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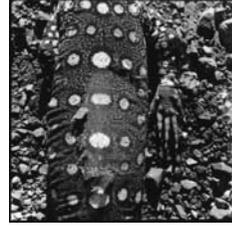
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## The mass production of celebrity

### 'Celetoids', reality TV and the 'demotic turn'<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** ● In *Understanding Celebrity*, I coined the term 'the demotic turn' as a means of characterizing the increasing production of 'ordinary' celebrities through reality TV and DIY celebrity websites. Refusing the idea that this necessarily constituted a democratizing process – hence the term 'demotic' – I wanted to examine the role that the access to mass-mediated fame plays within the construction of cultural identities. In this article, I develop this idea a little further by asking whether the shrinking distance between TV and 'reality', and between the famous and the 'ordinary', means that we need to reconsider our understandings of what kind of cultural apparatus the media has become. ●

**KEYWORDS** ● celebrity ● cultural identity ● media ● reality TV

In *Understanding Celebrity* (2004), I coined the term 'the demotic turn' as a means of referring to the increasing visibility of the 'ordinary person' as they turn themselves into media content through celebrity culture, reality TV, DIY websites, talk radio and the like. In the context of the book, it was used as a means of understanding the proliferation of celebrity across the media since the 1980s, as well as celebrity's colonization of the expectations of everyday life in contemporary western societies, particularly among teenagers and young adults. Where there was a crossover between certain aspects of reality TV and the production of celebrity, I was concerned to

argue for the importance of recognizing how celebrity was being constituted in such formats. Much of the participation in reality TV is aimed at a certain kind of recognition of the self. Even though the contestants on *Idol* may be competing for the chance to be a successful singer, we frequently find them arguing their case to the judges in terms of their essential selves – their intrinsic star quality – rather than in terms of their musical skills or abilities. *American Idol*'s notorious William Hung, for instance, attempted to impress the judges by pointing out that he had never had any training in singing or dancing – as if this was an argument in his favour. If celebrity is understood as a natural attribute of the self, rather than a mode of production and consumption, then of course it was.

I think more might be done with the idea of the 'demotic turn', partly because of its implication in a new field of relations between media and culture. The media, particularly television, have developed new capacities for constructing identities and these capacities are producing social effects that are about more than just the production of *Big Brother*. Indeed, in what follows I want to argue that the function of the media has mutated as it has increasingly directly participated in the construction of cultural identity as one of its primary spheres of activity. I should point out, though, that this is not a version of an anti-tabloidization argument or an account of 'dumbing down'. My interest is in asking if there has been a structural shift in what the western media is doing, some (not all) of the time, and if the explosion of celebrity, reality TV and so on – the provocations for coining the phrase 'the demotic turn' – actually reflects something more fundamental than contemporary media fashion.

## II

Let me begin by reviewing the recent trends in the production of celebrity which encourage the kind of questions I want to raise. I am by no means the first to have noticed what has become quite a programmatic shift in the preferred territory for the development of celebrity in particular media platforms – television and the internet in particular. This is a shift from the elite to the ordinary. 'Ordinariness', of course, has always occupied a place among the repertoire of celebrity discourses. Elsewhere, Frances Bonner, David Marshall and I have pointed out the contradictoriness of the discourses of celebrity – their capacity to simultaneously valorize the celebrity's elite status while nonetheless celebrating their 'intrinsic ordinariness' (Turner et al., 2000: 13). 'Ordinary people', of course, have always been 'discovered', suddenly extracted from their everyday lives and processed for stardom; both the film and the music industry have incorporated such processes into their cultural mythologies as well as their industrial practice. In recent times, however, the use of this practice has grown

dramatically. Whole media formats have been devoted to it, and the contemporary media consumer has become increasingly accustomed to witnessing what happens to the 'ordinary' person who has been plucked from obscurity to enjoy a highly specified and circumscribed celebrity. The *Big Brother* housemate is the most obvious example.<sup>2</sup> (Their 'ordinariness' is not negotiable, either. In some countries, *Big Brother* housemates have been evicted when they were found to be already working within the entertainment industry and thus attempting to incorporate their new visibility into an already existing media career). The trend has a broader provenance than this, however. As Nick Couldry points out, ordinary people have never been more desired by, or more visible within, the media; nor have their own utterances ever been reproduced with the faithfulness, respect and accuracy they are today (Couldry, 2003: 102).

The explosion of reality TV, confessional talk formats, docu-soaps and so-called reality-based game shows has significantly enhanced television's demand for ordinary people desiring celebrification. The expansion of both the demand and the supply has occurred in a symbiotic and accelerating relation. Although the 'reality' of reality TV is of course a construction, what has become significant is the way these formats have exploited the reality effect of television's 'liveness'; that is, the foregrounded liveness (as in, what we are watching is happening right now!) enhances the illusion that what is being watched is real or genuine, thus challenging the competing suspicion that it is only being staged and produced for the camera. Often reality TV is quite exorbitantly 'live': it is occurring in real time as we watch it through live video-stream via the internet, and those wishing to interact with it directly can do so by accessing one of the websites or online chat-rooms, or by participating in the audience vote. Stripped across the schedule for months at a time in a set daily timeslot, as it is in many countries, *Big Brother* is not only received as a live media event; it also becomes embedded in the routine structures of the audience's everyday lives. (*That*, it seems to me, is the 'reality' of reality TV, not what is actually happening in the house or on the *Idol* audition set.)

Among the consequences of the trend towards the ordinary celebrity and the success of reality TV formats is an acceleration of the industrial cycle of use and disposal for the products of these trends. If performing on *Big Brother* can generate celebrity within a matter of days, it can disappear just as quickly. Indeed, it is essential that each crop of *Big Brother* housemates are easily replaced by the next if the format is to successfully reproduce itself, series after series. In this regard, television's production of celebrity can truly be regarded as a manufacturing process into which the product's planned obsolescence is incorporated. The replaceable celebrity-commodity (Turner et al., 2000: 12–3) is structurally fundamental to both of the leading primetime formats aimed at the key 14–35 year old demographics: reality TV and soap opera.

In order to define this particular formation of celebrity – the individual with no particular talents which might give them expectations of work in the entertainment industry, no specific career objectives beyond the achievement of media visibility, and an especially short lifecycle as a public figure – Chris Rojek has coined the term ‘celetoid’:

Celetoids are the accessories of cultures organized around mass communications and staged authenticity. Examples include lottery winners, one-hit wonders, stalkers, whistle-blowers, sports’ arena streakers, have-a-go-heroes, mistresses of public figures and the various other social types who command media attention one day, and are forgotten the next. (2001: 20–1)

Given what appears to be our culture’s appetite for consuming celebrity and the scale of the demand for new stories, gossip and pictures the celebrity-media industries generate,<sup>3</sup> the accelerated commodity life cycle of the celetoid has emerged as an effective industrial solution to the problem of satisfying demand.

In relation to the broader culture within which the consumption of celebrity occurs, these trends have resulted in celebrity itself mutating: no longer a magical condition, some research suggests that it is fast becoming an almost reasonable expectation for us to have of our everyday lives.<sup>4</sup> The opportunity of becoming a celebrity has spread beyond the various elites and into the expectations of the population in general. Among the effects of this, in turn, is the proliferation of various kinds of DIY celebrity; on the internet, in particular, ‘celebrification’ has become a familiar mode of cyber-self-presentation. As I have discussed in *Understanding Celebrity* (chapter 5), this is sometimes regarded as a reason for optimism, a sign of the democratization of celebrity as the means of production are seized by the ordinary citizen.

The most important development, in my view, is the scale with which the media has begun to produce celebrity ‘on its own’. Where once the media was more or less content to pick up celebrities produced through a range of sports, news and entertainment contexts, or to respond to approaches from publicists, promotions and public relations personnel, contemporary television in particular has introduced much greater vertical integration into the industrial structure which produces their celebrities. In addition to exploiting those who have already been established through other means, television has learnt that it can also invent, produce, market and sell on its celebrities from scratch on a much larger scale than ever before. Installing ordinary people into game shows, docu-soaps and reality TV programming enables television to ‘grow their own’ celebrity, to control how they are marketed before, during and after production – all of this while still subordinating the celebrity of each individual to the needs of the particular programme or format. The extent to which this is now done, and the pervasive visibility its most successful products can achieve, make this is an

extremely significant shift not only in terms of the production and consumption of celebrity but also in terms of how the media now participate in the cultural construction of identity and desire.

Cultural and media studies have responded in a number of ways to these developments. We have had discussions which helpfully problematize the 'reality' of reality TV, as well as look at the performativeness of the identities on offer through this newly vertically integrated mediascape (that is, the motivated performance of ordinariness or authenticity is the focus of analysis and attention) (Kilborn, 2003). There are post-Habermasian critiques which see the mass production of celebrity as yet another instance of the media's tendency to produce simulations of the real as spectacles for consumption, and thus as another instance of the diminution of the public sphere. There are also suggestions that the increased diversity evident in the contemporary production and consumption of celebrity contains a political potential that may well be positive (Dovey, 2000). Among the latter is the argument that such programming engages in particularly direct and useful ways with the socio-cultural process of modelling ethical behaviours and identities (Lumby, 2003).

The most influential example in this context, and one upon which I want to build, has been developed through John Hartley's deployment of the term 'democrataintment' (1999, see chapter 12). Hartley has argued in a number of places that we are witnessing the democratization of the media: breaking with more elite formations of popular entertainment, dispensing with the privileging of information and education, and allowing the media to focus on the construction of cultural identities. In *Understanding Celebrity*, I challenged the neologism of 'democrataintment' by querying the connection it argues between democracy and the proliferation of DIY celebrity, the opening up of media access and the explosion of 'the ordinary' in media content. I agree with John Hartley that the trends we both notice have, among other things, opened up media access to women, to people of colour and to a wider array of class positions; that the increased volume of media content now available could result in increased powers of self-determination becoming available to media consumers; and that there is every reason why the positive by-products of this increased volume and diversity might excite optimism about its democratic potential.

Nonetheless, I would argue, the 'democratic' part of the 'democrataintment' neologism is an occasional and accidental consequence of the 'entertainment' part, and its least systemic component. It is important to remember that celebrity still remains a systematically hierarchical and exclusive category, no matter how much it proliferates. No amount of public participation in game shows, reality TV or DIY celebrity websites will alter the fact that, overall, the media industries still remain in control of the symbolic economy, and that they still attempt to operate this economy in the service of their own interests. Further, and while I might sympathize

with the more optimistic accounts, I also want to insist that there is no necessary connection between, on the one hand, a broadening demographic in the pattern of access to media representation and, on the other, a democratic politics. Hence my view that these developments are more correctly seen as a demotic, rather than a democratic, turn. Diversity is not of itself intrinsically democratic irrespective of how it is generated or by whom.

### III

If this demotic turn is not producing democracy, then, what is it? That is not easy to answer. To start at the simplest level, though, we can say that it is generating programming – a lot of programming. What the media has to gain from its mining of the rich seam of ‘the ordinary’ is, at the very least, unlimited performances of diversity. Performing ordinariness has become an end in itself, and thus a rich and (it seems) almost inexhaustible means of generating new content for familiar formats. A number of media (television, radio, the internet) have developed production techniques which help to ensure that ‘reality’ is satisfactorily performed by the ordinary citizen even when their ‘ordinariness’ – given the processes of selection through which they have had to progress – is at least debatable. One of the means through which these processes are sanitized (that is, through which their implicit hierarchies are disavowed) is by dramatizing the democratizing implications of the thousands of ordinary (that is, apparently untalented) applicants turning up to audition. Clearly, the spectacle of the audition tells us, anyone has a chance in such a competition. It is in the interests of those who operate the hierarchy of celebrity in this context to mask its exclusivity in practice, and one of the distinguishing features of the demotic turn may well be the media industries’ enhanced capacity to do this convincingly today. As we have seen, this enhanced capacity has dramatically increased the numbers of ordinary people it can attract and process.

There is more to this, however, and I want to ask how we might think through the implications of what I have been describing. My motivation for asking this question is my sense that we are witnessing the emergence of a role for the media that is slightly different from the one which has been conventionally assumed within the traditional versions of media and communications studies (and more on that in a moment). Importantly, I suspect this is an aspect of the media’s contemporary cultural influence which is new. In a conversation about these emerging forms of cultural influence, Chris Rojek once suggested to me that we may need to rethink the notion of the media as a ‘mediating’ apparatus because the media now operated in ways that were analogous to those we might once have attributed to the state: that is, as a source of power which organizes representations in support of its own interests. I thought then, and want to argue

now, that there are good reasons why it might be useful to follow that suggestion to see where it leads us: to think about the media more in the way we have become accustomed to thinking about the state – as an apparatus with its own interests, and its own use for power.<sup>5</sup>

Let me clarify the distinction I am attempting to make here – and it is a heuristic move rather than a substantive case I want to put, so I acknowledge that this next set of explanations is a little crude. What I am trying to do is to compare conventional academic accounts of the media with the kinds of understandings that now seem necessary in response to what, I am arguing, are new and important developments. Let us think back a decade or two, to the conventional arguments we used in media and cultural studies to explain the relation between the media and the state. According to most models, the media was thought to operate as a medium or a carrier rather than as itself a motivating ideological force; its activities were the product of the interests of other locations of power: the state, largely, or perhaps capital. The media typically ‘mediated’ between the locations of power and their subjects. Among our original tasks in cultural studies was to interpret how the media did this in order to determine whose interests were being served and to what ends. We argued that we could use media texts as a means of accessing that information. Rarely (if ever) did we suggest that the texts merely served the interests of the media organizations themselves. Mostly, the media was framed as an instrument of the ideological state apparatuses (if it wasn’t one itself), or of the nation-state, or of dominant ideological formations/power blocs, or even of the government – contingently and conjuncturally defined. We did not expect the media to simply serve its own interests. Moreover, despite the structural importance of capital to these models, I don’t recall too many analyses in which commercial power was offered as the media’s ultimate objective. To the contrary, much of the discussion of the media during the 1970s and 1980s, even that of the concentration of media ownership for instance, seemed to suggest that commercial power was itself only a means to an end: it had to be reducible to something else, something more fundamentally or structurally political, such as class interests or other forms of political or cultural hegemony.

The general point I want to make is that during these earlier formulations, we were interested in media texts for what they told us about the generation of meaning, and in media institutions for what they told us about the production of culture, but we tended not to look at the media as a motivating force – as itself, an author rather than a mediator or translator of cultural identity. Even when we looked at public service broadcasters and their participation in the construction of national identity, we would normally have examined how individual programmes or network positioning constructed such identities as a means of accessing an ideological cultural/political agenda that was outside of and larger than the programming or the carrier.

Over the last decade or so, internationally, the media landscape has changed in ways that significantly affect the nature of the media's involvement in the construction of cultural identities. Some of the relevant changes are in those markets where public service broadcasters have been displaced by a commercial and, often, a transnational media organization. Where this occurs, the commercial provider attempts to appropriate the functions of the 'national' service, including the construction of citizenship or of membership to the state or national community. In Australia, the market I know best, the leading commercial network loses no opportunity to stake their claim to being 'the national broadcaster' notwithstanding the fact that there is still a publicly funded broadcaster with a national network that is far greater in size and reach (if not in audience ratings). The point of such a claim, in this instance at least, is primarily commercial – or, more correctly, it serves as a means of extending the network's social and political purchase in order to extend their commercial power. While there may well be ideological consequences to flow from a move such as this, they are by-products rather than a primary concern.

The identities constructed by the media networks I am referring to here are, I would argue, not only 'mediated'; as I have been suggesting throughout this piece, sometimes they are constructed from whole cloth. Although I would accept the possibility that this observation might apply to public or national identities as well, my primary focus here is on the media's construction of the private identity: the personal, the ordinary and the everyday. It is not difficult to see how the demotic turn collaborates with this. In its most vivid location, the hybrid reality TV/game-show franchise, the production of celebrity offers a spectacular form of personal validation.<sup>6</sup> The format's apparent tolerance of a lack of exceptional talents or achievements is available as long as the person concerned (paradoxically) can perform their ordinariness with some degree of specificity or individuality. Reality TV of this kind issues an open invitation to its participants to merge their personal everyday reality with that created publicly by television. The fact that the opportunity is offered and accepted as a validating or empowering process for the 'actual' (as well as the televisually performing) individual shrinks the distance between these two dimensions of everyday life – 'on-television' and 'not-on-television' – even though everyone is thoroughly aware of how constructed the process actually is.

Nick Couldry has provided us with a resonant explanation of the appeal of such a process in his description of the place the media occupies within systems of identity and desire among many of our citizens. Couldry's 'myth of the media centre' refers to what he describes as the commonly held belief that there is a centre to the social world and that, in some sense, the media speaks from and for that centre (2003: 46). As a result, there are media people and there are ordinary people; crossing the boundary which separates these two categories of person takes one from the periphery to the

centre of the social. In the context I am addressing here, the myth of the media centre has been useful to the media industries because it legitimates formations of identity that are primarily invented in order to generate commercial returns. That is, what Couldry sees as the media's perceived social centrality is an effect of an apparatus that has built the media's power, but as a commercial rather than an ideological or political imperative. This is why I am so interested in the extent to which we might argue that the media now plays a significantly different role in inventing, popularizing and distributing formations of identity and desire in our societies – and why I have been drawn to point to their participation as authors rather than mediators in this process. The implications of this argument are fairly plain, I would have thought. If the media operate so that they seem like the 'natural representatives of society's centre' (Couldry, 2003: 46), and if they occupy the centre of symbolic production, then the kinds of realities they offer as forms of identity within their programming must have a powerful social and cultural impact. That is the situation to which I am responding.

#### IV

Among my responses is to point out that the impact of these new forms of identity seems out of all proportion to the motivations which call them into being. This is not necessarily a critique of what they are, but the scale and penetration of their circulation prompts me to go back to that earlier question – just what kind of cultural apparatus is the media these days? Another way of framing that concern might go like this. What do we make of a situation where a powerful mechanism of legitimation is being mobilized in ways with which we are familiar from other projects – in the service of the construction of the citizenry, for instance, or in developing plausible demonstrations of the homogeneity of the nation – in order to represent forms of behaviour and identity that are motivated simply by their viability as commercial entertainment or spectacle? To address that question – and it is important we do so given its wholesale intervention into the formations of cultural identity, particularly among the young – perhaps we should be asking some slightly old-fashioned questions of the media as a formation, that is, asking not just in whose interests they operate but what might constitute the media's own interests.

I am not going to do that here. When we get to this point in the conversation, I need to say that I actually don't yet think the media does work exactly like a state, even though this is a helpful way to resituate our thinking about the kind of social and cultural apparatus it has lately become. As a strategy, it does assist in focusing on the media's behaviour and on what that behaviour tells us about the media's objectives and interests. What I notice about the behaviour of the media system I am

describing is that it seems utterly short term in its concentration on producing the conditions for commercial success and shamelessly contingent in the tactics chosen to pursue that outcome. In the instances upon which I have been focusing, that means something apparently quite banal: generating audience and participant behaviours which will result in successful television entertainment programmes. Less banal, though, is the possibility that these behaviours, where they occur, are the result of a direct and sustained intervention into the construction of people's desires, cultural identities and expectations of the real. Their effect is not only to generate thousands of applications to appear on *Big Brother* or *Pop Idol*; their effects also spill out beyond the boundaries of the programme as largely uncontained and so far relatively un-inspected by-products. As a result, current research<sup>7</sup> is reporting that fame is now being talked about as a realistic career option by young people even though they have yet to decide in what area of public performance they might pursue their fame. All of that said, the curious thing is that the behaviours we have been discussing may have no intrinsic content or necessary politics. I suspect that there is no reason why an entirely different format would not drive entirely different behaviours or be mobilized to generate entirely different constructions of cultural identity. I also accept that it would not be difficult to extract a set of principles of citizenship or an implied and contingent ethical framework underpinning the structure and narrativization of much contemporary reality programming; it is not without its own internal argument.

In this article I have been raising what seem to be important implications to draw from the rise of a media formation generating behaviours and cultural patterns that reinforce its commercial power and its cultural centrality within a changing public sphere, but the actual content of which is driven (at least in the first instance) by the needs of an entertainment format. It is a system that could be described as operating like an ideological system but without an ideological project. I am proposing that there is now a new dimension of cultural power available to the international media system, and that it has the capacity not only to generate celebrity identities from whole cloth but it may also have the capacity to generate broader formations of cultural identity from whole cloth as well. The media system I am describing is largely multinational or transnational in its semiotic reach and economic organization, but relatively localized in its application, purchase and effects. The design and distribution of formats is locally differentiated and so the effects often are too. However, while the interest in generating the behaviours and audiences I am talking about might be highly localized in terms of specific ratings wars in specific markets, for instance, the celebrity of the formats themselves is increasingly globalized. This suits the large media conglomerates who have learnt how to trade their formats across cultural and national differences, but it also means that they may be trading in constructions of identity that are dislocated from any social or

cultural context. Interestingly, and to qualify this, there are many examples of local versions which have modified formats to give them a degree of indigeneity (Roscoe, 2001).

Notwithstanding that qualification, the alarming and perhaps surprising thing is that the forms of cultural identity the media produce today are so contingent, that they are so loosely connected to the social conditions from which they emerge, and that they are the object of so little sense of responsibility from those who generated them in the first place. As a result, rather than an increase in access providing the route to a more representative and coherent expression of the will and ambition of the people, the demotic turn has unleashed the unruly, unpredictable and irresponsible characteristics of Le Bon's (1960) 19th century crowd – the true sense of the demotic in all its unharnessable, exciting but anarchic character: energetic, over-responsive, excessive and capable of instigating but not easily organizing or managing social and cultural change (Marshall, 1997, see chapter 2). I am of course aware that these are also the very characteristics upon which the conservative taste-based critiques of *Big Brother* et al. have focused. My interest in this is not to pursue that taste-based critique, however. My interest is in what the success of the demotic turn says about the cultural and industrial formation that produced it. At this point, all I can claim is that this is a formation I don't understand as comfortably as I once thought I did. But I'm working on it.

## Notes

- 1 Earlier versions of this article were presented to the Media, Communications and Cultural Studies Association conference in Lincoln (UK) in January, 2005 and to the Australian and New Zealand Communications Association conference in Christchurch (New Zealand) in July 2005. I would like to thank all of those who offered comments, criticisms and suggestions aimed at improving this paper; it has greatly benefited from these discussions.
- 2 Su Holmes (2005) has an excellent discussion of *Big Brother*, ordinariness and celebrity in Holmes and Jermyn, *Understanding Reality Television*. While her concerns are ultimately quite different to mine here, a number of the issues dealt with in this essay are also raised in hers.
- 3 Nick Couldry has made the point to me that we know very little about to what extent this appetite is 'industry constructed' rather than the product of some kind of grassroots cultural process (which is how it is customarily understood). It is a fair point and, like him, I am unaware of any empirical work on this area which could answer that question.
- 4 See chapter 3 in my *Understanding Celebrity*. This is in fact a common theme in many accounts of contemporary TV, such as Bonner's *Ordinary Television* (2003), Dovey's *Freakshow* (2000), or the many accounts of reality TV

formats such as *Big Brother*. The core location to which I am referring, however, is the 'GirlCultures' project currently being conducted by Catharine Lumby and Elspeth Probyn, which is reporting clear evidence of this from their interviews with teenage girls in Sydney. At this stage, most of this work has only appeared in conference presentations rather than in print, but it is referenced in Lumby (2003). A monograph reporting on this project is expected in 2007.

- 5 Nick Couldry also investigates the idea of the media as a quasi-state, in different and interesting ways, in his 'Media Meta-capital: Extending the Range of Bourdieu's Field Theory' (2004).
- 6 This is also a point well made at some length in Su Holmes (2005).
- 7 See note 3.

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