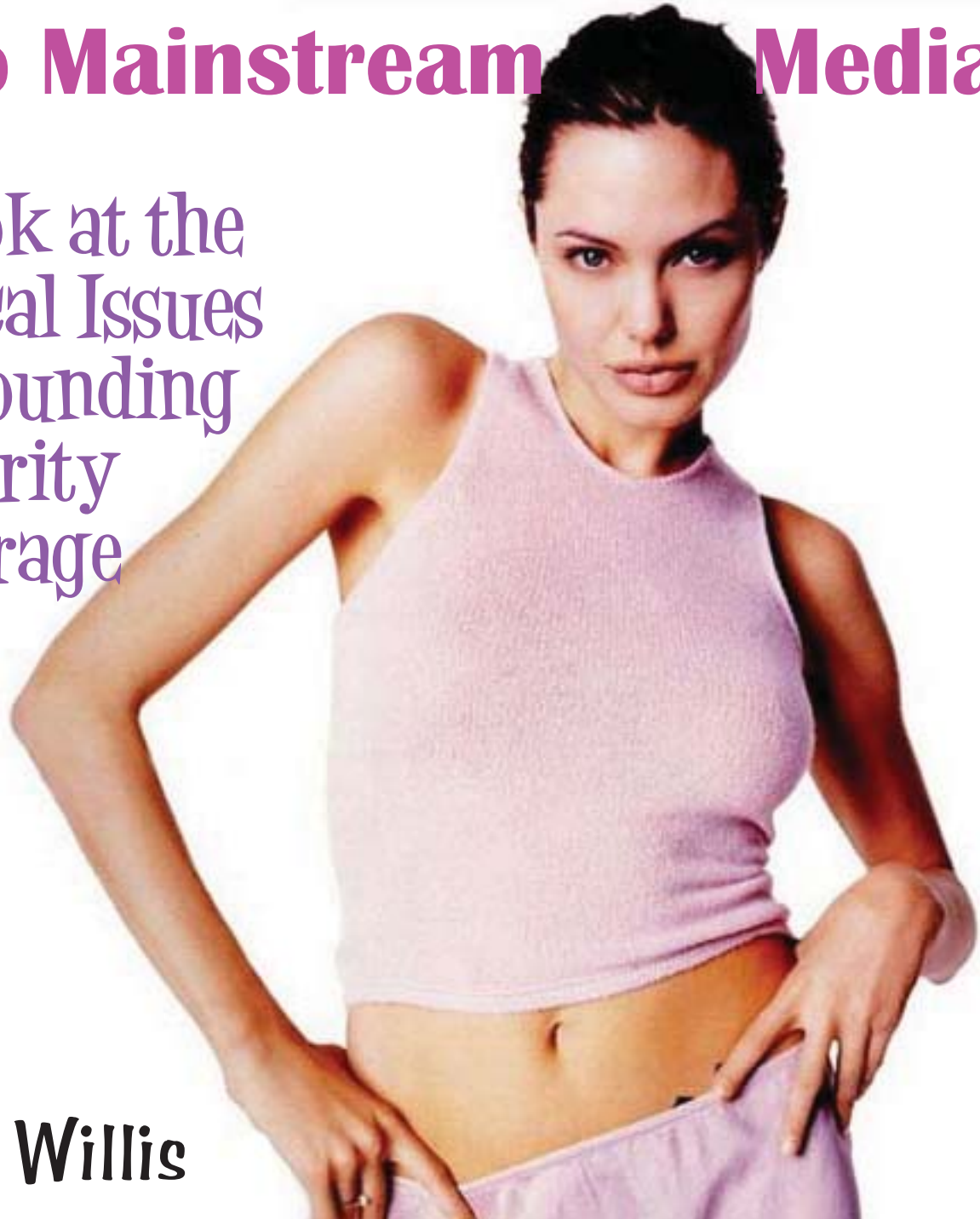


The Infiltration of CELEBRITY NEWS

into Mainstream Media

A look at the
Ethical Issues
surrounding
Celebrity
Coverage



Lara Willis

The History of Tabloids & Celebrity Gossip

Historically, entertainment news has been near the forefront of journalism. Publishers learned that satisfying readers' voyeuristic natures was a profitable enterprise, ensuring sales of their printed publications to the masses. William Randolph Hearst launched the American Daily Mirror in 1924 amid fierce competition, promising "Ninety per cent entertainment, ten per cent information — and the information without boring you." (Rego, 2006).

Throughout the early to mid part of the 1900s, celebrity gossip was a diversion from harsh economic climates such as the great depression. A long-time

employee of Hearst's publications, Walter Winchell is credited as a revolutionary who broke taboos and "single-handedly expanded the purview of American journalism forever" (Gabler, 1995, p. xxi). For over 30 years, New York based Winchell was known as an unscrupulous antagonist fighting the establishment. Conversely, in Hollywood the movie studios and publicity houses often tapped into the



WALTER WINCHELL

influence of well-known gossip columnists Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons to disseminate information about celebrities, garnering box office interest and countering potentially damaging rumours.

"Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper could make or break somebody's career," says celebrity columnist Rita Zekas. "They practically tarred and feathered Ingrid Bergman because it was such a scandal that she was having a baby out of wedlock [with Roberto Rossellini]."

Following Hearst's death, and towards the end of the McCarthy era, gossip columns became disreputable and fell by the wayside. A series of investigations into the publication of criminally libelous material effectively shut down gossip magazines such as Confidential and stories were relegated to the pages



HEDDA HOPPER

of the much maligned supermarket tabloids such as The National Enquirer, where rumour, innuendo and shock value were the foundation for

many articles. By the mid 1970s, The National Enquirer made an effort to present more factually-based content. Alien abductions and mythical creatures were out, investigative journalism was in. The Enquirer provided sensational coverage of some of the more notable events of this decade, focusing on the marital breakdown of popular variety stars Sonny and Cher, the deaths of Elvis Presley, Bing Crosby and John Lennon, and alcoholism of television stars Carol Burnett and Shirley Jones. The Enquirer continued to fight lawsuits filed by defamed celebrities and public criticism over sensational photos and coverage.

Despite the criticism that gossip columns were amoral and contributed to degeneracy, striking “the very fibre of the American soul” (Gable, 1995, p. 74), the tabloid, as an entertainment medium, retained a stronghold in popular culture. In

the 1980s, interest in celebrity culture underwent resurgence through the efforts of People Magazine, a spin-off of Time Magazine’s “People” page, and various trade publications such as US Weekly. As the interest in celebrity culture increased, both publications morphed – from a focus on human interest stories and entertainment news and reviews, respectively – into celebrity life and style magazines.

The end of this decade spawned daily syndicated tabloid shows such as Hard Copy, Inside Edition and A Current Affair – all focusing on sensational news stories and celebrity gossip.

Did You Know?
 Mary Hart, host of Entertainment Tonight, was once said to have triggered convulsions in an epileptic.
 The New England Journal of Medicine reported the event, caused by Hart’s shrill voice.

Mainstream Sensationalism

In the 1990s, the climate of journalism changed considerably. The Cable News Network broke new ground as the only news agency broadcasting live from Baghdad during the early hours of the Gulf War. People at home



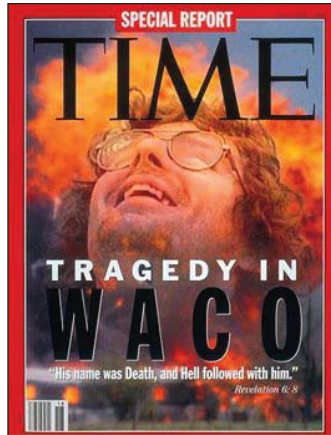
GULF WAR COVERAGE

were voyeuristically watching live coverage of news events as they happened,

catapulting CNN’s status to a top-level American network. The viewing public was, essentially for the first time, watching news as it happened as opposed to reading about it the following day.

This phenomenon continued as other notable events unfolded on national television. In 1993 the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and

Firearms stormed a compound in Waco, Texas that housed Branch-Davidian leader David Koresh. Viewers witnessed as four ATF agents were gunned down on camera during the raid, and followed the 51-day standoff that ended with the fiery deaths of 76 church members – all broadcast live. The same year, viewers were glued to their television sets watching more history in the making – the sensational trial of Lyle and Erik Menendez for the murders of their parents (broadcast on the relatively new network “Court TV”), the first sexual assault allegations against pop music icon Michael Jackson, and the trial of Lorena Bobbit. Bobbit’s trial sparked national debate over the marital rape and abuse allegations, while the shocking nature of the severed penis made



DAVID KORESH

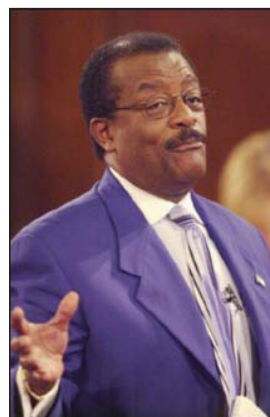
tabloid headlines. Victim John Wayne Bobbit went on to appear in adult films, while the incident spawned bad puns and cultural references to this day. The 1993 conviction of Hollywood madam Heidi Fleiss made headlines nationwide, as curiosity was piqued over the names of prominent politicians and celebrities who frequented her services.

Worlds Collide: The Trial of the Century

In 1994, the worlds of sensationalized mainstream news and celebrity journalism collided when football superstar and actor Orenthal James Simpson was charged with the murders of his ex-wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and her boyfriend, Ron Gold-

man. Viewers watched as Simpson led police on a notorious chase through the streets and highways of Los Angeles on a live news feed from a pursuing helicopter. The chase, arrest and subsequent trial became the most widely publicized in American history. In 1995, viewers tuned in to Court TV to watch 134 days of testimony in what is called the “trial of the century.” It is estimated that over 150 million people were watching when the verdict was read.

The trial not only focused on the fall of a celebrity, but created celebrities as the lawyers for the prosecution and defence, witnesses, police and the court employees



JOHNNY COCHRANE

became household names. Prosecutor Marcia Clark’s change of hairstyle part-way through the coverage garnered attention from celebrity stylists. Her fashion

choices were the topic of discussion by gossip columnists. Following the trial, Clark eventually went on to become a special correspondent for the celebrity-centric prime-time show Entertainment Tonight.



MONICA LEWINSKY

The same year that O.J. Simpson was arrested by police, the world of Olympic figure skating was also front-and-centre amid controversy. Tonya Harding's alleged attempted sabotage of rival skater Nancy Kerrigan received mainstream and celebrity news coverage and catapulted coverage of the 1994 Winter Olympics figure skating to the forefront of the entertainment news media.

The O.J. Simpson trial was perhaps one of the earliest news stories to garner both mainstream media attention and tabloid magazine appeal. The phenomenon was not limited to this instance

however. In 1998, journalists were focused on the White House as the scandalous affair between President Bill Clinton and intern Monica Lewinsky made headlines.

The coverage of the impeachment trial made national news headlines, while tabloids and gossip columns dug up dirt on the president's previous illicit relationships, criticized Lewinsky's voluptuous figure, and focused on key player Linda Tripp's hair styles and wardrobe.

Everyone's a Celebrity

Over time, the divide between legitimate news sources and gossip columns has become narrower. In the 2008 presidential election, as much or more attention was paid to rumours of vice-presidential candidate Sarah

Palin's shopping habits and family drama than to the political platforms of the presidential candidates. Average Americans may not be able to identify the nominees' stances on the economic climate, but they can recite quotes of Palin's future son-in-law Levi Johnston from his MySpace page. John Street posed the question "in a world in which pop stars increasingly are portrayed as, or behave like, politicians does it make equal sense to think of politicians as pop or film stars?" while theorizing that the worlds of politics and popular culture are nearly inseparable. (Corner, 2003, p. 85).

When pop-music icon Britney Spears started acting out in a bizarre manner, the Los Angeles Times and the Associated Press both devoted prominent coverage to her decline. When Paris Hilton confronted a Toronto adult video store about the advertising of her home-made porn DVD in their front

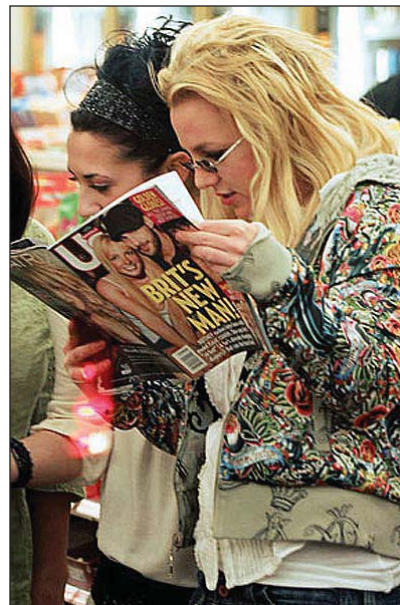
window, the story and surveillance tape of her reaction made headline news on CNN. When a distressed fan of Spears posted a tearful plea to "Leave Britney Alone!" on YouTube, coverage on CNN, Fox News and MSNBC catapulted the vlogger, Chris Crocker into the public eye as a celebrity in his own right, and earned him guest spots on talk shows, as well as scandalous tabloid coverage of nude photos and alleged involvement in soft-porn. As screenwriter Aben Kandel foreshadowed, "If this appetite is not curbed, a tabloid a day will soon become the national drug habit." (Gable, 1995, p. 74).



CHRIS CROCKER

Obsession with Celebrity News

Critics consider the growing trend of entertainment journalism overshadowing hard news to be a bastardization of the media and refer to the detriments of tabloidization – the tabloid influence on mainstream media. (Krajicek, 1998, p. 3). Celebrity photographer Louie de Filippis has the opinion that news is driven by popularity, and that celebrity news is a money-maker for news agencies.



BRITNEY SPEARS

a mandate to go after this trend in a news oriented way." Di Filippis says. "One image that comes to mind by AP is the one of Paris Hilton crying in the back of the police car on way to jail. Most people don't know it was shot by the same guy who took that famous image of the child running down the street screaming after the bomb had gone off, I think Vietnam? Classic shot."

"We got pictures of Britney Spears pregnant and we ran it on the front page of the newspaper," recalls Zekas. "We got so much grief about it. That was five years ago or so. Today, every time she burps it's news."

Watching televised news today is far different than in yesteryear. When

Did You Know?

Jennifer Aniston is compared to a modern-day Debbie Reynolds. Ongoing coverage of her and "Brangelina" is reminiscent of the Elizabeth Taylor/Eddie Fisher affair that ended Reynold's marriage.

once the entertainment news was mentioned briefly near the end of the hour (somewhere between sports and light human-interest stories), today celebrity news can be near the top of the hour, or sometimes even the lead story. Journalist David J. Krajicek opines that "the media has done an increasingly poor job of developing a balance between what is interesting and what is important." (Krajicek, 1998, p. 12)

The public driven obsession with celebrities is not a new phenomenon, but is far more widely accepted than it once was. Media is an easy scapegoat for the increase of public interest in celebrity lives, but Carlin Flora writes that "Celebrities tap into powerful motivational systems designed to foster romantic love and to urge us

to find a mate. Stars summon our most human yearnings: to love, admire, copy and, of course, to gossip and to jeer. It's only natural that we get pulled into their gravitational field."

De Filippis feels that the increasing obsession with celebrity media is based largely in part on the delivery format and the increase in popularity of the Internet.

"You get to taste the trappings of fame and at the same time have a chance to get a piece of the pie through reality type TV and web based options, very different than say ten years ago plus when it was more fantasy related at a distance."

While some consider that the abundance of celebrity news is a corruption of mainstream media venues, De Filippis argues that "news is news," but states that he

prefers covering celebrities to the hard news stories such as fires and accidents.

"I consider those true private moments that should be left alone," He says.

Ethical Coverage: Amateurs, Blogs & Accountability

With celebrity news coverage, particularly by celebrity photographers, there are frequently citations of privacy issues. While some cite invasive actions by photographers (such as using zoom lenses to view private moments through windows or security fences) as being unethical, frequently the outcry is related to the swarming of celebrities when out in public. Britney Spears' altercations with photographers are a case-in-point: Bloggers and critics of the paparazzi bemoan the loss privacy that celebrities have in day-to-day life, yet the same individuals are often raptly attentive to

the stories in the first place, creating the market.

"As long as they are in public, it's fair to say they expect they may be photographed and we look for a news hook," De Filippis says. "I think that once you step out your front door, unfortunately celeb or not, it's open season in a way. With the amount of cameras any given cities have up or banks, taxis, etc. where do you expect privacy? "

Still, implies De Filippis, there's a modicum of mutual respect between professional paparazzi and celebrities that is often lacking today. The advent of cell phone cameras has led to an abundance of wannabe photographers or hobbyists participating in the media scrum.

"Los Angeles is out of control at the moment," he says. "That type of pursuit by non-professionals needs to stop as it gives the industry a bad name."

Zekas shares De Filippis

opinion of amateur reporters, citing the Internet and blogs for casting a negative light on ethical journalists.

"They now have paparazzo that are seven, eight or nine year old boys," she says, the shock apparent in her tone as she relates a recent story in the New York Times. "One of the kid's fathers drives them around, they stay up all night because they want to be paparazzi then they go to school in the morning. That's got to stop."

With the new immediacy of news, blogging has become a haven for unverified gossip. Though she believes that all news is essentially gossip, Zekas is quick to point out some of the frequent offenders who are not held accountable for irresponsible reporting methods.

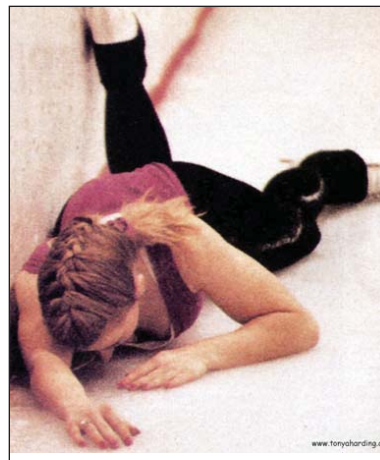
"With a newspaper or magazine

[stories] have to be law-

yered," she says. "You have to make sure of your facts or you get sued. Blogs are not accountable. How many times have they tried to sue Perez Hilton and he's weaseled out?"

How Far is Too Far? Credible Reporting and Studio Shills

As with the early days of gossip columns, when Hopper and Parsons were romanced by studios to keep stars in a favourable light, today's studios and publicity agencies have a hand in the news-making machine. Stu-



TONYA HARDING

dios can affect pressure on the journalists to hype promotional stories or soften potentially damaging ones, and the jour-

nalists may agree in order to

maintain a working relationship and be kept in the loop for the next big story.

In a panel discussion in 2004, The Poynter Institute delved into the ethical concerns surrounding celebrities in news coverage. Panellists discussed the ethical issues surrounding "getting the story", citing intense competition as a factor in crossing ethical boundaries such as caving to pressure to skew, suppress or hype a story. (Merina, 2004). Some boundaries also include paying for stories, a practice that became increasingly popular following the Tonya Harding debacle, when Inside Edition paid excessive amounts of money for exclusive interviews with key players in the story. (Krajicek, 1998, p. 64). Tabloid bidding wars can drive up the price of any story, in which the mainstream media can either participate, or simply reprint the story with credit to the original tabloid coverage. The New York

Times cited The National Enquirer twice during the O.J. Simpson coverage, reporting on alleged jailhouse confessions. The Times argued that the Enquirer had proven to be responsible and accurate in their coverage. (Krajicek, 1998, p. 64).

When coverage is not publicity driven, much ado is made by celebrity confrontations with the media, with assault charges against Keanu Reeves and Sean Penn demonstrating hostility towards the profession.

"In most cases the loss of control is what they are most upset with and once you bring a balance to it they are fine." De Filippis says. "Simply asking for a picture usually takes care of this. Relationships are built to help the celebrity gain back some control."

Princess Di: Victim of Vultures, or Media Savvy Celeb?

In 1997, journalists were front and centre in an international controversy surrounding how they obtain coverage. Princess Diana died in a car crash in Paris,



PRINCESS DIANA CRASH SCENE

France, while being pursued by paparazzi. The cause of

the crash

was later attributed to the driver, Henri Paul, who was intoxicated and reportedly following orders to elude the photographers.

The incident cast a spotlight on the profession, eliciting negative reactions from many A-list celebrities and public outcry over paparazzi in general.

"Diana was used as a platform by those who saw it as an opening to take ac-

tion against something they wanted to put a stop to," De Filippis says, citing that the princess used the media to her benefit as well. "My old partner from London was someone that she would contact directly to give him her precise location and get that image that she wanted put out."



GEORGE CLOONEY

When the celebrity backlash occurred, George Clooney and a handful of other stars publicly lambasted the profession. De Filippis recalls feeling that consumers are more interested in reality than studio and public relations "versions".

"The point here is we feed the public a reality of a distorted Hollywood image of perfection." He says. "If you don't want to play the game then don't do interviews don't walk the red carpets don't invite people into your life as that needs a balance

and people want to know it all when you open that door."

As a result of Clooney's outspoken opinions, the media created their own boycott by refusing to photograph the actor during publicity for a gala in New York City hosted by the studio Dreamworks SKG. De Filippis says that the boycott was effective, with Hollywood getting "a little taste of the power of the press." The status quo was upheld for the following gala in Hollywood. Once Clooney scaled back the rhetoric, the media restored coverage.

Celebrity Sells: Finding The Hook

In the world of modern-day celebrity news, the public dictates what is newsworthy and what is not, and news agencies risk alienating consumers if they refuse to provide coverage. De Filippis

states that public consumption impacts celebrities' bottom-lines, and smart celebrities use the opportunities to expand on the brand of their celebrity - while making choices in fashion and product use during candid, everyday life to secure deals in product placement. This type of promotion of consumerism was once relegated to red-carpet designer gowns and jewellery loans, but is now present in the day-to-day, since magazines are catering to the mass appeal with more photos of celebrities performing everyday tasks like walking dogs and buying gas.

"The studios are masters of spin, and celebrities are complacent in it," Zekas says, relaying the differences between photos of actresses such as Julianne Moore in public without makeup and Madonna being caught in the same manner. "If Madonna gets caught coming out of the Kabbalah thing looking

like shit, that's all orchestrated."

With an increase in celebrity news worldwide, the Poynter Institute panel recommends utilizing an ethical process to answer questions related to the story's newsworthiness and value, and whether celebrity news is being featured at the expense of, or in place of, a more important story. (Merina, 2004)

For De Filippis, the "news hook" is what appeals to him most. He cites the dramatic hard-news effect of Britney Spears shaving her own head as an example of what is a more marketable photograph.

"Drama is good," he says, "but News is first and crossover images are best. One that can be on ET and CNN."

Zekas agrees, pointing out that there's no point to covering the stories or getting the photographs if the consumers aren't interest-

ed. She notes that with the harsh economic and political climate, people need the escapism and fantasy of celebrity news as a way of living vicariously through them.

"You put them up and then you bring them down. Our life is more infinitesimally more boring than theirs," she says. "In times of depression, the sale of red lipstick and cosmetics booms. You don't want to read about the real world, you want to read about celebrities."

Perceptions: A Profession Maligned

While many argue that the celebrity news coverage has no place in mainstream news, the sales figures speak volumes about what the consumer wants. While Zekas admits that, in the journalism world, celebrity journalists aren't given respect by journalists who don't consider them "real journalists",

she states that the public reaction is often quite the opposite.

"Take a political journalist and take an entertainment journalist and put them in a party of civilians and they all want to know the dirt," she laughs. "They're all going to flock to you more than they will to someone who discusses Harper."

As philosopher Henry David Thoreau once said, "To a philosopher all news, as it is called, is gossip, and they who edit and read it are old women over their tea."

Perhaps those in mainstream media who are quick to criticize celebrity news as being the "lowest-common-denominator" in journalism need reminded of the opinion that others hold of them.

Did You Know?

The author, Lara Willis, is a first-year Journalism student at Centennial College.

No stranger to celebrities herself, Willis has met stars such as Kiefer Sutherland, Robert Downey Jr. and Antonio Banderas. She has a tattoo of Sutherland on her leg.

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