

# Twenty-First Century Celebrity

Fame In Digital Culture



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## Fame In Digital Culture

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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# PART I

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## CELEBRITY IN THEORY AND RESEARCH



## CELEBRITY STUDIES AND THE CHANGING MEDIA LANDSCAPE

*“There was no such thing as celebrity prior to the beginning of the twentieth century” (Schickel, 1985, p. 23).*

*“Celebrity must be understood as a modern phenomenon, a phenomenon of mass-circulation newspapers, TV, radio and film.” (Rojek, 2001, p. 16).*

If the phenomenon of celebrity is inextricably tied to cinema and television, what are we to make of celebrity in the twenty-first century? As I write, the number of Facebook members is starting to approach two billion—yes, almost a third of souls on the planet—and each month, various sources claim, over a billion people view video material on YouTube. Never mind the hundreds of millions of people using Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat every day. The media landscape has changed beyond all recognition in the last two decades: these are mass, global communication systems like none before, spawning their own cultures of fame, and generating ‘stars’ with, it is claimed (Sehdev, 2014), greater social influence over younger generations than the movie stars and pop singers of 20 or so years ago. PewDiePie, the most popular YouTuber, has 62 million subscribers to his various channels, and many others have attracted over 10 million. But are these influential individuals really *celebrities* in the twentieth century sense of the word? In this book, I will argue they are, but to claim this requires us to examine what we really mean by celebrity, and to develop

a concept of celebrity that is sensitive to cultural contexts, particularly in relation to their media landscapes.

The birth of ‘celebrity studies’ as an academic discipline is a thoroughly twenty-first century affair. When I produced my own early contribution to the literature, *Illusions of Immortality* (Giles, 2000), there was precious little academic literature to help me. Braudy had produced his exhaustive history of fame (Braudy, 1986), and, in a more sociological vein, there was Gamson’s analysis of American fame from Hollywood onwards (Gamson, 1994). Film scholars had for some time cultivated their own sub-field of ‘star studies’, where Dyer in particular blended a semiotic reading of star texts with a sociological analysis of their ideological significance (Dyer, 1979). But at the turn of the millennium, only Monaco’s (1978) *Celebrity* and Marshall’s (1997) *Celebrity and Power* had focused explicitly on the concept. In producing a psychological account of fame and celebrity, I was forced to take my ideas from biographies and press interviews by celebrities themselves.

Things took off rapidly after the turn of the century. Rojek published *Celebrity* (Rojek, 2001), and then came Turner’s *Understanding Celebrity* (Turner, 2004), followed by a slew of books and articles on the subject, culminating in the 2010 launch of the Routledge journal *Celebrity Studies*. This publication, and its associated biennial conference, have drawn together a wide international network of scholars from media, film, and television studies, right across the humanities and social sciences. There is plenty of contemporary writing on the subject. (For a comprehensive overview of the pre-*Celebrity Studies* literature, see Beer and Penfold-Mounce, 2010; see also Marshall and Redmond, 2015.)

Increasingly, scholars in the field are turning their critical gaze to the emergence of celebrity in digital media, with key studies on YouTube (García-Rapp, 2016; Smith, 2014 to cite just two), Instagram (Marwick, 2015), and Twitter (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Thomas, 2014; Kehrberg, 2015). Alice Marwick has argued that the digital explosion has brought about “two major changes in celebrity culture” (Marwick, 2016, p. 333): direct access to established celebrities via platforms like Twitter and the emergence of ‘micro-celebrity’, which is “a self-presentation technique in which people view themselves as a public persona to be consumed by others.” I will argue in this book that this second change has evolved rapidly as the social influence of digital media has spread across mainstream culture, with individuals who would have remained ‘micro’ celebrities now competing with, and surpassing, many traditional celebrities in popularity, especially as far as younger audiences are concerned.

In this opening chapter, I dig into the rapidly expanding academic literature to unearth some clues as to how we might understand the nature of celebrity in its contemporary form. Is celebrity really something that originated with cinema and broadcast media? What about the claim that the cultural conditions for celebrity emerged as far back as seventeenth century Restoration Theatre (Studlar, 2015)? Is there actually one single, unitary concept of celebrity that covers all periods, media cultures, and spheres of activity? Or is celebrity one of those words, like ‘community’ (Potter & Reicher, 1987), which can only be understood through the rhetorical force of its actual use, which may vary from moment to moment, even in the mouth of the same speaker? It would seem that the best place to start is to examine some definitions of the term.

#### DEFINING CELEBRITY

How has celebrity been defined by those who have studied it? One of the first things that becomes apparent when surveying the many and varied definitions in the literature is that no single definition has succeeded in accounting for all the individuals we habitually lump together under the term. As Driessens (2015) points out, we should at least be grateful for those writers who make the effort, but something is always missing.

#### Celebrity as Talk, Text or Sign

Luckhurst and Moody (2005, p. 1) begin their historical study of theatrical celebrity with these words: “Celebrity, the condition of being much talked about”. Definitions don’t come pithier than that, but clearly “being much talked about” is insufficient to capture all aspects of the phenomenon. For a start, who does the talking? Where? And exactly how much is required to create the condition of celebrity? Maybe Luckhurst and Moody are wise not to over-complicate matters. After all, researchers commonly adopt quantitative methods to ascertain just how famous a person is. In one study, van de Rijt, Shor, Ward, and Skiena (2013) amassed a corpus of names cited in various media and found that, across different domains, a subset of names enjoyed remarkable durability over time. It could be argued, alternatively, that these researchers were examining *fame* rather than celebrity *per se*.

The terms ‘fame’ and ‘celebrity’ are, more often than not, used interchangeably. In Giles (2000), I argued that they constitute two different phenomena. Fame is essentially a *social* process, by which individuals (or even their names) become well-known outside their immediate social circle. You can have fame in a school, or any organization; the Head Teacher is the usually the most famous individual in a school, followed by the class teachers (whose individual fame will vary for all sorts of reasons), but an individual student may, for whatever reason, eclipse the lot of them. Celebrity, I argued, is primarily a *cultural* phenomenon, which is why it has so often been associated with the media.

This brings us back to Luckhurst and Moody’s (2005) definition and the issue of *where* celebrities are talked about. “Modern celebrity,” argues Turner (2004, p. 8), “is a product of media representation,” and it is often assumed that, unlike fame more broadly, celebrity requires some form of mass communication, preferably an electronic one. But many authors are not content to see celebrity as simply a by-product of electronic media. As Gamson (1994, p. 16) argues, “the basic celebrity motifs of modern America were composed long before the development of mass cultural technologies”. Ultimately, it is the cultural formation brought about by mass representation that creates the conditions for celebrity to flourish, which enables such processes to take place as ‘celebritisation’ (the influence of celebrity on fields such as politics) and ‘celebrification’ (the process by which a private individual becomes a celebrity) (Driessens, 2013a).

The idea that celebrity transcends any specific medium or form of representation has led authors such as Marshall (1997, p. 52) towards a semiotic understanding of celebrity as both sign and text. This is ‘talk’ of a kind, but rather more complex and elusive than simply the citation of names in a newspaper. The semiotic definition allows us to cut across the various media in any time or place to see celebrity as a *discursive construction*, infused with various cultural and historical significations. If celebrity is, for example, “an extensive, industrialised, and inter-textual mode of gossip” (Goldsmith, 2009, p. 22), it can be said to perform essentially the same function for YouTubers like Zoella as for the Duke of Wellington in nineteenth century Britain.

But like Luckhurst and Moody’s talk-based definition, this broad brush-stroke doesn’t really identify the essential distinction between celebrities

and non-celebrities. Though it neatly describes the form that celebrity takes, at what point do all these signifiers produce celebrity for one person but only simple exposure for another? Perhaps it is not the amount of talk that goes on about them as much as the *nature* of that talk. Christine Geraghty (2000, p. 187) has argued that a celebrity is “someone whose fame rests overwhelmingly on what happens outside the sphere of their work, and who is famous for having a lifestyle”. This introduces a new dimension to the phenomenon: that of the ‘work’ the celebrity does. Rather than just being talked about, a celebrity needs to *do* something, whether or not it accords with our own particular work ethic.

This again, though, is only a partial definition because the nature of ‘sphere’ remains suitably vague. Geraghty is essentially talking about the distinction between a television personality, whom we always encounter in the workplace (the televisual sphere) and a sports performer like George Best who became a tabloid fixture long after his football career had nosedived. Would Best have become a celebrity in the first place were it not for his extraordinary skill in his sphere of work? And, in such a media-saturated, high-profile sport as football, does the sphere of work consist solely of the pitch, training ground, and changing room? The modern footballer, in high-definition close-up on regular live television, is also (in England in 2018 at least) a permanent fixture on Twitter.

Geraghty’s definition of celebrity makes it harder to fit to modern YouTubers and influencers, whose sphere of work is inseparable from their lifestyle. The same limitation applies also to many modern television personalities, such as the late Jade Goody, whose private and public performances, including her intensely scrutinised terminal illness, were acted out on the same stage (Bennett, 2011). Either these new forms of media representation constitute something new and different from celebrity, or we need to rethink some of the category boundaries we have placed around the concept.

### Celebrity as Lived Experience

Thinking about celebrities as *people* (rather than representations, signs or texts) who have jobs and lifestyles, we might favour definitions that emphasise its lived experience, such as Ferris’s (2010, p. 393) claim that celebrity is “the experience of being recognized by far more people than

one can recognize back”<sup>1</sup>. Ferris uses this definition to lay claim to the phenomenon of ‘local celebrity’ (celebrities who are famous only in a delimited geographical area), likening this to ‘subcultural celebrity’ (Hills, 2003), a category likewise constrained by shared (sub)cultural concerns. To these one could also add ‘micro-celebrity’, a term initially coined to describe the ‘webcam girl’ phenomenon of the mid-2000s (Senft, 2008) and later extended by Marwick (2013) and others to describe the limited fame of social media pioneers in the early Silicon Valley start-up scene.

On the whole, particularly in the emergent field of celebrity studies, the study of lived celebrity experience has not been the approach taken by researchers. It is undoubtedly the case that celebrities constitute a hard-to-access ‘elite’, yet it is still surprising so few scholars have engaged directly with the question of what it is like to be a celebrity. One exception to this is Rockwell and Giles (2009), where it rather helped that the first author (Donna Rockwell, a former media employee) had useful contacts in the entertainment industry. Our study of the phenomenology of fame identified several core elements, positive and negative, that best captured its lived experience: a loss of privacy, a sense of objectification (‘entitization’), increased expectations from life, the gratification of certain ‘ego needs’, and the sensation of symbolic immortality. One could argue that these personal events arise out of the ‘talk’ already identified as constructing celebrity for society as a whole and which apply, to varying degrees, to all figures from international megastars down to Ferris’s (2010) local celebrities.

Other definitions of celebrity have taken the watching audience, or ‘public’, as the focus. A kind of midway point is John Ellis’s term for celebrity as ‘being-in-public’ (Ellis, 2015, p. 355), which extends the phenomenological theme by referencing Heidegger’s concept of ‘being-in-the-world’. For Ellis, media provide a public stage for individuals to act on, and the celebrity of the individual is that aspect of their performance

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<sup>1</sup> This is a good example of my point earlier about fame and celebrity being used interchangeably because Ferris’s definition maps closely on to my own definition of fame. In a later study of localebrity, Williams (2016) discusses the operation of low-key stardom in geographically bound communities where even a familiar local tramp may be talked about as a (non-mediated) form of celebrity. This fits with the idea that celebrity is primarily a talk-based phenomenon, in which case media are simply convenient channels for that talk.

visible to the audience. Like Geraghty's (2000) definition, Ellis's is rooted in the distinction between film and television stardom, the latter being more 'public' because the performer is acting in person rather than interpreting a character and a script. He has a little trouble applying it to digital forms of celebrity, however, arguing that social media enable everyone to have a public existence, but that "this does not mean that we are all celebrities now" (Ellis, 2015, p. 357). Celebrity, he suggests, still requires "the confines of the mass media", meaning radio, press, and television, and that social media can only perform an ancillary role.

### Celebrity as Comparative Term

Ellis's differentiation between mass media and social media as two fundamentally different representational systems brings us to a central concern of this book. In chapter 2, I will develop a theoretical argument for treating social media first and foremost as media, but I want to turn briefly to sociological approaches that have defined celebrity in relation to its public status.

What constitutes 'the public', however, is no simple matter either. Rojek (2001, p. 9, his italics) has argued that celebrity is essentially about being "[tied] to a *public*" and how it involves "the attribution of glamorous or notorious status to an individual within the public sphere" (p. 10). So, this calls our attention towards another 'sphere', one that we all inhabit on a basis of inequality, certainly as far as glamour (or notoriety) is concerned. (These are, of course, those aspects of 'lifestyle' mentioned by Geraghty, but there is no sense in Rojek's definition of them being disassociated from the celebrity's sphere of work). The notion of the public sphere as a (mythical) place where celebrities become distinguished from 'ordinary people' is central to Couldry's (2003) theory of media rituals. The 'ritual media space' of traditional broadcast media allows these distinctions to be understood as 'natural', thereby reinforcing the essential powerlessness of the ordinary person.

Tolson (2015) has explored how this process operates in the promotional literature around media (in this case, television). Through a discursive analysis of terminology in *TV Times*, a British television listings magazine, he identified a trend whereby the preferred term for famous people on television shifted from 'personality' during the 1950s to 'celebrity' in

the 1960s. He argues that this arose out of the increasing use of ordinary members of the public in gameshows and other TV formats, and that this constitutes evidence for Couldry's thesis that in these types of ritual events, the celebrity/public boundary becomes salient. Other studies of the interactional dynamics in shows where ordinary people participate under the control of a media professional (e.g. a presenter) have revealed the subtle ways in which this boundary is reinforced (Giles, 2002a; Smith, 2010).

How might celebrity in contemporary digital culture be understood as a function of media rituals? YouTube celebrity could be seen as a continuation of the trend whereby genres like reality TV reinforce the symbolic boundaries between celebrities and ordinary people. On the other hand, it could be argued that the various strands of social media have broken open the ritual media space to an extent that 'populist' politicians like Donald Trump can use Twitter and other outlets to attack 'the establishment'. In later work, Couldry has argued that social media have created a different mythical space conceived as "the place where 'we' come together" (Couldry, 2015, p. 621). As I will go on to argue in the next chapter, the success of Trump and other (apparent) political 'outsiders' may result partly from the failure, on behalf of voters and the mainstream press, to perceive social media *as media*.

#### Towards a Material/Discursive Approach to Celebrity

To recap, there seem to be three broad trends in defining celebrity that derive from different epistemological, or possibly disciplinary, positions. One is that celebrity is defined in terms of how it is talked about (a discursive definition); a second is that it is defined by its impact on the individual celebrity (a psychological or phenomenological definition); a third is that it is defined in terms of its impact on the public (a broadly sociological definition). To these we could add, finally, a more differentiated type of definition, which is conditional upon *where* celebrity is talked about, which I will consider in more detail in the next section.

I have been rather loose in my application of terms like 'discourse' and 'discursive' throughout this chapter so far, but there is such a range of interpretations in the literature (much of it disciplinary-bound, it must be said) that I did not think any further elaboration would be helpful. However, the closest theoretical position that can be identified to this definition of

celebrity would probably be the ‘material/discursive’ approach of writers on psychological aspects of health and illness like Yardley (1996) and Ussher (1997). These authors see concepts like ‘anorexia’ and ‘depression’ as social constructions, existing primarily as language categories, meaningful only within a specific cultural/historical context. However, unlike purely relativist approaches to social construction (e.g., Edwards, Ashmore, and Potter, 1995), these concepts are acknowledged as material realities that constitute the lived, or ‘embodied’, experience of ‘distress’ for those individuals concerned. Applied to celebrity, the material/discursive approach enables us to treat it as simultaneously a discursive category applied to public (or famous) individuals *and* the condition of being-in-public (Ellis, 2015) for those individuals. It is this position that I will tend to favour throughout the remainder of the book. First, I want to try and disentangle one particularly thorny matter of terminology that has threatened the boundaries we place around the study of celebrity.

#### CELEBRITY VERSUS ‘STARDOM’

One of the biggest problems in developing theory around celebrity, as Driessens (2015) has pointed out, is that nobody can agree on exactly which people should be considered celebrities. Of course, different definitions of celebrity will inevitably throw up different exclusionary criteria. It is quite possible, for example, if employing a discursive definition of celebrity, to consider non-human figures as celebrities, such as animals and fictional characters (Giles, 2013a). Ones that are based on broad ideas about cultural formation that override the communication potential of different media allow us to go far back in history to the Romantic era (Mole, 2007) or further still (Luckhurst and Moody, 2005).

Even definitions of celebrity tied to twentieth century media, such as Schickel’s (1985), can generate debate around who is and who is not a celebrity. Is the President of the United States a celebrity? Donald Trump is indisputably a celebrity, having risen to fame as an entrepreneur and host of TV show *The Apprentice*, but Barack Obama? George W. Bush? Many authors attempt to put some meaningful distance between ‘public figures’ and celebrities, implying that the former are somehow necessary for society while the latter are an indulgence peculiar to post-industrial (or mediatised?) society (Boorstin, 1961; Friedman, 1999; Schickel, 1985).

But this overlooks the cult of personality that has developed around charismatic leader figures since Alexander, exploited most effectively of all in societies that ironically espouse a philosophy of collectivism, Stalin's Soviet Union and Mao's communist China, to cite but two spectacular examples (Edwards and Jeffreys, 2010; Pisch, 2016).

Even if we allow that politicians can be celebrities, we still need to differentiate between those politicians who are celebrities and those who are not, either because their fame is limited to their constituency (their sphere of work, perhaps), or because they have not (yet) acquired the degree of media representation that is the prerequisite of celebrity status. Street (2004, p. 449) has identified the 'celebrity politician' as one who "seeks to realise a form of political attractiveness through the gestures and images of popular culture". On the face of it, this would seem to fit with Geraghty's (2000) definition of celebrity, except that it ascribes an agentic role to the individual: for a politician, it suggests, celebrity is something that can be determined at will. But just how far do the "gestures and images of popular culture", for example appearing on stage with a rock group, take politicians from their sphere of work?

### Celebrity as Vulgar Modernity

The idea that we could divide politicians into pure, noble representatives of the people and shameless, vote-grabbing celebrity politicians introduces another dimension into our attempts to define celebrity: the idea that there is something vulgar, and possibly immoral, about celebrity. As Turner (2004, p. 4) and others have pointed out, the word 'celebrity' is frequently used in a pejorative sense to signify "a culture that privileges the momentary, the visual and the sensation over the enduring, the written, and the rational". In the same way that the 'celebritisation' of fields like politics and the arts is used synonymously with other pejorative terms like 'dumbing-down', so many people's lists of celebrities would differentiate individuals whose fame is seen as worthy or meritorious from those who are well-known largely through their visibility in various media. Such is the nature of probably the most famous definition of all that has been applied to celebrity, Daniel Boorstin's (1961, p. 58) claim that a celebrity is someone who is "well-known for their well-knownness". Ironically, it could be argued that the fame of this definition is largely down to its ubiquity rather than its saying anything profound about the phenomenon.

Boorstin's work, *The Image*, from which this quote is taken, was the first of many books, scholarly and popular, that have identified the emergence of broadcast media after World War II as a turning point in Western civilisation. Prior to this point, it is argued, individuals earned fame through performing great deeds, be they military, political, artistic or philanthropic; beyond this point, seemingly anyone can earn fame through appearing on television, being talked about in the newspapers, or, in the present century, making a noise on social media. There are some, and I think it is fair to include Braudy (1986) in this group, who find it difficult to credit this high media visibility with the word 'fame' at all. (In Braudy's conclusion he suggests that 'modern fame' is essentially a vulgar parody of historical fame.) For these authors (see also Postman, 1985; Schickel, 1985; Rein, Kotler, and Stoller, 1987), fame is historical, timeless, and worthy; celebrity is modern, ephemeral, and generally worthless.<sup>2</sup>

Quite clearly, this understanding of affairs relies on a media-centred definition of celebrity that rejects the claims of Mole (2007), and others who have located the emergence of the phenomenon in the Romantic period or before. Either these authors have simply identified a *celebrity-like* culture residing in limited contexts (such as the Restoration theatre), or fame itself might not be quite so lofty a status as imagined. Braudy's (1986) history of fame makes it quite clear that from ancient civilisation onwards, fame is essentially *amoral*. At various points in time, the goddess Fama is depicted with two trumpets: one for broadcasting noble deeds, the other for scurrilous gossip. Reputation has not always been well-earned. There is also a degree of randomness about the process by which great names become established: even an undisputed genius like J.S. Bach had to be 'discovered' (by Mendelssohn, who rewrote parts of the St. Matthew Passion to make it palatable to the early Romantic audience; see Boyd, 2000).

Then there is Hollywood. Cited as the moment when the publicity machine really assumed the form that it was to take throughout most of the twentieth century, much of the discourse and iconography around celebrity can easily be traced back to the myth-making practices of the inter-war

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<sup>2</sup> It is notable that these particular arguments were more prevalent in the 1980s, and are seldom voiced in serious literature today, particularly among scholars of celebrity. Perhaps one is unlikely to take up research in a field where one has such a poor opinion of the subject.

studios (Gamson, 1994). If, as Boorstin and others have argued, celebrity itself, in all its vulgar worthlessness, did not emerge until the advent of television, the birth of rock ‘n’ roll, and other allegedly debased cultural forms, what label should be applied to the famous pre-war Hollywood actors? The answer: *stars*.

### Stars and Star Studies

If celebrity studies is a twenty-first century discipline, ‘star studies’ has been in evidence since the 1970s. Dyer’s seminal (1979) work *Stars* is an obvious reference point here, but the disciplinary foundations had already been laid by Alberoni (1972) and Walker (1970)<sup>3</sup>. Dyer’s contribution was, through the application of a semiotic/discursive approach, to foreground film stars’ social and ideological function, arguing that they should not simply be understood in their filmic context but in their broader social context through their appearance in other media, such as magazines and billboard advertising. This approach enabled the study of stars to spread to other domains; to some extent, Dyer’s work acted as the cornerstone for Marshall’s (1997) broader study of celebrity.

Though most authors agree that the word ‘star’ was first applied to theatre actors in the 1820s (indeed Cavicchi, 2007, argues that it represents the moment that individual actors became renowned independently of acting troupes), film scholars have largely appropriated the term as the most appropriate label for movie actors. This is probably because the academic literature on stars has been developed in film studies and until recently has only been discussed further in relation to television. Scholars interested largely in film have tended to scoff at the idea that small screen performers might be accorded star status. Indeed, Bennett (2011, p. 15) describes film scholars’ beliefs about “the impossibility of television stardom” as a ‘mantra’ challenged by his own work and that of other television scholars (Jermyn, 2006).

What is so special about film actors that grants them an exclusive right to the star label? One argument is that film stars inhabit more than one identity; they perform as the characters they portray (in films) and as

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<sup>3</sup> see also King (1985) and DeCordova (1990); a useful recent overview of the field is Shingler’s (2012) *Star Studies: A Critical Guide*.

themselves (their representation in texts outside films). Therefore, their text has to be ‘read’ across more than one persona (Dyer, 1979). Television performers, typically thought of as the hosts or presenters of shows, only perform “as themselves” (Bennett, 2011). Even when they play a character, as in a soap, they are, as Butler (1991, p. 81) has argued, “practically treated as ciphers for the character”. One counter-argument here is that, particularly in the United States, television drama has increased in quality over the years to be placed on an equal footing with cinema, and its stars can no longer be relegated to the status of soap actors (Jermyn, 2006).

However, both these arguments hark back to the fame/celebrity distinction deriving from Boorstin and others, whereby stardom, like fame, is elevated to something earned through merit based on an aesthetic hierarchy of dramatic art. Dyer (1979, p. 185) concludes his work by arguing that analysis can only go so far to explain the “beauty and pleasure” he derives from his favourite performers. Indeed the word ‘star’ itself carries with it so many elitist associations (e.g. the performer who burns, shines, shimmers, and dazzles, and who is brought into being through other light sources, such as flashbulbs, silver screens, spotlights) that one can see why it would be clung on to as a metaphor in preference to the mucky, debased celebrity.

But what about those of us who derive beauty and pleasure from cultural products other than cinema? The star label is routinely applied to performers in popular music and sport though not politics or the arts. It is true that the intertextual representation of film actors prompts different questions about authenticity from those figures in other media, and because of the association between actors and the roles they perform, film star celebrity has different elements to the celebrity associated with being a ‘television personality’, such as a presenter. However, the elitism suggested by film scholars’ ownership of the star label is challenged by James Bennett (2011), who offers a powerful defence for the work of television performers to be seen as skill of a medium-specific kind (‘televsual skill’). I will return to this important work in later chapters, when exploring the specific skills of performers in digital media.

### Industrial Aspects of Celebrity

Ultimately, the distinction between stars and celebrities may not have anything to do with beauty and pleasure at all but with their terms of

employment. As Graeme Turner has observed, “when we conceptualise celebrity as something to be professionally managed, rather than discursively deconstructed, we think about it differently” (Turner, 2004, p. 136). The “narrative of discovery” (Ibid, p. 98) around stars is very much tied to the studio system of Hollywood and the idea that stars are ‘chosen’ (Shingler, 2012). A similar logic could be applied to popular music where, at least traditionally, record labels are usually accorded the power to select a handful of would-be stars from a potentially unlimited supply of talent. As with film, there is an expectation that the star is loyal to the company (while under contract, that is). Sport also operates within a similar structure of talent scouting, selection, and company (club) loyalty.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the term ‘star’ gets attached to these three domains much more readily than others, and that film, pop, and sport may be profitably contrasted with forms of celebrity that are rooted fundamentally in media representation: television’s personality system and that of the traditional press (newspaper/magazine). In these latter forms, the individuals concerned are relatively free-floating and autonomous and only temporarily (if at all) contracted to organisations like television companies. This distinction might offer a further explanation of the way different descriptive labels have evolved over time. As the media landscape becomes ever more fragmented in the present century, it would seem that ‘celebrity’ might be a more appropriate term than star for the popular figures it produces (although even here it could be argued that there are now talent and management agencies at work in media like YouTube to try and control the production of that medium’s own stars).

At the start of this section, I suggested that a discursive construction of celebrity enables us to consider all kinds of figures, from political leaders to animals, as celebrities. Like the professional management companies of film, pop, and sport, zoos operate their own star system in which certain individuals are ‘discovered’ (in the wild) and then offered up for the gaze of the adoring public. The star text around such figures as Knut the polar bear and Paul the clairvoyant octopus (Giles, 2013a) draws strongly from the discourse around celebrity while at the same time working to promote the zoo (or parent entertainment company) with which the star is under contract. If animals, lacking any obvious agentic power, can be constituted as stars and celebrities, this suggests that both concepts are ultimately a

matter of representation<sup>4</sup>. If we consider any system of representation, from coins, sculpture and painting through to electronic communication technologies, as a medium, we arrive at a definition of celebrity that includes famous individuals throughout history, human and non-human, in which the only unknown parameter is a quantitative one. How much (mediated) representation is required to render an individual famous or well-known?

The answer to this question depends entirely on the scale of interest. As Williams (2016) points out, even a familiar face in a village can attain a kind of 'localebrity' without any form of media representation beyond oral communication, but this means little to anyone outside that limited geographical area. One can define celebrity as contained by national boundaries or even regions, such as Flanders (the Flemish-speaking half of Belgium; van Gorp, 2014) where representation is restricted linguistically to the Flemish language press and broadcast media. Even on an international scale, the spread of any one celebrity's fame will be determined by common language and shared interest. Ultimately, then, any definitive list of celebrities will be shaped by the social and cultural context in which it is produced, but the pool of eligible names is wider than that conceived in most existing writing on the phenomenon.

#### THE MODERN DAY: WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THE DIGITAL ERA?

Having earlier worked up a material/discursive definition of celebrity that allows us to apply the term to anyone with sufficient media representation,

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, there are other non-human figures besides zoo animals that are discursively constituted as celebrities. The representation of Mickey Mouse and other cartoon characters in theme parks such as Disneyworld and Peppa Pig World draws widely on celebrity discourse, and here, Geraghty's (2000) definition might be usefully adapted by substituting the term 'primary text' for 'sphere of work'. So, even though a representation of Mickey Mouse in a clearly defined text like a film or comic can be seen as confined to the primary text, a physical representation of Mickey Mouse (at Disneyworld, say) draws on a discourse of celebrity, meeting some of the requirements for Rojek's (2001) definition of celebrity as "tied to a public". This distinction could also be applied to extra-textual representations of non-human figures, such as a story that was widely reported in the British media when the yellow glove puppet Sooty, familiar to UK television audiences since the 1950s, was said to have hospitalised celebrity magician Paul Daniels by hurling a hot pizza at him while filming a TV show (Telegraph, 2011).

the task that remains is to specify the contemporary media landscape in which twenty-first century celebrity is manifest. Most of this work will be done in chapter 2, but I am aware that, as with the interchangeable use of terms like ‘celebrity’ and ‘star’, there is a danger of underspecification when glibly drawing on terms like ‘the digital era’, ‘digital media’ (as opposed to traditional or broadcast media), or, worse, increasingly obsolescent terms like cyberspace.

The problem with rapid technological and cultural change is that any all-inclusive term that differentiates the *now* from the *then* faces imminent death the moment it zips off to the printers. I have little alternative but to pick a convenient term and stick with it. At the same time, media theorists will argue that the distinction between these terms is non-trivial. For example, the use of digital media as a way of distinguishing ‘new’, social media from ‘old’ broadcast media has been criticised because radio, television, and cinema have not simply been supplanted by new media and are now themselves fully digitized (see Bennett & Strange, 2011). As will be discussed shortly, my use of ‘digital’ is more a matter of history than of technology. The same argument can be applied to discursive concepts like ‘web 2.0’, which fall apart once unpacked as technological definitions (Allen, 2012) but nonetheless serve as convenient cultural milestones for describing how different things started being done with technology past a certain point in time.

The authors of a recent cross-cultural ethnographic investigation into social media admit that the term social media is unfortunate because, like the telephone and telegram in the last century, they do not regard phenomena like Facebook as media at all; they have reluctantly adopted the term simply because it is in current usage and is widely understood in the very diverse populations they study (Miller et al, 2016). While I do not agree with the researchers’ definitions of media (see chapter 2), I think this is a sensible position to adopt. One might even argue that the same is true of the word ‘celebrity’ as used in this book, and, indeed, much of celebrity studies.

So, to summarise, I use the term ‘the digital era’ to refer to the present century, during which all forms of media have necessarily become digitised to some extent; ‘digital media’ to differentiate contemporary media (including television, newspapers, and cinema) from broadcast media that are dependent on fixed schedules and limited scope for expanding beyond their primary texts; and ‘digital culture’ more broadly to describe the global cultural environment whereby anyone with access to the World Wide

Web can share, simultaneously, the same content irrespective of their geographical location (local censorship notwithstanding).

Given the above, I will argue that celebrity, as a form of representation tied in the last century to the 'discovery' narrative tied to the star systems of various artistic and media domains, is gradually shifting towards a system of representation that is more fluid and decentred, enabling different kinds of celebrity to emerge, with different relationships to their audiences. How these new kinds of celebrity are tied to emerging forms of media will be discussed in chapter 2. How they are tied to different kinds of audience, and the significance of their relationships with these audiences, is the concern of chapter 3.