



MITCH DIAMOND

Celebrity Nation: New Book Tracks How Celebrity Worship Took Over in the United States

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Like many of us, I used to think that celebrity culture was an amusing diversion — sometimes intriguing, often superficial, but not harmful. But that was before, as a founding editor of *People* magazine in 1974, I watched the celebrity state morph into a vast profit-generating enterprise we can think of as the celebrity-industrial complex. When I started writing for *People*, the other journalists in the Time-Life Building saw it as a déclassé distraction from the important issue-raising they were doing for the nation every week. But by October 1975, *People* was selling a million copies a week on newsstands, and by 1980, the weekly circulation was 2.5 million copies. When John Lennon died, the issue with his photo on the cover sold 2.6 million copies. We had conclusively legitimized a new genre: celebrity journalism, a name that once sounded like a contradiction in terms.

"No one was smart enough to know we didn't know what we were doing," the editor Dick Stolley said to me. At its heart, though, *People* was merchandizing an illusion. We told the public we were writing about extraordinary people. But in reality, we began portraying celebrities as ordinary people. We were stripping away the mystery and mystique. Their private lives were on full display in the now-mandatory "home takes" in which photographers peeked behind the curtain and revealed the subject relaxing at home, off guard with their dogs, their partners, and their messy kitchens. There were no extraordinary people in this world. Everyone was recognizably ordinary.

The stars were just like us! That, of course, was an illusion too, a construct made by and for the media. Magazines like *People* were its initiators and, at first, its beneficiaries. But it spread beyond anyone's control.

Today there is no single model of celebrity. Thanks to the centrifugal forces of the internet and social media, celebrities are created overnight on TikTok and YouTube and reinforced by marketers and media. Now, an unruly democracy of celebrities crowds the public imagination. Anyone can become a celebrity with enough patience and enough followers.

Yet the damage is everywhere. Celebrity worship has become a disorienting force, hurting not only celebrities but the nation as a whole. This isn't to say you can't be obsessed with your favorite musician and also organize around issues that matter to you. But it's where fandom tips into obsession that the risks become more clear.

Here, drawing on my book, *Celebrity Nation: How America Evolved into a Culture of Fans and*

Followers, are five ways that celebrity worship hurts us all.

1. Celebrity worship is a weapon of mass distraction

When we wonder why American politics has become so divided and disarrayed, all we have to do is turn on the television or check our smartphone and watch the celebrities parade by. They are commanding our attention. Meanwhile, the once carefully policed borderlines between public and private, ordinary and famous, famous and notorious, celebrities and heroes, have weakened or all but disappeared in recent years.

As a candidate, Donald Trump mastered not just the messaging of celebrity but its mechanics too. He used TV and Twitter not only to grow and sustain his visibility but also to position himself as the one politician who engaged his supporters directly, unmediated by the political elite. In the absence of experience and conventional qualifications, however, he was required to work endlessly to keep reminding people he was a “totally big celebrity” — since his fame was the primary measure of his merit.

Do you wonder who the three most-searched people were on Google in 2022? Answer: Johnny Depp, Will Smith, and Amber Heard.

Here's betting on [Gwyneth Paltrow and her court case](#) this year.

2. The celebrity worship machinery especially disadvantages women and minorities

The first person to become world-famous was Alexander the Great. Why? Because his was the first mortal face to be placed on a coin. Thanks to new technologies, men then dominated the ranks of the famous for centuries. It took the new visual media of posters and photography to enable entertainers like Sarah Bernhardt, Jenny Lind, and Annie Oakley to become widely known. In the 20th century, after the arrival of Hollywood, Black women were hit particularly hard by racial disparities. Musical performers like Marian Anderson and Josephine Baker faced humiliating setbacks early in their careers. Today the entertainers most at risk of erasure are still people of color. Just ask *The Come Up's* Sophia Wilson.

3. Celebrity worship is especially bad for kids

The desire for fame starts early. From our youngest ages, people crave it. In Britain in 2006, the organizers of National Children's Day asked children under 10 years old to reveal their Christmas wish list. The desire to be famous or “being a celebrity” emerged at the top of the list, followed by “good looks” and “being rich.”

The desire of individuals to acquire fame and celebrity is carried by generations, especially among children and preadolescents. According to one study, fame is the biggest goal in life for children in the U.S. ages 10 to 12. In a 2017 survey of 1,000 British children, the most popular choice for a future career was “YouTuber.”

According to a 2005 survey done by the *Washington Post* and Harvard University, 31% of American teenagers thought they would become famous one day. A 2012 study in the journal *Psychology and Marketing* found that intense personal worship of celebrities most affects female adolescents who acquire “a poor body image.”

The hunger for fame is not about “we.” In other words, fame — which rewards individuals — has grown in influence, while those values promoting community strength, equality, and democracy have diminished

4. Celebrity worship promotes narcissism

Everyone who seeks fame risks suffering from the very real [diagnosis](#) of what is known as Acquired Situational Narcissism (ASN).

No, there is not a pill for that. ASN is a diagnosed condition in which those in high positions of power, such as movie stars, politicians, and professional athletes, develop narcissistic traits as a result of their fame. ASN is a multifaceted personality trait that combines grandiosity, attention-seeking, an unrealistically inflated self-view, a need for that self-view to be continuously reinforced, and a general lack of regard for others.

Narcissism can lead people to seek out fame, but ASN develops after achieving success, sometimes intensifying narcissistic tendencies that were already present. ASN is fed by attention from others. Individuals with ASN tend to be high-profile celebrities, so the attention they receive is necessarily more intense and constantly reinforced by their employees, the media, and of course by their fans and followers.

There is essentially an unspoken Faustian bargain between the celebrities and the media. If the celebrities cooperate with the media (and the more they feed the media’s needs, the bigger they become), they hold on to their fame and fortune, but at the cost of their individuality, their privacy, even their independence. And the more famous they become, the more vulnerable they become.

What this amounts to is that our addiction to fame has become a key component of the American dream — but one that betrays us. F. Scott Fitzgerald previewed it in his judgment about the wealthy Buchanans in *The Great Gatsby*: “They were careless people, Tom and Daisy — they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made.”

5. Celebrity worship promotes materialism and compulsive buying

Consider the new generation of brand influencers. The scale is astonishing. Kim Kardashian alone has more than 350 million followers on Instagram. What is less well-known is the impact on the millions of her followers. Many of them have what researchers call [problematic engagement](#) with social media influencers.

A 2022 study by three Australian scholars estimated the size of the influencer market at \$13.8 billion in the US alone. They then looked at what is termed “the dark side of social media influencing.” They specifically drew on psychological attachment theory to examine the ways that followers can become attached to and obsessed with brand influencers paid to promote their buying choices.

They studied two types of attachments: parasocial relationships and sense of belonging, both of which are key in social media influencing. A parasocial relationship refers to followers’ perception of their one-sided relationship with an influencer, and a sense of belonging describes the feeling of being an integral member of the influencer’s community. The study showed that when followers develop attachments both to influencers (a parasocial relationship) and their community (a sense of belonging), it can lead to problematic engagement.

Risks include negative consequences such as followers’ anxiety and depression, eating disorders, and spending well beyond one’s means. If we compare ourselves to the fantasy lives they see exhibited by brand influencers on social media, it is not surprising that we look into the mirror and find ourselves feeling alone together.

Celebrity is ultimately at the core of a cash-generating ecosystem that empowers social media, nightlife, entertainment, fashion, publishing, television, and much more. If celebrities can negotiate this thicket carefully and gain the self-awareness to use their platforms for good, unmediated by intense media coverage, there is hope.

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