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2 The Fame Formula

A reasonable inference of the emphasis put here upon the connection between celebrity and the PR-Media hub is that today, fame is formulaic. If modern celebrity advances by design rather than accretion, it must be right to see fame as partly a product of the labour of cultural intermediaries, especially in the areas of opinion research, personality layering and impression management. On this logic, celebrities are not born. They are made. The purpose of assembling and polishing a celebrity is to achieve high impact factor ratings with the public. The term 'impact factor' refers to the space given to an individual or a brand on the horizon of public life. It is measured quantitatively in press column inches, print citations and airwave time. The objective behind engineering a high impact factor is to consolidate and advance the interests of business, government or special interest groups.

This circle is hardly virtuous, for it is apparent that, unlike Bernays, the PR-Media hub has ceased to confine itself to moulding public opinion so as to ensure that the objectives of leaders coincide with the subconscious good and true motivations of the group. Manipulation, in the sense of charming-up superficial needs and creating new markets, is now blatantly part of the game. Yet all things being equal, it is entirely plausible for the PR-Media hub to claim the capacity to conjure fame and ensure its endurance, by mixing the required impression management and publicity potions. This is indeed what representatives of the complex say that they accomplish for clients.

Publicist Mark Borkowski even offers a formula that claims to put the relationship on a scientific footing: $F(T) = B + P (1 + 10T + 1/2T^2)$. Thus:

- F is quantity of fame
- T is the Time, measured at three-month intervals
- B is the baseline of fame at the commencement of the top-up process
- P is the fame increment boosted by PR-Media activity (Borkowski, 2008: 372)

Upon this basis, Borkowski, in effect, contends that public relations activity can make gold from base metal. He submits that a person of negligible talent can be projected in the public eye by fate or the domestic system of celebrity and, if the right media connections are activated, the result is fame.

Andy Warhol, who knew how to manipulate the media better than most, famously predicted that in the future everyone would be famous for fifteen minutes.¹ Borkowski quotes Warhol approvingly, but he modifies the fame spike. From a public relations standpoint, unsupported fame lasts not for fifteen minutes, but fifteen months. This is the typical lifespan of a 'celetoid' in receipt of professional support from cultural intermediaries (Borkowski, 2008: 371).

For example, in September of 2009, Sultan Kösen from Turkey was momentarily a media sensation. Kösen became famous not for his exceptional learning, extraordinary technical abilities, devastating pulchritude, or what have you. There was only one thing that the PR-Media hub deemed sensational about him: his height. At 8 ft 1 in (2.47 m), the 27 year old, who suffers from the medical condition known as pituitary gigantism, was named by the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the tallest man in the world. Various publicity devices were employed to bolster his impact rating. In interviews Kösen expressed the hope that his new-found fame would help him find a girlfriend (he never had one before, his height being viewed as an impediment by eligible women). The press also carried stories of how his height inconvenienced him by savagely limiting his fashion options and prevented him from driving, since no car was big enough to accommodate him. According to the fame formula, Kösen's celebrity has, on average, a fifteenth-month shelf life. Indeed, at the time of writing, his impact factor is on the wane. From being front-page news, he is seldom mentioned and never photographed. He is moving ineluctably, to the graveyard of public oblivion that is the lot of the overwhelming majority of celetoids.

Borkowski's contention is that, with the intervention of professional cultural intermediaries, the fame spike can be extended indefinitely. The method is to build up a narrative of publicity incidents to retain the famous figure in the public eye. This directly follows Bernays, who constantly advocated the value of engineered 'dramatic incidents' to maximize impact ratings (Bernays, 1928; 1935). For Borkowski, all things being equal, professional intervention reboots the impact factor at a fifteen-month interval. Thereafter, unless achieved celebrity status is attained, which requires talent and accomplishment, 'fame follows an exponential slide to obscurity' (Borkowski, 2008: 371). A celetoid becomes a has-been, yesterday's man. Even if achieved celebrity is attained, such is the attention span of the public that cultural intermediaries need to engineer another fame spike to boost the impact factor. This may centre on a programmed episode like the release of a new film or album or a revelation from the private life of the star. The object is to reboot the impact factor of the star in order to boost fame for at least another fifteen months.²

Borkowski claims that his fame formula is based upon case histories of celebrity trajectories, notably, Kevin Spacey, Halle Berry, Paris Hilton, Nicole Kidman, Richard Branson, Mel Gibson, Lindsay Lohan, Tom Cruise, Abi Titmuss, Angelina Jolie,

Brad Pitt, Hugo Chavez, Jeffrey Archer, Jade Goody and George Michael. It also reflects the study of branding campaigns for front-line Red Bull, Stella Artois, Heineken, American Express and Adidas. From a public relations standpoint, Borkowski holds, there is no consequential distinction to be made between star personalities and products. Both are commodities whose impact factor will dip without the intervention of cultural intermediaries. He substantiates his argument with brief case studies of the fame trajectories followed by the celestoid Jade Goody and the celebrity idol Madonna.

Jade Goody

Jade Goody first came to the attention of the British public in 2002 when she participated as a contestant in the reality TV programme *Big Brother*. Brash, vulgar, overweight, physically plain and self-opinionated, Jade featured in media coverage as, not to mince words, a representative of white, working-class trash. She failed to win the contest and extended her moment in the limelight by occasionally appearing in gossip columns and participating in charity events like the London Marathon. Her refusal to train for the latter event was well publicized in the press. It was taken to be further evidence of her ignorance and ill-judged self-importance.

After fifteen months, the professionally inspired reboot came with the publication of her autobiography (2006). This was the pretext for a round of tabloid interviews and the chat-show circus. In this way Goody extended her celestoid status, albeit with the strong suspicion among cultural intermediaries that the law of diminishing returns was kicking in. After fifteen months, an attempted celebrity reboot via the autobiography and related publicity, her halo on the public horizon was plainly slipping.

What first transformed the situation was Goody's participation in *Celebrity Big Brother* (2007). More particularly, a publicity incident in the series rocketed her back into public consciousness. It is not clear whether the incident was spontaneous or was staged, i.e. whether Goody acted spontaneously or followed the advice of public relations cultural intermediaries. What happened was that Goody reacted angrily to what she took to be the superiority of a co-contestant, the Bollywood star Shilpa Shetty. She launched into a racist attack, which immediately became headline news and resulted in Goody's expulsion from the house.

Writing in 2008, Borkowski confidently predicted that Goody had 'little chance' of relaunching into true fame again (Borkowski, 2008: 374). Fate had a different hand in store. The following year, in August 2008, while appearing on the Indian version of *Celebrity Big Brother*, she was diagnosed with cervical cancer. Her public image changed. The uncouth racist poacher of fame was suddenly rebranded as

the tragic prey of a killer disease. Her highly public death in 2009, at the age of twenty-seven, which she faced with courage and dignity, raised public awareness of cervical cancer and prompted a government review of screening processes for the under-25 age group in England and Wales.

The terminal phase of her illness included an expertly managed media-wide publicity event, in the shape of her marriage to 21-year-old Jack Tweed. The ceremony, which the press reported cost a reputed £300,000, was widely covered by the global media. Jade was portrayed as a dying princess snatching a last grasp at happiness while, of course, her estate benefited richly from exclusive photo shoots and transmission fees.

After the wedding, cultural intermediaries also extended Goody's public profile with regular bulletins focusing on her physical condition, Essex funeral plans and general state of mind. During the last days of her illness, she featured regularly on national news. Her death was front-page news and a lead item in television news broadcasts. Her will, published in 2010, announced that she left £3 million to her two sons. Not bad for a celebrity blessed with, no discernible talents who was widely labelled by the industry as 'finished', after the Shilpa Shetty incident in 2007.

Madonna

In contrast to Jade Goody, Madonna is a bona fide contemporary idol. Her fame has now extended for over quarter of a century. Press and audience responses to her *Sticky and Sweet* tour (2009), humanitarian work in Malawi (where she founded an orphanage for girls and, controversially, adopted two children, a son in 2006 and a daughter in 2009), film work, health regime, pedicure and love life, shows no sign of abating. She remains a top-drawer attraction for celebrity product endorsement from the likes of multinational corporations such as Pepsi-Cola, Max Factor, Microsoft Windows XP, BMW, Gap, Estée Lauder, Motorola, H&M and Sunsilks. In the 1980s and early 1990s her sexuality was iconic for an entire generation. They have remained faithful in the subsequent dramatic shifts in public face that have been the trademark of her career. Madonna's refusal to be hidebound by image or typecast by public personality was widely and enthusiastically adopted as a female role model by millions of young girls and mature women, throughout the world.

For Borkowski, she is a classic example of the fame formula at work. He submits that all of the principles of fame promotion and calculated exposure management mentioned in relation to Goody apply to Madonna. She prolonged her fame by staging dramatic publicity incidents, calculated, typically in fifteen-month cycles. Examples include controversial pop promo video work, the *Blond Ambition* (1990) tour in which she simulated masturbation on stage at the end of 'Like A Virgin', the

cinéma vérité movie *Madonna: Truth or Dare* (also known as *In Bed with Madonna*) (1991) in which she simulates fellatio with a wine bottle, the soft core, coffee table book *Sex* (1992) in which she posed naked in a variety of private and public settings, and the infamous on-stage kiss with Britney Spears at the 2003 MTV Video Music Awards. In the words of Borkowski:

From her early days as a sharp-witted 80s party girl, she has moved onwards and upwards in her quest to stay famous, creating controversy through videos of her kissing a black Jesus, her *Sex* book and her flirtation with lesbianism, changing style for every album, acting parts in movies, adopting children, writing books for children and becoming a member of the English landed gentry by dint of marriage and money and taking to it like a duck to water. (Borkowski, 2008: 375)

Borkowski presents these various shifts in public image as part of an industrial programme of fame management involving cultural intermediaries at every stage. Madonna engaged in carefully planned publicity-grabbing events to reboot her public profile. Although she refuses to be confined by image and is critical of a world that is entirely filled with images, she is massively image-conscious. This reflects a deeply saturated and nuanced knowledge of American popular culture, which she and her advisers raid to boost her image. Thus, her 'Material Girl' image drew on public representations of Marilyn Monroe in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*; the *Blond Ambition* (1990) stage show included references to Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, Tamara de Lempicka and *A Clockwork Orange*; while in the movie *Dick Tracy* (1990), she recreated a Jean Harlow look.

For Borkowski then, Madonna is a case study of the fame formula. She and her advisers have exploited her talents and accomplishments by engineering publicity incidents to boost her impact factor with the public. It is not enough to be Madonna. In order to seize the public mind she had to pose naked in a variety of soft-core images for the *Sex* book and challenge codes of racial segregation in the black Jesus video. The fame spike requires the boundaries of public expectation to be broken in roughly, fifteen-month intervals.

The 'fame formula' is a diverting party piece. The first thing to note about it is that it is a self-serving concoction. It identifies cultural intermediaries as pivotal in the production of fame. Borkowski is himself a successful PR practitioner and therefore has a vested interest in insisting on the fundamental importance of cultural intermediaries in celebrity culture. This is also the line taken by the pop publicist and reality TV impresario Simon Cowell: Stars do not exist without management (Cowell, 2004: 260).

But it leaves aside the thorny question of why a Tila Tequila or a Miley Cyrus should be elevated from the rank and file to occupy the celebrity limelight. You might say that it is simply a matter of being selected and packaged by a cultural intermediary like Borkowski or Cowell and subject to the fame-formula regime. But two unfortunate things follow from this.

Firstly, it elevates the cultural intermediary into a puppet master and casts celebrities and audiences as puppets.³ It is understandable why cultural intermediaries present themselves as indispensable for they have a service to sell. But to discount the cultural literacy of celebrities and audiences is a mistake. Madonna ruffled adoption protocols when, as a white, wealthy superstar, she adopted two Malawi children. But the inference that this is a matter of the fame formula undermines her literacy as a humanitarian and activist. It cheapens the motivation of celebrities to engage in some types of positive public acts and misconstrues why audiences recognize cultural prestige in them.

The second result of 'the cultural intermediary is all' argument is that it misunderstands the expanded opportunities for the production of fame offered by new technology. The Internet has revitalized the domestic system of celebrity.

Take a figure like Chris Cocker. He is a small town, Southern, openly gay adolescent who posted rants and performance pieces on his MySpace page. All of this changed in 2007 when he posted a defensive piece on Britney Spears after her performance at the MTV Video Music Awards. Spears's performance had been pilloried by the media as lacklustre and embarrassing. Crocker presented himself as her *Don Quixote*. Within two days Crocker's posting received over 4 million hits. He has gone on to become an Internet celebrity with a cult following.

It is one thing to propose that Crocker is an isolated example of Internet celebrity. In that case his fame might be easily dismissed as a topic of paltry exceptionalism. But when I submit that the Net has revitalized the domestic system of fame, I am referring to a general, well-documented phenomenon.

For example, the Filipina singer Charice Pempengco, who performed at two presidential pre-inaugural events and two post-Oscar award events in 2009, acquired fame by releasing her songs on YouTube. Carol Zara, a Brazilian-Canadian blogger, achieved global fame through her *digitallyblonde.com* site on Twitter. Rebekka Guðleifsdóttir became a celebrity after releasing her photographs on Flickr. By 2006 her site received 1.6 million visits, making it the most popular Flickr site. Her images led to her creating and appearing in a Toyota advertising campaign (Smith, 2006). Zoe Margolis posted a blog, under the name Amy Lee, of a young woman's sexual adventures, which became a bestselling book. Ben Going, under the username *boh3m3*, became a video blog star after posting videos on YouTube.

The list is hardly exhaustive. What it indicates is that the Internet offers unprecedented new pathways to acquire fame. The cultural literacy of performers and audiences can create a significant fan base without the intervention of the established factory system of celebrity.

It would be a gross exaggeration to maintain that the Internet is producing a new generation of stars that in time will overtake the factory system and make the PR-Media hub irrelevant. On the other hand, it is changing the traditional rules of the game that apply to celebrity promotion. Established pathways of being discovered and packaged that are based on the factory system of fame are not exactly being replaced. But they are now supplemented by a reinvigorated domestic system, which uses private laptops, the mobile phone and the Internet to generate a fan base. As we have already noted, the Arctic Monkeys, Lily Allen and Little Boots have credited MySpace with launching their popular music careers. In each case the Web built a following that eventually triggered the interest of managers, promoters and other cultural intermediaries. You might say that the revitalized domestic system is creating peripheral stars and parallel supply chains for the promotion of celebrity. However, once they reach a measurable impact factor, the commercial tendency is for them to be co-opted by the factory system, and professionally repackaged.

The case of Justin Bieber is typical.

Bieber is a 16-year-old musician from Stratford, Ontario, whose album *My World 2.0* debuted at number 1 in the *Billboard* chart in 2010 and has, at the time of writing, sold 850,000 copies. He did not acquire fame as a child model, and his parents did not audition him for reality TV shows like *Star Search* or the Disney Channel. What happened is that his mother posted videos of him performing on YouTube. Although the audience was mainly intended to be relatives and friends of the family, Bieber's performances generated a wider fan base that came to the attention of an Atlanta-based promoter and music manager, one Scooter Braun. Braun masterminded a programme of Internet promotion that eventually produced 2.2 million Twitter followers, 50 million YouTube subscribers and a contract with Def Jam Recordings. Bieber has appeared on *The Late Show with David Letterman*, *The Tonight Show*, *Saturday Night Live* and at the White House (Suddath, 2010). He was one of the most commercially successful 'discoveries' in the music industry in 2010. Does this invalidate the fame formula? Not really, since the evidence suggests that durable stardom does eventually require managerial expertise from publicists, promoters and other cultural intermediaries. The domestic system of fame can flag new talent, but the factory system is required for acts to make a real splash with the public and flourish.

Conversely, the idea that the fame formula is a science needs to be handled with caution. If fame is truly only a matter of promotion and packaging at timely intervals to increase the limelight awarded to stars, how are we to explain the descent into

comparative obscurity of Simon Dee, Les McKeown, Kelly LeBrock, Justin Guarini or Adam Ant? In aggregate, the factory system has more fame causalities than celebrity successes.

What the fame formula describes is a strategy for engineering sensation and tinting fame. This is very different from explaining why some celebrities have the capacity to produce a social transformation and compel strangers to repose intense faith and unqualified trust in them.

If we return to Borkowski's case studies, it is true that publication of Jade Goody's autobiography, participation in events like the London Marathon and the racist attack on Shilpa Shetty were effective spikes in rebooting her fame. But what made her an enduring national and international figure was the positive and courageous way that she dealt with her terminal illness and the public sentiment that her life had been appropriated by the promotions and media industry. No PR man could have predicted or concocted this. Throughout her illness there is no doubt that Goody was guided by cultural intermediaries on how to present the most winning public face and generate a substantial financial legacy for her children. Her book *Jade: Fighting to the End* (2009) was published during the terminal phase of her cancer. *Forever in My Heart: The Story of My Battle Against Cancer* (2009) and a photo book, *Jade – Remember Me This Way* (2009), appeared immediately after her death was announced. They were stage-managed to milk public sympathy and garner maximum publicity and sales. Infamously, *OK!* magazine published a tribute edition that carried the phrases 'In Loving Memory' and 'Jade Goody 1981–2009' days *before* her death. This shows how consistently the media was already treating Goody first and foremost as a commodity rather than a vulnerable, suffering person.

Turning now to the case of Madonna, it is true that media reports of bisexuality, a wild temperament, simulating masturbation on stage, the soft-core photos in *Sex* and the video of kissing a black Jesus certainly grabbed airwaves space and filled print columns. Madonna may well have been advised by public relations experts to periodically outrage the public in this calculated way. Nevertheless, it is unrealistic to contend that these overt acts are the sum reason for explaining her durable fame. Madonna's celebrity is more than an exercise in effective exposure management. The attractive and powerful force of her fame is based on the popular belief that she is an exceptional, inspirational individual whose personal history is so vivid in culture that it enables society to take stock of itself and its position. Madonna symbolizes qualities of boldness, direct thought, spontaneity, unpredictability, frontier-lifestyle flexibility and heroic conviction that are either absent, or widely felt to be thwarted and underdeveloped in everyday life. In a mainline way, her celebrity fulfils a craving, or set of demands in society that, so to speak, *anticipated* or *craved* her and which are beyond the power of cultural intermediaries to create or control.