

# Is celebrity obsession destroying our society



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The pedestal on which we have put movie stars, sports figures, and famous people could give some people neck strain. We idolize them, follow their every move, and treat them as modern gods. There is a giant media subculture around the cult of personality. Gossip and news about the rich and famous is big business. Magazines like People and Us Weekly, TV shows like Access Hollywood and Entertainment Tonight, and a long list of blogs such as Gossip Girl, TMZ. Com, and Perez Hilton have captured our imagination. More specifically, the celebrities on which they report have.

These days, there are more celebrity magazines than real news mags in the United States. Simply go to a grocery store to see how obsessed America is with our neo-royalty. In our culture, celebrity news often takes the headlines above world events. We build them up as modern gods, and tear them down when they show us they are all too human. They make an easy object of obsession, as celebrities are ubiquitous. And the paparazzi have helped this craze by blurring the line between private citizens and public persona. When Princess Diana died, it was in a high speed getaway to escape reporter/stalkers.

French courts ruled that photographers were not responsible for her death, but it clearly drives home the point: Our obsession with the rich and famous has a cost on us, and on them. Fascination with the famous seems to be a human phenomenon that goes as far back as recorded history. In ancient Greece and Rome, people created their gods as very human-like beings, complete with character flaws and drama. Through the Middle Ages, the celebrities were royalty and nobility. When Madame Tussaud opened her

wax museum in 1835, it was a huge hit, with people lining up simply to look at the visages of famous people.

Humans are captivated by those they see as glamorous. We build up myths about humanized images, or people, and then observe their every move, looking to expose every shred of humanity inside them. Many studies have been done on the obsession people have with celebrities, and some interesting conclusions are bubbling up. There is even a name for the affliction, "Celebrity Worship Syndrome". In our modern culture, celebrities are like gods, and the issue of fame, hero worship, and voyeuristic tendencies to watch their lives is a fascinating, if still lightly explored, subject.

It is perfectly human to compare ourselves to others, and modern celebrity worship is the perfect forum for this behavior. Consumption of media is no small activity in the U. S. , and TV, movies, and the Internet are dominant fixtures in our lives. Celebrities come into our homes regularly, and share parts of our lives with us. They are often with us at dinner, talking to us in the background of our home lives, and sometimes they tuck us in as we drift off to sleep. When they take on such a powerful role in daily life, we feel connected to them, and thus we want to know about their lives in the same way we would a close friend.

We begin to relate to them as friends, even though we have never met them. There's a circular logic to the cult of personality. It has become hard to tell if the media is simply giving us what we want, or if we are blindly consuming the information they give us. Search engine rankings consistently show

celebrities near the top of the list of top search terms. We are clearly obsessed with famous people. There's a real escapism to it. Instead of the world of inflation, job losses and rising debt, we can turn our attention to someone else, often to feel better about ourselves in the process.

Schadenfreude is defined as pleasure taken from observing the misery of another. We follow the trials and tribulations of the rich and famous as they fall from grace, sometimes hoping they overcome, and more often casting judgment upon them, measuring our own lives against theirs. We watch with morbid fascination as our modern gods and goddesses go bankrupt, have their relationships fall apart, and succumb to drug abuse. When we tune in to the latest celebrity plight, it's easy to grab a secret joy from seeing their misery.

Look at Britney Spears.

This former Mouseketeer went from teen sensation to having a real life Jerry Springer play out. Although to those of us watching, it isn't any different than any reality TV program. We get to feel the joy of knowing that no one is following us around, and parading our marriages and personal issues for everyone to see. We get the relief of knowing we won't be harassed in grocery stores, and have our garbage filtered through. In those moments, these neo-gods become human to us. And when they are no better than we are, we see that the price of fame may not be worth the price, and find a satisfaction with our ordinary lives.

Dr. Drew Pinsky, host of Celebrity Rehab and Loveline, says, " We deify people, and then tend to scapegoat them. Nobody is immune from our desire  
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to scapegoat. Underneath that, ultimately, is a deep acting out of a common feeling of which we seem to have an excessive burden these days: envy. "

Cary Tennis replied to a letter about celebrity obsession in a 2006 issue of Salon, saying, " I figure that the ancient Greeks and Romans regarded their gods and goddesses much as we regard our film stars the obsession with celebrities is an act of primitive cultural innocence.

It is natural for us to be transfixed by these characters because we are thirsty for magic" So what is the magic we are hungering for? What has us transfixed by these larger than life figures? James Houran, Ph. D. , is a relationship expert and co-author of *Celebrity Worshipers: Inside the Minds of Stargazers*. He opined: " When we see people looking perfect and glamorous on TV, we may think they have a perfect life. Money, influence, and nice things often equate to joy for people, and we forget that there is a price associated with all of that."

We become intoxicated by the clout they have. Who wouldn't want to walk into any fancy restaurant and get seated immediately, or have the velvet rope at an exclusive club opened when they walk up? The world of famous people is surreal to the rest of us. Fancy beach houses, lots of cars, red carpet walks, private jets, high fashion, it all seems like a life we would love to have. Beyond our motives or opinions, some people follow the lives of their imaginary friends closer than the ones in their real lives, sometimes to the point of obsession.

We track their social circles, and their personal victories and failures become a central topic of conversation. Of the social element, Dr. Charlotte De

Backer of the University of Leicester, Department of Media and Communication, concluded in a study, " Living in scattered societies, we often don't know who to talk about with the many people we know, and celebrities can act as our mutual friends and acquaintances. " Celebrities are a common bond between us. Like sports and world news, they are a social reference point we can use to relate to others, giving us a sense that we are all living in the same world.

The quest for fame is nothing new. Achilles, the Greek hero, performed his amazing deeds for glory, as did Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great. How deeply does the quest for fame influence people's drive? Are people seeking fame simply to be known in a world that is rapidly getting smaller, while the population explosion continues? Could this be a manifestation of the human need to be noticed? Perhaps fame has become an end to itself. Some people are famous simply because people know who they are, the same phenomenon that drives popularity contests in high schools.

One need look no farther than reality television or game show winners to see this play out. Jake Halpern, author of the book, *Fame Junkies: The Hidden Truths Behind America's Favorite Addiction* suggests, " Kids see fame as a cure-all for problems. " And why wouldn't they? In culture-filled viral videos, young people today see fame as something that's achievable for everyone, even if, like Joe the Plumber, it's a brief flash. All it takes is one headline, and anyone can have a book deal, or be a movie of the week.

When Andy Warhol said, " In the future everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes," he may not have known how accurate his prediction would

become for our society. We grab onto the newest craze, idea, or person, then promptly discard it when we become bored, or the next flavor-of-the-week arrives. And what is the price of fame? In reality, their lives are as messy as everyone else's, and people like to have the flaws of others paraded. We take a grim satisfaction in taking them off their pedestals, and experiencing their humanity.

Celebrities live in a bubble, their day to day reality is a macabre reality TV show where nothing is private, and no personal problem is sacred enough to be considered off limits. They live with constant stalking by reporters and photographers, and often find that the most mundane elements of their lives can end up as a news piece. And beyond all that, celebrities are scrutinized for every word and action. While we may snap at a waiter, or get upset when something happens, celebrities can find themselves crucified publicly for displaying the same emotions as the rest of us. In marriage, normalcy is a true blessing.

While most of us may have to deal with opinions of our friends and families in our personal relationships, we have no worries of tabloid scandal, no fear of public discussion or scrutiny of our relationship. We have the opportunity to work our relationships out privately, as compared to having every argument and dispute aired publicly for everyone to see and discuss. It's hard to comprehend what it must be like to deal with a rocky relationship, and be reminded of it everywhere you go, or to have your marriage be a topic of conversation among people you have never met, but who seem to know far more about you than you might like.

And what about the children of celebrities? In the culture of celebrity news, even the offspring of the neo-royalty aren't safe from prying eyes. Kevin Federline told Today, in 2006, " It's overwhelming and kind of a curse, and as a father and a parent I really don't like my children being out there the way that they are. There's nothing you can really do about it. You don't want to make the fans feel like you are jaded; you want to give them what they want. " One of the most wonderful parts of life for a woman is the opportunity to carry and give birth to another human being.

With celebrities, the lengths of our obsession become apparent, as one of the greatest gifts of womanhood becomes a distorted reflection of itself. Does our obsession with weight and body type impact celebrity pregnancy? And in the mad rush to deliver the latest pregnancy news, are we putting the emotional well being of the mother-to-be at risk? In an October 2007 article in the Student Operated Press, LaShelle Turner addressed the subject of celebrity pregnancy and birth. " The pressure these women must feel to get back into their size 2 skinny jeans must be enormous.

It is easy to wonder, do they get to enjoy being a new mom? " On the plus side, famous people have the capacity to influence social change, such as when George Clooney was given the opportunity to address the United Nations. While it takes large community protests and actions to implement changes, celebrities have a powerful voice that they sometimes use to influence political policy. There is a lively debate on whether or not these people are qualified to offer their opinions, but as all people have opinions on just about everything, I'll avoid addressing that.



Arnold Schwarzenegger and Ronald Reagan are only two of the famous people who parlayed their fame into successful political careers. Many people voted for them simply because they knew them, or because the characters they played were considered a reflection of their personal character. While I am not going to cast any judgement upon the quality of their governance, it's obvious that fame can be a powerful political commodity. One need look no farther than the lengths politicians go to obtain celebrity endorsements during elections to see the impact the famous have on the very fabric of our society.

In *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon asserted that there were several factors contributing to the fall of Rome, including outsourcing and a loss of civic virtue. He said, " The development of an over-obsessive interest in sport and celebrity was one of the factors in the collapse of the greatest civilization ever known to man. " Perhaps our obsession with celebrity culture is an all too human trait, or maybe it is an indicator of the impending collapse of our society. Either way, our obsession is nothing new and isn't going anywhere.