The Next Big Thing: Local Celebrity

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Abstract In this essay I observe that, as the field of celebrity studies established itself in the academy, there is a need for a distinctly sociological and interactional approach to celebrity. In particular, I argue for a focus on the experiential and relational dynamics of celebrity from the point of view of celebrities themselves, something which has so far been difficult for researchers to achieve. One way to accomplish this goal is to move in the direction celebrity itself seems to be headed: toward local or subcultural celebrities and their smaller, more segmented audiences. Empirical research on the lived experiences of local celebrities provides a practical way to generate celebrity-level data and makes an important sociological contribution to broader theorizing about the cultural phenomenon of celebrity.

Keywords Celebrity · Sociology · Interaction · Local · Subcultural

We are awash in celebrity. It is a sea which only widens and deepens with time. Changes in media technology, including the proliferation of television channels and the advent of the Internet, have meant that there is more celebrity available now than ever before, because there are more outlets for those who seek it (both as consumers and aspirants). Even the most pop-culture-averse types are hard-pressed to avoid the torrent of celebrity news streaming at them from multiple sources. For social scientists, it’s time to sink or swim: either treat celebrity as an appropriate area of scholarly inquiry, or prepare to drown in its deluge. Fortunately, many have taken up charge, and the field of celebrity studies is growing at a healthy pace: the first scholarly journal devoted entirely to the topic debuted in March, 2010 (Celebrity Studies), and research on celebrity is published regularly in all sorts of outlets.

As celebrity studies establishes itself in the academy, it has begun to develop in both comprehensiveness and complexity, with a variety of sub-areas and different theoretical and methodological approaches. Located so far largely in media studies and cultural studies, celebrity studies has focused on textual analyses, broad political questions, and issues of representation (Turner 2010). Sociologists have certainly participated, along with scholars in literature, film, communications, mass media and other disciplines, in the growth of celebrity studies, and its interdisciplinarity is one of its strengths. However, it also seems important to develop a distinctive sociology of celebrity. Sociologists need to apply our disciplinary methods and theories to the study of celebrity, and celebrity studies will benefit from the application of sociology’s virtues. In particular, empirically-grounded, meaning-centered sociological research will help fill a specific gap in celebrity studies: we still know relatively little about what people really do, say, and think about celebrity in their everyday lives.

An interaction-based sociology of celebrity will connect the existing analyses of celebrity texts, celebrity politics and celebrity representation with what celebrity means to real people in the real world. I have been especially interested in fan–celebrity interactions, mostly from the perspective of fans, and believe that this approach should be extended to include the study of fan–celebrity interactions from the perspective of the celebrities as well. In this essay, then, I call for an interactional sociology of celebrity that focuses on the lived experience of celebrity from the point of view of celebrities themselves; I also propose that focusing on local celebrity is one way to facilitate the growth of this area of sociological research.
Celebrity and Social Interaction

While fan–celebrity relations are a region of interaction that has yet to be comprehensively mapped, prior research has identified some of the distinctive interactional dynamics that characterize celebrity in contemporary society. These interactional dynamics include widespread recognizability, relational asymmetry, lack of conventional mutuality, and, often but not always, lack of physical copresence. The first, recognizability, is perhaps the defining characteristic of celebrity—indeed, Mills (1956) and Boorstin (1961) identified this as a central quality of celebrity half a century ago. Celebrities are highly visible, well-known individuals who may or may not have some special quality, talent, or skill, but who are widely recognizable on a national or even international level. So, at the core of being a celebrity is the experience of being recognized by far more people that one can recognize back. For example, I can easily pick actor George Clooney out of a crowd; however, he cannot do the same with me. This central attribute of contemporary celebrity is the basis for the fundamental asymmetry of fan–celebrity relations: George Clooney cannot recognize me because, while he is aware that he has teeming throngs of female fans, he hasn’t the slightest idea who this particular female fan—Kerry Ferris—is. Ours is a lopsided relationship. Horton and Wohl (1956) were among the first to consider the ways in which electronic media creates a kind of one-sided intimacy, in which fans feel they have come to know celebrities (through regular viewing of television or film, consumption of celebrity journalism, or other types of information gathering (Ferris 2001)), while celebrities have no equivalent knowledge of fans (and few avenues through which to obtain it). This, then, contributes to the lack of conventional mutuality in fan–celebrity relations as well—they inhabit what Glaser and Strauss (1964) call closed awareness contexts, in which one party possesses more knowledge about the other, while the second party knows little or nothing about the first. This is why I can tell you all sorts of details about Clooney’s life, such as his love for bulldogs and pot-bellied pigs, but he does not possess corresponding knowledge about me.

These relational dynamics are sustained by the fact that fan–celebrity relations are conducted almost entirely outside of physical copresence. While each participant is aware of the other (in the unconventional and asymmetrical ways described above), they are not usually available to one another for the mutual monitoring and interpretation of expressions that makes copresence so crucial to conventional interaction (Goffman 1959). Only in exceptional cases, such as celebrity sightings or other types of relatively rare encounters, does copresence obtain. Fans may seek out copresence in order to equalize some of the asymmetry inherent in their relations with celebrities, but even physical copresence does not solve the fundamental imbalances of knowledge and power that characterize fan–celebrity relations (Ferris 2001). I may stand in line at a movie premiere or other event for the chance to shake Clooney’s hand, get his autograph, or have my picture taken with him. But such an encounter does not make us true intimates, nor does it do much to open the awareness context within which we dwell. George and I both know this, and while I may lament these relational dynamics, he is likely quite satisfied with them.

From Global Celebrity to Local Celebrity

While contemporary celebrity is usually conceptualized as a national and even an international phenomenon, many of the interactional dynamics associated with celebrity also operate at the regional, local and hyper-local levels. For example, if recognizability is the central element of celebrity status, the category of “celebrity” may be expanded considerably, and comparatively minor media players—such as local newscasters, minor league athletes, or local politicians—may be defined as celebrities, at least within their local context. This means that fan–celebrity relations involving the big stars (like Mr. Clooney) are not the only types of relationships that feature the interactional asymmetries discussed above. The relational dynamics of celebrity operate at other levels as well; and there may also be interesting variations on these patterns that are observable at these levels.

At the local level, celebrity may be defined in a more limited way—people who are well-known in smaller, more circumscribed worlds, but who are not necessarily household names like the Hollywood stars. I propose local celebrity as a specific type of Hills’ (2003) “subcultural celebrity”—a more narrow-cast version of celebrity, in which people are “treated as famous only by and for their fan audiences” (p. 61). Hills uses this term to describe such smaller-scale celebrities as cult-TV actors (2003), TV producers-cum-bloggers (Chin and Hills 2008), and even some media fans themselves (2006), but in its broadest definitional sense the concept can cover a good deal of empirical ground, including the type of local celebrity I am interested in here.

Largely as a result of the rise in Internet technology, there are more opportunities for celebrity, with smaller, more segmentated and specialized audiences, and the prospect of more open awareness contexts (or what Redmond calls “ever decreasing circles of affective connectivity” (2006, 36)). Local celebrities may include newscasters, politicians and professors, as well as the lifeguard at the pool, the cashier at the market, and the waitress at the diner—people who are seen, recognized, and followed by more people than they can keep track of, and who hence experience relational dynamics similar to those of global, mass culture celebrities. (Blogs, Facebook and Twitter also provide means by which ordinary people can have relation-
ships with their fans, followers and audiences—technologically mediated, but comparable to those of bigger media stars.) Local celebrities are easier for audiences (and researchers) to access, to gather information about, and to connect with interactionally, which may alter some of the relational asymmetries associated with global celebrity. In any case, this is one of the directions in which celebrity as a cultural phenomenon is headed, and those who study celebrity will be moving this way as well.

### Downsizing Celebrity Studies

Taking a local approach to celebrity studies will make it easier to do something that, so far, very few celebrity researchers have been able to do: address a topic from the perspective of the celebrities themselves, by gathering data directly from celebrity respondents. This gap in the scholarly literature is the result of a number of different problems and issues, methodological and otherwise. National and international celebrities and their handlers work hard to create barriers between the stars and those who want contact with them (Ferris 2004), and may be leery of participating in research because of confidentiality issues. Researchers may also avoid even attempting access because of the difficulties associated with “studying up” the status hierarchy (Lofland and Lofland 1995; Ostrander 1993). Young and Pinsky are the only researchers to successfully utilize national media celebrities as research subjects, in their work on narcissism (2006; Pinsky and Young 2009). These researchers enjoyed a rare level of celebrity access due to Pinsky’s position as both a radio and television personality and a research physician, and they used careful methodological precautions to preserve their subjects’ anonymity. Few other researchers possess this access advantage, and this has meant a dearth of celebrity research that focuses on the lived experience of celebrities themselves.

Why is it important for researchers to explore the perspectives of celebrities themselves, rather than just audiences’ responses to them, or the ways in which they are represented in popular culture? Scholars have finally begun to acknowledge the symbolic power of “celebrity” as a concept; this acknowledgement would seem to demand that more intellectual attention be paid to the individuals who embody that concept and who personify its symbolic and social power. Who are these individuals? (As noted above, Pinsky and Young have at least begun to attempt an answer to this question (Young and Pinsky 2006; Pinsky and Young 2009), but have done it from a more quantitative and clinical psychological perspective.) How did they become celebrities? What are the qualities and characteristics of their lived experiences as celebrities? How do they feel about the way they are represented by media, fans and critics? What are their perspectives on the issues already examined by researchers from the viewpoints of these other parties?

Since so few researchers meet the “unique adequacy requirements” (Garfinkel and Weider 1992) necessary to gain access to celebrities of national or international status, it seems that these questions could best be answered at the local level. Small-market celebrities such as local newscasters, community politicians, local musicians, or specialty bloggers, present fewer access obstacles, and hence are more realistic targets for scholars interested in the experiential and interactional aspects of becoming and being a celebrity. How do they see their own celebrity? What is it like to live with their extensive recognizability? Do they ever wish for more privacy or anonymity (or more fame)? Do they enjoy or resent the demands of their audience? What is their view of the relational asymmetries of their position? Answering these questions at the local level, with “subcultural celebrities”, will suggest more generalizable patterns, eventually allowing for a more comprehensive theorizing of celebrity at all levels.

Only a very few scholars have started down this path, most of them addressing local celebrity inadvertently rather than by design. The issue of local celebrity surfaces in a variety of different guises in studies of musicians (i.e. Grazian 2003; Sargent 2009; Villareal 2008); these authors don’t position themselves directly under the theoretical rubric of celebrity studies, but rather address related topics and hence deal only a glancing blow to the topic of local celebrity. Luthar (2003) gets a little bit closer, exploring how local politicians are celebritized in women’s magazines. (However, since this article is published in Slovenian, it will likely have a more limited impact on the field than works published in English and other, more common languages.) Gmelch and San Antonio (1998) put a gendered spin on the topic of small-scale celebrity by examining the relationship between minor league baseball players and their female groupies, while Forsyth and Thompson (2007) do something similar with rodeo cowboys. But Hills (2003, 2006; Chin and Hills 2008), studying the world of cult television and its fans, is really the only scholar addressing the localization of celebrity head on. He does this by creating, applying and extending the notion of subcultural celebrity, of which I argue local celebrity is a subcategory.

I intend to join Hills and others in working on empirical studies of smaller, more circumscribed worlds of celebrity (I am embarking on a study of local newscasters and their experiences of celebrity), and here’s why: First, “local” is where celebrity itself is going, so it is where celebrity studies needs to go, too. Second, “local” is really the only way to get celebrity-level data (at least until more sociologists start hobnobbing with the Hollywood haut monde), and empirically-grounded, meaning-centered research on celebrity is needed to enrich the current
sociological literature on celebrity. Finally, “local” celebrity data can generate broader theorizing pertinent to global celebrity and beyond, increasing the sociological relevance and applicability of this area of study.

The field of local celebrity is wide open, with many relevant situations and social worlds waiting to be explored by sociologists. The neighborhood bar bands, small-town mayors and aldermen, community theater divas, local weather guys, mommy-bloggers and semi-pro athletes are all out there waiting, ready to provide rich data and fascinating insights on the interactional dynamics of local celebrity. As sociologists, we must continue mapping this region of social interaction, and as celebrity scholars we must turn our attention to the lived experience of celebrity. Focusing on those who are famous in more circumscribed social worlds is one way to accomplish this, meaning that the next big thing in celebrity studies may in fact be rather small.

Further Reading


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