

SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM – 2008
USC ANNENBERG SCHOOL FOR COMMUNICATION

JOUR 457: The Role of Celebrity in Public Relations – 4 units

Instructor

Jonathan Wilcox

Class Facts

Day: Tuesdays Time: 6:45 – 10:05 p.m. Classroom: ASC 204

Spring Recess: 3-17/3-22 Final Exam: Thursday, May 8th – 7-9 p.m.

Syllabus

This syllabus will be subject to some change and modification throughout the semester, in conjunction with issues or events, as well as the needs of students. Any questions regarding assignments should be directed to the instructors.

Course Purpose

Fascination with fame and attraction to celebrity is nothing new – especially for America. As H.L. Mencken observed:

“A celebrity is one who is known to many persons he is glad he doesn’t know.”

If this is true – why do we want to know about them? Are forces at work that we don’t fully know or understand that move us to drive the cars they drive, wear the clothes they wear, eat the food they eat and buy maps to gaze at their homes? Why do celebrities, people who work hard all their lives to become well known, then wear dark glasses to avoid being recognized? These questions and observations – and others – will be presented, dissected and better understood during the course of a series of lectures designed to compliment the mission of the Annenberg School for Communication.

Class attendees will become acutely aware of America’s now-fourth century of celebrity fascination, and they will also have the opportunity to fully trace the rise and fall of different classes of famous individuals and fully appreciate the intricacies of the diverse industry that can at once manufacture renown and maintain fame.

The course examines how the publicity, public relations and promotions industry has developed, and how celebrity is produced, promoted and traded within the American mass media. The study attempts to explain the appeal of celebrities to the market, and the process of how stories about celebrities reach the media and ultimately the differently targeted groups of consumers. Specifically, the course will examine why we watch, follow and even mimic the celebrity culture.

Course Rationale

The Roman historian Tacitus observed, “The desire for fame is the last infirmity cast off even by the wise.” This advice, true as it may be for most of us, is certainly garnering few takers in today’s popular culture. In theory, a person becomes a celebrity as a result of achievements. In practice, being a celebrity is widely seen as a great achievement in itself.

Being famous may (or may not) bring gratification and glory. But what about the rest of us? Fixating on the stars in the entertainment world’s skies can be occasionally immobilizing, especially if not accompanied by a social understanding of the communication realities of the power of celebrity. The more awed we are by their activities and achievements, the more likely we are to pay personal attention and even consumer currency. They make news; we consume it. They live public lives; we, in our private lives, follow them. They go places and do things we never will; we observe them – and to varying degrees – live vicariously a more glamorous life.

That is the celebrity cycle, and it is not likely to change anytime soon. But it must be understood.

Course Outcomes

This course is designed to provide an outcome of learning and experience that includes:

- **An enhanced understanding of multimedia outlets attached to the celebrity industry**
- **A new recognition of the practice and practitioners of public relations and celebrity**
- **An appreciation of the ways that celebrity has impacted history, social science, politics, sports and, naturally, the entertainment industry**
- **An awareness of the trends and major issues affecting public relations and the new and emerging ways it is attached to the celebrity culture**

Class Activities

- Lectures, open discussions, analysis and solutions of case studies and exercises
- Guest lectures by personalities and practitioners specializing in relevant areas of study

Course Requirements and Grade Determination

- Mid-term: 25%
- Term paper due: 25%
- Week #16 final exam: 40%
- Class participation: 10%

Midterm Exam

The midterm exam will be in essay form, and all subjects, topics, quizzes and assigned reading is fair game. Students will be able to choose from a list of essay topics, which will be provided immediately prior to the exam. This will allow any and all students to ask questions and fully understand the scope and specifics of the questions and what is required.

Term Paper Description

The term paper will be in essay form, drawn from lesson plans to date. Students will have a choice: Answer any of the assigned essay topics, **or** submit an essay topic of their choosing to the professors for approval. Students are neither encouraged nor discouraged from following either choice. It should attempt to both define and determine a deeper point (a case study, a suggested

course of action, an alternate view of course teaching) and demonstrate both analysis and explanation.

Final Exam

The final exam will take the form of a required essay or essays, as well as a “matching” section that will test your knowledge of course and speaker specifics. Don’t worry. No tricks, no gimmicks and no surprises. If we talked about it in class – or reviewed it during the recap session, it could be asked on the final. Remember: Everything you need to know and understand will be covered in class.

Assigned Reading

Required reading for this course will be culled from the following books and publications and compiled as a course reader through USC Custom Publishing:

- **Winchell: Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity** By Neal Gabler
Published by Random House, 1995, 681 pages
- **Celebrity** By Chris Rojek
Published by Reaktion Books, Ltd, 2002, 208 pages
- **Peepshow: Media and Politics in an Age of Scandal**
By Larry J. Sabato and S. Robert Lichter
Published by Rowman and Littlefield, 2001, 175 pages
- **The Frenzy of Renown – Fame and Its History** by Leo Braudy
Published by Vintage Books, 1997, 667 pages
- **Celebrity and Power: Fame In Contemporary Culture** By P. David Marshall
Published by University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 290 pages
- **Illusions of Immortality: A Psychology of Fame and Celebrity** By David Giles
Published by St. Martin’s Press, Inc., 2000, 187 pages
- **A Massive Swelling: Celebrity Reexamined as a Grotesque, Crippling Disease and Other Cultural Revelations** By Cintra Wilson
Published by Viking Penguin, 2000, 229 pages
- **What Price Fame?** By Tyler Cowen
Published by Harvard University Press, 2000, 248 pages
- **Intimate Strangers** By Richard Schickel
Published by Ivan R. Dee, 2000, 312 pages

Course Lectures

Week One: What Is A Celebrity?

This discussion will explain fundamental guidelines for understanding the scope of any celebrity culture. This will also equip the student with a bridge to “new thinking” about the use, effects and manipulation of notoriety and its overall impact on dynamic societal communications.

Week Two: Understanding Our New First Principle

This discussion will review the principles of celebrity culture (introduced during previous lecture) and also include assessment and analysis of what has been described as our new American Celebrity Principle: “They’re famous, you’re not.” This will include reference points beyond the entertainment industry to include politics, advertising and social studies.

Assignments

- Read: *Illusions of Immortality: A Psychology of Fame and Celebrity*, by David Giles, Chapter One, “Introduction: Defining Fame and Celebrity.”
- Read: *Celebrity*, By Chris Rojek, Chapter One, “Celebrity and Celestoids”
- Read: *Illusions of Immortality: A Psychology of Fame and Celebrity* By David Giles, “Mad for Noblesse: Fame through History”
- Read: *A Massive Swelling*, by Cintra Wilson, “Statement of Intent, Or How To Read This Book Without Wanting to Hurt the Author”

Week Three: The Celebrity Shift: From Founders to Public Leaders to Omni-Entertainers

The culture of celebrity has shifted throughout American history. Beginning with the nation’s Founders, public American fame was mostly conferred upon men of theory and ideas, as well as religious leaders. As America grew and prospered, it developed a dynamic and unprecedented secular state that existed not in conflict with, *but in addition to*, the nation’s early character.

This gave rise to the first celebrity culture, which recognized fame and achievement outside of traditional environments, such as religion and politics. This is how our entertainment culture grew to become the first of its kind, and, in many ways, redefined the other designations of how Americans used to be considered famous.

Assignments

- Read handout: “Media and the Rise of Celebrity Culture,” by Amy Henderson, *Organization of American Historians Magazine of History*, Volume 6, no 4, Spring 1992
- Read handout: “The Moral Washington: Construction of a Legend (1800-1920s)”

Week Four: Elected Leaders Are Famous, But Politicians Are Celebrities

The dynamics of campaigns and elections, as well as government and politics, do not easily lend themselves to the celebrity culture. Because much of the entertainment industry involves make-believe or dramatic interpretation, people extend a unique standard of belief and acceptance. Because much of politics surrounds public policy choices and complex questions of law, the standard is more exacting.

Still, the two can be bridged, even successfully. Apart from any ideological consideration, Bill Clinton achieved this, and for reasons that legions of pundits did not notice or fully comprehend.

And with the words “Governor Schwarzenegger” now becoming more familiar to Californians (not so say the rest of the nation and world), we must examine how and why this happened, and if it’s likely to occur again for reasons we have yet to fully appreciate.

Assignments

- Read: *Peepshow: Media and Politics in an Age of Scandal*, by Larry J. Sabato and Robert Lichter, Chapter Two “Politics” and Chapter Three “Unindicted Coconspirators”
- Read: “Celebrity Culture in America – Has personality finally replaced reality?” By David McNair, “Oldspeak” – The online journal of the Rutherford Institute

Week Five: Do We Only Know the Notorious? (Also, recap & review of previous lectures)

For more than one year, Scott Peterson was one of America’s best-known individuals. Soon, however, he will be as unknown as he was before his spectacular crimes. His fame cannot be denied; but was he a celebrity or just a notorious figure? Has he left a legacy in his life or only, perhaps, in his death? This discussion will trace the path of notoriety to celebrity, why it sometimes endures, and why it most often cannot.

Assignment

- Read: *Winchell: Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity*, by Neal Gabler, Introduction and Chapter 12 “Stardom.”

Week Six – Class Midterm Exam

Midterm exam administered:

- **Midterm exam is 25% of grade.**

Assignments

- Read handout: “The Fame Economy: What’s Good for Michael Jordan is Good for America,” by Jonathan Broder, Salon.com

Week Seven: Lifestyles of the Poor and Famous

Everyone knows that celebrity can bring with it riches and wealth far beyond what most people can imagine. But it doesn’t always stay that way. This discussion reveals the much-misunderstood financial reality behind public celebrity: Most fail to earn a long-term living, even if they are still well-known. This will also describe how celebrity can maintain its own kind of currency, allowing for the perception of financial ability, which can translate into a kind of reality of actual affluence.

Assignment

- Read: *What Price Fame*, by Tyler Cowen, Chapter One, “The Intensity of Fame in Modern Society”
- Read handout: “Fame Factor,” by Thomas Nord, TheJournalNews.com

Week Eight: “I said, *celebrity*, not *celibacy*”

This discussion will focus on the societal forces and social “push-pull” that delineates the fascination with celebrities and our obsession with sex. An indelible part of celebrity is personal charisma, but it often quickly gives way to sex appeal.

How much of celebrity is based upon that unspoken (but not un-thought) attraction? And do we place the same value, importance and admiration for celebrities who are known for their “inside” as much as those who are known for their “outside.”

Assignment

- Read handout: “The Folly of Celebrity Culture,” by Roberto Rivera, *Boundless Webzine*.

Week Nine: Private: Keep Out!

How accessible should the celebrity be to the public? The old saying is an old truth: without the public’s approval and appreciation, the celebrity essentially ceases to exist. Therefore, the people provide the oxygen that allows stars to breathe their rarefied air, and can cut off the supply at any moment in time.

Still, what is the line between reporting and stalking ... between liking a celebrity and liking them ... *too much*? And for the famous, is losing their privacy the trade-off for fame?

Assignment

- Read: *Information Liberation*, by Brian Martin, Chapter 9 “Celebrity Intellectuals”
- Read: *Celebrity*, by Chris Rojek, Chapter Five, “Celebrity and Celebrification”

Week 10: Aren’t We In On The Game?

Many in today’s critical media correctly observe that our society often features celebrities – from Hollywood and Silicon Valley to Wall Street and Washington – glorifying a few rich and powerful Americans. But they incorrectly assume that the rest of us are mostly cast as incessant consumers, occasional voters and quiescent citizens. Further, they misunderstand when they offer that in a spectator mode, looking up to movers and shakers, we’re not likely to rock a lot of boats.

Better than anyone, we know deep down that the American celebrity culture is self-actualized. We’re fans more than we are followers, and we understand what is happening. We know the effects, and we know the import, and we can shut it off at any time: (See Simpson, O.J.)

Assignment

- Read: *Intimate Strangers*, by Richard Schickel, Chapter Two, “Where We Came In” and Chapter Three, “Where I Came In”

Week 11: The Minority Celebrity: Up From the Community? Or Down With It?

The minority celebrity is emerging into full social focus and altering the art formerly known as “the mainstream.” As America has grown racially and ethnically diverse, so has its celebrity culture, opening up new and influential opportunities for the nation’s minority communities.

Still, a case can and should be made that our appetite for celebrity presaged a more socially just nation – and yet today often holds tightly onto outdated social mores long after they have been

discarded by society as a whole. This includes also the lingering question “how much responsibility does the celebrity who has “made it” owe to those of a same or similar background to those who have yet to enjoy the same success ... or even access to success?”

Assignment

- Read: *The Frenzy of Renown – Fame and its History* by Leo Braudy, Conclusion “The Dream of Acceptability”

Week 12: Death and Taxes ... and Hacks and Flacks

A most certain constant in the entertainment culture is the permanent presence of “Hacks” (its media and industry promotional arms) and “Flacks” (industry professionals who have held a number of jobs in the business and who make up the equivalent of a public-sector bureaucracy).

While stars and their fans enjoy a symbiotic relationship, Hacks and Flacks are in a constant state of war, but with very well understood rules of engagement that each side adheres to – the equivalent of Hollywood’s Geneva Convention.

Example: An assumption exists that accepts the role of publicity as an aberration. But that is the way media operate. Some sections of newspapers are financially dependent on industry groups for revenue, and this takes the form of publicists cross-promoting celebrities in productions and in media outlets that are both controlled by a single entity.

Term Paper:

- **Term paper due today – 25% of grade**

Assignment

- Read: *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*, by P. David Marshall, Chapter 5 “Television’s Construction of the Celebrity.”

Week 13: After September 11th: The Contrast of Celebrity and Hero

The many public tributes organized and performed by America’s most famous entertainment and social celebrities after the Sept. 11th incidents have highlighted an important social truth: Celebrities are not heroes, and heroes are not long celebrities.

This is because the hero is distinguished by his or her achievement, while the celebrity is distinguished by his or her image or trademark. Heroes create themselves; celebrities are created in an intentional image. The hero is a big individual, while the celebrity is a big name, and the hero, even if he survives, enjoys a much shorter shelf life.

Assignment

- Read: *What Price Fame?* by Tyler Cowen, Chapter Two, “Why Fame is Separated From Merit”
- Read handout: “Arnett’s Story Shows Pitfalls of ‘Celebrity’ News Anchors,” by Joe Flint, *The Wall Street Journal*
- Read handout: “P.R. Lessons from the Pentagon,” by Clark S. Judge, WSJ.com.

Week 14: “Is It The Sitter Or The Seat?” – Real Professionalism In A Surreal Industry

Where does power in the celebrity industry derive from? Is it the “sitter” (the person in the seat of power?) or “the seat” (the place where the powerful can be found)? This lecture will give students indispensable advice, guidance and a reality check about how the system works.

No internship can substitute for experience on the firing line, and the lessons that only come on the job. Also, these lessons overlap into any professional endeavor, and will provide the most sound and practical ways to understand some of the human dynamics of the professional world.

Instructors Evaluations

- Evaluations will be administered at the beginning of the class

Assignment

- Read handout: “Coverage You Can Count On, If in the Chosen Demographic,” by Brian Lowry, latimes.com.
- Read handout: “No Kidding: On Iraq, Janeane Garofalo Fights to Be Taken Seriously,” by Howard Kurtz, washingtonpost.com.
- Read handout: “Unfit to Print,” by Howard Kurtz, washingtonpost.com.

Week 15: Recap. Review and Reverie

Review session for the final exam

FINAL EXAMINATION WEEK

Final exam administered:

- **Final exam is 40% of grade**

The Rules of the Game

Attendance

Students are expected to attend all classes, and unexcused absences, tardiness, leaving during the break and failure to meet deadlines will have a negative impact on any final grade.

Missed Classes

Students who miss a class are responsible for notifying the instructor in advance (if possible), getting assignments from students or the instructor and meeting any deadlines.

Writing Format

All assignments must be typed and submitted in hard copy, not via e-mail.

Grammar, Spelling and Writing Ability

All are important. While this is not an English class or writing course, it involves a good deal of English and writing, and the instructor expects students to demonstrate upper-division proficiency.

We're In This Together

Students and instructor must work together to produce the best seminar and lecture experience. So, all serious ideas and opinions will be accorded due respect and regard, as the widest range of viewpoints possible will make the class successful.

Class Discussion

The class should feature consistent feedback and interaction between student and instructor. This class will be the time of your life, so everyone is expected to contribute. Failure to do so will not help any student's grades.

Plagiarism/School of Journalism Academic Integrity Policy

If you didn't write it, don't present it as your own. If you use another's idea or work, cite it as such. In addition, here is the Annenberg School of Journalism's policy on academic integrity as published in the University catalog: "Since its founding, the USC School of Journalism has maintained a commitment to the highest standards of ethical conduct and academic excellence. Any student found guilty of plagiarism, fabrication, cheating on examinations, or purchasing papers or other assignments will receive a failing grade in the course and will be dismissed as a major from the School of Journalism. There are no exceptions to this policy."

Academic Accommodation/Statement for Students with Disabilities

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is 213-740-0776.