



Psychology of the Media

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Chapter 6

Parasocial interaction



Introduction

The concept of **parasocial interaction** is introduced in the first part of this chapter: the psychological processes through which media users treat media figures as if they were real people, even if they are fictional creations. The concept of **parasocial relationships** is then discussed, which are longer lasting psychological constructs through which we come to feel as if we ‘know’ media figures as members of a virtual social network. The remainder of the chapter deals with issues pertinent to parasocial phenomena – relationships with different types of media figure, the similarities between parasocial and social behaviour, and the conceptual limits of parasocial interaction.



Encounters with familiar strangers

If you’ve ever had the fortune (or misfortune, even) of bumping into a celebrity in real life, the chances are that it was a very strange experience. Typical celebrity sightings start off with a vague sense of recognition: you’re sure you know that person, but for a moment you can’t quite place them. Is it someone from school? A neighbour? Someone who you knew once and then lost touch with? Then suddenly the penny drops, and it all becomes clear. It’s somebody you’ve never actually met before, but you seem to know them so well – their face seems as familiar as that of a family member. But they have no idea who you are. No idea at all.

For years, psychologists lacked a concept for this ‘feeling of knowing’ that evolves through repeated encounters with celebrities and other

media figures. Since the 1950s, communication scientists have talked of the 'parasocial interaction' that takes place whenever a media user encounters a figure – real or otherwise, human or non-human – in the media. The term was coined by a psychiatrist called Wohl and a sociologist called Donald Horton in a paper in the journal *Psychiatry* (Horton and Wohl, 1956). They had become fascinated with the responses of radio listeners to certain fictional figures, most notably a young woman who was known as 'The Lonesome Gal'. This was a show broadcast on US radio late at night, in which a young woman with a seductive voice addressed the listener as her lover, inviting 'him' to lie down on the couch with her and have 'his' hair stroked.

Evidently large numbers of lonesome boys were captivated by this broadcast, because thousands of letters subsequently arrived at the radio studio proposing marriage. In those naive times, did the men honestly believe that the Lonesome Gal was for real? Horton and Wohl argued that the manner of her delivery had led impressionable listeners to form imaginary relationships with her, which developed with each broadcast until she became such a regular presence in their lives that they became obsessed with meeting her.

Of course, most modern-day media users are much more sophisticated. And yet, we can all relate to similar experiences when we have become preoccupied with someone whose photograph we have gazed upon, whose voice has captivated us, and who we may have fantasized about one day meeting – a film star, pop star or sports idol. Perhaps it's someone we just like a lot, because we share their views or admire their talents, or we are simply charmed by their personality. Perhaps it's someone we absolutely hate. Whatever the case, it seems as though the medium itself is no barrier to the basic human instinct to form relationships: in this case 'parasocial' relationships.

Little interest was shown in parasocial activity of any kind until the late 1970s, when US communication expert Mark Levy (1979) conducted a focus group study on TV viewers' relations with local newsreaders, or newscasters (in America, a 'local' newscaster may be broadcasting to an area the size of the British Isles). He found that, for many of these viewers, newscasters were perceived almost like friends, they kept viewers company, they missed them when they were on vacation, and they even addressed verbal comments out loud to them.

Levy and later researchers subsequently adapted these viewers' remarks as items for a psychometric scale, known as the Parasocial

Interaction Scale (Rubin et al., 1985). This instrument has been used in communication research ever since, to measure the strength of parasocial interaction with favourite celebrities, radio presenters, comedians, and even soap characters and cartoon characters. Researchers have found that many of the psychological features of parasocial relationships are exactly the same as those of social relationships, such as 'uncertainty reduction', or trustworthiness (Perse and Rubin, 1989), and that parasocial attachment styles reflect our general attachment styles (Greenwood et al., 2008).



Parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships

At this point, it is worth making a distinction between parasocial interaction (PSI) and parasocial relationships (PSRs). Parasocial interaction refers to the activity that takes place during the act of media use itself. Hartmann et al. (2008) have identified three psychological processes that constitute PSI: cognitive, affective and behavioural:

- *Cognitive* processes are thoughts we have regarding the media figure – Do I like them? Do I agree with their views?
- *Affective* processes are emotional responses to the figure – laughing, or becoming angry.
- *Behavioural* processes are actual behaviours that we perform when, for example, we watch a TV show, such as directing verbal comments at the media figure, or making gestures.

PSI processes are clearly related to PSRs, but once a relationship is established, it develops independently of episodes of PSI. After the TV is turned off, we don't stop thinking about media figures. We talk to our friends about them; this interaction itself has a powerful effect on our PSRs. If, for example, our friends disagree with our opinion about a new character in a soap or reality show, we might eventually modify or change entirely our original opinion to fit in. And think of the effect that bad news might have on a PSR. When former UK glam rocker Gary Glitter was arrested in the late 1990s for downloading child pornography, he lost thousands of fans in one fell swoop. Their PSRs changed from those of admiration to those of disgust.

Figure 6.1 contains a hypothesized sequence of events that take place as an initial parasocial encounter gradually develops into a PSR. It

consists of a network of ellipses (stretched circles), which refer to episodes of PSI, and boxes containing elements of a PSR.

The large ellipse at the top refers to a given viewing episode, say, an episode of a soap, during which we make use of our knowledge about the figure (he's called Tom and he's married to Joanne, works in a bank and so on) and our judgements about the figure (he's charming and good looking, but he's having an affair with his secretary, so he's essentially untrustworthy). The ellipse below ('Other encounters') refers to occasions when we come across Tom once the TV set is turned off. Maybe we read about the character and look at pictures of him on the soap's website, or read about upcoming episodes in the newspaper or in TV listings magazines.

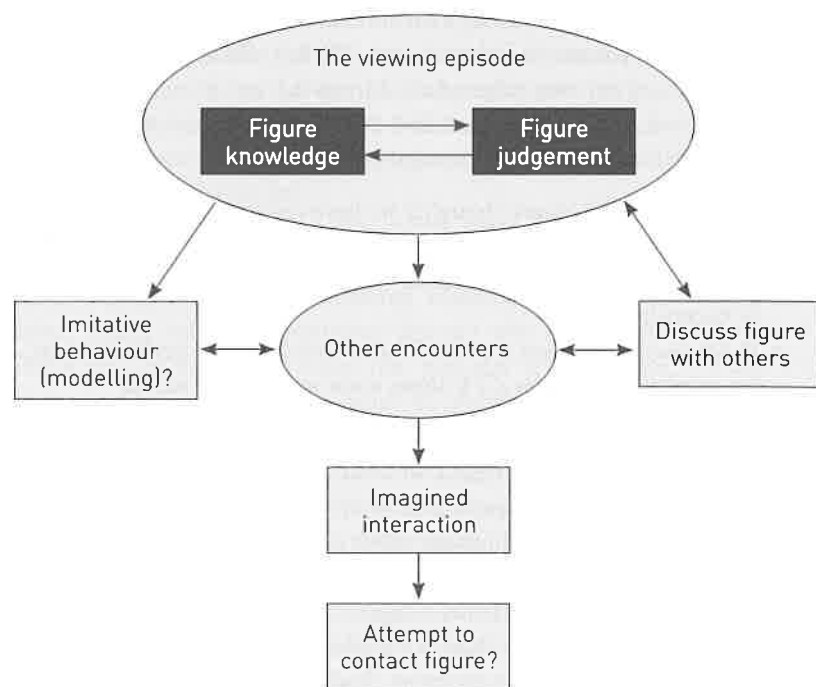


Figure 6.1 Stages in the development of a parasocial relationship

Source: Adapted from Giles, 2002a

The boxes in the diagram relate to possible outcomes of the PSI from a PSR perspective. The left-hand box 'Imitative behaviour' allows for the

behavioural expression of influence from the figure. If you identify with Tom – perhaps you are a young man in a similar situation – you might use Tom's behaviour to guide your own. Perhaps you have also considered having an affair at work, but by giving you Joanne's perspective as well, the soap makes you reflect on the impact that an affair might have on your marriage. Or, alternatively, you might think: if Tom can get away with it, so could I.

The right-hand box 'Discuss figure with others' allows us to be influenced by our fellow media users. What do your friends think of Tom's behaviour? As discussed in Chapter 2, much media psychological research treats the media user as a solitary individual, abstracted from all social contexts. But we often watch TV, and use other media, with friends and family. Their comments will have a profound impact on the way we perceive the figures we encounter.

Finally, there are two further options for the PSR. We can daydream about meeting Tom, particularly if we find him attractive. We might be so strongly attracted to him that we feel compelled to seek out the actor that plays him, or even, in some cases, to try to contact the actor 'in character'. Because there is a real person involved (the actor), actual contact is a possibility. We may simply settle for the prospect of running into him in a nightclub somewhere, someday.

Similarities between social and parasocial relationships

Perse and Rubin (1989) argued that there are three ways in which parasocial relationships resemble real relationships:

- 1 They are entered into voluntarily – we choose our real and our parasocial friends.
- 2 Both types of relationship fulfil a need for companionship.
- 3 They arise from social attractiveness.

While the first of these claims is undeniable (except that we might feel that often our real friends choose us), the second two points are debatable. The idea that parasocial relationships fulfil companionship needs is not really supported by much of the research. In the early days, it was imagined that TV viewers might form stronger parasocial relationships if they were lonely or isolated; however, Rubin et al. (1985) found low correlations between loneliness and strength of parasocial interaction with favourite newscasters. It seems, then, that we are

quite able to handle multiple parasocial relationships regardless of our actual social networks.

Perse and Rubin's (1989) third point is also in doubt. Most of the research, using the Parasocial Interaction Scale, asks respondents to select a single 'favourite' figure, whether a celebrity, newsreader or fictional character. But what about less favourite figures, and indeed figures that are thoroughly disliked? Do we not also form relationships with these figures? The continued focus in parasocial research on 'favourite' media figures has restricted our knowledge about these relationships.

Disliked media figures

One study that looked at negative PSRs is that of Hartmann et al. (2008), who asked fans of Formula 1 motor racing a series of questions about their 'favourite' and 'most disliked' Formula 1 drivers in order to discover which drivers they had established positive and negative PSRs with. They found that the nature of the existing PSRs reflected the level of suspense that fans experienced when watching a race. Suspense was high when they were rooting for their favourite driver to win, but less so when hoping that their most disliked driver would lose.

Other studies have found similar outcomes for fictional characters. Raney's (2004) work on fiction in particular has found that much of the enjoyment we derive from reading novels lies in our expectations that our favourite characters (typically the hero or protagonist) will enjoy positive outcomes, and that disliked characters (villains) will meet a sorry end. 'Affiliations' develop during reading, rather like PSRs, and these are constantly shaped by each new piece of information, for example revelations about a character's background.

Little other research has been conducted on disliked media figures. However, a recent study (Giles, 2008) asked sixth formers and university students to nominate their favourite and least favourite celebrities and fictional characters. Not surprisingly, their PSRs with favourite figures were much stronger and more positive, and in many cases their least favourite figures were very strongly disliked. Interestingly, the most disliked celebrities tended to be young females, and they were disliked by female participants just as much as by male ones.

Media figure type

So far in this chapter I have talked about PSI with real and fictional figures interchangeably. This is a common feature of parasocial research: very little attempt has ever been made to distinguish between our PSRs with real people, such as newsreaders, and PSRs with fictional, even non-human, figures. In a previous study (Giles, 2002a), I developed a three-level 'model' of parasocial relationships, in which I distinguished three types of **media figure**:

- 1 First-order figures (MF1) are human figures whose real existence is unambiguous, such as celebrities and other people in the news and entertainment media
- 2 Second-order figures (MF2) are fictional characters who nonetheless possess a visible human form, typically a character in a film or TV series
- 3 Third-order figures (MF3) are fictional figures who do not possess a visible human form, such as a cartoon character or a fantasy character.

My distinction between each of these three types is related to the potential relationship resulting from an encounter between a media user and a media figure. Even if I only encounter an MF1 through television use, it is possible, either through deliberate pursuit or by accident, for me to have a subsequent social encounter with that figure. A passionate fan of a television presenter could, in theory, end up having an intimate social relationship with that television presenter (this does sometimes happen).

With an MF3, such an eventual outcome is impossible, because the figure does not 'exist' as such. MF2s occupy the middle ground because, while it is impossible to have a social relationship with the character themselves, it is nonetheless possible to have a social relationship with the human form that the character inhabits, in other words, the actor who portrays the character. Indeed, when actors are encountered by media users 'in the flesh', they are sometimes responded to as if they are still in character (Tal-Or and Papirman, 2007). Soap stars often complain that they get abuse in public because of the way their character has behaved in the previous night's episode.

In a recent study, I compared these three types of media figure according to various characteristics of PSRs (Giles, 2008). I found that,

on some dimensions, such as similarity, there was no difference between types: the participants perceived themselves as similar to their favourite celebrities as to their favourite fictional human and non-human characters. Only on some fairly obvious dimensions was there a difference: wanting to meet that figure, wishing to emulate that figure and so on.

It seems, therefore, that there are some common processes at work in the formulation of PSRs with media figures regardless of their actual reality status. This goes back to the parallels made between parasocial and actual social relationships. One argument that has been advanced for the similarity between social and parasocial relationships is that, as in so many cases, human psychology has not been able to keep pace with technological change. In other words, our brains have not evolved quickly enough for us to be permanently conscious of the mediated nature of parasocial relationships (Kanazawa, 2002). This is what Reeves and Nass (1996) have termed 'the media equation', citing numerous instances where, for example, computers are treated as if they were people (especially when they don't do what we want them to).

Sometimes, PSRs can seem simply bizarre. During the 1960s, the American actor Robert Young received over a quarter of a million letters during the five years he played the leading role in medical drama *Marcus Welby M.D.*, most of which were asking for medical advice. In the pre-Internet era, when we relied on a doctor's appointment for any healthcare information, this might have seemed like a reasonable gamble for a desperate viewer who had already formed a strong parasocial relationship with a fantasy doctor with a nice bedside manner. During the 1970s, the UK soap opera *Coronation Street* ran a storyline in which a popular character, Hilda Ogden, lost her raincoat. The following day several mysterious packages arrived at Granada studios. Inside each was a replacement garment sent in by a worried viewer.

Parasocial bereavement

One way in which we can observe PSRs in action is in people's reactions when celebrities die. Michael Jackson's death in 2009 triggered a variety of responses, from those who mourned a great musician to those who could only relate to a controversial figure who had been involved in several dubious incidents concerning his relations with children. Many arguments and debates raged in the media as to which was the 'real' Michael Jackson, although ultimately it all depended on how the later

controversies had shaped the PSR that people had developed with him during his most successful years as an entertainer.

Similar confusion occurred around the death of Princess Diana in 1997. 'I would say that I am a fairly hard-nosed cynic, but tears came despite that', wrote one contributor to a BBC website dedicated to Diana tributes. Another wrote: 'As a happy, well adjusted woman, I was stunned by the emotions I felt ... I couldn't stop crying and I didn't know why.' In both cases, it appears that there is something essentially irrational – or at least something that seems irrational to us – about developing such strong attachments to people we have never met.

Eyal and Cohen (2006) coined the term 'parasocial breakup' to refer to the death or disappearance of a fictional character. They studied fans' responses to the final episode of the TV sitcom *Friends*, and found that the enforced termination of the parasocial relationship created a sense of regret and even loneliness. These responses are not as strong as those to celebrity deaths, suggesting that this is one area where we can clearly distinguish between PSRs with real people and PSRs with fictional characters.

Other types of media figure

The Giles (2002a) **typology** of media figures is, inevitably, oversimplified. There are several categories of figure that fail to match any of the types. MF1s – real people – assumes that PSRs exist only with figures that are actually alive. However, many people have very strong attachments to figures that are no longer alive, such as Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe and, possibly, Princess Diana.

In some ways, PSRs with dead figures are more like those with MF2s or even MF3s: since the relationship cannot possibly be reciprocated, it can only ever exist at a level of pure fantasy. There is no opportunity to meet Elvis, unless one is absolutely convinced that he is, somewhere, still living (for older figures even this remote possibility must be ruled out). In their study of Elvis impersonators, Fraser and Brown (2002) describe a number of people whose lives are intricately linked to the star, although in most cases their relationships date from a period when he was still alive.

One other way in which dead media figures differ from live ones is in terms of the trajectory of the relationship. We can follow the day-to-day events in a celebrity's life as they occur in real time, which means we can have a closer affinity with them. Of course, this doesn't mean to say that the PSRs with living figures are more intense, stronger, or more

meaningful than those with fictional or dead figures. They just allow for different possibilities in the way the relationship is incorporated into our everyday existence.

The MF2 category (fictional human) is also problematic since it is limited to visual media. It relies on the assumption that a fictional character is portrayed by an actor, and so we can make contact with the character indirectly (by meeting the actor). But what about (human) characters in books? Here, we may have a strong affiliation – or dislike – with a character whose visual image is entirely constructed out of the author's verbal description and our own unique interpretation (Culpeper, 2001).

Where the book is televised or adapted as a film, our visual image undergoes a strong challenge. The actor cast in our character's part will inevitably be different to our preconceived 'vision' (Martin, 2005). A parallel situation occurs when we encounter fictional characters in the guise of several different actors. James Bond and Doctor Who have both been represented by numerous actors, and fans continually debate which actor is the 'true' Bond, or the best Doctor. We each have our own personal favourites, typically the first actor we saw in the part. For me, those are, respectively, Sean Connery and Jon Pertwee. Other Bonds, and Doctors, just don't really cut the mustard.

What's *not* parasocial interaction?

I will end this chapter with a brief discussion of alternative concepts that arguably cover the same ground as parasocial phenomena. The literature is divided on this topic, largely because the use of the Parasocial Interaction Scale over the past two decades has restricted the way in which researchers have conceptualized parasocial relationships.

The tendency to equate the concept with the measure – with its items about addressing remarks to the screen and so on – has led a lot of communication experts to assume that this is the only context to which the whole idea can be applied. This is a shame, because other similar concepts are simply inadequate for capturing all the relationships between media users and media figures.

There is also a tendency for authors to casually refer to parasocial phenomena in ways that misrepresent the basic concept. This is particularly common when referring to human–computer interaction, or computer-mediated communication. So, while considering other terms,

like 'celebrity worship', that ought really to fall under the broad concept of PSRs, it is equally important to be clear what is *not* a PSR.

Several authors have tried to separate PSI from **identification**, a concept with a long history in psychology. We can trace it back to Freudian theory, where it was used particularly to refer to children's relationships with their parents, and to film theory, where authors employed psychoanalytic theory to account for viewers' involvement with the protagonists, or central characters, in films.

Feilitzen and Linne (1975) distinguished between 'similarity identification', where viewers identify with media figures because they share similar characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity and so on), and 'wishful identification', where we put ourselves in the shoes of the media figure – typically the hero in a film – and fantasize that we are that person. Or that we could, in time, become (like) that person. Of course, it is possible for both types of identification to exist simultaneously, where we idolize a successful figure who resembles us in some way. This is a powerful form of media influence, particularly for members of minority social groups – think of a young African-American boy idolizing Barack Obama.

How is identification different from PSI? Cohen (1999) devised a typology of relationship with media figure that distinguishes PSI from the two types of identification and 'affinity', arguing that we can *like* media figures without parasocially interacting with them. However, he didn't account for our relationship with figures who we *don't* like, or consider the development of PSRs over time. It is perhaps fair to argue that all four processes – PSI, similarity identification, wishful identification and affinity – are part of the PSR-building process.

Another concept that has emerged to account for audience relationships with media figures is **celebrity involvement** (Brown et al., 2003). This concept is limited in that it deals solely with living people (or MF1s, following our typology), but it is measured using a scale that is not unlike the Parasocial Interaction Scale (typical items include 'X is a hero to me', 'I feel I can easily relate to X'). Also the authors argue that celebrity involvement arises from a combination of PSI and identification. It is possible, therefore, to regard celebrity involvement as simply one form of a PSR.

Likewise, the concept of **celebrity worship** (to be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7) could be regarded as a specialized form of PSR, in that it involves celebrities, and that the PSR is fundamentally positive. Beware of statements such as 'parasocial interaction is a form of celebrity

worship', which you will read in papers on the subject. It is nonsensical to think of the association this way round.

The arrival of Internet technology has created a whole new 'grey area' for parasocial theory. Email, online dating, social networking and other forms of computer-mediated communication allow us to interact with other people all over the world without ever meeting them 'in the flesh', or even knowing what they really look like (as I will discuss in Chapter 12, this is a particular problem with online dating). Some authors have used the parasocial concept – wrongly, in my opinion – to describe these interactions.

First, PSI was invented to account for one-way interaction with figures only encountered through traditional one-way media such as radio and television. The Internet requires a new concept to account for interactions between remote users who cannot actually see one another. The term 'virtual relationships' would seem to cover these perfectly well, no need for any 'parasocial' business at all.

Second, parasocial relationships, by their very definition, cannot be reciprocated (returned). Once reciprocation occurs, the relationship ceases to be parasocial, it becomes a straightforward social relationship. Even if a fan of the Queen ever got to meet her, they could be said to have a social relationship, albeit one that is heavily circumscribed (limited) by social conventions, hierarchies and so on. A British person sending an email to a person in Australia, and receiving a reply, has established a social, although virtual, relationship. There is nothing parasocial about it after that.

Just because the Internet enables us to establish relationships across the globe without meeting people, it doesn't mean that parasocial theory has been made redundant, or that we can't interact parasocially with media figures via the Internet. Even on social networking sites, interaction can still be one way: on my *MySpace* page, I am 'friends' with all my favourite bands. I am even friends with William Shakespeare.

When things become really interesting is with fan websites that enable users to – apparently – engage their idol in online chat, or, at least, some kind of online dialogue. Here, fans can be under the impression that they have established an actual social relationship with their heroes, even if the site is managed by another fan, who might be impersonating the star themselves. You can never be sure, just as you can never be sure when you write a fan letter to your hero that the signed letter you receive in return hasn't been just typed out by the fan club secretary.

A final category of media figure, and one that really should belong in the MF3 compartment, is the game character, or avatar. These have developed along quite complex lines in recent years, so we need to consider not only figures like Lara Croft, whose character is simply a scripted part of a game, but also user-generated figures in role-playing games like *Second Life*. Researchers have referred to these relationships as 'character attachments' (see Chapter 11).

Authors have, of course, been interacting parasocially with their characters since time immemorial, except nobody ever thought to research the phenomenon as such. What makes user-generated game characters different is that they have a powerful representative function. Authors' characters – except in explicitly autobiographical fiction – are supposed to develop a life of their own independent of their creator. Game avatars are intended to *represent* the player. These may well be a special kind of PSR, and, as they are becoming increasingly common among Internet game players, probably deserve a category to themselves. In any case, they will be considered at some length in the final section of the book New Media.

Further reading

Giles, D.C. (2002). Parasocial interaction: A review of the literature and a model for future research. *Media Psychology*, 4, 279–302.

Chapter 7

Celebrity and fandom

Introduction

In this chapter, I consider three discrete, though related, literatures: the psychology of fame and celebrity, where the nature of celebrity itself is the centre of attention; the research on fans themselves and their various activities; and the concept of 'celebrity worship', which provides the link between ordinary fandom and pathological obsession, with celebrity stalking at its most extreme pole. Certainly, fame is highly desirable now as ever, with more and more opportunities for people to enter the world of celebrity, but, without any marked talent, it has also become more short-lived. Nevertheless, the problems of privacy and unwanted attention sour the fame experience. Fan activities resemble religious rituals in many ways; most of the time these are harmless and serve a primarily social function, but researchers are divided over how concerned we should be about more private, obsessional devotion, and how closely this is linked to stalking or abusive behaviour towards celebrities.

Fame and celebrity

Fame has been with us for centuries – millennia even. In the outstanding work on the topic, Braudy (1997) identifies Alexander the Great as the first famous individual, as he moved around the Mediterranean adding various countries to his empire, and word spread from one community to another about his deeds and his achievements. To be famous in the 4th century BC, you really did have to achieve. Communication media were thin on the ground (clay tablets and parchment at best) and it was only

by word of mouth, over many years, that tales of Alexander's exploits would have reached the most privileged citizens. Most of them wouldn't have got to hear about him until he had been long dead.

Today, becoming famous is a rather different matter. A new name can be broadcast across the world's media in a matter of hours, and the ubiquity of media outlets among the world's population means that the vast majority of people worldwide will soon become familiar with it. Such immediate fame would require quite a noteworthy deed. Around Christmas 2009, for example, the world had just got to know the name Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a Nigerian man who tried to ignite a bomb on a plane to Detroit and raised airport security everywhere a further notch. Everyone recognized Abdulmutallab's name for a few days, but he is unlikely to outlast Alexander.

Perhaps the most striking difference between ancient fame and 21st-century fame is that the latter can be obtained without an individual having to do very much – they simply appear on television and entertain the audience by dint of their personality. The remarkable fame of 'reality TV' contestants and other instant celebrities has fascinated audiences and commentators for several years. Its most noticeable feature is the speed with which it disappears, leading many people to recall 1960s' pop artist Andy Warhol's famous maxim: 'In the future, everyone will be famous for 15 minutes.' Well, maybe not everyone, and maybe not for 15 minutes, but fame's time frame has certainly shrunk since Warhol's day.

One of the most common debates around fame and celebrity concerns the business of definition. Braudy (1997) and many others see **fame** itself as something that is earned through merit: it is legitimate to talk about a famous author, painter or musician, but not a famous criminal or reality TV contestant. Fame needs to be earned over many years of hard work and well-won plaudits. It could equally be argued that, while through most of history fame is associated with worthy deeds, cultural and technological change has forced us to redefine it because people can, and do, now become famous quickly, through achieving less. Building a reputation is no longer a difficult task requiring years of hard work and brilliance. Fame is the social process through which individuals become famous, regardless of what they've actually done (Giles, 2000).

Meanwhile, a similar level of debate surrounds the definition of **celebrity**. Gamson (1994) and others have argued that celebrity is a uniquely 20th- (or 21st-) century phenomenon that has arisen because of the expansion of the media. The number of media outlets that exist, the

sheer size of the audience for each outlet, and the speed with which information can be communicated through them has created a culture that is completely unlike, and probably incomparable to, any other in history. The reasons for today's fame, and the nature of that fame, are fundamentally different and need a new concept to capture them.

Some researchers have attempted to distinguish between celebrities and other, worthier individuals, whether such individuals deserve such descriptions as 'heroes' (North et al., 2005), 'luminaries' (Cheung and Yue, 2004), or 'greats' (Simonton, 1994). North et al. (2005, p. 42) asked their participants to select heroes and celebrities on the basis that celebrities do 'not create any objects or ideas of permanence or lasting importance'. Needless to say, most of the 'heroes' chosen by participants in their study were historical figures; Princess Diana managed to slip through the celebrity net somehow, which is interesting, given that most researchers regard her as the ultimate celebrity (see, for instance, Cashmore, 2006).

In my own work, I have defined fame as a process and celebrity as a state (Giles, 2000). Neither fame nor celebrity has anything intrinsically to do with the nature of people's activities, why someone is famous, how long for, and in which media. Fame can be contained within an institution (some children are known by everyone at a school, others only by their classmates and class teacher), or it can be worldwide. Some people are literally famous overnight simply for fulfilling a role: the president of the United States, irrespective of their personality, will be world famous, as will most important political figures. Minor politicians could become famous, but they would need to do something exceptional.

However, it is important to bear in mind Gamson's argument that celebrity as a phenomenon could not really have happened without the contemporary media. Even at a local level, the media can create a form of celebrity – on the school website perhaps. Maybe the Internet, and its social networking capacities for making us all famous (albeit in a much smaller community) for 15 minutes, will eventually force us to redefine the terms.

What is it like to be famous?

The experience of fame is roughly the reverse side of the coin described in Chapter 6: to be the individual who is the object of a parasocial relationship, who is known by millions of media users but has only ever met a tiny portion of their audience. Meanwhile, stars have parasocial relationships

too, and one of the attractions of fame is that it opens up real relationships with other celebrities who have hitherto only been admired from afar. Most celebrities have been fans at some time in their lives.

A measure of success might be the importance of the people you get to meet. Even a relatively modest civil award such as an OBE (Order of the British Empire) will be pinned on by the Queen. If you have been widely exposed through the media, the Queen may even know about you – effectively she has a parasocial relationship with you – as the TV entertainer Rolf Harris found out when receiving his OBE: 'She knew the whole history of my career! It was bloody amazing!' (cited in Giles, 2000, p. 93).

One of the difficult things that famous individuals have to cope with, however, is the lack of control they have over new relationships. While it may be hugely rewarding to meet your own heroes, and come to the attention of highly attractive admirers, these are but a tiny sub-sample of the thousands of people who are clamouring for contact with you. It is nice to strike up a conversation with an attractive actor or model; it is rather less convenient to be harangued in public by people who you would normally cross the street to avoid. At modest levels of fame, before you require the assistance of bodyguards and chauffeurs, this lack of control is perhaps at its most disagreeable. The singer Robbie Williams, early in his career, spoke of getting abuse on the train three or four times a week. Even a radio presenter, without extensive TV coverage, may be forced to share his personal space with curious strangers, as journalist Stuart Cosgrove found out:

I took a train from Edinburgh to Glasgow ... and eight people talked to me about the show. Even the man selling tea and sandwiches sat down and chatted for about 20 minutes. You don't get any space.

(cited in Giles, 2000, pp. 94–5)

The loss of privacy is perhaps the most obviously unwelcome trapping of fame. Not only fans, but the media themselves are tracking your every move, so there is an acute sense of living, as it is often put, 'in a goldfish bowl', constantly under observation. Movement becomes restricted, as you are often chaperoned for your own protection, either because the sheer number of fans trying to reach you would be overwhelming (such as the arrival at a concert or screening), or because there may be individuals who wish you harm (see the section on stalking later in the chapter). Even inside the security cordon, you are subject to the attention of paparazzi snapping away, catching you off guard.

Academic research on the experience of fame is thin on the ground, not surprisingly, since the famous are not an easy population from which to recruit. A rare exception is the work of Donna Rockwell, an American psychotherapist who used her professional contacts as a former CNN journalist to interview a small sample of celebrities (Rockwell and Giles, 2009). Taking a **phenomenological** approach, through which the researcher attempts to delve into the 'lifeworld' of the interviewee, Rockwell found that the experience of fame was characterized by a process that incorporates four phases over time:

- *Love/hate*: Initial phase where some elements of the fame experience are deeply gratifying, such as being recognized, while others are extremely discomforting, like never having a moment to yourself.
- *Addiction*: After a while, celebrities find that they become preoccupied with doing all they can to remain famous. Rockwell's participants spoke of being 'on a high' in this period.
- *Acceptance*: This is the period during which celebrities finally come to terms with the ups and downs of fame and become more philosophical about the celebrity experience.
- *Adaptation*: Having accepted fame, the celebrity then makes changes to their life to cope with it. These are not necessarily positive changes: some celebrities choose at this stage to lead a reclusive existence, simply avoiding social contact where possible.

In another study on celebrity, Mrowicki and Giles (2005) looked at the paths to fame in a sample of young people striving for musical careers. For these individuals, fame was seen as a destination, involving a journey that took them through the highs and lows of success and failure. It seems that budding celebrities are not really prepared for the less appealing aspects of fame. Very few of them had any idea how to deal with things like media intrusion and loss of privacy. Clearly, the allure of its positive aspects rather blinds fame-seekers in the early days.

Ultimately, the variety of different fame experiences simply reflects the different reasons for becoming famous. For a sports star, it is easy to see how media can be regarded as an unwelcome intrusion, since, from the performer's point of view, it is solely through football, tennis, or whatever that you have earned your fame. For a reality TV contestant, the link between fame and the media is undeniable; one could not exist without the other. Ironically, the media role accounts for sporting fame

just as much as reality TV fame, televising their finest moments, broadcasting them to millions. Those who accept their debt to the media probably cope better with fame than those who see the media as simply providing a window through which others can admire their brilliance.



Why do so many people want to be famous?

In October 2009, the US media became transfixed by an unfolding story in Colorado. A giant helium balloon had broken free of its moorings and was drifting across fields with, according to his parents, a six-year-old boy inside. TV cameras and network news teams broadcast live footage as it finally came to earth near Denver Airport, disrupting flights. But the balloon was empty: as it turned out, Falcon Heene had been in his bedroom throughout the drama. Two months later, Falcon's parents were jailed, accused of orchestrating the stunt in order to publicize a reality TV show that his father Richard was in the process of creating. It seems that the pair had an unquenchable thirst for fame, having already appeared on various reality shows such as *Wife Swap*, and that this episode was simply a career move. Richard Heene was also prevented for profiting from the incident for four years, but whether this includes launching the reality show is not clear.

The long line of people queuing for auditions to *Big Brother* or *The X Factor* is testimony to the enduring desire for fame that seems to persist from one generation to the next. What drives them? Given the potential pitfalls of fame, why are so many people – mostly young people – prepared to do almost anything to see their name in lights? And what makes the rest of us settle, quite happily it seems, for relative obscurity?

A recent study by Maltby (2010) identifies six different dimensions of **Interest in Fame**, as opposed to 'wishing' or 'desiring' fame. These are:

- *Intensity*: 'I would do anything to become famous'
- *Vulnerability*: 'Being famous would bring some meaning to my life'
- *Celebrity lifestyle*: 'I want to see my picture in magazines'
- *Drive*: 'I work hard every day to be famous'
- *Perceived suitability*: 'I have got what it takes to be famous'
- *Altruistic*: 'I want to be famous so I can make a contribution to society.'

Some of these dimensions were found to be associated with personality traits and other psychological and social variables. For instance:

- intensity and perceived suitability were associated with the perceived encouragement of family and friends
- the vulnerability dimension is associated with high neuroticism, low self-esteem and insecure attachments
- altruistic is associated with agreeableness – efforts to get on with other people
- drive is associated with conscientiousness.

Like the fame experience itself, the desire for fame reflects the nature of the fame that is available in any given culture. Poets and authors were once content to be 'discovered' after their death, since in all probability it was not until a writer was dead that their fame had spread widely enough to make a significant impact. Today, instant fame is possible and is therefore the variety with the most appeal to the potential audience, auditioning for any reality show going. At the same time, the modern work ethic is reflected in Maltby's 'drive' dimension of fame interest.

Evolutionary explanations for fame and celebrity

Might there be an evolutionary explanation for our interest in fame and celebrity? One surprising suggestion is that we are fascinated with the intricate details of celebrity behaviour for their educational potential. Not in terms of conventional education, that is, but the kind of useful day-to-day social learning about potential hazards in the social environment – 'fitness-relevant survival information' (de Backer et al., 2007). Gossip about celebrities then operates as a way of alerting us to potential hazards – what might happen if we cheat on our partner, what kinds of outfits are likely to earn us admiration or provoke derision, and so on. Researchers have found that interest in celebrity gossip is inversely correlated with age, suggesting that these issues are important to younger people, whereas older people don't need this kind of reassurance.

But what about becoming famous ourselves? One of the most frequently cited reasons for becoming famous and successful is that it widens the pool of available sexual partners for the individual. At the very least it affords them a higher status, thus making them more attractive to potential partners. One other argument is that fame is a way of achieving symbolic immortality, a cultural equivalent of replicating one's genes: in this case the entire self is passed on, through thousands of

photographic reproductions, video and audio recordings, and legendary accounts (Giles, 2000).

Whatever the various theories behind the enduring popularity of fame, when I put the question to a psychology class I taught at Coventry University some years ago, they could only come up with one explanation: money. In their eyes, no other incentive seemed necessary. Perhaps this tells us more about contemporary celebrity – the flouting of designer labels and flash cars – than about fame through the ages. Or maybe it tells us more about the pecuniary ambitions of psychology students!

Fans and fandom

Of course, media coverage alone is not enough: fame is sustained by the presence, actual and virtual, of an army of adoring fans, who exist to remind the celebrity of their social importance. Famous individuals have always had their admirers, from 18th-century writers to early Hollywood stars, drawing crowds wherever they went. Some fans, it seems, will go to extraordinary lengths simply to catch a glimpse of their heroes in the flesh, camping outside their homes just to see them drive off, while others collect trivial belongings that have passed through celebrity ownership.

If there is something vaguely religious-sounding about fan behaviour, it may not be entirely coincidental. The term 'fan' derives from the Latin word *fanaticus*, meaning 'belonging to the temple', and numerous authors have identified fan activities that map neatly onto those of religious rituals: the collection of relics, creative artistic work based around the object of devotion, and the acceptance of whatever treatment their idols choose to mete out. In the early 1980s, Australian singer Nick Cave, then with The Birthday Party, would occasionally kick out at the heads of fans in the front row of the audience, who wore their bruises with pride afterwards.

In the early days of Hollywood, fans contacted stars on a regular basis to demand objects with which they had made physical contact – soap they had washed with, a handkerchief bearing lipstick traces, a used piece of chewing gum or even merely a blade of grass from the star's lawn (Tudor, 1974). These sacred items perform the same role, perhaps, as the relics collected by religious devotees since the veneration of saints and martyrs in the 4th century AD. Random bits of bone, hair and nails are still claimed as the remains of various saints, on view in reliquaries in churches throughout the world. Fans are not content simply to receive

objects from stars: equally important is the communication in the opposite direction. Park Dietz, a psychiatrist who has been involved in several high-profile trials, published a list of the 'enclosures' that had been sent to Hollywood celebrities (Dietz et al., 1991). Some of the items were largely innocuous, such as personal business cards and press clippings; some were offensive, including a blood-filled syringe and even the severed head of a coyote; others were simply bizarre, such as a half-eaten candy bar, a disposable razor and a toy submarine.

The exchange of personalized objects opens up another possibility for fandom. Like religious devotion, it is not simply a case of lesser mortals fawning over greater ones; clearly, fans hope some of the star's charismatic powers will travel back in their direction. Centuries ago, Petrarch (1304–74) and Rousseau (1712–78) were hounded by admirers who travelled hundreds of miles simply to see them in the flesh, some of them bearing their own poems, hoping that the experience would rub off on their own literary ambitions. While the purpose of sending a toy submarine to a celebrity is slightly less obvious, it may simply be enough to think that the star is going to handle an object that the fan has handled, establishing some remote connection.

There are many fans who have no burning desire to meet their idols, in fact, sometimes the experience of encountering one's heroes can be deeply disillusioning. Some prefer to worship from afar, building shrines to their favourite performers. One Boy George fan I met claimed to have amassed 11,714 images of the star in the form of pictures, posters, and badges (note the specificity of the figure). She spent large sums of money on clothes that would enable her to resemble him, and travelled across the UK to fan club meetings and concerts where she joined forces with fellow devotees. She had actually spoken to Boy George on one occasion, so making contact with the star was no longer an incentive (Giles, 2000).

Other fans express their devotion through creative activities. Henry Jenkins (1992) has documented in detail the work produced by fans of TV series such as *Star Trek*, ranging from reworked scripts of specific episodes to spliced-together footage of Kirk and Spock to generate a gay love story. Jenkins describes such activities as 'textual poaching', and we can now see a good deal of this kind of creativity on fan websites.

Many media scholars are dismissive of the links between fandom and religiosity (Hills, 2002), arguing that fans draw on the discourses of religion, often in a playful way, to avoid having to justify their enthusiasms, but also that there is great diversity in the fan community. Hills is

ultimately concerned that religious parallels are used to undermine fan activity by making unflattering comparisons between media phenomena and matters of life and death – and it is true that parallels between fandom and religious devotion are often made (by the media themselves, even) in conjunction with general complaints about the 'worthlessness' of modern society.

In actual fact, there are many different types of fan, and different reasons for being a fan. Following years of research on fan communities, Stever (2009) has developed a classification system of fandom comprising three elements:

- 1 Eight different *levels of intensity* ranging from a broad interest in stars and media through to pathological attachment, where, for example, a fan might commit suicide on hearing of their idol's death.
- 2 Nine different *motivations* for fandom, ranging from 'task attraction' (liking a musician for their artistic qualities) to various types of attachments.
- 3 Whether fans are *isolated* or *interactive* in their activities.



Celebrity worship

In recent years, some psychologists have attempted to capture the essence of fandom by creating a Celebrity Worship Scale (McCutcheon et al., 2002). This is a psychometric scale not unlike that used to measure parasocial interaction, in which fans are asked to agree or disagree with a series of statements about their favourite celebrity.

Over numerous studies, researchers agree that there are two fundamentally different aspects of celebrity worship that roughly map on to Stever's (2009) distinction between interactive and isolated activity:

- 1 an *entertainment-social* factor, akin to being a member of a fan club
- 2 an *intense-personal* factor, like building a personal shrine to a celebrity.

The entertainment-social factor is measured by items such as 'My friends and I like to discuss what my favourite celebrity has done', while the intense-personal one is tapped by items like 'I am obsessed by details of my favourite celebrity's life' (Maltby et al., 2002). While there is clear overlap between these factors (after all, a great many people might be obsessed by celebrity details, if only to share them), it is the psychological

function of each aspect that is of most interest to researchers. While the entertainment-social factor seems innocuous enough ('Learning the life story of my favourite celebrity is a lot of fun'), it was the scale constructors' intention to problematize celebrity worship, although they conceived it as a unitary concept (a **single factor construct**), with high scores *in general* indicating pathology (McCutcheon et al., 2002).

Later researchers felt that it was important to dissociate the social (fan club-style) elements of celebrity worship from the potentially pathological ones. It seems that the authors had already decided that extreme fandom contains elements of obsessive-compulsive disorder, since several of the statements are worded so as to reflect the clinical literature. 'I have frequent thoughts about my favourite celebrity, even when I don't want to' and 'I often feel compelled to learn the personal habits of my favourite celebrity' both seem to indicate a compulsive element to celebrity worship to go with the explicit obsessional component.

While there is clearly a pathological element associated with high intense-personal scores, several studies have identified a third dimension – 'borderline-pathological' celebrity worship, for example 'If I were lucky enough to meet my favourite celebrity, and they asked me to do something illegal as a favour, I would probably do it'. High scores on this subscale would clearly raise concerns about individuals' behaviour. A further four subscales have been suggested (Maltby and Giles, 2008) that identify aspects of celebrity worship – attempts to establish contact, collecting and other painstaking activities in relation to a favourite celebrity, sexual desires, and stalking tendencies, including the item 'I wish my favourite celebrity was dead'.

In a variety of studies in the UK and the US, different aspects of celebrity worship have been found to relate to other psychological phenomena. As anticipated, the intense-personal subscale is most closely associated with psychological disturbance – higher levels of depression, anxiety, stress and even physical illness (Maltby et al., 2004). The borderline-pathological dimension is associated with fantasy proneness – vivid fantasies and memories, even hallucinatory or paranormal experiences (Maltby et al., 2006). In another study, Maltby et al. (2003) related celebrity worship to personality traits, and found considerable overlap between its dimensions and the three factors of Eysenck's personality model. Scores on the entertainment-social dimension tend to correlate with high extraversion, scores on intense-personal correlate with neuroticism, and borderline-pathological with psychoticism.

How does celebrity worship develop in childhood? There is less research on this age group; indeed, the reliance of most celebrity worship studies on undergraduate samples, rather than, say, fans themselves, has been criticized by some authors (Stever, 2009). However, one study found that the emergence of attachments to celebrities coincided with a decrease in attachments to parents during adolescence, greater independence, and high attachments to peers, suggesting that celebrities may act as a set of parasocial friends for teenagers (Giles and Maltby, 2004).

One word of caution: do not confuse the concept of celebrity worship with that of parasocial interaction (PSI; see Chapter 6). Celebrity worship is a highly selective form of PSI. First, not all PSI requires 'worship', or even liking (parasocial relationships can be based on hatred). Second, celebrities only constitute one type of media figure with whom we can form parasocial relationships. But the two concepts are frequently muddled, and PSI has even been described, bizarrely, as a form of celebrity worship.

Given media scholars' dislike of the fandom/religion comparison, how valid is the term 'worship' for fan activities? Maltby et al. (2002) compared scores on the Celebrity Worship Scale with those on a measure of 'religiosity' (how religious an individual is) in an undergraduate sample, and found a broadly **negative relationship** between the two overall scores. Whether this means that the two are entirely separate activities, or that celebrity worship has replaced religion in terms of serving psychological needs requires further research.

Pathological fandom

Extreme celebrity worship can result in overidentification with stars, which can be measured by the Celebrity Worship Scale, with items such as 'The successes of my favourite celebrity are my successes also'. In rare cases, it can result in such a strong desire to make an impact on the celebrity that individuals are prepared to go to ludicrous lengths to demonstrate their adulation, from **stalking** them obsessively to actually attacking them.

Perhaps the most well-known instance of a celebrity obsession that got out of hand was that of John Hinckley Jr, a psychologically disturbed young man whose earlier obsession with becoming famous through music soon developed into a specific obsession with the actress Jodie Foster.

Foster was, at this time, still studying at college, which made her an easy target for stalkers. Hinckley would break into her dormitory at night and slip love letters under her door. In one letter, he admitted that he was content simply to be the subject of conversation between Foster and her friends, 'however full of ridicule it may be' (Franzini and Grossberg, 1995).

Soon, however, being talked about was not enough. As Hinckley's psychological state worsened, he began to plot ever more dramatic ways of securing her attention, such as hijacking planes and committing suicide in front of her. Eventually he turned for inspiration to one of Foster's early films, *Taxi Driver* (1976), in which the central character plots to assassinate a presidential candidate. Why not just shoot the president himself and have done with it, thought Hinckley. After stalking Jimmy Carter towards the end of his time as president in the late 1970s, and being arrested on a firearms charge, Hinckley had a spell of psychiatric treatment for depression. By that time, Ronald Reagan had replaced Carter in the White House, and was leaving the Hilton Hotel in Washington DC in April 1981 when Hinckley fired six bullets at him. All six missed, injuring other members of his entourage, but one ricocheted off his waiting limousine and struck Reagan in the chest, puncturing his lung. Hinckley was arrested there and then – given his motives, it would have made little sense to run away – and was later found not guilty by reason of insanity and confined indefinitely in a psychiatric institution.

Jodie Foster was lucky, as several other celebrities have been killed by their fans. In December 1980, former Beatle John Lennon was returning from a recording session to his New York apartment with his wife Yoko Ono when he was shot five times, once fatally in the heart, by Mark Chapman. Lennon had signed an autograph for Chapman several hours earlier in the same spot, but clearly making contact with his idol was not enough. Nor did it seem to be the motive for murder: although a fan of Lennon's music, Chapman was repeatedly angered by his anti-religious statements and deliberately moved to New York in order to kill him (Jones, 1992). Unlike Hinckley, Chapman overruled the initial decision of not guilty by reason of insanity and pleaded guilty to murder.

Could we have been able to identify Hinckley and Chapman as potential celebrity assassins by their scores on the Celebrity Worship Scale? Chapman maybe, although he would have scored highly on the religiosity scale in the Maltby et al. (2002) study as well. Hinckley would certainly have been labelled a risk to Jodie Foster, but who would have drafted in extra security for Reagan on the basis of obsessive sexual love directed at

an actress? The one thing that Hinckley and Chapman share with many other individuals who attack public figures is a delusion of grandeur, and a desire for some kind of fame or infamy (Meloy et al., 2008). Perhaps, ultimately, the answer may come not from studying fans and celebrity worshippers, but from those who are preoccupied with becoming famous.

Further reading

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Chapter 8

Audience participation media

Introduction

The media have always relied upon audiences to contribute to their output, whether in the form of readers' letters or as TV quiz contestants. In recent years, so much television in particular has drawn its participants from the viewing public that we have devised terms like 'reality TV' to describe shows whose stars are ordinary viewers transformed into celebrities. In this chapter I present some psychological explanations for the popularity of reality TV and other genres that rely on the public for their success, and discuss what it means for the viewer to identify so strongly with the person who could be their next-door neighbour snatching the limelight away from the remote, untouchable figures of traditional celebrity.

The psychological appeal of audience participation media

Ever since radio and television have been beamed into our living rooms, the viewing public has had a powerful presence in the programmes. The term 'audience participation media' covers any show that relies on the participation of the general public, from tightly edited and scripted 'lifestyle' television (property shows, for example) to reality shows such as *Big Brother* where viewers can watch 24-hour live footage of unscripted, naturally occurring social interaction.

The appeal of **audience participation media** is of interest to psychologists because it relates closely to some of the concepts discussed in the previous two chapters, particularly parasocial interaction and identification. It can be argued that audiences identify more strongly with public participants because they recognize them as peers, as distinct from people who work in the media (e.g. TV presenters), and traditional celebrities, who earned their fame through other activities such as acting or music.

What has become increasingly interesting in recent decades is the way in which public participants have been turned into celebrities through their appearances on such programmes. In the UK, the most striking example of all is that of Jade Goody, who shot to fame during her first participation in the 2002 *Big Brother* series, and who died from cervical cancer seven years later in the full glare of the media headlights. But Goody is something of an exception. Most people who make their name through audience participation media tend to exit the stage shortly afterwards, other than those who take up careers in the media as presenters.

This apparently new form of fame has raised a lot of questions about the social function of celebrity and its audience appeal. Most reality TV stars are not endowed with talent, good looks or charisma, as in Goody's case, their audience appeal lies in their very ordinariness. Goody's funeral in 2009 attracted thousands of people, many of whom described her as 'the girl next door' and 'our Essex princess' (BBC, 2009). This sets Goody completely at odds with traditional celebrities such as Hollywood stars, whose remoteness and exoticism contributed to their allure.

The psychological implications of this type of celebrity, and the popularity of audience participation media, will be discussed later in the chapter. But first, it is necessary to trace the evolution of such shows across the history of radio and television.

'Ave a go Flo! Public participation on radio and TV

Wartime radio

In the early days of BBC radio in Britain, it was quickly realized that a cheap and popular form of broadcasting involved a presenter visiting 'ordinary people' performing mundane, everyday activities, and getting them to speak into the microphone. For example, the Manchester BBC studio broadcast shows in which a personality presenter, Harry Hopeful,

interviewed people in various parts of the north of England about their daily activities. During the Second World War, this format became more popular as it was seen as a way to boost public morale by featuring groups of factory workers and other people engaged in the war effort.

Quiz shows

After the war, quiz shows became the dominant form of audience participation media, especially in the US, where at one point in the 1950s, five of the top ten rated network TV shows were quizzes (Goedkoop, 1985). These shows had high stakes for the participants, as substantial monetary prizes were on offer. The quiz show format suffered a temporary setback following a famous scandal involving the show *Twenty-One*, where it transpired that several contestants had been supplied with answers in order to keep them on the show so that they would become familiar faces to viewers, thus generating further publicity for the show. Here we can see the prototype for today's 'reality TV' star.

Later on, the basic quiz show format became extended to incorporate all kinds of competitions involving public contestants. While many of these continued to reward winners with money prizes, such as *The Price Is Right*, others appealed to contestants' (and audiences') romantic side, notably *The Dating Game*, first broadcast on US TV in the 1960s, and ITV's *Blind Date* (1985). Fuelled by huge viewing figures, some of the *Blind Date* contestants became minor celebrities for a brief period, such as Paul Nolan, a window cleaner from Dorset, who entertained the audience with his impressions of TV presenter Bruce Forsyth, and later, after being chosen by that week's female contestant, turned out to be rather less single than the show's prerequisites demanded.

Talk shows

A popular audience participation format in the 1980s and 90s was the **talk show**, which had its roots in 1950s' US television, where the likes of Steve Allen invited the studio audience to interact with his guests, actually moving around the audience himself with the microphone. This type of interaction evolved into a format in its own right with *The Phil Donahue Show* in the 1960s, and later Oprah Winfrey, whose highly popular 1980s' talk show was probably the most influential of them all, and certainly the longest running, set to end in 2011 after 25 'seasons'.

Although the format of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* was to become increasingly diverse, incorporating a book club and celebrity interviews, it initially focused on a separate theme each week, usually a topical social issue such as drug use or AIDS. The same format was briefly popular in the UK in the early 1990s, with former MP Robert Kilroy-Silk presenting a show (*Kilroy*) every weekday morning on the BBC. ITV launched a simultaneous rival show. Themes were typically social issues of varying degrees of seriousness.

The nature of the TV talk show began to change radically during the late 1990s, however, as audiences became younger, brasher and increasingly bored with discussing healthcare and unemployment benefit, preferring more personalized topics. This was in part due to the success of younger, less authoritative hosts such as Ricki Lake in the US and Trisha Goddard in the UK, but also due to the cult success of *The Jerry Springer Show*. Here, presaging the likes of *Big Brother*, the stars of the talk show were not specially invited 'experts' or celebrities as in *Kilroy*, but members of the public with a story – usually a scandalous one – to tell. The drama would unfold in the show as jealous partners, rivals, exes and relatives emerged from behind the curtain to challenge the protagonist, often with explosive consequences and, on occasions, actual violence, although there have been many claims that the brawls were largely staged for the cameras.

Springer and similar shows came under a good deal of criticism from within and outside the media, with social commentators concerned about falling moral standards, 'trash' TV and the ethical responsibilities of the TV channels. Were these people released from the show in order to go home and kill one another? It seems that is precisely what happened in 2002, when guest Ralf Panitz was jailed for the murder of his ex-wife Nancy just hours after the broadcast of the show. Springer was successfully sued by the couple's sons (BBC, 2002).

Almost as great a concern was the suspicion that individuals (and entire families) were appearing on the show simply for publicity, and doubts were raised as to the authenticity of the storylines and the emotions on display. These issues are vitally important for the psychological appeal of audience participation media, as I will go on to discuss later.

Lifestyle shows

In the 1990s, the full potential of audience participation was realized, both in terms of audience appeal and cheap programming. Two types of

lifestyle show became particularly popular during this period, containing elements that were to become critical to the success of reality shows in the following decade – the makeover show and the challenge. In the **makeover show**, members of the public have themselves, their love lives or their properties transformed through the help of experts. This format began in earnest with the BBC's *Changing Rooms* (1996), but had quickly mushroomed into an identifiable genre by the end of the decade (Moseley, 2000).

Makeover shows are a large subset of a broader genre of lifestyle programme in which audiences – and their representatives on the show – are invited to update, transform or improve some aspect of their lifestyle, typically during the course of a single episode. An army of experts is on hand to challenge the current state of affairs, for example a scruffy or dated hairstyle, and assist the participants throughout the show. In the BBC's *Ground Force* (1997), it was participants' gardens that received the makeover, while in its *What Not To Wear* (1999), self-styled fashion 'experts' Trinny and Susannah mocked participants' existing wardrobes before advising them on new purchases.

One of the key cultural features of makeover television is – as Moseley (2000) and other authors have commented – that they serve as a way of creating certain 'hierarchies of taste' and privileging some fashions and lifestyles over others, sometimes for commercial ends. In one episode of a short-lived gardening makeover show, BBC's *Gardening Neighbours* (1998), Taylor (2005) describes how one couple were ridiculed by the so-called 'design experts' for making the focus of their back garden a bed of Bizzy Lizzies, even though the owners were clearly fond of this colourful centrepiece. The makeover, meanwhile, consisted of the 'crisp formality of ... box hedges and standard bay trees' (p. 118), privileging trendy contemporary concepts over supposedly sentimental and old-fashioned styles of garden design, but ultimately sacrificing any visual focus.

At times – particularly with fashion-related shows – such innovations provide close commercial tie-ins with sponsors and other benefiting industries. The ultimately disastrous 1990s and 2000s boom in UK property values was supported by numerous property shows in which homeowners were instructed on the various style elements that could be transformed in order to increase property prices even more, sometimes, apparently, by tens of thousands of pounds. So viewers were simultaneously taught contemporary tastes and market values (Giles, 2002b).

The second popular format, related to the first, although not exactly a lifestyle show, involves members of the general public taking part in an

authentic, that is, naturally occurring, *challenge* of some kind, only the challenge takes place over the course of a series, with the public participants emerging as the real stars of the show rather than the experts. The BBC's *Driving School* (1997) is a typical example. This series featured genuine learner drivers at a specific establishment encountering weekly challenges in their ambitions to learn to drive. By focusing on the participants rather than the experts, 'challenge' series allow personalities to emerge over the course of time, such as Maureen Reece, a spectacularly slow learner who took eight attempts to pass her driving test, and then only in a car fitted with an automatic gearbox. For a while, Maureen was a household name in the UK, even scoring a minor hit single and fronting a safe driving campaign. As with Jade Goody, and other, later reality celebrities, Maureen's essential appeal was her ordinariness, but also her perseverance to master a skill that seemed initially to be beyond her.

'Reality TV'

It is hard to say when the first true **reality TV** show first appeared, although the basic idea of setting up cameras and recording free, naturally occurring interaction between members of the public was seen in a number of one-off series during the 1970s and 80s. These became known as 'fly-on-the-wall' documentaries, or 'docusoaps', creating the impression that the viewer had gained privileged insight into the everyday interaction of an authentic community, but that also there was a narrative unfolding in the course of that interaction.

Perhaps the first true 'reality' show was the BBC's *The Family* (1974), which followed the day-to-day activities of a working-class family from Reading in the south of England, whose members, like Paul Nolan, attracted much press attention at the time, especially since one of the daughters became married during the course of the series. During the 1990s, the docusoap format became more occupation based, with various series charting the day-to-day activities of the workplace or people engaged in a particular profession. The BBC's *Airport* (1996) focused on the activities of staff at London Heathrow Airport, making a star (again, briefly) out of the Aeroflot ground services manager Jeremy Spake.

However, the first shows that were recognizably 'reality' were probably the Dutch show *Nummer 28* and the US variant *The Real World*, broadcast by MTV in the early 1990s, in which public participants auditioned

to become flatmates in an authentic apartment. Although lacking the continuous footage later featured on *Big Brother*, the weekly summaries and 'confessional' monologues straight to camera were picked up by most later reality series, and the concept of a show based around the continuous interaction of public participants heralded the reality explosion later in the decade.

In the early 2000s, reality shows mushroomed on television networks across the globe. *Big Brother* led the way, first in the Netherlands in the late 1990s, then in the UK in 2000 and in numerous other countries during the same period, which reproduced the *Real World* formula, albeit with 24-hour live footage and various other contrivances to force the participants into an unfolding narrative. Most characteristic perhaps was the involvement of the viewing audience, who were able to vote for their least favourite contestant in order to oust them from the house, and then assemble to 'greet' them as they emerged. This element of 'viewer power' added to the impression of reality created by the show – a form of audience democracy, whereby it was the viewers rather than a team of media folk – scriptwriters, producers, celebrities – that dictated the unfolding narrative.

In the UK, *Big Brother* was followed by the BBC's *Castaway* (2000) and ITV's *Survivor* (2001), where public, and unacquainted, participants were thrown together in hostile environments and set a series of arduous challenges. Again, these were simply variants of internationally successful programmes, soon to be usurped by the success of a celebrity version (*I'm a Celebrity – Get Me Out of Here!*), the same fate ultimately befalling *Big Brother*. Indeed, as early as 2001, Channel 4 launched *Celebrity Big Brother*. Strangely, the appeal of seeing public participants in these shows began to fade shortly after.

At the start of the millennium, nobody would have imagined that, by 2010, the most popular TV series – in many countries – would be old-fashioned singing and dancing talent contests, but that is the large circle that reality TV has helped to complete. In 2001 in the UK, reproducing a successful Australian format from the previous year, ITV launched *Popstars*, a series in which young performers competed to form a singing group (Hear'Say), who were to go on briefly to have enormous commercial success.

Later in the same year, *Popstars* was followed by *Pop Idol*, a similar contest to find a solo performer, whose winner Will Young has gone on to sell over 8 million albums. In the US, the format was adapted as *American Idol*, going on to top the viewing ratings for several years, and many other

countries had similar success with local versions. In the UK, the same format has been preserved throughout the decade, with minor variations. By 2010, *The X Factor* continued to make the headlines and produce celebrity performers, even from the cast of also-rans. In 2009, the biggest musical success story in the UK was that of Susan Boyle, an unlikely 48-year-old singer from West Lothian in Scotland with what the *Washington Times* described as a 'homely' appearance (McManus, 2009). Like Jade Goody and Maureen Reece, Boyle scores heavily in the ordinariness stakes, albeit with slightly more evident talent.

While the TV talent show concept itself is a long-established format (UK TV had *Opportunity Knocks* and *New Faces* in the 1970s), the 'reality' version introduced successful elements from other shows. From makeover TV came the unbridled mockery and ritual elimination of unsuccessful applicants in the early phases, an opportunity for preserving taste hierarchies, such as formal vocal mannerisms, popular musical styles and so on. From *Big Brother* came the power of the audience vote, which has often countered sharply with the views of the shows' experts.

However, the most striking feature of the modern talent contest has been the savage criticism meted out by the same experts, helping in the process to make celebrities out of certain panellists, most notably Simon Cowell, whose barbed critiques made him as much of a star as the eventual *Pop Idol* winners – especially since he would be back next series to continue. The same feature has continued on another highly popular UK series, the BBC's *Strictly Come Dancing*, where celebrity contestants are frequently subjected to withering verbal assaults for being only slightly less polished than their opponents.

How real is reality TV?

Early definitions of reality TV were hopelessly confused. Some claimed that it referred to any programme with natural, unscripted and unedited footage; others even that it referred to fictional re-enactments of 'real' events, although these are now usually termed **docudramas**. The essence of reality TV seemed to be simply that it wasn't fictional. Difficulty over identifying precisely what constitutes reality TV has led some media scholars to claim that the term is too general to be useful (Holmes and Jermyn, 2004). Nevertheless, it has become well established in the contemporary lexicon, and there are certainly features of modern-day programming that are instantly recognizable by audiences as reality TV,

even if the shows themselves have precious little to do with reality per se. Whether we like the term or not, it seems we're stuck with it.

Su Holmes (2005, p. 148) has referred to pop talent contests such as *Pop Idol* as 'ultimate examples of reality TV', in that they subvert the workings of the music and entertainment industries by stripping away hype, marketing and internal contrivance and allowing the raw talent itself (and the audience) to be the centre of the selection process. In one sense, they have enabled television to triumph over the music industry itself. In 2009, the UK music sales charts were so dominated by current and former TV talent contestants that a *Facebook* campaign was launched to ensure that a 'genuine' act occupy the Christmas No. 1 slot, as the previous five years had seen that accolade falling to each year's winner of *The X Factor*. A 1992 track from US rock act Rage Against the Machine was dusted off and brought out of retirement and, thanks to the online campaign, received 50,000 more sales than 2009 *X Factor* winner Joe McElderry's debut single.

What makes Rage Against the Machine genuine and Joe McElderry fake? Following Holmes's argument, it should be McElderry that we acknowledge as the real deal, having fought through several rounds of competition and voted for by a huge viewing public, while, for all we know, Rage Against the Machine may have been entirely fabricated in the mysterious world of their multinational record company 17 years or so earlier. The difference is that TV played no obvious part in the formation of Rage Against the Machine. Nobody voted for them. They just emerged, as far as we can tell, from the creative urges of their constituent members, built up a following through live work and some modest recordings, before Sony came in, signing up an already fully fledged act with their own look and sound, untouched by TV-approved experts, professional trainers and advisers. When it comes to music, authenticity – at least for many fans – comes from *not* being involved with the media.

The essence of reality TV is surely the belief that the audience is watching real events unfold in real time, featuring real people. Much of the time this is simply not the case, even in classic reality shows like *Big Brother*. While there was a 24-hour live feed available for those with the time and interest to follow it, the vast majority of viewers relied on the tightly edited mid-evening highlights package, complete with selected chunks of 'action', straight-to-camera 'confessionals' from the diary room, commentary from in-house psychologists and former contestants and the reactions of a studio audience. Whatever viewers might have seen

on the live channel, this was where reality TV happened. And then some: the subsequent media commentary, particularly in the UK tabloid press, online interaction in *Big Brother* Internet fan forums, and even Channel 4's follow-up show *Big Brother's Little Brother*, which extended the analysis conducted during the main show. To quote Su Holmes again (2008, p. 20), 'participants have to come out of the house to find out what they mean (or who they are)'. She cites some telling dialogue from the show where contestants speculate about how the media will portray them: 'I'll be seen as the posh one' (p. 21).

Ultimately, then, reality TV is never the 'window on the world' that it sets itself up to be. Even live sport, which surely is a better candidate for the title of 'ultimate reality TV show' than *Pop Idol* or *The X Factor*, is profoundly shaped by commentary, summary and postmortem debate. Research that has manipulated the commentary to televised sport has found that viewers' perceptions can be significantly affected by the commentators' delivery and bias (Sullivan, 1991). Ultimately, Holmes's (2005) argument implies that reality TV is reality *shaped by* TV. It's really happening, and we're watching it as it happens. How 'authentic' it is remains another matter entirely.



Authenticity and emotional display in audience participation media

Despite concerns over reality TV's claims to be 'real', the question of authenticity is central to understanding the psychological appeal of the programmes. Fundamentally, the important thing about all audience participation media is that we believe the participants are being true to themselves. This is precisely what differentiates audience participation shows from fictional drama, and provides the key to defining 'reality' TV. Never mind that the whole thing is a set-up, that the situations are contrived, and it's a terrible way of producing a half-decent pop group, the important thing is that, in the course of the programme, we see genuinely ordinary public participants displaying sincere emotions.

Emotional display in audience participation media is skilfully manipulated by producers and editors, designing and organizing programmes so that they build up to some kind of **revelation** that will produce a spontaneous outburst of emotion in participants (Moseley, 2000). We can see multiple instances of such revelations in different types of show:

- *Announcements of winners, losers, qualifiers and so on in relation to a contest:* Suspense is created by deliberately delaying the actual revelation, thereby increasing the intensity of the emotional response both in the audience and, more importantly, the significant individuals involved. This is a long-standing tradition in contests such as *Miss World*, perhaps the first televised contest specifically built around extravagant displays of emotion by public participants.
- *Unmasking of transformed persons or their homes/gardens:* Typical of the *Changing Rooms*/*Ground Force*-type makeover show, this is usually the climax of the show where the owners of the home or garden are led, blindfolded, to a location for optimum visual impact. The blindfold is removed and the camera zooms in on their faces. In personal makeover shows, a mirror is suddenly produced for similar effect.
- *Delivery of expert judgement or critique:* The moment of revelation on shows such as *The X Factor* and *Strictly Come Dancing*, almost more important than the performance itself, is when each member of the panel of experts delivers their verdict. Irrespective of the panellists' standing, the visual focus is the face of the contestant.
- *Unmasking of mystery persona:* Typical of 'candid video' shows such as *Candid Camera* and *Beadle's About*, where members of the public are lured into unfortunate situations before the salesman, inspector or whoever is revealed as a TV presenter. Also seen on shows such as *Blind Date*, where contestants are expected to select a potential date solely on the basis of vocal interaction.
- *Disclosure of correct answer:* Seen mainly in quiz shows. As with prizewinners, or public votes in reality shows, the modern tendency is to delay the revelation for an almost painful interval, although in shows employing multiple-choice items (e.g. *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*), much of the audience pleasure lies in trying to 'read' the answer from the presenter's facial gestures and tone of voice.

The main function of emotional display at these moments of revelation is to convince the watching audience that the participants, and the things that happen to them, are genuine, and not actors responding to staged events. This is such an important feature of audience participation media that disclosures of fakery (such as the US quiz show 'rigging' scandal in the 1950s) are met with great hostility by the general public.

Why is it so important that we believe in the authenticity of participant emotion? One possibility is that it enables us to recognize the

participants as fellow members of the public; in other words, they are not part of the script. Defining what constitutes 'the general public' is an extremely difficult task. German philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1989) defined the 'public sphere' as an area where people can discuss political matters in an influential way without actually being politicians, rulers, lawyers and so on. Applying this concept to the media, you could argue that the general public are defined simply by *not being* celebrities, presenters or anything to do with the media.

In most TV programmes, it is easy to identify members of the public simply through the roles they are assigned in the production (Giles, 2002b). For example, a member of the public would never introduce the show; even if we have never seen the presenter before, we assume that they are a media employee of some sort. The most emphatic role assignment though is the on-screen description of each person who speaks: if you are billed by name alone, it is assumed you are sufficiently well known not to require a role, and are therefore a celebrity or other media personality. If you are billed as 'Joan Potts, housewife' or 'John Potts, local resident', then you are clearly assigned a public role until the show is over and other media have the opportunity of turning you into something more glamorous.

In short programmes, and particularly in edited shows, the appearance of public participants is not always long enough to fully convince a sceptical viewing audience that the individual is genuine (and not an actor). One of the most successful features of *Big Brother* and other reality shows is that the continuous coverage of live footage makes it harder for participants to sustain any kind of artificial front, and the expectation is that their 'real selves' will be exposed sooner or later (Holmes, 2008). It is, perhaps, for this reason that we saw a gradual shift in audience appeal from ordinary contestants to celebrity contestants on reality shows in the 2000s. Once the reality format was established, it became more fun seeing celebrities' real selves unmasked rather than those of public participants.

Participant experiences

While the audience at home is revelling in the tantalizing revelations and emotional twists and turns of the participants, what about the participants themselves? The welfare of individuals appearing on shows such as

Big Brother has been hotly debated by psychologists and the television industry, with long-running discussions in publications like *The Psychologist*. TV bosses are frequently accused of exploiting public participants, who, after all, don't command a fee, and of encouraging **voyeurism**.

The most important ethical issue concerns the psychological welfare of participants who – unexpectedly – find that they cannot cope with the social pressure of the show and yet are bound by the competition rules to continue. This kind of scenario has uncomfortable echoes of controversial psychological studies such as Milgram's 1974 obedience studies (see Chapter 11) and the Stanford prison 'experiment' (Haney et al., 1973). These examples prompted a tightening of ethical standards in social scientific research during the 1980s, with a scale of reform that has yet to be fully embraced by the media.

In *Big Brother 7* (2006), contestant Shahbaz Chauhdry walked out of the house after just five days after threatening to kill himself. It later transpired that four of the other housemates in the same series had previous or existing mental health issues, leading the founder of mental health charity SANE Marjorie Wallace to claim that the show was 'worse than bear baiting' (Wallace, 2006). Three years later, Sree Dasari, an evicted contestant, was hospitalized after cutting his wrist while watching a subsequent episode of the show.

The counterargument by media producers is that participants are free agents who are fully aware of the psychological risks of participation, and that they themselves are exploiting the medium for the good of their own self-publicity. Furthermore, should unexpected psychological distress occur, it is argued, there are counsellors on hand to look after contestants' welfare before, during and after the show (Addley, 2009). Despite this, there have been frequent statements from the British Psychological Society and the Mental Health Foundation about concerns over the actual ethical standards being observed by TV companies in producing reality shows that often seem to be exploiting vulnerable individuals in the name of entertainment.



Further reading

Holmes, S. and Jermyn, D. (eds) (2004). *Understanding reality television*. London: Routledge.