

Celebrities Or Celestoids?: Analyzing the Difference between Achieved and Ascribed Celebrities

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Celebrity has become a defining characteristic of our mediatized societies. It is ever-present in the news and entertainment industry boosted by formats such as reality TV, DIY (do it yourself) websites, talk radio and so on. ‘The Demotic Turn’ was coined by Graeme Turner in *Understanding Celebrity* as a means of defining the expanding growth of ‘ordinary’ while they modify themselves into the content of media through various reality shows, several DIY platforms, and widely, via ‘celebrification.’ It is generally defined as the process by which ordinary people or public figures are transformed into celebrities; for instance, film stars, public figures, celebrity politicians. This transformation from ordinary person to celebrity can be seen as a media ritual that both confirms this separation and legitimates the ‘myth of the media centre’, or the myth that the media are the essential gatekeepers to the imagined society’s centre. Celebrities are manufactured by the celebrity industry which produced and further help to sell other commodities and this can’t be equated with the democratization. This whole process of formation of celebrity leads to his conversion into ‘celestoid’ or a short-lived public figure. This paper tries to examine the role which this mass-mediated fame plays within the construction of cultural identities.

Keywords: Celebrity, Demotic turn, Celebrification, Democratization, Celestoid.

The word ‘Demotic’ is an early 19th-century word which comes from Greek *dēmotikos* ‘popular’, from *dēmotēs* ‘one of the people’, from *dēmos* ‘the people’. Hence, demotic is “of or belonging to the people,” especially “pertaining to the common people.” The word has been coined by Graeme Turner in his book *Understanding Celebrity* written in 2004. The paper draws upon new transformations in celebrity – such as the deployment of social media to create complex spaces

of identification and agency and to assess its impact on all aspects of contemporary life. Turner very keenly delineates the various practices of consumption and production of this celebrity discourse which lead to this entire interplay of complex power structures. The book not only cements Turner's status as the most important figure in celebrity studies but also reminds us why the study of celebrity is so important. It explains how social media is a key feature in establishing an online presence for celebrities. It critically analyses the changing nature of fan culture within the online environment and examines in greater depth the increased role of reality TV. The demotic turn has been vividly used as a means of understanding the proliferation of celebrity across the media since the 1980s and the colonization by celebrity across the enslaved minds of teenager and young adults. This process has been used in the somewhat similar context by Edward Said in his seminal work *Culture and Imperialism* where cultural studies or practices were used as a process to indoctrinate the colonizers and for economic purposes. Said observes that "The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them" (xiii). Hence, he analyzes cultural objects in large part to understand how empire works where Imperialism acquires a kind of coherence, a set of experiences, and a presence of ruler and ruled alike within the culture.

Turner's big question is whether the "demotic" (the presence of ordinary people) signals the democratic (which he defines as "inclusion in social, political and economic processes, meaning-making, autonomy and expression"). This is rather a calculated step on the part of capitalists to increase the profit. The distance between TV and reality; famous and ordinary has reduced, but the question is whether this process is natural and not intended to help gain larger viewership at the cost of selling the life stories of the innocent masses. He maintains that:

In *Understanding Celebrity*, I challenged the neologism of 'democritainment' 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 (157).

The highly-commercialized, globalized media are now shaping and creating identities, but that they are no longer doing this in service of nationalisms, states, citizenries or publics. Today,

modern-day media are having powerful effects on who we understand ourselves to be and desire to be. There has been a significant change in the role of media practices where it has not remained a medium any longer. It takes in control of the production as well. Celebrity culture is the inflation of personal lives on a global scale and is inherently linked to consumer culture. It has rather become a commodity that is manufactured and which in turn, is selling ordinariness. Turner writes that:

‘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 (154).

The concept of culture has evolved over the past two centuries in terms of meaning and its interpretation. Raymond Williams’s definition of culture lies in its exploration of everyday actions. It can be described as a means through which meanings and ideas are expressed, not merely in art and education but even through everyday interaction of individuals within a concerned society. It can be described as a general process of “...intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development”, and “...the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity” (Williams 90). Stuart Hall in his seminal essay, “Notes on deconstructing the popular” talks about the problematic popular culture and how it is being manufactured in the name of some other over a given period of time. With the transition in the working of the press, a wide area of mainstream media is now available to the masses for consumption. Popular would be stated in terms of its humongous availability to its consumers and which speaks in terms of commercialism and consumption. Things are tagged as ‘popular’ when they are forcefully propelled upon the masses by the dominant group and therefore, involve a class struggle. Hall states that Culture is a constant battlefield: “where no once for all victories are obtained but where there are always strategic positions to be won and lost” (233).

Individuals are not free-agents but they are posed to be as free –agents. They are ‘bearers’ and they work in a particular form of system. It is moreover, an imaginary relationship with the real condition of existence. Force and domination never worked in Ideology. Here, “Freedom itself means Coercion.” Gramsci’s idea of hegemony works equally well while problematizing the

popular culture where the relations of control and subordination are constantly shifting and while certain cultural forms gain and lose support from institutions.

Over the years the idea of what is a celebrity and what is not is contrived according to different requirements. Through numerous mediums, ordinary masses are persistently trying to inculcate into the industry, while rendering them as an 'object.' The construction of cultural identities has become one of the primary roles of media for grabbing more attention. It transforms news, events and reality shows into a popularized, lurid and sensational form. There is a clear cut shift in the production of celebrity viz. from elite to the ordinary. With access to the internet, the production of different forms of art has become more available to the masses. Ordinary people suddenly rise to fame and are recognized. This sudden fame, however, is short-lived. Just as how fast they are sucked into the entertainment industry, their exit too follows a similar pace and pattern. Their descent is as quick as their ascent and one celebrity gets quickly replaced by the other.

Special focus is put on how an ordinary man, who is completely drained in his mundane existence, is suddenly "discovered." His journey from obscurity to fame is given extra attention. The 'reality' of the reality show is in question when the content is manipulated through modification and editing. More emphasis is put on the personal life of the participant, rather than showcasing his talent. Turner asserts that:

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 (154).

In order to define this kind of manufacturing of celebrity for certain formats, Turner uses Chris Rojek's term 'celetoid.' Rojek puts it as, "celetoids are the accessories of cultures organized around mass communications and staged authenticity... the various other social types who command media attention one day, and are forgotten the next. (156)" Celetoids might not have real talent or special abilities; their sole purpose is limited to media visibility. These celetoids are

invented, produced, marketed and sold on television. The more their ordinariness would appeal to the masses and help in increasing the profit, the more will be their life span in the show. The moment they stop entertaining and providing ‘masala,’ they are somehow made to exit the show. In recent times, the entertainment value is put on the higher pedestal, over the talent quotient. As per Rojek;

“The culture of fame is now as fundamental to the well-being of capitalism as is oil and nuclear energy. [...] Fame culture produces fame attack in which the desire for celebrity results in obsessional personalities and dangerously skewed types of behavior” (148).

Noam Chomsky in *Media Control* comes with two counterposing definitions of democracy- one in which the public actively participates, and other in which the public is manipulated and controlled. According to him, “propaganda is to democracy as the bludgeon is to a totalitarian state,” and the mass media is the primary vehicle for delivering propaganda in the United States. He examines how the mass media and public relation industries have been used as propaganda to generate public support. According to him, media control is an invaluable primer on the secret workings of disinformation in democratic societies.

The most common instance of production of TV celebrities include the Big Brother show where the ‘ordinary people’, of course, have been discovered, suddenly extracted from their everyday lives and processed for stardom. The whole media forms have now been devoted to it and the contemporary consumers of media are now accustomed of witnessing the manufacturing of the ‘celetoid’ who has been plucked from obscurity to enjoy a highly specified and circumscribed celebrity. The Big Brother housemate is the most obvious example of celetoid where their ordinariness is being celebrated. The accelerated commodity life cycle of the celetoid has emerged as an effective industrial solution to the problem of satisfying demand involving new stories, gossip and pictures. The format of these entertainment-mediated shows has been formed in a way that will fetch high TRP. There is the deconstruction of the concept of celebrity to celetoids, where they come up for a short span of time with targeted audience and also, one more indispensable part of this process is the timing of these shows when all the members of the family are assembled either for dinner or family gossips.

Big Brother is a TV reality game show which consists of a varied group of contestants, known as House-Guests, who lived together in a customized building under constant surveillance. While in the house, the contestants are completely isolated from the outside world while having no access to mobile phones, TV, internet or any other mass media. The format of the series is mainly seen as a social experiment; and requires house-guests to interact with others who may have differing ideals, beliefs and prejudices. It also involves various featured twists which will lead to an extra number of viewers and there's a grand prize of 500000 US dollar. 'Big Brother' has entered the English language after the name of an evil presence in the novel *Nineteen eighty-four* by George Orwell, that describes any attempt by the Government to use mass surveillance. The main surveillance tool described in the novel is the imaginary 'telescreen,' a cross between a TV and a security camera.

Reality TV may not be as real as some might be led to believe. "Social Constructionism" is used as a lens by many theorists through which this reality can be put forward. Reality TV contributes to the construction of its viewers. Many scholars have raised concerns about the reality of reality TV and the reason behind so. The more appropriate cause of manipulation could be the tedious nature of reality. For something to be called 'exciting' there has to be the presence of some thrilling element in it. According to Kitman,

The weakness of reality television as an entertainment concept is that real people can often be quite boring and that's where the television creative establishment fits. First, they select a real person bound to create controversy: a black or gay. The real people are often coached to act in a certain manner by off-screen handlers who feed them talking points sure to create heat and the end result is called "enhance reality."

When the concerned audience watches these formulated shows, they are more interested in other people's lives and their preferences. There is a blurring of the boundary between reality and fiction as such, which states that such platforms are created for public attention, to improve their show's TRP and for maxim downloads. Thus, the media, particularly television, have developed new capacities for constructing identities and these capacities are producing social effects. Through this process of indoctrination, a relation has been developed between media and culture where the media has altogether altered its function from producers to the constructor of cultural

identities. There are post-Habermasian critiques which shows how through the new and creative modes of production of celebrity, a yet another simulation is created, whereby public space is narrowed down further. So, what we see is just an illusion that might not be real at all.

Turner has questioned this entire process of “democratainment” and explores the shrinking distance between television and reality, where the ‘reality’ of reality TV is, of course, a construction. These formats have degraded the reality effect of television’s ‘liveness’ and further, questions the whole idea of what is real or genuine. The ability of television is to create a sense of “being there” which produces a kind of hyperrealism. This paper also tries to elucidate the difference between the actual celebrity and the fabricated ones through this entire discourse of ‘celebrification.’

Also, J.D. Bolter through his essay “Theory and Practice in New Media Studies,” discusses how the culture is getting manufactured or how culture is industrialized. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer are critiquing ‘culture industry’ and they condemned mass media (contemporary) as ‘economically determined.’ Culture industry would always be explained in terms of technology but no one mentions the fact that the basis on which this technology acquires power over society is basically the power of those whose economic hold over the society is greatest. Hence, “A technological rationale is the rationale of domination itself.”

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