

Cass Creatives Report: Stars in Our Eyes

Wednesday 2 March 2005
Cass Business School, Bunhill Row, London EC1

Panel

- Frank Kane (Business Editor, *The Observer* – Chair)
- Andy Milligan (Author, *Brand it Like Beckham*)
- Joanne Wilson (Senior Producer, BBC, *Celebdaq*)
- Camilla Wright (Founder and Editor, *Popbitch*)

Aim of debate

To explore the reasons underlying the “cult of celebrity” in the media and in marketing today; to explore why celebrities appear to be an everyday source of escapism, fantasy and aspiration for millions, and how businesses are tapping into this phenomenon; to discuss who really controls the omnipresence of celebrities in the media and to address whether our current fixation indicates a healthy need for diversion and amusement or a worrying obsession with superficiality.

Summary

Frank - As a media and business editor I'm particularly interested in how a broadsheet like *The Observer* might follow the cult of celebrity. I have to put my cards on the table and say that I'm firmly with John Humphrys when it comes to the proliferation of celebrity stories in the media. As a reminder of what Humphrys said about celebrity and television in general at last year's MGEITF, I've the following: *A vast amount is simply mediocre. One of the most senior executives in the business described it to me as carbohydrate television. You watch it ("consume" might be better) because it's there. After an hour or two you feel as if you've wasted your time, but what the hell. It probably hasn't done you much harm and if it leaves you feeling a bit bloated... well, you can search out a bit of quality stuff - a bit of protein to go with the carbohydrate.* Humphrys is right – this is trivialisation – the celebration of mediocrity. To give a flavour of how celebrity stories are dominating the press, here are four national newspaper front pages from last Monday [*holds up four newspapers*]. We have *The Sun* and *The Mirror* leading on Charlotte Church's spat with her lover, while the *Daily Express* has a front page split between Prince Harry and ex girlfriend Chelsy Davy on the one side, and Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles on the other; finally the *Daily Mail* has a half page promoting exclusive coverage of Piers Morgan's diary while the rest of the front page tells how the estranged wife of the missing Earl of Shaftesbury has been accused of his murder. It's just not very good journalism – these are front page stories which are meaningless. You could say, “Who cares? I can always go off and read the FT if I want serious news”. But I believe this is dangerous. It gives us a false sense of what our values should be. It's corrupting in that respect. Before we kick off the debate, I

would like to propose that ***celebrity culture is a negative influence on British life and society*** – who would agree and who would disagree?

A show of hands indicates that audience is divided roughly 50/50

Frank - Well, I know I sound like an old fart (and maybe I am one), but the audience may have been swayed by my rant. Camilla – maybe you'd like to say why it is you that we need all this celebrity coverage?

Camilla - We need celebrities in our daily life. We're isolated from our families, we work 50 or 60 hour weeks. Celebrities have come to be the glue that holds us together. We used to gossip about the village idiot and the neighbour who'd slept with a few too many men. Now we've got Jade Goody – she's the village idiot – and Abi Titmuss – she's the racy woman. They fulfil a role that we absolutely need in society. We all need to say, "did you see Charlotte Church on the front page this morning?" We can all relate to these stories. Jordan and Peter Andre are providing a public service.

Frank – Jo, is all publicity good publicity?

Jo – Certainly in terms of Celebdaq it is. We measure success on the amount of column inches celebrities have each week. The US stars are very good at controlling their coverage in the press – they only have stories in the papers when they're selling something.

Camilla – But not all publicity is good. Who buys a Michael Jackson record these days? Or anything by Gary Glitter?

Jo – Michael Jackson is the most expensive share on Celebdaq at the moment...

Andy – Thirty years ago all we had was Henry Cooper and Kevin Keegan selling Brut. Now celebrities are beginning to see themselves as branded properties – they are selling themselves as brands, developing their own intellectual property. These days celebrities surround themselves with marketing and image advisers – they want to see how long they can sustain their "celebrity-ness". We appear to be celebritising every aspect of our culture at the moment – we have celebrity chefs, celebrity decourators – and each one who fills a gap with us can earn as a celebrity in their own right. With the proliferation of media now, thirty years ago, if I wanted to get as much of Kevin Keegan as possible, I could maybe watch Match of the Day, I could read a football comic...I could buy some bubblegum cards...but that would be about it. Today, with all the television channels we have, I could probably plot a schedule where I could see David Beckham every hour, I could have his picture on my mobile phone, I could visit his website...it's completely different. There's a massive need for content out there and celebrities fill that content better than anyone.

Frank – What does the audience think? Is the cult of celebrity fulfilling some primordial need we all have?

Rebecca Johnson (London CBN) – It's just entertainment.

Sara Shamsavari (MA student) – I think it shows a shallowness in current life – people just want to look on the outside rather than within.

Frank – That’s a very Humphrys friendly idea...

Anna Mackenzie (Focus West) –I agree with what you said regarding the news agenda but then I subscribe to Popbitch and I can’t understand why on earth the BBC got rid of Liquid News...for me, it’s an endless internal dichotomy.

Frank – There does seem to be a new “spirituality” – but is that just because we’ve seen Madonna do yoga?

Camilla – We now have celebrity libel defendants with the winners of the McLibel case; we have the chef, Michael Roux...

Frank – and, possibly, Gordon Ramsey...so are these better role models?

Andy – Celebrities often use their fame for the greater good. Jamie Oliver (through *Jamie’s School Dinners*) has increased the budget allocated for school meals in Greenwich to a whopping 37p. He has given the area of school meals some authority. A star can use their celebrity for good or for bad.

Joseph Lampel (Cass Business School) – One of my Phd students, Nermeen Mustafa, has written a background paper to this event showing how Hollywood stars are used to launch products...Sharon Stone has stood up in Dallas and launched a whole political movement...such individuals can use their power in negative ways. Many of them are moving into areas where they have strong feelings but they don’t have expertise – George Michael speaking out against the recent war in Iraq, for example.

Frank – Andy, will we see the day when David Beckham becomes an ambassador for world peace?

Andy – Are celebrities famous for what they do or for the values they represent? When do their values begin to transcend what they’re doing and have the power to influence the way we think? In my opinion we’re all lazy and if we like people and trust their values, we can abdicate intellectual responsibility to them. Beckham is a great footballer who has a great affinity with children – he probably will end up setting up soccer clinics around the world, or something like that.

Frank – Jo, so why is Michael Jackson currently top of the Celebdaq ratings?

Jo – We’ve come to the stage where we no longer idolise our celebrities. We want to see them fall off their pedestals. We want to know that they’ve got cellulite...

Frank – Is this a trend that’s going to continue?

Peter Antonioni (University College London) – Two hundred years ago we had a cult of celebrity. It’s pretty basic, pretty human. The people of Rome were probably far more interested in some contemporary gladiator than the philosophy of the Stoics.

The mass media has intensified this natural foible. But Beckham will be remembered for the graffiti that's been written about him.

Haili McHugh (*News of The World*) – We live in a society where anybody can be a celebrity overnight. We've got real empathy with people like Charlotte Church and Britney Spears who've got the voices of angels but are not the innocent virgins they say they are.

Andy – Yes, we like our heroes to be flawed...

Frank – Is that true, Camilla?

Camilla – We're now seeing the gap between the image portrayed by a celebrity and their private life. With the marriage of Charles and Diana we were being sold this story and told to accept every bit of it. Now we don't want to believe anything. Maybe it's something to do with the collapse of deference. It's a weird twist...

William Higham (*Next Big Thing*) – Over the past few years we've had a kind of moral vacuum...we don't have religious leaders any more, for example. Now it's the Dave Pelzers of this world that we want - the flawed characters who've overcome trauma – "I've survived this, so you can, too".

Anna Bolladdio (*Wall To Wall TV*) – Thirty years ago it would have been Charles and Di...

Frank – Is there a Faustian Pact over who gets the media's attention? Is Max Clifford really in control?

Audience member – It's not the press's fault – it's what we want. There is a vacuum. We've had no war [on home soil] for so many years, we've developed an interest in the frivolous and inconsequential...

Ros Coward (*City University Postgraduate Centre for Journalism*) – How do we define "celebrity", and what are the perceived benefits that go with this status?

Camilla – It's hard to tell these days...

Andy – My simple definition of celebrity is "someone who is known by more than their immediate friends and family for something". The need for entertainment and gossip in the light of the collapse of the family is true. The aim of most celebrities is to make as much money as possible and then hopefully go on and do something good with that money.

Camilla – Are there any celebrities that purposely do something bad?

Anna Mackenzie (*Focus West*) – Jeffrey Archer...

Frank Kane – No, he was just a bad person who was already famous...Charles Manson could be a better example.

Jo Wilson – Maybe Michael Jackson? We'll see.

Audience member 2 – Celebrity has always been there but the mass media has raised all sorts of people – cooks etc – to celebrity status. We have choice overload and tremendous pressure on our time. Historically we've always trusted brands. Now brands are taking a step back and using celebrities as a sort of Trojan horse to get to the consumer.

Andy – Like Chesterfield Cigarettes did a long time ago by using Jane Wyman and Perry Mason...

Audience member 2 – As with brands, we're setting celebrities up and knocking them down. Transience is the most powerful thing these days. We chew them up and we spit them out. It used to be different with Rock Hudson, Gary Cooper et al. Only now after fifty years are we starting to chip away at those facades.

Andy – The modern celebrity is the manager of his own brand. They're asking, "why don't I cut out the middleman and start selling me direct to my public?" Celebrities are becoming aware that they are brands in their own right.

Audience member 2 – yes, a market-driven commodity...

Ros Coward (City University Postgraduate Centre for Journalism) – The fact that anyone can be a celebrity is a poignant point. Take McLibel for example: those people stood for something worthwhile – they had hardly any money, they suffered...it's not quite the same. The media's readiness to buy into it all and not make the distinction between people who are worthwhile and those who aren't, is a problem.

Camilla – I have to admit I agree - it is a junk food diet – we need to be pointed in the direction of more worthwhile things as well.

Anna Mackenzie (Focus West) – Who is really in control of what stories are printed? There's an incestuousness between the people who are pushing their brands and the people who are giving them the space to push those brands.

Frank – Yes, why is it that celebrities sell newspapers?

Andy – It's back to the content argument. The proliferation of media is driving the celebritisation of culture. Television creates reality shows which create celebrities which are then fed back in.

Camilla – It's an interesting fact that no one celebrity can sell a magazine any more – it used to be Victoria Beckham and a few others – but that's not possible today.

Martin Bartle (Net-a-porter) – Even 200 years ago there were celebrity chefs and celebrity litigants. The one's that stick in my throat are the ones that are famous for being famous. At least Jennifer Aniston's a leading American actress, that's ok. But Jade Goody...?

Camilla – Maybe being on TV and being able to be yourself is a talent in itself?

Martin Bartle – Tara Palmer Tomkinson is nothing new – rich heiresses have been in the media for years...

William Higham (Next Big Thing) – Isn't it good that council estate kids can have a role model too?

Liz McShane (JHP Design) – You get kids in school who just want to grow up and be famous – it's pointless and vacuous.

Haili McHugh (News of The World) – Yes, children in primary school want to be celebrities but being a celebrity can be a good thing.

Anna Bolladdio (Wall To Wall TV) – Sixty years ago we were all scared of the Germans so we aligned ourselves with Winston Churchill. Now we all want a Porsche and a nice house, it's Jade Goody.

Joseph Lampel (Cass Business School) – Who is Jade Goody?

Frank – I think Camilla is probably best-placed to explain...

Camilla – She was a *Big Brother* contestant who became famous for getting drunk and showing her "kebab".

Andy – Who knows what's possible? These people are now seeing that fame is a commodity and learning how to use it.

Audience Member 3 – Why is it ok to be interested in architects and chefs but not in Jade Goody – is this not all about class? Personally I find John Humphrys offensive. If we're going to make value judgements we should be explicit about it.

Martin Bartle (Net-a-porter) – There are plenty of working class icons but they're famous for doing something useful.

Andy – The heterogeneity of society today means that we don't have a *single* moral code/value/figure. We have a number of different celebrities who appeal to different groups of people. Just as brands have become segmented. It's a reflection of the way in which our society's developed.

Camilla - There's more variety in the media now than there ever has been – you can see that with the rise of blogging etc. We certainly have a big homogeneous mass media but there's lots of other stuff too.

Frank – Is fame different for men and women?

Jo – The press prefer women. With the Oscars it's always the women who get the attention – who's wearing what?

William Higham (Next Big Thing) – It's because women are doing the reading – they're the market.

Haili McHugh (News of The World) – the press is full of stereotypes. Jimmy "Five Bellies" Gardner is the typical boozy bloke. It's also misogynistic – women become famous for one thing – Ellen MacArthur [Round-the-World record-holding yachtswoman] is one exception.

Andy – We all want to find a connection...

Noam Sohachevsky (Mint Digital) – I think it's amazing that Beckham is seen to be some kind of ambassador but what about his alleged affair with Rebecca Loos? What about the kind of message that sends out to children?

Andy – Whatever we think about these things these celebrities are people and they're flawed. The world took a view of the Loos affair and shrugged its shoulders. An opinion poll in *The Guardian* about a month after the allegations broke found that most people liked Beckham even more than they did beforehand. He seemed fallible. There was sympathy for him. Most people blamed Victoria for the affair anyway. The Beckham brand emerged stronger.

Camilla – The Beckham brand has been damaged more because since he's been playing for Real Madrid he's been playing like shit.

Andy – There are three things people like most about Beckham – firstly, they like the fact he is dedicated; secondly they like his iconoclastic sense of style and, thirdly, they like the fact that maybe he doesn't sound that great when he speaks – that gives him some down-to-earthness.

Jo – And after all this, Rebecca Loos is now a celebrity in her own right.

Audience Member 4 – What about the pig?

Peter Antonioni (University College London) – This all detracts from serious issues.

Rebecca Johnson (London CBN) – What about the nature of the "Faustian Pact"?

Andy – It's not all easy for celebrities. It's very hard. They're under 24-hour surveillance...they have people rooting through their bins...

Frank – Sadly we have to wrap it up. But before we go, I'd like to see a show of hands again for the motion, "Celebrity culture is a negative influence on British life and society".

The show of hands is 25/75 in favour of the motion.

Our next Cass Creatives debate will be in June 2005 - topic tbc – please send ideas, comments and suggestions to creatives@interactiveknowhow.co.uk

