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1 Celebrity Supernova

Farah Fawcett-Majors and Michael Jackson died on the same day. As events go in the time and tide of newsworthy celebrity culture, the exit of Fawcett-Majors was as perverse as that of Aldous Huxley on 22 November 1963: the day of John F. Kennedy's assassination. A celebrity supernova refers to the death of an individual whose fame is so immense that their existence frames the character of the age. It is an image of a cultural presence of something that is not only bigger, but also higher than ourselves.

All cultures require institutions dedicated to promoting transcendence. That is cultural escalators that transport ordinary men and women from private cares and the dun horizon of daily monotony, into a bigger, richer mental and social space. In premodern society, religion, magic and totemism supplied men and women with a sense of following the grand plan of Creation. In the words of Eliade, in archaic society 'life is lived on a twofold plane; it takes its course as human existence and, at the same time, shares in a transhuman life, that of the cosmos or the gods' (Eliade, 1957: 167).

Modern men and women have mostly lost the belief in magical and totemic cosmology, and organized religion is generally thought to be in decline in the West.¹ These escalators of premodern transcendence have been replaced by general acquiescence to the testable propositions of science and technology. But the human affiliation with the notion of transcendence survives. In modern society, celebrity culture – in sport, popular music, fashion, film and television – provides the overwhelming majority of ordinary men and women with access to intimations of elevated existence. In this regard, celebrity culture rivals our relationship with Nature and, in Western society, now outperforms organized religion in the sheer numbers that it attracts. It is no accident that celebrities are also known as stars. Celebrity culture provides a desacralized highway to transcendence. Hence, John Castles notes the rituals of immortality that surround superstars. They are widely idolized as supremely gifted, luxuriantly equipped, larger-than-life beings that provide millions of people with a sense of meaning in a universe that is habitually regarded as indifferent to mankind (Castles, 2008: 91).

Celebrity supernovas present a sense of being in touch with cultural immensity. With the death of a Michael Jackson or a John F. Kennedy, the age changes. It translates into something else. The occurrence of a celebrity supernova involves the pain of group loss and the bitter gall of personal mourning. There is no other news. When Jackson and JFK died, the biographies and cultural significance

of Fawcett-Majors and Huxley and all other news items were snuffed out. They became as moths to a black hole. Everything was sucked in and swallowed by the all-absorbing stellar cataclysm.

Not one, but several riddles demand to be solved here. Of the millions who grieved for JFK and Jackson only an infinitesimal number had what might be called a *primary relationship* with them. That is direct, personal contact in non-public settings. In ordinary life, primary relationships with parents, children, other blood relations and close friends are the main source of joy, desire, wonder, pain, remorse, grief and other deep emotions. The majority of people knew of JFK and Jackson as they were familiar with long-dead figures from history, like Hadrian, Salome or Napoleon, that is by writings and word of mouth. True, modern men and women have access to technologies of fame that would have been beyond the imagination of predigital generations, technologies such as sound recordings, photographs, television clips and film footage. Without doubt, these provide more detailed impressions of famous people. But this scarcely amounts to a primary relationship. Through these technologies celebrities have become vastly more accessible to the general public. Strangers and stargazers know more about the private lives of celebrities than ever before. Yet, curiously, celebrities remain consummately out of reach. It is a peculiar quality of modern culture that, via the media, ordinary men and women possess the means to be familiar with much in the private lives of celebrities without ever having shaken their hands or even set eyes upon them face-to-face. Upon what grounds do the millions who never broke bread or supped with the celebrities grieve a supernova as both an immense cultural event and a matter of *personal loss*?

If fame is truly vanity, as Kolakowski (1999) tells us, the adulation of celebrity is surely a base, shallow emotion. For it is not founded in direct personal contact, but imaginary relationships. Yet why should a celebrity supernova make us sensible of a deep, profound, irrevocable transformation in our lives and the social and cultural composition of things, just as the rise of some celebrities makes us conscious of entering a new epoch?

The contagion effect of celebrity is not limited to the case of the celebrity supernova. Commodities that are authenticated as once owned, or even touched, by celebrities command a high price in the auction market. When Sotheby's auctioned 1,300 items from the estate of the late Jacqueline Kennedy, the optimistic pre-sale prediction was \$4.6 million. In the event, the sale netted \$34.5 million. Some items possessed iconic significance. For example, President Kennedy's rocking chair was sold for \$453,000; his set of golf clubs for \$772,500; and the desk upon which he signed the 1963 Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, \$1.43 million. Other items that had no iconic significance still fetched remarkably high prices. For example, a tape measure (\$48,785) and a set of books on Cape Cod (\$21,850) (Newman *et al.*, 2011).

The contagion effect is not limited to figures of historical importance. Notorious celebrities generate the same price inflation. For example, the US government auctioned several possessions of the infamous fraudster Bernie Madoff, including a footstool listed at \$360, which was sold for \$3,300, and a standard bar set, originally listed for \$680, which fetched \$2,200 (*New York Times* 15.11.2010). Similarly, Stone (2007) reports staggering prices achieved at auctions for locks of Charles Manson's hair, paintings by the serial killer John Wayne Gacy and personal effects of Saddam Hussein.

In *Auguries of Innocence*, William Blake wrote that we can see a world in a grain of sand. The worlds shown to us when a celebrity supernova occurs stretch much further than the life of the individual who has passed. They embody and reflect the spirit of the times. In their import about the glories, setbacks and achievements of human life, they stand square in the searchlight of eternity. In this generation, and for generations to come, they offer parables for the lives of others. The most prestigious celebrities have replaced the gods of ancient society as the immortals.² To some this may seem an excessive proposition. However, is it really fanciful to propose that figures like Michael Jackson, Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, James Dean, John Lennon, Frank Sinatra, Kurt Cobain and JFK have achieved immortality? Probably not. As recorded people, their films, radio broadcasts and TV interviews have a timeless quality. Monroe and Dean are still vivid, instantly recognized presences in our culture, despite being dead for nigh on fifty years.

In October 2010 the entire remastered John Lennon catalogue was rereleased on the seventieth anniversary of his birth and the thirtieth anniversary of his assassination. Reviewers and fans treated the event as a new album release by a living star. They referred to fresh power in the singing and the clarity of arrangements that made the music sound brand new. In doing so they unintentionally revealed an important link between celebrity, technology and immortality.

Technological improvement can perpetually recycle celebrity recordings to renew the fame of dead stars. The effect is to create the illusion of an ever more closer union between the audience and the dead celebrity. According to *Forbes* business magazine's 'Top-Earning Dead Celebrities' list (2010), the Lennon estate earned \$17 million in 2009, nearly three times as much as the estates of other dead pop stars such as Jimi Hendrix (\$6 million), but well behind Michael Jackson (\$275 million) and Elvis Presley (\$60 million).

Recorded celebrities die physically, but culture provides them with an afterlife. Their deeds are remembered and talked about just as Apollo, Athena, Aphrodite, Zeus and the other Greek gods are recalled today. Might there be a meaningful parallel here? Why should some of us lean upon a celebrity, as others look to gods

for comfort and guidance? Why should others abhor the world of celebrity as some despise the work of the Devil? Is the media and public reaction to celebrity culture more in the nature of an overreaction? Or is the media unintentionally conveying the significant truth that, today, celebrities perform some of the functions once performed by the gods?

Fame attack: Defined

Not infrequently, the media is sweepingly condescending about celebrity culture.

If, for most modern people unschooled in the Classics, Angelina Jolie has replaced Aphrodite, and Russell Brand, until his marriage to Katy Perry (2010), was presented in the tabloids as a modern-day Dionysus, the media is also full of choleric disapproval of reality-show wannabe celebrities and mediocre talents eager to hog the limelight. There is the strong sentiment that celeb culture, especially in the guise of reality TV, has gone too far. Among other things, it is deplored for corrupting personal values so that many vainly strive for fame at any cost, inflating the desire for public acclaim over real achievement and encouraging the development of an engorged, irresponsible entertainment sector in which the values of the lowest common denominator are pampered and cosseted.

When Cheryl Cole's judging process on *The X Factor* or Paris Hilton's drug bust receive headline inches that are as big as those assigned to reports on the peace process between Israel and Palestine or the campaign against child poverty, something is amiss with the fourth estate. But the media reflects public demand as well as shapes it. Today, the unpalatable fact is that the public has a keen, apparently inexhaustible, and in the view of many social commentators, seriously unbalanced interest, in the toings and froings of celebrity culture.

Evidently, the inflation of celebrity culture is connected, by association, with personal traumas and toxic social problems. Yet, to date, among the regular bromides of disapproval issued by the media and the struggle to understand what is really going on, a precise definition of the nature of the personal ills and social malaise caused by celebrity culture is oddly wanting. This book is an attempt to partly redress the situation.

Fame attack refers to the neurotic, obsessional disorders that derive from celebrity culture. Three subdivisions of the condition should be distinguished:

- 1 Celebrity Worship Syndrome, which means the tendency to formulate an over-close identification with a celebrity, leading to dysfunctional behaviour.
- 2 Star Paranoia, which refers to the emotional conviction that celebrities behave in unreasonable ways, which, for example, infringe human rights,

ignore human nobility, avoid fiscal responsibilities and ride roughshod over legality. The nub of the matter is that celebrities are seen as getting away with it, while the rest of us suffer. This promotes bitterness, resentment and anger about celebrity culture in general. In some cases this may metastasize into vigilantism against specific celebrities.

- 3 Narcissistic Personality Disorder, which refers to the onslaught of an innate sense of superiority and entitlement that is indifferent to personal and social consequences.

At the level of psychology, fame attack applies to both stars and stargazers. However, the first two types of disorder clearly apply mostly to audiences rather than stars. Narcissistic celebrity disorder is common in stars who have grown too big for their boots; while celebrity worship syndrome and star paranoia is distributed most widely among vulnerable, isolated fans who develop harmful crushes, injurious dependencies or irrational hostilities around illusory relationships with stars.

There may be a therapeutic gain in this. Celebrity worship syndrome may help some individuals get through life. Attaching oneself to celebrities enables individuals to act out ambitions and desires that have been thwarted in ordinary life. In some cases identification may take the form of copying the physical appearance, cultural values and political beliefs of the celebrity. In extreme cases, people suffering from celebrity worship syndrome may use plastic surgery to physically resemble the features of the celebrity. Playing out a sense of fraternity with stars who are out of reach may be a rational coping device to manage the privations of daily life.

Similarly, star paranoia, which is most widespread among people who develop intense sentiments of resentment towards celebrities for getting ahead in some way that is commonly deemed to be unreasonable, may help to manage anger about other areas of personal life that are experienced as painful and intractable. Mostly, fame is lambasted when it is applied to ignore proper social conventions or skip legal hurdles. In recent years the main examples of star paranoia have occurred in allegations of celebrity verbal abuse, tax dodging, drug use and controversial Third World child adoptions. Accordingly, legislation against star harassment and stalking has expanded. In 1990, following the fan-related attempted murder of the actress Theresa Saldana (1982), and the fan-related stalking and murder of the actress Rebecca Schaeffer (1989), the state of California passed anti-stalking laws. Congress passed the Violent Crime and Law Enforcement Act (1994) and in 1996 extended anti-stalking legislation to encompass interstate stalking and stalking within federal jurisdiction. The UK sought to legally tackle stalking with the Protection from Harassment Act (1994).

The condition of fame attack is not limited to the young; it affects all age groups and both sexes. Usually, the neurotic and obsessional behaviour that it produces is not, strictly speaking, dysfunctional. People with celebrity worship syndrome, star paranoia or narcissistic personality disorder may seem a bit peculiar to the rest of us, and they may experience severe difficulties in forming and developing relationships. However, these conditions do not generally warrant clinical intervention. This is not to say that the effects of fame attack are superficial.

In extreme cases, celebrity worship syndrome, star paranoia and narcissistic personality disorder lead to types of behaviour that pose a threat to the individual and those around them. Celebrity worship syndrome, star paranoia and narcissistic personality disorder are often cited in legal cases of trespass, fraud, attempted suicide, suicide, harassment, physical violence and homicide.

It is more difficult to pin down the social effects of fame attack. To speak of malaise, especially when hard research facts are not available, is open to the objection that we are straying into the territory of mere conjecture. Notwithstanding this, the recurrence and frequency of certain allegations in the media is such that they must be aired here. They have to do with the oft-expressed view that people are becoming ruder in public, more concerned with acclaim than integrity, more preoccupied with self-esteem, and fixated upon narrow, selfish, emotional and material wants than the realization of the public good. Specifically, celebrity culture is seen as creating narcissistic personalities who are addicted to attention-seeking and are quick to represent themselves as victims when they don't get it. Self-promotion has been elevated above social responsibility, with the result that the social bonds that hold society together have grown frayed and decayed. Celebrity expressions of entitlement over property, rights of access, scientific and medical privilege, and even adoption, have produced resentment and paranoia among people who accuse celebrities of economic exploitation and personal oppression.

Fame attack is the result of ordinary social and economic practices that have, so to speak, got out of hand. Among these are the pressures on the media to win ratings wars, the narcissistic tendencies produced by huge acclaim and financial reward, the growth of therapy culture which leads greater numbers of people to seek guidance and role models by looking up to strangers, and the apparent volatility of media and public judgements that can make a star out of someone one day and a has-been or demon the next.

The role of the media is particularly noteworthy here. Take the case of Michael Jackson. For more than a decade prior to his death Michael Jackson was regularly portrayed as an unstable individual, a crank, a spendthrift and, most grievously for his public image, a child molester. In 2005, his five-month court trial on seven counts of child abuse ended in acquittal. However, many were left with a rank

taste in their mouths. The media played its part in fuelling this by suggesting that there is no smoke without fire. Over and above this, the cost of the trial created numerous, well-publicized financial problems for Jackson. At the time of his death he was a mired, debt-ridden figure, commonly referred to as a musical has-been, of insalubrious character and shot judgement.

The process of rehabilitation started on the day of his death, 25 June 2009. One by one the bricks of bad publicity were gradually wrested away, and with the mortar surrounding them, swallowed by the celebrity supernova. Inch by inch the media reconstructed an overwhelmingly positive image of Jackson as an irreplaceable superstar, a loving father, an admirable humanitarian and, in jaw-dropping irony, one of the greatest victims of media muckraking and character assassination the world has ever known. Denigration gave way to semi-deification. So much so, that when his memorial service was held on 7 July 2009, at the Staples Center, Los Angeles, where his casket was displayed prominently at the front of the stage, was I alone in half expecting Michael to rise in righteous glory from the dead?

Understandably, when people are told one thing by the media on one day and the opposite on the next, a doubt about what to believe grows and eventually takes hold. Celebrity culture revolves around rumour and hearsay as much as facts and professional reporting. This may fit with the distorted, overblown values that characterize the world of the stars, but it makes it devilishly tricky for ordinary people and social commentators to separate the wheat from the chaff.

‘He who sings or dances the best...’

We live in a culture dominated by celebrities. Arguably, there is nothing new in this. All societies have figureheads whom most people recognize as possessing cultural priority and economic power.³ Paganism recognized other-worldly forces and magical figures. Totems were erected to the ineffable, the binding, the solidifying links between natives. In traditional societies, kings and queens ruled and took their licence from divine authority.⁴

The age of monarchy is now passed. Modern societies are based upon formal principles of individual freedom, equality and justice. Yet we still recognize certain individuals as possessing higher status, and society rewards them with privileges that are not given to the majority. We call these figures celebrities. We like to think that they have risen by merit from the ranks of ordinary mortals. But it is not so. Celebrities are constructed. Even in the age of post-monarchy, the type of figures singled out for recognition and reward has changed.

In the century before 1920, people looked up to political leaders, scientists, writers and engineers. Individuals who succeed in a *career* hogged the limelight as

respected celebrities. With the coming of mass communications, the importance of career in the construction of celebrity underwent a profound change (Lowenthal, 1961). Celebrity became based, first and foremost, on visual impact, incident and *frontierism*. The latter term is fundamental in understanding the culture of celebrity, yet oddly it has been under-theorized and under-researched. By frontierism, I mean living on the edge of social mores, sexual conventions, psychological orthodoxy and economic prudence. Superstars often flaunt these commonly observed courtesies of life as if they belong to the world of little, unknown people. The media reinforces with this by flagging stories of superstar tantrums, marriage bust-ups, drug problems, alcohol dependencies, devotion to cranky religions, economic profligacy and so on. Before the 1920s, celebrities were generally presented as possessing to the highest degree the qualities of prudence, orderly balance and modesty of the man in the street. After the 1920s, lives of risk, emergency and incident suddenly became attractive and newsworthy.

There is some disagreement about why this happened. The rise of mass communications, the growth of the importance of people skills in the labour market, the decline of the family and community, the erosion of religion, the development of new public spaces in which seeing and being seen were central have been cited as key instrumental factors (Roach, 2007; Gundle, 2008). What emerges most powerfully from the literature is the proposition that, from the 1920s, visual impact, emergency and incident became essential features of celebrity. The famous occupied the frontier existence that was denied to ordinary odds and sods. As such they inhabited a transcendent space into which millions peered, and through gossip columnists, biographers and TV documentary makers, monitored and savoured.

The frontier was a place beyond the boundary of economic privation, sexual restraint and political insignificance. Symbolically, the individuals who resided on the frontier lived a charmed existence. They were beyond Mammon and morality. In having apparent, media-endorsed, access to everything and everyone, celebrities became magnets of aspiration and models of emulation. Their influence permeated national local politics, where they left their imprint upon the bearing and performance of political candidates in elections; the sphere of global diplomacy, where they provided scripts for fundraising, negotiation and power brokerage; public advocacy, where they promoted issues of health, childcare, adult welfare and the environment; and the economy, where they were used to maximize commodity sales and add a dash of glamour to the dull business machinations of corporations.

The star system has now permeated through every level of society. Thus, charities have their star givers; schools and universities have their star academics; professional musicians and sports teams have players and superstars; and businesses have star managers. Even the criminal world has its bad asses and its

real bad asses: the Kray Twins, Carlos the Jackal, Peter Sutcliffe, Ted Bundy, Bernie Madoff, O. J. Simpson, Colonel Russell Williams, Fred and Rosemary West, Paul Bernardo and Karla Homolka are not just criminals, they are legends of crime. Their notoriety casts a long shadow in private life and popular culture (Penfold-Mounce, 2009). Stardom is not just a matter of renown; it is a question of cultural clout.

One of the most noteworthy developments in contemporary celebrity culture is *celanthropy* (Bishop and Green, 2008). That is the migration of celebrities from the sphere of entertainment into charity investment and humanitarian work. It's one thing to speak out against ignorance, want and injustice, but if you do so as a George Clooney, Angelina Jolie, Annie Lennox, Michael Stipe or a Bono, it possesses note. The words and deeds of ordinary men and women leave ripples. Celebrities make waves. Some celebrities, like Bono, Angelina Jolie, Brad Pitt, Annie Lennox, Bob Geldof, Youssou N'Dour, Sting, George Clooney, Oprah Winfrey, Michael Stipe and Nicole Kidman, are formidable goodwill ambassadors and campaigners for a variety of human rights causes (Cooper, 2008). They use their fame to act as the unelected tribunes of the people. They purport to speak the plain truths from which politicians and business leaders shrink. Like it or not, fame is the name of the game. Our voices are second or third strings in the orchestra. *They* are the maestros, or at least they are acclaimed as such. How does this happen? Why did it arise? What are its consequences?

Once we dreamt of a better world where all would be equal and judged by the quality of their character. Only those who set their faces against the course of history do so now. In attempting to build societies founded upon incorruptible principles of equality and liberty the great social and political revolutions produced their Robespierres, Stalins, Maos and Pol Pots, to say nothing of their less renowned accomplices, adept in torture, repression and execution; I am thinking of the St Justs, the Berias, the Zhu Des and the Ta Moks. Sadly, the writ of liberty and equality does not run free. It often goes hand in hand with blithe disrespect for the sanctity of life. The boldest builders of brotherhood have seen fit to don the butcher's apron and wield the meat cleaver when historical 'necessity' demands.

Notwithstanding this, decency, respect and generosity for our fellow man are not taken lightly. Brotherhood is alive and well. One sees it in the countless, unrecorded acts of consideration, kindness and selflessness that human beings practise daily among one another. But creating a society of universal brotherhood, in which all are recognized as being made of the same stuff and deserving of equal respect, appears to lie within our imagination, but beyond our competence to attain. A face always rises out of the crowd, one flame always leaps higher than the rest.

Is this simply in the nature of the human condition? Common sense indicates that men and women may be born equal, but their charms and talents are not the same.

Should we not regard celebrity as a question of natural gifts? If you are a superior actor than me, if you are physically more alluring and intellectually more able, do you not have a right to fame? If you can hit a ball on a tennis court with infallible accuracy or captivate the people with the beauty and power of your speech, is it not just that your reward should be great and your acclaim merited? After all, Rousseau, in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, remarked: 'He who sings or dances the best, he who is most handsome, the strongest, and most adroit or the most eloquent becomes the most highly regarded.' Tellingly, he goes on to observe: 'this is the first step to inequality, and at the same time towards vice' (Rousseau, 1984: 114).

Rousseau meant that the rewards of fame divide celebrities from the crowd and provide licence for improper behaviour and fantastic rewards. At least he was working with the assumption that there is a direct, universal correlation between natural gifts, accomplishment and fame.

In our own day no such iron law exists. Fame can be achieved despite the absence of natural gifts or accomplishments. Anyone who watches *Big Brother*, *American Idol*, *The X Factor*, or who buys *Heat*, *Closer*, *The National Inquirer*, *OK!* or *Hello!* knows this. Those of mediocre talents, the clamorous, the attention-seeking, the gaudy, common blusterers, tricksters, jades, clowns, tramps, intriguers and simple misfits are perfectly able to claim the attention of ordinary men and women. They rise without trace and amass fortunes by playing a one-string fiddle. For every Michael Jackson, there is a William Hung; for every Oprah Winfrey a Jade Goody.⁵ Nowadays, the high and the low mix easily in the washing machine of celebrity culture.

Domestic and factory systems of fame

There is a reason for this mix. Celebrities are not necessarily the most gifted, or virtuous, of men and women. True, it may happen that a figure with the authority, grace and nobility of a Gandhi or Nelson Mandela arises from our midst and achieves righteous acclaim for their precious, enviable humanity. But this is rare. Even when it does happen it would be an error to mistake an industrial relation for a natural one. An industrial relation involves a team of workers, often located in a factory setting, to turn the resources of nature into commodities that possess market value. Training and expertise in public relations and how to use the media are pivotal. Celebrities are cultural skyscrapers. They hog public space. They are built and maintained for public consumption by public relations and media specialists.

This is not the only way in which celebrity value is produced. In recent years what might be called the *domestic system of fame*, based on utilizing the immense power of the Web, has emerged. How might we categorize this system? It is a means

of generating public regard that is self-directed and doesn't involve significant teamwork. It is a do-it-yourself approach to fame acquisition.

Historically speaking, the term is associated with craftwork, in other words pre-industrial forms of manufacturing. This is appropriate, as there is indeed a craft element in the domestic system of fame. Celebrity is custom-built and self-administered. This suggests primitive, unapprenticed qualities. But it's a big mistake to associate the domestic system of fame with low-tech operations. The Internet makes automatic, weightless communication available at the flick of a switch. Do-it-yourself strategies for acquiring fame are compatible with the mobile phone, the laptop and the Web. The proliferation of blogging sites and social network platforms supports the accumulation of fame in ways that the publicity seekers of yore could scarcely imagine. Community exchange sites like MySpace, Facebook and Twitter offer switchboards of communication that have been intensively exploited by individuals and groups intent in acquiring fame. They also permit fans to outflank the celebrity spin produced by the public relations industry and middlebrow features editors, to get the inside story. From the earliest days of the Hollywood studio system fans were keenly aware that the public face of the star constructed by studio moguls and their support personnel was stylized and manicured. There was always strong public interest in ferreting the truth behind the appearances of Tinseltown. Practically speaking, this centred on fan club networks that generated and exchanged data on the private lives and secrets of the stars (Barbas, 2001).

It goes without saying that this was not a relationship between equals. Stars have the full power of the PR-Media hub at their disposal. They are supported by life coaches and communicate through heavily controlled mechanisms such as press releases and staged interviews. Fans organize meetings and conventions but they mostly depend upon a do-it-yourself network of exchange.

Nonetheless, it is a mistake to think of this in terms of a zero-sum game in which all of the power resides with stars and their back-up teams, while fans are powerless. From the beginning, there was a degree of what might be called co-operative labour between fans and stars. Thus, by sifting through press releases and engaging in detective work, fans could dig out some of the secrets of the stars and get a grasp on the truth.

Over the last two decades, the spread of the Internet has vastly increased the opportunities for co-operative labour. The volume of unauthorized data about celebrities has increased exponentially. The proliferation of dedicated websites and blogging sites has inevitably created a demand for rankings and impact factors.

The *Forbes* 'Web Celeb 25' list of top bloggers (2010) places the celebrity gossip hound Perez Hilton as the top blogger. His site attracts 7.2 million people a month and is one of the 500 most visited sites on the Internet.

- 1 Perez Hilton (Perezhilton.com)
- 2 Michael Arrington (Techcrunch.com)
- 3 Peter Cashmore (Mashable.com)
- 4 Evan Williams and Biz Stone (Twitter.com)
- 5 Kevin Rose (Digg.com)
- 6 Guy Kawasaki (Guykawasaki.com)
- 7 Heather Armstrong (Dooce.com)
- 8 Tila Nguyen (Tilahotspot.buzznet.com)
- 9 Gary Vaynerchuk (Garyvaynerchuck.com)
- 10 Cory Doctrow (Craphound.com)

Figure 1 Forbes Web Celeb 10 (2010)
Source: <http://www.forbes.com/2010/02/02>

The traditional PR-Media system has learned from the new technology. The Internet offers a new global highway for the exchange of news and personal details about celebrities. Blogging sites provide stargazers with the gossip and the low-down on a star. They also provide stars with the opportunity to give messages and interviews, through the creation of dedicated blogging sites. The Internet constitutes a new basis for the commercial exploitation of stardom by providing novel subscription-based models for acquiring celebrity data and merchandise. It gives stargazers unprecedented opportunities to participate, in conjunction with stars, in building celebrity brands and, through the laptop, the iPad and the mobile phone, increases the saturation of celebrity culture to round-the-clock status. Vicariously, you can always be in the company of your star, even though you never stand by his or her side or exchange the merest pleasantry. The Internet is a body and a dynamic resource for raising awareness of stardom and integrating it into everyday life.

The appeal of notoriety

The domestic system is also associated with less salubrious forms of fame. Because the media is ubiquitous, it has been used by individuals and groups as a shortcut to acquiring fame. Typically, this takes the negative form of public notoriety in which a criminal act, or acts, is used to garner shock attention and column inches. A spree killer, a mass murderer, an assassin who kills a high-profile figure, or a suicide bomber can acquire notoriety and gain celebrity overnight. On 10 September 2001 Mohammed Atta was a nobody. The following day he was the most famous person

in the world after being identified as the ringleader of the 9/11 bombing team. Who knows if the desire to acquire fame was a motivation behind Atta's terrorism? Without doubt, it was a consequence of his leading role in the annihilation of the World Trade Center. There is reason to believe that this type of domestic system of generating fame is becoming more significant as individuals and groups exploit the publicity access afforded by the media.

The opportunities to acquire fame without resorting to publicity agents or celebrity managers have never been greater. The Internet makes a do-it-yourself approach valid, accessible and relevant. But it carries a bucket-load of risks. In order to be durable, celebrity must be carefully honed and skilfully promoted. It requires a well-judged target audience, accurate information about group motivations and well-considered supplements to enhance fame. Group and solo performer websites have limited resources to generate innovation and initiative in order to build and expand audiences. A cultural skyscraper needs constant maintenance and polishing. Typically, this is beyond the resources of a do-it-yourself approach.

The problem is compounded in what might be termed *domestic system single-issue* bids for fame. For example, McCutcheon *et al.* submit that the two killers in the Columbine massacre deliberately sought celebrity to highlight their experience of school victimization (McCutcheon *et al.*, 2004: 18–20). They left behind communications, which showed a keen concern for their posthumous public image. They speculated on how the massacre would be presented in the media, what stars would play them in the film of the event and even who would direct the movie. The two killers, assert McCutcheon *et al.*, wanted to be celebrity legends with lasting fame of the kind achieved by Billy the Kid, Jesse James and Al Capone (McCutcheon *et al.*, 2004: 19). But how many people remember the names Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold? Although the event is remembered, their names are more or less forgotten.

Seeking fame through the Internet or an infamous act involves an unstable ratio between energy and achievement. You may spend a good deal of time making your poetry or photography available on the Web and still be ignored. You may develop a personal philosophy of Armageddon and crucifixion and, like the Virginia Tech mass killer, Seung-Hui Cho (2007), kill many in a shooting rampage; you may study serial killing, enrol for a criminology PhD in the history of murder, and kill three female prostitutes, like the Bradford serial murderer, Stephen Griffiths (2010) who, when first asked for his name in court, called himself the 'Crossbow Cannibal' (and, it emerged, was partly motivated to kill to command 'the media metric') but your name will not necessarily endure. Fame notoriety possesses impact but its legacy is mostly in doubt. The public has become habituated to apparently random mass and serial killings. The outrage is remembered, but the assailant generally achieves no more than fleeting fame.

While the importance of the domestic system of fame is real, it should not be exaggerated. Typically, the ratio of energy and achievement is misdirected unless it is governed by public relations and media personnel who understand how to propagandize celebrity and make fame durable. In other words, it requires a professional, salaried team of dedicated expert labourers in emotional management, publicity and promotion to design fame and take the required publicity steps to prolong its life. Comparatively speaking, the domestic system of celebrity is small beer.

The factory system and cultural intermediaries

Today, celebrity is, above all, an industrial relation created through a factory machine process. The fame of Gandhi and Mandela does not emerge like water from the mouth of a spring. On the contrary, it is planned, measured, set and burnished by the hands of trained strategists in image-making and dedicated media relations experts. This is an industrial relationship because it involves a blueprint of fame to turn a naturally given, amorphous set of resources into a symbol of public approval, desire or, at the very minimum, recognition.

The term *cultural intermediaries* is used to designate these labourers. Examples include publicists, bodyguards, chauffeurs, voice coaches, PR assistants, personal trainers, private doctors, accountants, financial advisers, personal chefs and astrologists. They are described as intermediaries, because they are located between the star and the public and charged with the task of forging the chains that unite the two. Their labour power is devoted to matters of culture rather than the manufacture of things.

In a world where seven out of ten workers in the advanced economies gain their livelihood from the service sector, culture is king.⁶ It possesses pivotal economic value. We need to know which catchphrases, buzzwords, attitudes, jokes, hairstyles, skin tones and wardrobe are regarded as cool, because our daily world consists of trading in communication, ideas and knowledge. We use these resources in work and personal life to acquire personal note or enhance the impression that we make on others. Service labour revolves around being adept in symbols, ideas and communication. In retailing, marketing, sales and teaching, the most effective workers are those who communicate most forcefully. It is celebrities who are presented and recognized as the most glamorous purveyors of these ways of going about things, which is why they dominate popular culture. They act as unofficial life coaches feeding the impulses, habits and emotions of the public by providing attractive examples and glamorous role models. They provide symbols to assist us in narrating,

negotiating and interpreting shared experience and drawing moral boundaries (Butler Breese, 2010: 352). Still, the public face they present is a product of public relations and media specialists. What precisely do these chiefly invisible workers contribute?

If we know more about the love lives, diet, health, political preferences and childhood traumas of celebrities than at any point in human history, it is because cultural intermediaries make it so. They provide and manage the constant data flow about stars, persuading the public that they 'know' these persons whom they have never met and, chances are, will never meet, in the form of a face-to-face relationship.

A given of this is that celebrities must be positioned in the media in ways that maximize public impact factors. This requires cultural intermediaries to cultivate and activate media networks and angle celebrities in the best light. If celebrities behave in ways that are contrary to public expectations, it is cultural intermediaries who intervene and recast celebrity encounters for us. This is an intriguing fact about all forms of factory-based fame: celebrity comes locked-in with a veiled, adaptive back-up system. Before stars are known to us they are *prepared* for public consumption. Questions of hairstyle, skin tone, scent, dress, political values, social beliefs and anger management are sifted by experts in the people-skills/impression management industry. It is an organized, well-oiled business designed to create selected stimuli to exert a captivating effect upon audiences. A public face is constructed to achieve instantaneous, affirmative social responses. Moreover, this mask is carefully constructed and regularly polished to take account of changes in personal behaviour, audience demands, corporate requirements and cultural factors. It is like running a power plant that deals with common-or-garden desire instead of electricity and runs via discrete social networks instead of grids.

The core of this is people skills. The factory system of celebrity holds that fame does not advance by accretion, but by design. There must be a plan and a system of communication. This is not primarily a question of economics or politics; it is a question of culture. Knowing how to put people at their ease, take them into your confidence and get the best out of them has high economic value and cultural cachet. This knowledge is transmitted through the structures of the family, education system and community. But society has also evolved dedicated, professional networks of commerce and governance that engage perpetually in nothing else but transmitting and honing people skills for a ravenous public. The most highly developed of these is the public relations industry. It is impossible to understand how celebrity works today without grasping the fundamentals of this industry.

Edward Bernays and the public relations mill

Public relations has a long history (Ewen, 1996). The leading historical guru in propaganda and public relations is generally accepted to be Edward Bernays. He developed techniques to use what he called 'associational values and dramatic incidents' to dramatize communication and elevate and position 'opinion-leaders' (Bernays, 1928: 154). The aim is to mould the public consumption of celebrity. Bernays emphasizes the positive, constructive role of public relations in 'producing harmony' between government, business and the people (Bernays, 1928; 1935: 82). But he is realistic enough to acknowledge that public relations may also bring about destructive effects.

In public relations, social impact is all. Engineering high impact factors is the epitome of good public relations. Other sectors may have a sentimental or trusting view of the motivations of trust in social groups. In contrast, the public relations industry is hard-headed and cultivates an ethos of cool professional detachment with respect to the question of influencing the passions and opinions of the public.

For moulding public opinion presupposes three things. Firstly, a *leader* through which 'vast numbers of individuals can be reached'. Secondly, *pressure groups* who actively support leaders, interpret ideas and communicate enthusiasm to the wider public. Thirdly, an *assessment* of what matters to the public. Among the issues he mentions in this regard are self-preservation, ambition, pride, love of family and children, patriotism and love of play (Bernays, 1935: 83).

Having got the three elements in place, Bernays continues, public relations works on a couple of fronts: symbols and the media. *Symbols* are 'shortcuts to understanding and to action'. They operate via emotional potency and familiarity. One of the most important tasks of the public relations specialist is to fashion the right symbols and maintain their potency in constantly changing conditions (Bernays, 1935: 84–85).

The *media* is posited as the essential network 'by which his facts and point of view reach his public' (Bernays 1935: 84). The media allows individuals and groups to be brought into instant, perpetual, fruitful juxtaposition. The correct use of the media makes it impossible to ignore appeals based upon dominant motives and the support of group leaders. Control of media output is therefore a precondition for building celebrity.

Upon this basis, Bernays outlines his famous four key steps in a successful programme of public relations (Bernays, 1935: 85–87):

1. Formulation of an objective

This involves defining a corporate or political objective that articulates the goals of leaders and matches them to public motivations. The optimal condition in public relations is when the aims of business and corporate leaders mesh with the public

interest. Significantly, Bernays maintains that a public relations exercise should be abandoned if this condition is not met. Properly used, public relations can create a potent match between group needs and political and economic objectives. Of course, it can also be used to cultivate false appetites and obsessions in the public and build forms of leadership that produce domination. For this reason, public relations must be transparent, accountable and bound by strict ethical codes of practice.

2. Gathering data on public attitudes

This is the use of interviews, focus groups and survey questionnaires to elucidate group motivation and public interests. For Bernays, this is the 'scientific foundation' of the public relations industry because it brings to light data that do not arise from ordinary social encounters that reveal the state of 'the group mind' (Bernays 1935: 86).

3. Study of analysis

The analysis of public attitude supplies the basis for the formulation of objectives and the conduct of public relations campaigns. The ideas of leaders and the symbols that they use must be crafted to appeal to the public. Getting the message across may simply be a matter of fact finding and dramatic presentation, but it also involves technologies of 'educating' the public.

4. Use of media

The press, billboards, advertising, newsletters, television, radio and the other branches of the mass media are used to maximize accessibility. Use of the media requires careful planning, continuous monitoring and discriminate targeting to ensure that the basic ideas of the PR campaign stand out from 'the welter of competing ideas' that 'flow naturally to the public through the accustomed channels' (Bernays, 1935: 87). Practically speaking, this means equipping opinion-makers with people skills and investing symbols with potent payloads of associational meaning so as to ensure that they will be noticed and reported by the media.

Bernays writes chiefly about the relationships between party politics, business and mass opinion formation (Bernays, 1928). But the logic and principles of his public relations model are transferable to today's factory system of celebrity culture. Bernays himself pioneered the use of the silent movie star, Clara Bow, and the famous aviatrix of the 1920s, Mrs Stillman, to endorse commodities of the day. In addition he worked as a press agent for Enrico Caruso, Florenz Ziegfeld, Diaghilev and Nijinsky. He was also employed as the public relations mastermind to transform the grey image of the US President Calvin Coolidge into something more exciting and palatable for voters.

Bernays was fully aware of the associational values and dramatic dividend of celebrity upon the public. He was part of the generation for whom motion pictures was a seismic innovation in popular culture and leisure. He quickly recognized the potential of film and film stars in making a mark on the group mind:

The American motion picture is the greatest unconscious carrier of propaganda in the world today. It is a great distributor for ideas and opinions. The motion picture can standardize the ideas and habits of a nation. Because pictures are made to meet market demands they reflect, emphasize and even exaggerate broad popular tendencies. (Bernays, 1928: 166)

So it is no surprise that Bernays availed himself of the associational values of Hollywood to give Coolidge's image a boost. He did so by organizing high-profile, public, press-related meetings between the President and Hollywood superstars of the day like Al Jolson, Ed Wynn, and the Dolly Sisters.

Bernays operated at the crossroads between celebrity culture, business and government. Among his business clients he numbered Proctor & Gamble, New Jersey Telephone, Dodge Automobiles, the United Fruit Company and Filene's Department Store. He was also employed by the US government for the President's Emergency Committee on Employment (1931–2) and the war effort.

The new electronic technologies of mass communication, especially radio, film and later television, provided public relations with unprecedented new motorways into the public mind. For well-nigh seventy years, Bernays was at the forefront of proselytizing the effective application of these new media in advancing the science of public relations. Bernays was a nephew of Sigmund Freud. The methods of good practice that he developed for public relations were indebted to the theory of psychoanalysis devised by his uncle. Added to them are contemporary insights from Gustave Le Bon, Wilfred Trotter and others, on the social psychology of the crowd. In particular, Bernays follows Freud in maintaining that human beings are directed by unconscious drives that are evident in subconscious motivations, dependencies and other psychological materials, that influence conduct. Freud regarded psychoanalysis to be a benign science that brings order out of chaos. Despite acknowledging latent destructive potential in the enterprise, Bernays sees the science of public relations in the same vein. For him, the purpose of moulding public opinion is to bring the subconscious motivations of the people fit flush with the progressive goals articulated by enlightened leaders for the benefit of mankind.

However, things are not so simple when one turns to underlying questions relating to how Bernays understands the people and the role of leaders. One does not need to delve very far into Bernays's writings before the conviction that he is an elitist emerges and is corroborated. For example, he contends that democratic

society consists of 'the herd and the group (who) follow those whom they recognize as leaders' (Bernays, 1928: 126). He continues:

... the group mind does not *think* in the strictest sense of the word. In place of thoughts it has impulses, habits and emotions. In making up its mind, its first impulse is to follow the example of a trusted leader. (Bernays, 1928: 73, emphasis in original)

On this logic, the challenge facing what Bernays called 'the intelligent minority' of people-skills professionals, business interests and government is obvious. In short order it follows that the task of public relations is to construct 'the associational values', 'symbols' and 'dramatic incidents' calculated to harness the 'impulses', 'habits' and 'emotions' of the people (Bernays, 1928: 127).

Bernays wrote before the fully developed emergence of Fascist leaders, the Fascist propaganda machines and the rise of related militia groups in interwar Europe who acknowledged no responsibility to be accountable to the public for their actions. Even so, his invention of the phrases 'intelligent minority' and 'trusted leader', to say nothing of his easy use of terms like 'the herd' and 'regimented' to describe the masses, struck a chill in the hearts of many contemporary observers and commentators.

Bernays was not interested in the questions of how 'the intelligent minority' are recruited, the social means by which they are integrated or why the sinews of power that they exert over the majority are largely 'invisible'. Nor was he an apologist for the universal literacy programmes initiated by democracy as the defence against manipulation by an elite. According to him:

Universal literacy was supposed to educate the common man to control his environment. Once he could read and write he would have a mind fit to rule. So ran the democratic doctrine. But instead of a mind, universal literacy has given him rubber stamps, rubber stamps inked with advertising slogans, with editorials, with published scientific data, with the trivialities of the tabloids and the platitudes of history, quite innocent of original thought. Each man's rubber stamps are the duplicates of millions of others, so that when these millions are exposed to the same stimuli, all receive identical imprints. (Bernays, 1928: 48)

This is a bleak assessment of freedom and justice in modern life. It holds that the game of democracy is not worth the candle. The realpolitik of modern life amounts to rule by an 'invisible government' (consisting of business leaders, educated professionals and specialized technical staff) who operate through 'trusted leaders' to 'regiment' and 'guide' the masses. Celebrities pour the oil that makes this machine run by humanizing the objectives of government.

Optimally, the interests of invisible government and the masses coincide. But this leaves a raft of unresolved questions.

To begin with, it is a very peculiar vision of democracy. For Bernays, the rule of the people is not derived from the will of the people. The challenge of democracy is to ensure that the triumph of decent, healthy popular values – what the people would ideally want – are articulated on their behalf by responsible leaders and trusted celebrities.

Of course, Bernays acknowledges the possibility of corruption. The main checks that he lists against the misuse of power by the elite are the accountability of leaders to the media and the electorate, and the ethical codes of professional and technical staff intended to prohibit irregular or bad practice. However, given that he sees the electorate as pliable and inscribed with ‘rubber-stamped’ stimuli that prevent them from thinking for themselves, the only practicable checks he advances against the misuse of elite power are the ethics of professional and technical salaried personnel.

Without wishing to discount the probity and fearlessness of public relations and media personnel, it is questionable whether this guarantee amounts to very much. The reward structure of public relations and media personnel is dictated by the ‘invisible government’ of business and political leaders who demand high impact factors for their investment. The interests of one are consecutive upon the interests of the other. If public relations organizations expose the practices of business and government as corrupt, they bite the hand that feeds them. This is not to say that it is right to assume that they always collude with the interests of invisible government. However, it is naïve to assume that breaking with these interests when matters of corruption are revealed is either an automatic or fail-safe response.

Bernays’s discussion raises larger issues about the engineering of consent and the proper uses of power in modern society that go well beyond the concerns of this book. The simple point that needs to be made here is that the principles he formulates and applies have since been adopted and developed by the factory system of celebrity production to manipulate mass motivation and desire. Bernays anticipates the point when he maintains that freedom of speech together with the free press have expanded the American Bill of Rights to include the right of persuasion. The expansion of the media has opened the gateway to communication, providing the basis for good and powerful arguments to be spread to the widest possible number, for the benefit of mankind (Bernays, 1947: 113). As usual, Bernays does not situate this technical development in relation to history or power. He does not ask the big questions, such as who has the real power to use the media as a communication tool or why the majority of people are marginalized or excluded from the open gateway of mass communications. He treats ‘the intelligent minority’

and 'the herd' as transhistorical facts of the human species and confines himself to the technical problems of effective communication and opinion formation arising therefrom. His benign account of the open gateway of mass communications is dependent upon a Pandora's box of questions of power, inequality and influence remaining firmly shut.

For Bernays, PR practitioners, publicists and media commentators are in the business of positive people-persuasion. They profile celebrities in public life through the strategic use of associational values, dramatic incidents and calculated symbols of prestige in order to shape public opinion. This process is supported by the use of surveys, questionnaires, focus groups and unstructured interviews. This process of data accumulation is the basis for refining objectives and navigating media interventions. The highest cultural value of this process is achieved through media placement and representation. The celebrity factory system does not innocently seek access to the media. Rather, it engages in a war of manoeuvre to ensure that the celebrity skyscraper is presented to achieve the highest impact rating.

It is important to understand that the cultural standing and presentation of celebrities are not just matters of talent, achievement or position. In addition, they are centrally dependent upon the data yield harvested by public relations and media specialists into the motivations and opinions of the group. Nor is the subject of data yield a straightforward matter of fact-finding. Public relations personnel, and cultural intermediary accessories of many shapes and sizes, engage in a variety of celebrity design issues that aim to integrate the public face of celebrity with the public mind. Underlying the qualitative relationships that the public relations industry strives to form, then, is a mass of quantitative data that supports and informs the production of high impact factors.

Bernays lived a long life. His heyday was between the 1920s and 1970s. During this half-century he had the ear of presidents, business moguls, newspaper tycoons, the heads of film production companies, TV network executives and celebrities from the world of popular entertainment. The principles that he carved out to promote associational value and dramatic premium in the public mind have been widely adapted and perpetually refined.

Public relations is now a multi-billion dollar business with multiple international service centres serving a global market. It coordinates interlinked promotion campaigns in both the Northern and Southern hemispheres, using multiple languages and negotiating with a variety of religious and political systems. A campaign founded in New York has to make allowances for cultural differences in London, Athens, Cape Town, Vancouver, Hong Kong, São Paulo and Sydney. These are often handled by employing national celebrities to headline campaigns in different geographical regions. But the message is the same. While there is obvious

and real competition between different public relations and media corporations, it is legitimate to think of them as a unified force moulding global opinion.

The public relations-Media hub

In the advanced industrial societies a public-relations-media complex has emerged and taken root. Global public relations corporations such as Taylor Herring, Weber Shandwick, Fleishman-Hillard, Ketchum, Ogilvy, Rogers & Cowan and Edelman combine with international media giants like National Amusements, News Corporation, Disney, Vivendi, Time Warner, Viacom and Bertelsmann AG to form a power bloc which dominates the market in information, opinion formation and taste. Global public relations corporations determine campaigns for multinational businesses, states and voluntary organizations. They endeavour to shape public opinion and boost product awareness through public opinion research, press releases, press kits, photo ops, publicity stunts, talk shows, advertising and other media outlets.

Although they are not ruled by a class of illuminati, it is correct to refer to them as a power bloc. They are the gatekeepers between corporations, celebrities and the public. The personnel that staff them are generally recruited from the same educational backgrounds, and they express uniform business values. They exhibit a good match in cultural interests, political intelligence and economic management skills. They understand that people-persuasion is a business that is ultimately judged on profit/loss criteria. Despite the measurable and intangible shifts in public behaviour that campaigns achieve, the buck stops with the balance sheet. They use remarkably similar tools to reach their ends. The PR-Media hub now operates with a six-stage model of client service:

- 1 **Strategy Objectives:** Defining the focus, demographics, message, symbol, scope and budget of campaigns.
- 2 **Audience Analysis:** Locating the audience, examining their motivations and social networks.
- 3 **Community Demographics:** Mapping the communities that will be the target for strategy objectives. If an audience is not transparent, the onus is placed upon constructing one through the manufacture of associational values and dramatic incidents.
- 4 **Content Creation:** The production of narratives and storyboards to convey messages directly and unambiguously. A corollary of this is to itemize and manage a production schedule.

- 5 **Delivery:** Enlisting a variety of multimedia gateways to transmit campaigns from the client base to communities. These include television, video-sharing sites, social network communities, Internet sites, mobile communication devices, podcasts, email and physical encounters.
- 6 **Result Calibration:** Measuring the impact factor of campaigns through public opinion research into views, comments, links, MSM mentions and social bookmarks.

While celebrities are regularly used to endorse campaigns, it goes without saying that in their own right they also make consummate use of the PR-Media hub. It is not just a matter of positioning celebrities before the public. The PR-Media hub also positions the public before celebrities. Remember, stage three of the six-stage PR-Media programme makes provision for constructing an audience around a set of objectives and a campaign message if one does not exist.

This is a big step on from Bernays's era. Bernays made great play of the scientific status of public relations resting in the capacity of expert staff to glean valid information about the subconscious motivations and desires of the group mind. But when he used the term 'propaganda' to describe what public relations people do, he understood it to mean a strictly technical relation. That is public relations refines objectives and formulates messages that unite the motivations of the public and popularize the outlook of leaders. Politicians and trusted celebrities are meant to articulate the idealized good, honest and true values of the people. For the latter are judged to be incapable of articulating them by their own efforts.

Today, something different is openly discussed as a legitimate end of public relations. Namely, persuading consumers to develop new wants, aspirations of identity and lifestyle goals determined by business interests to achieve business ends. This involves a good deal more than merely bringing the good and true values of the public into harmony with the objectives of leaders. In a word it involves creating a *new* public.

Every step of the process entailed in mounting a campaign in the viewfinder of public consciousness and presenting the public to clients is quantitatively and qualitatively investigated and planned. Nothing is left to chance. Promotional messages and symbols are injected into the public mind by a variety of instruments. Celebrity prestige is just one of them.

The leading public relations corporations see themselves as people-smart. They do not resort to browbeating the public or hectoring them with indignant messages to consume this or that commodity. Rather, they blend campaign messages with building trust, support and empathy between campaign objectives and audiences. Establishing social network communities, customer relations groups and corporate

responsibility programmes is indispensable. They convey the message that corporations and campaigns are about confirming belonging, and addressing real-world issues, as well as making money. They contribute to a variety of global stewardship duties with respect to educational, healthcare and environmental issues that matter to us all. The catch is that this agenda of interests is not chosen by the people but imposed upon them by the combination of business interests and media information hubs.

The PR-Media hub expounds accountability and transparency as core ethical values. Bernays himself set great store on the values of probity and fair dealing. However, studies of public relations practice in the pop music business have exposed a long covert history of bribery and intimidation (Dannan, 1991; Segrave, 1994). Allegations persist that aid money to Africa generated through event management is misappropriated and squandered (Theroux, 2006). Since the public does not control what the public gets, there is always room for murky financial seepage and nefarious appropriation of relief commodities. The networks of power that enlist the PR-Media hub in the service of government, business and voluntary sector humanitarianism, support illicit counter cultures that work outside the law to achieve the same ends.

The PR-Media hub is the most advanced version of the factory system of celebrity production. It operates to boost the public standing of celebrities and uses famous people as the face and mouthpiece of testimonials to bolster business and government campaigns. Making money is presented as having fun. The connection is stronger if the distribution of profits is allied to goals of corporate social responsibility. An oil company that makes billions from petroleum sales gives something back by supporting literacy programmes in the Third World or by purifying polluted lakes and waterways. Because celebrities are closely connected with the world of play, they provide immediate associational links with fun/giving culture. The greater use of them by the PR-Media hub demonstrates a business decision that 'celebrity sells'. However, celebrities are not the foundation of the complex.

The state, multinational corporations and international voluntary special interest organizations are the core client base. It is their financial, cultural and political requirements that drive the show. By common consent, the PR-Media hub uses technologies of pleasure accumulation to achieve the end of capital accumulation. It is in their role as catalysts of pleasure accumulation and trust that celebrities possess economic value for the PR-Media hub.

Doug Holt (2004) maintains that iconic brands are powerful symbols connected to a set of ideas or values that society holds to be important or compelling. Brands spill over into lifestyles and aspirations so that buying the brand becomes the insignia for wider and deeper forms of community membership. Celebrities afford

shortcuts to preconceived associations of power, influence, empathy and glamour. Iconic celebrities build iconic brands. Isabella Rossellini, Jerry Hall and Bryan Ferry have been employed to advertise the Mandarin luxury hotel chain (Magainini *et al.*, 2008); L'Oreal has used Jennifer Aniston, Natalie Imbruglia, Milla Jovovich, Beyoncé, Jennifer Lopez, Andie MacDowell and Sarah Jessica Parker to enhance the brand (Pringle, 2004: 22); George Clooney and Nicole Kidman advertise Omega watches; Catherine Zeta-Jones is the face of Arden. These examples are hardly exhaustive.

The phenomenon of celebrity endorsement is so generalized that it has become an institutionalized feature of the PR-Media business. Celebrities have the capacity to get under the skin of audiences and consumers. For this reason they are signally attractive to the PR-Media hub pursuing the brief to build demand around brands and maximize sales.

The celebrity skyscraper casts a long shadow. Fame is in short supply. For this reason it is in high demand by the many for whom fame is perpetually elusive. Among the positive associations made with it are economic wealth, social power, cultural influence, free time and sexual licence. Celebrities are seen as leading a life of excitement, emergency, risk and incident. In consumer culture, these qualities are keenly desired as a break from routine, anxiety and inhibition. The PR-Media hub positions celebrities on the horizon of public life to persuade us to consume products and provide coaching in boutique lifestyle choices bearing upon questions of health, diet, welfare, public responsibility, personal bearing and environmental care.

An immense concentration of power is vested here. It is one that is little examined and poorly understood. In conjunction with government and business interests, the PR-Media hub supplies symbols, messages and celebrity personalities that dominate the public horizon. They manage brand reputation, visibility and preference at local, national and global levels. This is much more than a simple matter of brand-building. The PR-Media hub devises lifestyle boutique data to predispose audiences to consume products, formulate humanitarian aspirations and adopt government directives as lifestyle choices. Celebrities personify the plans of business and government. Putting a face to a product or a policy makes consumers and audiences feel that they are operating in a safe comfort zone.

Celebrity culture is a soft target for ridicule. The whirligig of press releases, tweets, publicity stunts and melodrama seems to be an extension of soap opera. The media, who feed off celebrity stories, is blatantly patronizing about the phenomenon. They link it with superficiality, triviality, deceit and the dumbing down of culture. Celebrities make nothing but sound bites and snapshot opportunities for the paparazzi. They add to the white noise in modern life, which makes it hard to separate matters of substance from the vacant trails of data confetti. This is a mistake.

In reality, the PR-Media hub is engaged in a battle for the mind. Celebrities are foot soldiers to win the public over to predetermined campaign messages and provide coaching tips on boutique lifestyle. Their political significance is that they constitute brands that predispose the *polis* to identify with them and emulate them.

Celebrities are as essential to modern capitalism, as the steam engine was to the start of the industrial revolution. Today, people skills are no less important than petroleum in making the system work. If the modern capitalist mode of production truly profits by exchange in communication, information, image and knowledge, celebrities are indispensable in making the wheels go around. Conversely, the guile, sweat and artifice that goes into constructing a celebrity means that it is often impossible to have what you might call a natural relation with them. We can't live with them and we can't live without them. To understand them accurately is not just a challenge for the media pundit, it is a requirement for ordinary men and women living in a society dominated by sound bites, the power of fame and visual culture.