

BOOK REVIEW**ANNA MARIA KARCZEWSKA¹**

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Review of *Journalism and Celebrity* by Bethany Usher, Routledge 2020, 216 pp. ISBN: 9780367200886, £36.99.

In his essay “Big Bucks and Fake Tears” (2009) Zachary Snider wrote that the twenty-first century celebrities in America reflect an imitation of reality. In claiming this, he referenced Jean Baudrillard’s “Simulacra and Simulation”, in the sense that a majority of the American public nowadays want their celebrities to reflect an imitation of reality that they can identify with and relate to. Snider suggested that viewers prefer mirror image-type celebrity archetypes and images of themselves, so that, in our age of obsessive reality TV and tabloids, the viewers themselves feel like celebrities. Celebrity is generated outside celebrity itself; it is a vision that rarely appears with its own voice. By the same token, Zygmunt Bauman (2007), in his foreword to Wiesław Godzic’s (2007) thorough analysis of celebrities in tabloid culture, claims that it is the public that creates celebrities and the same public constitutes a surrogate of community, a community which in celebrating celebrities, celebrates itself. The rhythm of celebrities’ heartbeats is the same as ours but louder; their dreams are our dreams. When we recognize the actions of celebrities as noteworthy, we gain recognition for our own actions, and so on. Additionally, according to Bauman, celebrities constitute a window through which we may observe the political, social and cultural mechanisms of a society. Without this window they would remain invisible. Celebrities are part and parcel of our culture, they are their essence and one of its central features, to quote Ponce de Leon (2002). The emergence of democracy and the expansion of consumer capitalism changed the nature of fame, and developed it into a new form of public visibility made possible by social, economic and political change,

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and by the power of the masses. That is why celebrities are the product of modernity. They occupy a central place in modern cultures, and as celebrity emerges from contemporary forms of democracy and capitalism it is closely connected to political enfranchisement and literacy. That is why Marshall (2006: 323) claims that celebrities are a function of media and “[i]t is difficult to separate the histories of journalism and the emergence of the contemporary celebrity system”.

The aforementioned ideas (and many more) also appear in Bethany Usher’s book *Celebrity and Journalism* (2020). The author, who is a former tabloid journalist and a lecturer in Multimedia Journalism at Newcastle University, aims to present the relationship between journalism and celebrity in chronological order, simultaneously examining the social, cultural and political aspects of capitalist democracies against the dichotomy of proper journalism and celebrity news. Bethany Usher focuses on the manifestations of journalism and celebrity from the 18th century to the present day in the “transatlantic cultural sphere” of an English-speaking world (p. 1).

In the chapter entitled ‘**Journalism and celebrity in the consumer revolution and bourgeois public sphere**’ the author traces the beginnings of the emergence of publicly recognized, respected people and ‘celebrified politicians’ in newspapers and periodical magazines. Usher, citing an extensive bibliography of celebrity studies, claims that celebrity culture emerged in the 18th century, and points to the fact that the term celebrity “emerged with linguistic specificity in the 1760s” (p. 20). Usher claims they were a symbolic representation of life and had the power to stabilize or reshape social norms. The author also, using Rojek’s taxonomy of fame, enumerates examples of ascribed, attributed and achieved celebrities, showing at the same time that there was a place in the ‘star system’ and in public society for those who were outside the worlds of social elites. Usher also traces the public/private binary oppositions and shows how the intertwining of the public, private and personal helped create different people’s celebrity and politics. In this chapter, the author also discusses the role of celebrity in political campaigns.

The next chapter’s title ‘**Celebrity and the New Journalism**’ is quite misleading. It is not about the New Journalists represented in the United States by Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson, Gay Talese, Rex Reed or Jimmy Breslin, to name just a few (see e.g. Weingarten 2005). This group of writers, who were revolutionizing journalism in the 1960s, were also engaged with celebrities, hence the confusion, which might also come from willingness on the part of the reviewer to read the author’s analysis of this particular movement’s engagement with changing celebrity interviews and writing celebrity pieces. Talese’s article for *Esquire* magazine, ‘Frank Sinatra has a cold’, is considered one of the greatest celebrity profiles ever written. ‘Do you sleep in the nude?’ is Rex’s Reed celebrity profile collection, and Thompson’s ‘Temptations of Jean Claude Killy’ describes celebrity sports endorsements. However, it turns out (on p. 49) that this chapter covers the Victorian New Journalists (such as W.T. Stead or Randolph Hearst), and the group of the

abovementioned journalists never appears in Usher's book. In this chapter the author shows that Victorian New Journalism was, on the one hand, understood as a distortion of reality, its masking, reproduction of social conditions, and on the other, as Usher shows, it used celebrity to fight for social and political changes, to perpetuate the social structures of capitalism, or to shape the politics of readers. Usher describes the mutual dependency of capitalism and democracy in celebrity journalism, and its impact on news development, the development of tabloids, celebrity interviews and gossip news.

The chapter '**Acts of Consecration and Desecration. Journalism and 20th century stardom**' discusses different processes of celebrification and explores the power of journalism, explaining how stardom and culture work together to construct reality, mask it or distort it. Usher writes here about the similarity of celebrity functioning and influence to the religious system (see Rothenbuhler 2005; Rojek 2001). This chapter also discusses celebrity interviews, and analyses how different rituals of celebrity journalism make ordinary people extraordinary and create stars in Hollywood, in the political arena and in pop music.

In the chapter '**Tabloidism, television and the neoliberal soap opera**' the author explains how tabloids have changed the practice of journalism. On the one hand, it has become predatory and bloodthirsty (see Rupert Murdoch's case), while on the other hand, thanks to tabloids, journalism has begun to be linked to distinct political orientations and theoretical concepts. It shows the areas of tabloid culture and their voyeuristic tracking of various events, as well as the transformation of the soap opera of the 1980s into tabloid television. This chapter describes how tabloid culture creates politics, disregards moral principles, and facilitates seeing the world as a result of the ideology of consumerism and populism. However, as most divisions of modern culture are characterized by instability and blurring, the author also recognizes the importance of this segment of the press, and argues that it is an inherent feature of democracy, seeing the powerful influence of the tabloid in shaping the opinions of members of a democratic society.

'**The story of the 21st century. Hyperconsumerism, neopopulism and the networked applications of journalism and celebrity**' explains how journalism, in the era of convergence culture, has been dominated by hyperconsumerism, which, as a sequence of practices aimed at producing objects and activating their properties, becomes a creative tool in constructing individual biographies or communicating aesthetic preferences. The hyper-consumptionist nature of postmodernity lies in the inability to function other than mediated by consumption and commodities. However, as the author shows, it is not only oppressive in nature, but there is also some emancipatory potential in it when, for example, journalism realizes the sovereign will, or even the whims and fantasies of the readers. Apart from discussing the phenomenon of microcelebrity, Usher describes how journalism and celebrity have changed in the era of multi-platform environments, and analyses the practices of celebrity news production and the key sites where this production is most visible: Twitter, YouTube and Instagram.

Concluding her book, apart from showing different challenges celebrity journalism might create, the author has some suggestions on how (competently, ethically, and with civic and critical awareness) different institutions, journalists and audiences should approach constructing meanings. The book ends exuding optimism about journalists and celebrities, whose actions may positively influence our societies, and how journalism and celebrity can work better as part of politics.

Bethany Usher has published an interesting book concerning the relationship between journalism and the phenomenon of celebrities. In dealing with this topic this book is not necessarily unique, and the long and rich reference list in Usher's work is proof that the literature on this topic is broad and varied. However, it may also suggest that there is never enough scholarly reflection on the production, consumption and content of this polarizing form of journalism. What makes *Journalism and Celebrity* fascinating and effective is its historical account, its focus on journalism's role in creating celebrity, and the place of celebrity within the news industry. This book is an important contribution to both celebrity and journalism studies. It is well organized and well written, and demonstrates a high degree of understanding of the cultural and economic significance of celebrity journalism, the workings of consumer capitalism in relation to journalism, and the systems that create and maintain fame. Readers with interests in the histories of journalism and celebrity culture will find much value here.

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2 To translate Godzic's title I borrowed Daniel Boorstin's phrase (see: Boorstin 2006[1961]).

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