

You must imagine this – the function of celebs

Nick Lacey

Whilst celebrities are not new, (stars in the theatre were feted in the 19th century), it does appear that much of popular broadcasting and print media are relying, more than ever, on ‘celeb’ culture to sell their wares. The rise of celebrity culture may be linked with the idea that popular culture is in the process of ‘dumbing down’ the nation, but then pop culture has never been generally regarded as edifying. However, we can also consider that celebs actually glue the nation together.

When EMAP launched *Heat* as an entertainment based magazine in the late 1990s, it threatened to be a high profile failure. Re-launched as a celebrity publication it became one of the publisher’s most successful launches and reached a circulation of 500,000 by 2002. The 2004 Christmas issue of this celebrity Bible offered 11 celebs on its front cover [the fact that I knew of only Nadia, Jude (Law) and ‘Dirty Den’ is symptomatic of my personal interest in celeb culture so what follows is written as an ‘outsider’ – corrections to the editor please]. Flicking through the issue (bought for this piece) I complained to my wife (who is as clueless as I am on the subject) that I didn’t get it; “it’s because you don’t know who they are”, she replied. Obviously (once it had been pointed out to me) this was the case. But I still struggled to understand what I would ‘get’ from it even if I did know who they were.

In terms of the ‘uses and gratifications’ model of audiences I should be getting one of, or a combination of, the following: personal identity; information; entertainment; social interaction. Clearly celebrities can offer role models in a positive or negative sense; the red-top tabloids are particularly keen to ‘dig dirt’ offering prurient satisfaction to their readers. The information offered is likely to simply be fuel for gossip (social interaction) though, if the celebrity does have an actual career (as an actor or singer, for instance, rather than simply

existing as a celeb), then details of new films/CDs etc. can be construed to be informative. No doubt images of celebrities offer entertainment either as sex objects or as objects of ridicule if they are captured looking ‘less than their best’.



Audiences, of course, are at liberty to make their own readings of celebrities, and I guess much

fun can be had discussing the pros and cons of celebrities with friends. The *Big Brother* series plays on this with the audience encouraged to vote on who to throw out of the house. However it did strike me that there was more to celebrity culture than simply offering audiences ‘uses and gratifications’. Not being ‘in’ on the culture suggested I was missing out on something and that something might be an aspect of the ‘imagined community’ that is Britain.

Benedict Anderson suggested that nation states gained their sense of identity through an ‘imagined community’:

It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each, lives the image of their community. (Anderson, 1991, p. 6)

Unsurprisingly the mass media is crucial in the formation of the ‘imagined community’ (though not in a monolithic way as there are always competing versions even if they vary only a little) and Anderson showed how the origins of national consciousness coincided with the first mass medium: the printing press.

Before the age of print, the Vatican easily won every war against heresy in Western Europe because it always had better internal lines of communication than its challengers. But when in 1517 Martin Luther nailed his theses to the chapel-door in Wittenberg, they were printed up in German translation and ‘within 15 days [had been] seen in every part of the country’. (Ibid., p39)

Luther’s works represented one third of all books sold in Germany between 1518 and 1525. It is unlikely that Protestantism could have succeeded without the printing press, which itself was exploited by early capitalists. Luther’s protest against Roman Catholicism represented, and contributed to, the ideological

Title	Publisher	Circulation	Rank in Top 100 Magazines
<i>Now</i>	IPC	597,733	8
<i>Heat</i>	EMAP	539,983	13
<i>Closer</i>	EMAP	500,202	15
<i>New</i>	Northern and Shell	357,523	25
<i>Reveal</i>	National Magazines	239,907	[48]
<i>Star</i>	Northern and Shell	176,983	69

Circulations of selected ‘celebrity’ magazines taken from the Top 100 ‘Actively Purchased Magazines’ Dec 2004 UK/Ireland (listed on <http://www.ppamarketing.net/cgi-bin/wms.pl/26>).

shift from feudalism to capitalism and the 'imagined community' offered by celebrities in the 21st century is strictly consumerist in nature.

Celebrities are, from this perspective, people we all can know and gossip about. For example, in July 2004 the *Daily Star* ran several pages on Charlotte Church's holiday, invariably including shots that emphasised her breasts and/or backside. We learned who she was on holiday with, how she was having fun and what she looked like when she had had a tad too much to drink. Readers are encouraged to keep buying the newspaper to follow the on-going narrative of Church's holiday (Church came to fame as an 11 year-old singing 'serious' – using the term loosely as it was Andrew Lloyd Webber – music. Part of the fascination, I guess, in Church is seeing her transformation into a sexually attractive woman and the fact she, artistically, comes from the apparently repressed world of 'classical' music).

Whether the celebrities are used to attract an audience, by anchoring shows such as MTV's 'celebrity choice', or to sell particular products through advertising, they exemplify:

The historical transition in the meaning of 'the popular' from 'the property of the people, through packaging for the people, to consumption by the people.' (McGuigan, 1992, p127)

Celebrity culture is enmeshed in the consumer culture of late (if its days are numbered) capitalism. However, one democratic aspect of current celebrity culture is it appears possible that everyone, as Warhol suggested, "can be famous for fifteen minutes" (the 15 minutes being spun out as long as possible by celebs' agents). In this sense, we can all possibly become part of the 'imagined community' of our nation. However, who (and, by extension, what they represent) is allowed to become a celeb is heavily dependent upon the gatekeepers. And given the entertainment-driven consumerism of celebrity culture, political issues (such as the role of Muslims in UK's imagined community) are only apparent in their absence.

The Internet may also be contributing to this democratisation as those with access to the mass media can create websites and/or weblogs, in the way that

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video made it simpler for the public to capture audio-visual images and, with the advent of cheap editing packages and DVD authoring, make their own high quality 'films' about their lives. Politics, however, can appear on the Internet from the virulent right wing (carried most effectively in mainstream media by the *Daily Mail*) to the far left (not carried at all in the mainstream).

If celebrities have a major input into the imagined community of a large proportion of Britain, then their ideological conservatism will have a large impact upon political consciousness. Whether this represents 'dumbing down' depends upon your political persuasion.

References

- Benedict Anderson (1991, revised and extended edition) *Imagined Communities*, London and New York: Verso
- Jim McGuigan (1991) *Cultural Populism*, London and New York: Routledge

[Editor's Note: Soon after Nick completed this article, *The Independent* published a piece in its (very good) Media Supplement, in which Nat Pettinger

analyses the page design and layout of the 'celeb mags' such as *Heat*, *Closer* etc. He demonstrates that all the 'good practice' of page design is jettisoned in favour of misaligned text boxes, screaming 'splashes' and 'bad' paparazzi photographs. But this is clearly what the readership wants and Pettinger concludes that:

The brain really wants to idle, something that these magazines, in common with television, allow us to do. And our inherent laziness in the face of celebrity culture and some visual jiggery-pokery can be translated into record sales this week as yet another benchmark is set in the market's intensifying battle for our attentions. (From: 'How bad design gets the best results' by Nat Pettinger, *The Independent Media Weekly* 28 February 2005.)

Unfortunately, you can't download the article from the *Indy's* website unless you pay a fee. *The Guardian* is under pressure from the improving *Independent*, but the Guardian Unlimited website, the largest newspaper site in Europe, remains free to access.]