results may assist in demonstrating the extent to which occurrences or information regarding celebrities is investigated and publicized. The number of instances in which a certain type of information was broadcast could serve as an indication of the media influences that may negatively affect celebrities, and counting these instances could assist in recognizing and understanding them. However, this analysis was not meant to wholly vindicate the thesis of this project, as the project only sought to investigate the potential negative effects of the media on celebrity behavior, not if coverage caused such effects.

Weblogs were chosen as a media form for content analysis because Weblog readers consider the form to be the most credible (Johnson 630). The two Weblogs discussed in the Review of Literature, TMZ.com and Perezhilton.com, were chosen for examination based on their ratings on various “Most Popular Blogs” lists online; Technorati, the Internet search-engine for user-generated media, placed TMZ.com and Perezhilton.com 12th and 13th respectively in its “Popular Blogs” list of 100 of “the biggest blogs in the blogosphere, as measured by unique links in the last six months” (Technorati). eBizMBA’s “30 Most Popular Blogs” list, which ranks blogs based on inbound links from Yahoo Site Explore, Alexa Rank, Compete and Quantcast U.S. Unique Monthly visitor data, placed the TMZ.com and Perezhilton.com second and sixth respectively (eBizMBA). On both lists, the two Web sites were distinctly the top two entertainment-news blogs.

Additionally, E!Online at eonline.com was analyzed as well, as a study found, while online news was rated highest in credibility by adults 18 years of age and older, television news was rated the primary source of information (Abdulla). Also, it is the highest-rated entertainment-news television show by far (Stelter 1). The Web site was chosen for analysis over the television show because similar news is found online as is broadcast on the television show, and restricting sources for content analysis to one media form allowed for more-focused comparisons.

In order to strike a balance between entertainment-focused and mainstream media, and demonstrate the effects both types of media may have on negative celebrity behavior, three entertainment sources as parts of mainstream media forms were chosen for content analysis in addition to TMZ.com, Perezhilton.com and E!Online: the LA Times’ Entertainment section online at latimes.com/entertainment/news; the Web site MSNBC, the major American news channel NBC family’s Web site that also has a

television form, at msnbc.msn.com; and the New York Post's online gossip column Page Six at pagesix.com.

The front pages of each of the selected Web sites were downloaded every Monday and Wednesday at 5 p.m. for four weeks for content analysis, from the week of January 28, 2008 to the week of February 25, 2008.

In order to determine if the content included anything that might negatively affect a celebrity's behavior and psyche, information classified in the following categories were recorded:

- Negative portrayal of a celebrity and the formation of an undesirable image - Coverage of a celebrity publicly performing or having performed an illegal action; coverage of a celebrity acting aggressively, inappropriately, oddly, unintelligently.
- Invasions of privacy - Coverage of/in private places such as the home; disclosure of personal details such as weight; coverage taken without the knowledge of the celebrity. Legal issues were not counted here, as court-related findings are considered public information.
- Exaggeration, opinion, potentially false statements – Information reported without appropriate attribution or investigation; information broadcast that is clearly incorrect for an entertaining effect on the public.

IV. Results

The purpose of the project was to determine how the extent and quality of American celebrity coverage in the media, mainstream and entertainment-focused, may negatively affect celebrity behavior and psyches in the United States. Content analysis of more-traditional and entertainment-focused Web pages including celebrity news was performed to investigate this.

Examples of negative portrayal for the aims of this project include the series of stories about Britney Spears Feb. 4, 2008 on Page Six. "Britney's Lawyer: Britney's Competency Must Be Determined" said that her lawyer, Adam Streisand, thought she did "not have a grasp of what is going on or the implications" and she was not "competent" enough to care for her children. Also that day, "Britney Hearing #1: The Custody Battle" mentioned the court denied her custody of her children, as well as the fact that she was staying in the psych unit at the UCLA Medical Center throughout all of this. Finally, "Britney Wants Her Bank, Not Her Dad" said that Spears did not want her estranged father to be her conservator to keep him from her \$40 million estate, though he argued he wanted no financial gain but only "recognizes that his daughter is in great distress. He only wants her to get the medical help she needs so that she can return to the grandbabies."

MSNBC's Jan. 30, 2008 story "Holmes denies secret first pregnancy" serves as an example of invasion of privacy for this project. A friend of actor Chris Klein, who dated actress Katie Holmes, told the National Enquirer that Klein impregnated Holmes before she married actor Tom Cruise. As a spokesperson for Holmes said the story is false, and Holmes did not publicize or confirm the fact herself, it can be assumed that Holmes, who was never married to Klein, did not wish for the information to be broadcast.

Several references to singer Amy Winehouse's rehabilitation treatments and her husband's prison time can be found on Perezhilton.com. However, Weblog posts, such as the Feb. 18 piece "A Girl's Gotta Eat," also may imply – or blatantly comment – that she is a user of crack cocaine, and are complete with photos of Winehouse with white dots painted on her nose and mouth by the author of the posts through a computer program. These allegations are not supported with any evidence, thus they can be considered opinions, exaggerations or potential falsities.

Through content analysis of the selected online news sources listed in Chapter III, the counts of broadcasts of a certain type were made and recorded in Table I. The first entry means that 11 instances of negative portrayal were found on the front page of TMZ.com on Monday, 8 on Wednesday of Week 1.

TMZ included the most counts of every category, minus MSNBC with slightly more stories of invasion of privacy.

While the more traditional Latimes.com retained the lowest counts of potentially harmful content in the study, mainstream MSNBC and Page Six actually included more counts of stories of negative portrayal than Perez Hilton and E!Online.

There were more counts of exaggeration, opinion and potential falsity than of the other two categories in the overall total counts.

TABLE I

Instances of negative portrayal, invasions of privacy, and exaggeration and potential falsity on the front pages of mainstream and celebrity-news sources

INSTANCES	TMZ	Perez Hilton	E!Online	LaTimes	MSNBC	Page Six
Negative Portrayal	Week 1: 11/8 Week 2: 5/6 Week 3: 8/7 Week 4: 10/7	Week 1: 1/2 Week 2: 1/2 Week 3: 0/2 Week 4: 2/5	Week 1: 1/3 Week 2: 2/0 Week 3: 0/2 Week 4: 1/3	Week 1: 1/1 Week 2: 2/1 Week 3: 0/1 Week 4: 0/0	Week 1: 3/2 Week 2: 1/3 Week 3: 1/3 Week 4: 3/5	Week 1: 1/6 Week 2: 4/0 Week 3: 2/7 Week 4: 2/5
Totals	34/28=62	4/11=15	4/8=12	3/3=6	8/13=21	9/18=27
Invasions of Privacy	Week 1: 1/1 Week 2: 0/0 Week 3: 0/1 Week 4: 1/1	Week 1: 1/0 Week 2: 0/0 Week 3: 0/0 Week 4: 0/0	Week 1: 1/0 Week 2: 0/0 Week 3: 0/0 Week 4: 0/0	Week 1: 0/0 Week 2: 0/1 Week 3: 0/0 Week 4: 0/0	Week 1: 2/0 Week 2: 1/3 Week 3: 0/0 Week 4: 0/0	Week 1: 1/0 Week 2: 0/1 Week 3: 0/0 Week 4: 0/0
Totals	2/3=5	1/0=1	1/0=1	0/1=1	3/3=6	1/1=2
Exaggeration, Potential Falsity	Week 1: 2/3 Week 2: 5/1 Week 3: 2/0 Week 4: 1/3	Week 1: 3/5 Week 2: 6/5 Week 3: 3/9 Week 4: 2/2	Week 1: 1/2 Week 2: 2/2 Week 3: 1/3 Week 4: 1/1	Week 1: 0/0 Week 2: 0/0 Week 3: 0/0 Week 4: 0/0	Week 1: 1/1 Week 2: 2/1 Week 3: 1/1 Week 4: 2/2	Week 1: 1/1 Week 2: 0/1 Week 3: 1/1 Week 4: 2/0
Totals	10/7=17	14/21=35	5/8=13	0/0=0	6/5=11	4/3=7
Overall Totals	84	51	26	7	38	36

V. Discussion

The purpose of the project was to examine how the extent and quality of American celebrity coverage in the media, both mainstream and entertainment-focused, may negatively affect celebrity behavior and psyches in the United States.

The study demonstrated that both entertainment and traditional media outlets included celebrity news on their Web pages. The quality of coverage and the extent to which news was investigated and reported varied between the two types. There was a deficit between the number of instances potentially harmful information was published in mainstream or celebrity-news Web pages. This difference is slight, however, and does not disprove the idea that mainstream news sources is pressured by entertainment-focused sources to offer more celebrity news, which is growing in popularity (Ives 34).

The minimal differences in credibility between blogs and more traditional media enhance the popularity of blogs (Trammell 975), also possibly increasing competition between mainstream and entertainment-based news outlets. Furthermore, Weblogs are restricted by fewer legal obstructions (Semuels C.3). The codes implemented by ethics programs and organizations can serve as boundaries, but they cannot completely prevent anything from being written in a blog (Beeson 18).

Trends toward sensationalism in mainstream news have been found (Slattery 297, Wittebols 24), most likely as a result of competition between traditional media outlets and celebrity-news sources (Dobbs 48). These statements were not disproved by this study, allowing it to be said that competition between the two media types may result in more efforts to investigate and cover the latest, boldest, most intimate information relating to celebrities.

Maintaining a particular image is made difficult by the media, which makes the effort to share information concerning a celebrity's life. These details, public or personal, may cast a negative light upon him or her – and they may not even be true. The fact that there were more counts of exaggeration, opinion and potential falsity means that content does not even need to be supported for viewers to read it and generate opinions from it, rendering media credibility relatively inconsequential in this study. As counts were highest in the Weblogs TMZ and Perez Hilton, it could be said that the high credibility of Weblogs in the eyes of readers is not negatively affected by unsupported or questionable information (Johnson 630).

The publication of such information may prove detrimental to the health of a celebrity, as the constant pressure of maintaining a certain public image can result in various psychological conditions, such as anxiety disorders, as well as chronic stress, the symptoms of which include eating disorders, body aches, insomnia, anxiety, anger and depression (Rockwell 25). Also, in attempting to maintain a particular image, celebrities may repress rage, fear or sadness caused by negative or excessive media coverage, which may lead to psychological and physical damage.

There are many ways in which celebrities are negatively affected by extreme media coverage that are difficult to demonstrate or that may only apply to certain stars. For instance, the fear of being stalked may increase anxiety and supplement issues already present, such as mental conditions. Also, cruelty on the part of media practitioners may have its effects on celebrities as well (Daly 341), but such intentions are difficult to prove at best.

Additionally, readers can leave comments to celebrity Weblog posts, which are often critical of celebrities if not unduly cruel and insensitive, as if celebrities do not read them and their words have no effect. It is unfair that blog posts can be anonymous, rendering a celebrity incapable of knowing who exactly sees them negatively, and giving him or her virtually no chance for defense against such scrutiny

The mere frequency or repetitiveness of coverage of a certain celebrity may be enough to cause that person stress, anxiety or another form of physical and mental harm, as suggested by the study on community stress levels in Hong Kong following the 2004 tsunami (Lau 675). While infrequent negative press alone may not have a considerable influence on celebrity mindsets and behavior, it may have undesirable effects when broadcast multiple times, whether by the same publication or various ones.

There is no law against broadcasting a story or photo too many times, so long as information was legally obtained, but the effect on celebrity psyches and behavior of repetitive publication or broadcasting of a single topic was not investigated in this study, as the level of coverage frequency sufficient to affect a celebrity's well-being would differ among stars and again would be difficult to determine.

VI. Conclusion

The purpose of the project was to examine how the extent and quality of American celebrity coverage in the media, both mainstream and entertainment-focused, may negatively affect celebrity behavior and psyches in the United States. After researching relevant articles and performing content analysis on entertainment Web sites, it was concluded that broadcasts containing information potentially harmful to the well-being of celebrities was present in both mainstream to entertainment-focused sources. Thus, based on the content researched, as well as the outlets analyzed for this project, it was found that the media may indeed negatively affect celebrity behavior and psyches.

Media law binds traditional news sources more strictly; thus, it is more unlikely that inappropriate material will be published or broadcast through those types of sources. However, competition with blogs and celebrity-news sources may impel the presence of sensationalism and more extreme investigation of celebrities and their lives. There are few regulations preventing contributors to blogs and other user-generated media from posting what they wish – true or not.

There are a number of forces that may directly or indirectly stand against the well-being of celebrities, rendering their supposed good fortune in being famous somewhat ironic. The bitterness of the public for being “regular” rather than rich and well-known may lead to a lack of sympathy with celebrities suffering the effects of negative press. Citizens may even actively contribute to such misery, as Perez Hilton has by starting his notorious blog.

There are limitations to this project, primarily that it is difficult if not impossible to determine the exact causes of negative celebrity behavior and psyches, and the extent of the effects those causes may have on celebrities. Existing mental conditions may influence said behavior in addition to or more than media coverage.

Future research may further investigate the exact content of media coverage of celebrities. While this project noted the existence of content that could negatively influence a celebrity’s behavior and mindset, it did not pinpoint or record what the effects, direct or indirect, precisely were. Comments to blog posts by readers, which may be damaging to a celebrity’s well-being, were not investigated. Also, the frequency of coverage of a particular celebrity was not documented; a celebrity could be additionally affected negatively if the majority of a news outlet’s content concerned his or her life. For instance, it appeared that most of the news featured on the Web sites analyzed for this project was about Britney Spears, her parents, custody battles, driving record, mental health and everyday life – oftentimes information seemingly commonplace but broadcasted solely because she was involved. Spears is also arguably one of the most troubled stars of this era.

Though it is not possible to identify the media as the precise cause of negative or undesirable celebrity behavior and mindsets, existing research and media content as well as this project continues to support such a premise.

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