# CELEBRITY GOSSIP, MAGAZINES

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# Reading Celebrity Gossip Magazines

Andrea M. McDonnell

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# Reading Celebrity Gossip Magazines

For my parents

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# Introduction Celebrity Gossip Magazines in American Popular Culture

We see them in airports and grocery checkouts, lining drugstore counters and street-corner news-stands. They are laughed at, ignored, and purchased - skimmed, pored over, flipped through. Their hot-pink headlines proclaim news of dates and diets, breakups and baby bumps. Whether you thumb through them or thumb your nose at them, celebrity gossip magazines are a ubiquitous part of the current popular cultural landscape in the United States, and most other Western countries. Since their emergence in the early part of the twenty-first century, these magazines have gained popularity and power, earning millions of readers and dollars to match. But while a handful of scholars have considered the role of similar publications in other countries (Brewer, 2009; Feasey, 2008; Holmes, 2005; Johansson, 2006), little is known about the influence of American gossip magazines, despite the genre's cultural and economic prominence. What are these magazines really about? Who reads them? And how have they sustained their success during a socially and economically tumultuous period, despite the fact that their contents have remained remarkably uniform? This book investigates these questions, combining interviews with editors and writers, trade press reports, reader commentary, and textual evidence from the magazines themselves, in an effort to understand why celebrity gossip magazines matter in contemporary American culture.

Since 2000, a new crop of magazines has earned a place on America's news-stands. Us Weekly, Life & Style, In Touch, Star, and OK!, have become synonymous with celebrity gossip. Week after week, these colorful, photo-filled glossies reach millions of readers, peddling news of feuds and facelifts. Celebrity gossip magazines are bright, colorful, and opinionated. Their stories are as short as their photos are large. And they offer bold headlines and oodles of juicy tidbits, for about the price of a cup of coffee. These features have helped celebrity gossip magazines carve for themselves a popular and profitable niche within a publishing market that has suffered through a decade of economic downturn.

The emergence of the celebrity gossip genre can be traced to the entertainment magazine Us, which in March 2000 announced that it would undergo a major redesign. In hopes of boosting lagging sales, Us transformed from a monthly entertainment magazine to a celebrity-focused weekly. Advertising Age dubbed the \$50 million transformation "the largest re-launch in a decade," and Terry McDonnell, former editor of Men's Journal and Esquire, was named editor-in-chief.1 The revamped *Us* promoted itself as a "cultural newsweekly," featuring celebrity news stories designed to attract female readers aged 18 to 34. Though critics cringed and initial sales disappointed, Us Weekly reported a 12 percent increase in circulation and a 34 percent rise in ad sales by the start of 2002.2 Two months later, Bonnie Fuller, the Canadian media executive credited with spicing up Glamour and Cosmo, was tapped to replace McDonnell. Fuller injected a dose of winking irreverence into the magazine, raking in readers, fueling a cultural obsession with celebrity, and transforming Us into an industry darling while earning herself the nickname, "gossip's godmother."4

By the end of 2002, *Us Weekly* had increased its newsstand sales by 55.3 percent, more than any other massmarket magazine. The New York Times proclaimed that "the medium has transformed the message," writer David Carr noting that the weekly's new format had converted scandalous tabloid themes into attractive stories, encouraging "thousands of new readers, some of them pretty far upscale." Meanwhile, as *Advertising Age* praised Fuller for transforming the magazine into a "cultural touchstone," the

maven made a controversial exit, leaving Us to become the editorial director of Star.7

Previously a paper tabloid known for its no-holds-barred celebrity coverage and Enquirer-style covers, Star was to undergo a glossy, 20-million-dollar makeover in order to compete with Us.8 American Media, the tabloid's parent company, hoped that Fuller and her "upbeat," "energetic" spirit would place Star at the center of the growing celebrity weekly industry.9 The industry was, in fact, expanding. As Fuller took her place at the helm of Star, Bauer Publishing debuted two new celebrity weeklies, In Touch and Life & Style, both featuring content, format, and aesthetics nearly identical to those of Us. 10 Then, in August, 2005, British media mogul Richard Desmond and his company, Northern & Shell, launched an American edition of the popular British tabloid OK!.

As the industry grew, sales continued to climb, silencing critics who predicted that the market was oversaturated and doomed to fail. In 2003, Janice Min replaced Fuller as Us Weekly's editor-in-chief. The following year, news-stand sales of *Us* rose 47.3 percent to 745,887 copies per week and *Advertising Age* named *Us* 2004's "Magazine of the Year:"

Roll your eyes; purse your lips and shake your head; slip it inside your bag so your smarty-pants friends don't see it. But resistance is futile. Thanks to its unprecedented fusion of newsstand heat, advertiser interest and - most incredibly - the way it's found a younger and wealthier audience, Us Weekly is Advertising Age's Magazine of the Year.11

And *Us* was not the only one cashing in on the weekly craze. In 2006, advertiser spending in Us, In Touch, Life & Style and OK! totaled \$564 million, proving that gossip could sell, and sell big, to the coveted female demographic.<sup>12</sup> All the while, countless blogs, television programs, and even newspapers were revamping their content in an attempt to court celebrity-obsessed audiences. By the middle of the decade, the celebrity gossip genre had become an instantly recognizable and virtually unavoidable part of American pop culture. "Like it or not," wrote Advertising Age's Jon Fine, "Us Weekly has become a cultural reference point, if not an entire world view."13

#### 4 Introduction: Celebrity Gossip Magazines

Celebrity magazines have existed since the start of the twentieth century, when cinema captured audiences' attention and fueled fans' desire to learn about their favorite players. Richard deCordova (1990) traces the ways in which the discourse surrounding actors transformed throughout the nineteen teens and twenties. Early fan magazines such as *Photoplay, Silver Screen*, and *Picture-Play Magazine* produced what deCordova calls "picture personalities." Narratives within these publications emphasized the link between actor and character and essentially worked to produce the actor as an extended version of his or her filmic representation. As deCordova writes:

Personality existed as an effect of the representation of character in a film – or, more accurately, as the effect of the representation of character across a number of films . . . Extrafilmic discourse did talk about the players' personalities outside of films but only to claim that they were the same as those represented in films . . . the player's identity was restricted to the textuality of the films she or he was in. (1990: 86–7)

The content of these stories was primarily controlled by studio press departments, which "operated not only as promoters but also as protectors," crafting public personae that fit with the studio's desired image, according to Joshua Gamson, who traces the history of the celebrity industry in his book, *Claims to Fame* (1994: 27).

But, by 1914, the discourse around picture personalities took an important turn. Whereas early stories were often redundant and narrowly focused, these new narratives began to explore the players' private lives outside of film, dramatically expanding the scope of information that readers could learn about famous figures. DeCordova argues that it is precisely this shift that produces the actor as *star*. Throughout the twentieth century, discourse around the star continued to evolve and expand. In the 1920s, emphasis on actors' private lives produced scandalous stories, wherein the stars' domestic problems and moral transgressions took center stage (deCordova, 1990: 119). By the 1930s, the glamorous aura of the star was dissolving; actors were now depicted not as idols or as democratic royalty, but as wealthier, prettier versions of ordinary people (Gamson, 1994: 29). As the studio system

began to unravel in the late 1940s and early 1950s, due largely to anti-trust legislation and the emergence of television, actors gained greater control of their own image. Since then, an entire industry of publicists, agents, stylists, editors, and groomers has emerged to help stars cultivate and maintain their fame, a fame based not on some idealized screen image, but on the appearance of authenticity and ordinariness (Gamson, 1994). In 1974, these stars began appearing in the newly launched People Magazine, whose names-makenews approach to reporting helped feed an appetite for celebrity culture that has influenced the American media landscape ever since. All the while, a growing body of research has emerged in an effort to understand the proliferation of fame and its industries; scholars have examined the historical roots of fame (Braudy, 1986), the evolution of stardom and its ties to the development of radio, film, and television (Gamson, 1994; Marshall, 1997), the relationship between celebrity and commodification (Cashmore, 2006), and the ways in which star stories impact conceptions of social mobility (Sternheimer, 2011) and ethnicity (Negra, 2001).

In many ways, the latest group of celebrity magazines may be viewed as a logical extension of pre-existing discourses around celebrity and stardom. Today's celebrity gossip magazines have much in common with their predecessors. They emphasize the sensational and the outrageous. They revel in bias and speculation. They, too, use large, stylized images to catch the eye of potential readers. And they follow the rich and famous with a monomaniacal eye. Yet I argue that Us Weekly, Life & Style, Star, In Touch, and OK! can be understood as a singular cohort, one which marks an important elaboration and exaggeration of previous representations of fame. Throughout this book, I refer to these five texts as celebrity gossip magazines and I consider them a genre, in and of themselves. I do so not to diminish their historical ties to other similar publications, but to emphasize the common features and affordances of these particular texts.

What makes celebrity gossip magazines unique? First, the aesthetic of the genre is specific and shared across publications. As chapter 2 demonstrates, all celebrity gossip magazines adhere to a defined set of visual and textual codes. In particular, the use of many, large, full-color photographs is a

contemporary development, one that has only been made possible thanks to digital imaging technologies and the widespread availability of high-speed Internet.

Second, where previous star magazines meshed industryrelated content with narratives about the personal lives of the stars, contemporary celebrity gossip magazines eschew nearly any reference to players' professional careers. Here, celebrities are no longer idols of the silver screen. They are ordinary. They are, quite simply, just like us. The paradox of ordinary stardom is a theme that has been widely discussed in the literature on celebrity culture (Dyer, 1991; Gamson, 1994; Holmes and Redmond, 2006; Lai, 2006). But while the motif of the ordinary celebrity is nothing new, it is made all the more salient in the twenty-first century, in an age where the fame (and notoriety) once reserved for royalty, inventors, and film stars (Braudy, 1986; Rojek, 2001) has been sprinkled over a vast and ever-growing army of celebs culled from the ranks of reality television shows, YouTube videos, and human interest stories.

Celebrity theorist Chris Rojek calls this new crop of stars celetoids, "media-generated, compressed, concentrated" celebrities, made famous through pseudo-events and the industrial machinery of a well-oiled celebrity industry (2001: 18). The need for these types of stars has grown exponentially since the emergence of cable television in the 1980s, when the rise of niche channels and the 24-hour news cycle sparked a ceaseless demand for content (Lotz, 2007).14 Further fueling this push for fresh faces, reality television took root in the 1990s and early 2000s with the debut of The Real World, Survivor, Big Brother, and American Idol. Now a pervasive part of our televisual landscape, reality TV creates a demand for new "ordinary" stars while simultaneously grooming an endless group of up-and-comers who, once known, are discussed in the tabloid press, dissected on talk and entertainment news shows, and obsessed over in the blogosphere. Add to this the rise of online technologies and social media and the explosion of "ordinary" celebrities on the pages of gossip magazines seems almost inevitable.

In addition, deCordova notes that early claims about the ordinariness of the stars were built on representations of private life, which typically focused on familial relationships.

Thus celebrity scandals of the early twentieth century emphasized breaks in the traditional nuclear family caused by infidelity and divorce. In short, moral transgression for stars of the past was defined as sexual transgression. In chapter 3, I trace the development of the ordinary star as she appears in celebrity gossip magazines; indeed, contemporary narratives continue to emphasize family life - marriages, babies, and the like - and today's scandals are often sexual in nature. Yet within contemporary narratives, a new site of moral transgression emerges. Private life, and the codes of conduct deemed "ordinary" therein, is no longer defined only by sexual relations, but also by the body and the regimentation of that body (Douglas, 2010). The culmination of sexual and bodily discourses of the private appears in what is perhaps the genre's defining narrative: the baby bump watch. As we will see in chapter 4, this storyline obsessively scrutinizes the female body (which, being pregnant, is also a sexual body). The genre's emphasis on the behaviors and bodies of women is crucial, for the final element that distinguishes celebrity gossip magazines from fan magazines of the past is their singular focus on female stars and female life.

Celebrity gossip magazines are fundamentally concerned with the experiences and emotions of women. Although each publication has a self-avowed mission: to combine "honest and accurate reporting" with a "fun, irreverent format" (In Touch), to "highlight Hollywood's timeliest trends and help readers translate their favorite stars' styles into their own lives" (Life & Style), or to be "the magazine the stars trust" (OK!), all share a single-minded goal: to document and comment on the personal lives of celebrity women. In other words, these magazines are not simply about famous figures; they are about famous females.

This is not to say that male celebrities do not appear in the pages of these magazines. They do. However, they are featured less often and less prominently than their female counterparts. They are rarely the centerpiece of a story and narratives are almost never told from a male perspective. To see this, we need only think of the British royal family. Prince William, Duke of Cambridge, is, as the heir to the British throne, arguably the most renowned man in England. And yet when he appears in the pages of celebrity gossip

magazines (yes, even the American ones) he is not depicted as a famous figure in his own right. He is the son of Diana, Princess of Wales (whom the tabloid press notoriously pursued), and the husband of Duchess of Cambridge Kate Middleton. Now, he is also the father of a mini-royal, Prince George. And so the Duke of Cambridge appears as a man whose import is determined by his relationship to the women in his life, not by his own prestige or actions. The role that men play across the celebrity gossip genre is that of supporting actor.

Meanwhile, women take center stage. The faces of female celebrities, in various stages of jubilation and defeat, beam out at us from the covers of these magazines. Headlines herald the excitement and tragedy of female life. From breakups to baby bumps, dates to diets, friendships to feuds, these magazines investigate and celebrate women's triumphs and challenges, all narrated from a female point of view. These magazines tell star stories, stories that have long been told about the rich and famous, but they do so in a way that specifically speaks to the experiences and concerns of women. Reading Celebrity Gossip Magazines is, therefore, not only a study of fame and an industry that both perpetuates and benefits from it, but is also a study of the ways in which ideas about fame influence ideas about femininity. Further, because this narrative emphasis, as chapter 2 will demonstrate, works to attract a predominantly female audience, this book takes as its starting point the idea that celebrity gossip magazines are a form of women's popular culture.

#### Loving (and Hating) Celebrity Gossip

I began my study of celebrity gossip magazines as a fan of the genre. While working at a museum in suburban New York, my female coworkers and I would spend our breaks and lunch hours debating the merit (or tragedy) of Jessica Simpson's frocks, or empathizing with Jennifer Aniston, or worrying over Kristen Stewart and her angsty expressions. We were often most intrigued, however, by the genre's depiction of pregnancy – from the so-called "bump patrol," relentlessly eyeing celebrity midsections, to tales of Nadya Suleman,