

The celebritization of monarchy media essay



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Introduction

Celebrities are a staple of the media industry. From tabloids that promise ‘exclusive looks’ into their homes to television talk shows that offer audiences the chance to ‘get up close and personal’ with actors, singers and reality TV stars, today’s mediated world is awash with celebrity. Advances in media technology, the availability of 24-hour news and entertainment channels, as well as the advent of the Internet and social media, have meant that there is more celebrity available now than ever before, because there are more outlets — for both those seeking news about their idols or trying to be famous themselves (Ferris, 2010). Even in a seemingly ‘democratized’ media such as social networking sites, the brightest stars are still traditional celebrities – 9 out of the top 10 Twitter accounts with the most number of followers are pop stars and actors. Only US president Barack Obama is the non-celebrity in the top 10 list, although it has been argued that his image in popular culture is certainly reminiscent to that of a celebrity – which was both a blessing and a curse during his 2008 presidential campaign (Alexander, 2010a).

It is easy to take for granted the fact that celebrities are in the public eye because they are famous; most tend to forget that celebrities are not born – they are created. Through careful management of images, on-air and off-air personas, a celebrity can be manufactured out of virtually anyone (Turner, 2004). Indeed, the boom in reality TV content, which gave “ordinary” people a chance to be famous, and the popularity of “manufactured” pop stars who are auditioned, recruited, and moulded specifically to appeal to the masses, seem to prove that it is the image that is celebrated, not the person (Turner,

2004). Boorstin (1961) described a celebrity as “ a person who is known for his well-knownness ... a human pseudo-event”. Some researchers have suggested that the adoration of celebrities as role models are a normal part of identity development (e. g., Giles & Maltby, 2004; Yue & Cheung, 2000; cited in Swami et al., 2011). In other words, society needs celebrities in order to learn about ourselves, and needless to say, celebrities need an adoring public, without whom they would not exist.

Some researchers have called this relationship a “ celebrity-worship” culture, proposing that a psychological absorption with a celebrity results in a heightened sense of reality of the idolized celebrity, which leads to an addiction on the fan’s part to maintain a sense of connectedness (McCutcheon et al., 2002). One researcher even drew a comparison between modern society’s celebrities and the wooden totems and masks of primitive cultures, both of which sustain meaning, ritual, and solidarity (Alexander, 2010). Celebrities, then, are the “ most powerful icons of our time” (Alexander, 2010).

What is it that makes a celebrity? Ferris (2010) offers four aspects of the persona’s relationship with fans or outsiders that characterize celebrity in contemporary society; the first of which is widespread recognizability – meaning, you would be able to recognize George Clooney out of a crowd. The second aspect is relational asymmetry, whereby fans get to know celebrities through films or television, but it is a one-sided intimacy, as the celebrities themselves have no equivalent knowledge of fans, and few avenues through which to obtain it (Ferris, 2010). This contributes to the lack of conventional mutuality and lack of physical co-presence, where the

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celebrities and fans do not occupy the same space, making rare encounters and celebrity sightings a special moment, almost as if making contact with the divine (Alexander, 2010).

The same could be said of monarchies; far more than “ordinary” celebrities, royal families live in a different world, inaccessible by the public, and the chance to meet them is a once-in-a-lifetime event riddled with special protocols. Even the world’s most prominent politicians have fumbled when meeting the Queen – gaffs which ultimately make it to the news as items of, at worst, ridicule and humiliation, and at best, a surprisingly generous gesture on the Queen’s part, as in the case of Michelle Obama’s infamous break of protocol by hugging the Queen (Thornton, 2012).

In this paper, we explore the relationship between the British royal family and the media. We argue that both the technological advances in news production and consumption as well as society’s evolving appetite for celebrity news have shaped the treatment and coverage of the British monarchy, likening them to “celebrities” in the media. Drawing from relevant cases at specific points in history, we explore the role of the media, the public, and the royal family themselves in the creation of an iconic institution.

Utilizing the media

The modern monarchy’s relationship with the media has always been a delicate one (Baldini, 2012). In 1952, the BBC – then a monopoly broadcaster in Britain – approached the palace for permission to broadcast the coronation ceremony of Queen Elizabeth II. Against the advice of Prime Minister Winston

Churchill and the church, who felt that inviting cameras (and the public) to watch the ceremony would “ make profane an otherwise sacred event” (Turnock, 2005), the Queen agreed that it was important for the event to be televised.

The coronation ceremony, the first royal event to be broadcast live, became a defining moment in the development of British broadcasting (Turnock, 2005). 20 million Britons watched the ceremony on TV (Hastings, 2012), and this single event has been credited for the sharp increase in televisions owned in Britain - 2.1 million in 1953 from 1.4 million the year before. It was the first time in history that the masses witnessed this traditionally sacred and secret event, bridging the gap between the public and the distant palace.

Future evolutions in the media landscape - such as the emergence of tabloids and paparazzi culture, social media and the Internet - would further blur the line between the masses and the “ sacred” world of royals, but it was Queen Elizabeth II’s foresight in making the event accessible to the public that endeared her to them as their new ruler (Hastings, 2012).

It would be impossible to guess the Queen’s true intentions at the time, but her insistence that cameras be present at Westminster Abbey signaled a motive to be in the “ spotlight”, and demonstrated an understanding that the position of the royal family depends on public support - which, in turn, depends on public access. She, above all, understood that modern monarchs “ will be judged for who they are, not what they do” (Hastings, 2012). From the framework of Gramsci’s hegemonic dominance theory, the event can be

seen as a stealthy assertion of power – rather than being imposed from above, hegemony involves the active seeking of consent from ordinary people to “comply with their own subordination” (Duffett, 2004).

Furthermore, the use of television to bring the coronation event into people’s homes via television can be viewed as a deliberate strategy to infiltrate people’s everyday lives, as hegemonic leadership has to operate on the “terrain of common sense and in the seemingly apolitical marshlands of popular culture” (Duffett, 2004).

Breaking into the media

The Queen’s understanding of the media’s power to shape public opinion can be supported by the change in the British monarchy’s “royal persona” over the years, as evident with the changing appeals in its representation – from being a distant, imperious body to a lighter, brighter, more accessible dynasty, whose palaces could be toured via holiday packages, exploits reported freely and lives documented glossily on cinema and TV (Times of India, 2012).

In her 60-year reign, the Queen has been the single most visually recorded human being in history (The Art Newspaper, 2012). Since her ascension to the throne in 1952, millions of images have been captured of her, but it was the media expansion of the 1920s and 1930s that helped to shape the public’s demand and subsequent reception of these images. The era’s media expansion saw the rapid increase of the public’s demand for the personal lives of film stars and celebrities (Fraser & Brown, 2002), which launched “fame” as a commodity in itself, manufactured and distributed by media professionals (Fame, 1931, p. 450). Instead of a byproduct of film and music,

fame became an industry, which Lippmann (1960) regarded as an “ engine of publicity such as the world has never known before” (Fraser & Brown, 2002).

The BBC has arguably played a critical role in maintaining the image of the royal family in the public sphere, while keeping a respectful distance. When it was a monopoly and public broadcaster in 1945, news was the staple programming and the BBC aimed to ‘ carry into the greatest number of homes everything that was best in every department of human knowledge’ (Clayton, 2010). The prevalent media ideology was to educate rather than attract the highest level of viewership. The launch of commercial television and radio meant selling advertising space and hence, attaining more viewership. This was seen by many as the point in time when mass media led to the ‘ dumbing down’ or ‘ sexing up’ of news and entertainment to increase their viewership.

Moulding celebrity

Media has been instrumental in the changing “ royal persona” from its 1945 aura of mystique and detachment when it connected with the masses only during public events or Christmas Day broadcast to imparting them with a celebrity status, with paparazzi following their every move and the public eagerly consuming news that surrounds them. The public’s need to look to the royal family as celebrities can be traced back to the enduring themes of heroes in folklore; all cultures have narratives that articulate larger-than-life personas, and today’s stars and idols are a similar narrative of dynasties and gods, kings and heroes (Dale, 2001). Heroes, however, are “ moral” characters who reach for a higher calling or defeat a villain in defense of his

country. Celebrities are amoral; “ normal” rules do not apply, and behaviour usually shunned by normal people in our lives is accepted as evidence that celebrities are not ordinary people (Campbell, 1998). Despite this clear distinction, people develop psychological bonds with both heroes and celebrities and seek to emulate their lives (Campbell, 1998, p. 127).

Nevertheless, one can't but ignore the fact that World Wars brought a large degree of social leveling, leading to apparent changes in the social dynamics of the authority figures such as the British royals family. They had to adapt from being powerful, elite and detached from the public to maintain the authority of being the rulers to connect with them socially with the change in the political power it enjoyed. Owing to their collective sacrifice, ordinary people began to feel entitled to things which had been the preserve of their 'betters' in previous generations (Clayton, 2010). Therefore, the changing media atmosphere dictated by commercialisation led them to focus on providing the masses escapist fare with their keen interest in “ celebrity” stories and the socio-political changes adapted by the monarchy guided the persona of the British monarchy.

Documenting royalty

In his article ' Television and the Decline of Deference', Clayton (2010) cites examples that support the fact that media have been creating both a respectful as well as critical image of the royal family. Some documentaries that showed royals in deferential light are the 2007 BBC documentary Monarchy: The Royal Family at Work; the 2008 ITV documentary on the Duke of Edinburgh and the hit film The Queen (2006), which showed the Queen in a very good light in her actions immediately following the death of Diana, <https://assignbuster.com/the-celebritization-of-monarchy-media-essay/>

Princess of Wales (Clayton, 2010). Some other documentaries which have been critical of the royal family include the *The Royal Family* (1969), which attempted to show the royals in an informal setting to boost their popularity with the British public. A further notorious example was *It's A Royal Knockout* in 1987. The show, which involved Prince Edward, Princess Anne and Prince Andrew running around obstacle courses in costumes, was largely designed to help Prince Edward establish a career in television. The show was a “public relations disaster” which lowered the dignity of the royals in the eyes of the public (Clayton, 2010).

Above all, the divorce and scandals that surrounded Prince Charles and Diana, Princess of Wales, and Prince Andrew and Sarah Ferguson in the mid-1990s marked a watershed in the treatment of the royal family. The intrusion of the media coupled with people’s interest in the British royals and the Monarchy’s willingness to enjoy “celebrity status” has shaped the public opinion in terms of awe, affection, love, respect, empathy or despair towards the royals.

Private to public

The marriage of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer was an inevitably public affair from the beginning. The young and beautiful Lady Diana, who rose from obscurity to capture the heart of a prince, captivated the nation – who identified with her humble background as a kindergarten teacher and saw her as one of their own (Pillow & Cassill, 2001). The royal wedding – a rare enough event – became a media spectacle; it was a wedding “made for television, and television knew it” (Castro & Cronin, 1981). 28 million people watched the televised wedding in Britain, along with 750 million viewers in

61 countries across the globe. Media coverage of the wedding emphasized its “ Cinderella quality” (Kirby & Sorensen, 2010), with a notable difference between British (which tended to be more “ stately”) and American media, which was more “ up close and personal” (Castro & Cronin, 1981).

The wedding captured front-page headlines around the world; the Times of London published a colour photograph of the royal couple as a souvenir front, and The Economist printed its news pages in colour for the first time in its 138-year history. Even the highest circulating newspaper in the world at the time, Japan’s Yomiuri Shimbun (circulation 8 million), deemed the wedding story important enough to rush in a color photo midway through its evening press run (Castro & Cronin, 1981).

Although these figures and anecdotes are impressive, it is doubted whether the wedding of Charles and Diana attracted such media coverage because there was public demand for it, or if the media’s treatment of the event that pushed the news into a global spectacle. The media environment was, after all, far less cluttered in 1981, and cable television reached fewer than 25% of all households. With the majority of people only having access to five or six channels to choose from, and all the networks covering the wedding, “ it became one of the last events that saw everyone tune in at the same time” (Thomson, quoted in Kirby & Sorensen, 2010).

Likewise, a relatively clutter-free media environment could have been responsible for the creation and public acceptance of Princess Diana’s image as a global icon. Diana was one of the world’s famous media personalities, and her celebrity status was a result of people following her life story all

around the world (Pujik, 2009). She was often hounded by the media, and the public loved her, nevertheless to the say, the media followed her everywhere she went and reported what she what she wore, said or was doing. The publics considered here as one of them. Her image of not being “ too royal, nor “ too ordinary”, but royal and ordinary, was loved by the public (Thomas,. 2008).

Shared grief

Diana’s death turned the public against paparazzi because they were believed to have played a part in her accident; at the same time, the public was ‘ united in grief’ and Diana’s image was immortalized. Mendelson (2007) stated that the “ subsequent handwringing by members of the press, the public and governments” after the death of Diana was drew tension between paparazzi and celebrities, causing heightened tension between celebrities and their right to privacy.

For many, it was like losing a member of their family. In fact, many believed they knew the Princess better than anyone else in their lives. It is quite ironic how the entire world was mourning over the pictures that were clicked by the same paparazzi which they had criticized. Did the media have a set agenda behind this? According to agenda setting theory, the mass news media have a large influence on audiences by their choice of what stories to consider newsworthy and how much prominence and space to give them (McCombs, et al., 1972). As in the case of the Diana’s death, the mass media had a large influence on shaping the opinion of the audiences by continuously feeding them with reports of the sudden death of Diana. The media reaction to the Diana’s death was unprecedented in its intensity and

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scale, a 'flashpoint' in recent global media history in which the concerns of national and international media were united (Turner et al., 2000: 6). But the press argued that it was merely their duty to reflect what the public felt. As Merrin (1999) wrote, "they were 'caught out' by the outpouring of public grief at Diana's death and so quickly devoted themselves to reflecting the mood of the nation" (Merrin, 1999). Here we can see that McLuhan's theory of the media as the message (1962) holds through, since the very fact that the media was so clearly present in those times reflected the event's significance.

It has been also been argued that with regard to such 'media events', the public had – to a greater or lesser extent – been conditioned to 'learn' their reaction from the media (Dayan & Katz, 1992; Linenthal, 2001). The British media gave the death of Diana so much prominence that it turned out to be extremely newsworthy. The coverage was so exaggerated that it even was the extent of crowding out the death of another newsworthy personality – Mother Theresa.

The media continuously ran stories about the universal grief and how they loved Diana. The views of people who did not share the same opinion were not aired by the media. There were many who raised questions in the public, and were in turn harassed. For those who felt coolly towards Diana, it was prudent to simply keep silent (Black & Smith, 1999; Smith, P., & Riley, A. 2011). During Diana's funeral, it was reported that the whole world was watching, and mourned "like they mourned the loss of a family member or friend" (Brown, et. al. 2003).

Noelle Neumann's (1993, 1984) theory of spiral of silence can be critically applied here to how public opinion was moulded with the persona created around Princesses Diana, her private life, her wedding to Charles, her celebrity status, her children, her divorce, her death and coupled with agenda setting people framed opinion based on the Media's agenda and those who didn't agree to the media framing tended to remain silent.

Breaking down barriers

Zelizer (1991) states that the media plays an important role in breaking down the boundaries between the private and public world. Since " people interpret, discuss, and react to what they see," it can be argued that the media works as a two-way channel in the dissemination of information. In the earlier studies of Diana's wedding and television viewing, a public sphere, as stated by Zelizer, stems from a sense of " connectiveness" among the public. " Audiences organize around media events in a strategic and directed fashion that allows them to connect effectively with others... The result is an intrusion of the public sphere into the private domain" (Zelizer, 1991).

Embracing the media in its totality, the royal wedding of Prince William and Katherine Middleton echoed the spectacle of Prince Charles and Lady Diana in 1981, involving over 8, 000 reporting staff, broadcasting the event live worldwide. The Guardian reported, ' More than 36 studios, for broadcasters including the BBC, Sky News, ABC, NBC, CBS and Al-Jazeera, are housed in the three-storey structure, with outside broadcast vans and other equipment taking up so much space that part of Green Park has been closed to the public' (The Guardian, April 28, 2011).

Since the media today have to operate on a business model, the media took advantage of this event as a means for revenue. The Huffington Post reported that the couple's "uber celebrity-royal status have created a stir on the Internet and social networking sites which boosted ad revenue for online news organizations." (The Huffington Post, 11 March, 2011). The article further stated that 'advertisers started calling to reserve space on the website for April 29 "within a nanosecond" of the wedding date being announced.' Thus, it could be argued that in some ways, the media too benefited from the grand occasion and celebritization of the royals.

While the hype was generated by the media, social media played a large role this time round, with the general public feeding themselves with information shared over social networking sites. An analysis of social media mentions around the Royal Wedding revealed that there were over 200,000 mentions of 'Royal Wedding' on April 27, two days before the wedding day. This increase of 1,215% mentions from the month before demonstrated that the public was indeed excited about the upcoming event (Radwanick, 2011). On the day itself, CNN reported 300 tweets with the Royal Wedding hashtag per second (CNN, April 29, 2011). The wedding was an event without borders, and anyone with a phone in their pockets could participate - which was the crucial difference to the 1981 royal wedding. The existence of Facebook, YouTube and Twitter blew the event up in scale, larger than was ever expected. Bruns' (2012) visualization of Twitter activity on the day of the wedding showed a sharp increase in the number of original tweets at specific points of the ceremony. The most significant spike of the day occurred at around 12:30pm - the minute of the newlyweds' first kiss on the balcony of

Buckingham Palace. It was as if the world “ let out a communal ‘ awww...’ at that very moment” (Bruns, 2012).

At a time when the UK was in economic recession, lavish public affairs funded by taxpayers was feared to cause public uproar (Dalrymple, 2011) – the Queen had called off the palace’s Christmas celebrations the year before in sensitivity to public sentiment (McVeigh, 2011). However, as the royal wedding prompted some parties to question the need for a monarchy and expensive events funded by taxpayers (Hastings, 2012), as demonstrated by social media, others were more than happy to participate in the media spectacle that it became.

Latching on to this idea of celebrity, fashion played a big role in grappling the interest of the public. While many watched the event for its significance, there were a few different angles in which the wedding was featured. The event that saw Hollywood celebrities arriving in style was almost a fashion event in itself. Even news websites got into the action; The Telegraph Online showcased the wedding dress, with headlines using words like “ secret dress” to hype up the wedding gown, as well as mentions of her guests’ hats, which became an icon of the wedding (fashion. telegraph. co. uk).

Changing with the times

In the ultimate signal of progression with the times, the Queen is even present on social media with a specially-made Facebook page called “ The British Monarchy”. While users cannot “ poke” the Queen or send her “ friend requests”, they can “ like” the page and become fans of the Queen. The Queen also launched a Flickr account, making more than 600 photographs of

the Royal Family at work and play available to the public for the first time. A Royal Twitter account was launched in 2009 and Royal Channel went live on YouTube in 2007. The Queen also “podcast” her first Christmas Day message in 2006, and launched a website for herself and other members of the Royal Family in 1997.

According to the Times of India published on June 5, 2012, the British Monarchy once reigned supreme as the head of the colonial rule extracting revenue which has now become the modern day revenue-earning machines. The transition is not a result of revolutions but evolution of the British Monarchy especially the ‘Persona’ of the Queen. Post World War II, the monarchy understood that a cult of celebrity was fascinating the people across the globe but it was only available democratically to millions of those who were interested in reading about the lives of the celebrities or watching Hollywood. This sparked a change in the appeal and aura of the British Royal ‘Persona’ and one could visibly see the domineering image giving way to the friendlier dynasty which could be documented on cinema and TV. There was a time in the history when this ‘normalization’ seemed under threat with the tragic end of Princess Diana – the ‘People’s Princess’ when the Royals were criticised for their coldness. But, Diana provided the ‘Persona’ with the right amount of sadness that is required of the celebrity cult. The 60th anniversary celebration of the Queen’s reign is a splendid example of the social and cultural status enjoyed by the Monarchy as the event was marked by millions of ‘Celebrity’ fans lining the banks of the Thames to catch a glimpse of the royal flotilla sailing past.

Conclusion

While medieval societies viewed and accepted the top hierarchal position of royal families as ordained by God, modern society values individualism and an “unprecedented mobility” whereby people are no longer necessarily defined by their birthright (Handler, 1986).

In a modern constitutional monarchy such as the United Kingdom, where governments are democratically elected and economic influence lies with mega-corporations rather than a handful of elite individuals, the role of royal families, too, has evolved to a more symbolic role of nationhood sovereignty rather than actual power (Duffett, 2004). Even the British monarchy, at one time commanding vast armies to colonize distant lands, has seen its political power dwindle – a centuries-long process during which the Crown “ceded power to government to ensure its own survival” (Duffett, 2004). For the House of Windsor, public support is vital to remain relevant in a society that is no longer convinced that people are born into certain roles, or that God’s will ordains the very need for an aristocracy.

The royal family, then, can be said to have a “motive” for being in the limelight; it needs to remain influential – culturally and socially, even if limited politically – in the public’s eyes. Celebrity is the new royalty, and royalty needs to keep up. Unlike celebrities as defined in the introduction, whose motives of fame are usually preceded by the motivation of selling CD’s, merchandise or personal brand, a royal is born in the limelight – and remains there for the rest of his or her life – with nothing to sell but the idea that his or her place, power and privileges in society is valid.

Similarly, the media can be said to be imposing its influence in shaping public opinion in its “celebritization” of the royal family. A normalization of hegemonic dominance is established (Duffett, 2004), and the status quo is maintained. Beyond the media’s profit-driven motives and prevalent belief that anything celebrity-related sells, is the rather sinister notion of keeping the public subordinated. Support for the monarchy, Duffett (2004) writes, implies consent for a national constitution that ensures people are governed in a particular way: “by a hypercentralized state, as subjects not citizens, and, ultimately, through rule rather than total democracy. It also implies agreement that wealth and privilege should be distributed on the basis of birth rather than need, and that tradition is an acceptable reason for social inequality.”

Ultimately, the eager consumers of news surrounding the royal family – and the citizens willingly accepting the role of the monarchy – are the public, for whom the media and monarchy supposedly serve, and without whom the media and monarchy collapse. In 2008, Nepal’s 238-year-old monarchy faced the threat of being redundant and ousted in a contemporary society equipped with 24-hour mass media and an increasingly urban, literate and middle class population (Baltutis, 2011). Attempting to consolidate his loosening grip on national power, King Gyanendra and the royal government raised highly visible billboards as propagandistic advertisements (Baltutis, 2011). These proved to be unsuccessful, demonstrating that even with significant ruling power and an international media blackout – King Gyanendra had banned international communication in 2005 – an unwilling public will not tolerate a redundant monarchy.