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Reference:

Van den Bulck Hilde, Paulussen Steve, Bels Annebeth.- Celebrity news as hybrid journalism : an assessment of celebrity coverage in newspapers and magazines

Journalism : theory, practice and criticism - ISSN 1464-8849 - (2016.07.08), p. 1-20

Full text (Publishers DOI): <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1177/1464884916657523>

To cite this reference: <http://hdl.handle.net/10067/1342920151162165141>

Celebrity news as hybrid journalism: An assessment of celebrity coverage in Flemish newspapers and magazines

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Abstract

This contribution discusses the content and characteristics of celebrity news as a hybrid news genre by means of a quantitative content analysis of a random sample from one year of celebrity news as published in two elite and two popular Flemish newspapers, and two Flemish celebrity gossip magazines. To this end, a theoretical framework is developed that combines insights from celebrity studies regarding the characteristics of the celebrity as a mediated construct with insights from research on (the decline of) journalistic quality, as well as insights from genre studies on hybridity. Different from what the literature suggests, the results indicate a certain dominance in celebrity news of the public over the private and a distinct attention to public interest next to human interest news, although results differ according to type of medium. The results also show clear indications both of original but sensationalized reporting in magazines and of a high level of ‘churnalism’ in (elite) newspapers. In the conclusion, the article suggests a need to pay more attention to ‘regular’ rather than exceptional celebrity news and a reconsideration of what is ‘wrong’ with celebrity news as indicative of what is ‘wrong’ with journalism in general, and shows that celebrity news is a hybrid genre in three different ways.

Keywords

Celebrity news, hybridity, celebrity culture, journalistic quality, quantitative content analysis

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Introduction

This contribution discusses (the characteristics of) celebrity news as a hybrid journalistic genre. Theoretically, it combines insights from genre studies, celebrity studies and journalism studies while empirically, the study is based on a quantitative analysis of a random sample of celebrity news in two elite and two popular Flemish newspapers and two Flemish celebrity gossip magazines. Content characteristics analyzed include topical focus, public relevance and originality, while form and style are examined through source treatment and degree of ambiguity, gossip and sensationalism. This allows for a discussion of celebrity news as a journalistic genre that combines characteristics of news and entertainment.

Conboy (2014: 171) points to (and refutes) a lingering viewpoint in journalism (studies) of celebrity news as an oxymoron, i.e. as something that ‘combines contradictory qualities for literary effect [for reasons that] journalism is incompatible with the coverage of celebrity issues and that the juxtaposition of these two nouns demonstrates that journalism cannot be considered to be upholding its true purpose if it is dealing with celebrity’. Working from a celebrity studies perspective, however, Marshall (2006: 315) proposes that celebrity and journalism are ‘intimately intertwined in the most public way’ as celebrity has been part and parcel of news provision ever since the rise of the mass press in the 19th century. Today, celebrity news is the staple of specialized gossip magazines and websites and makes up a key part of old and new, elite and popular news media (Gorin and Dubied, 2011). These two contradictory positions raise all kinds of issues that can be reduced to the simple question: if celebrity news is not news, then what is it and why are news media full of it?

The contradiction is here explored as resulting from the fact that celebrity news is both news and entertainment. As such celebrity news is analyzed as a *hybrid* textual genre, i.e. as a genre that combines, in a variety of ways, the characteristic themes, formula, routines and styles of the two categories of news and entertainment. In journalism studies, hybridity has been studied with regards to the relationship between news and PR (e.g. Erjavec, 2005), cultural, lifestyle and consumer news (e.g. Kristensen and From, 2012), and mainstream and alternative media (e.g. Harcup, 2005), amongst others. Yet, with some notable exceptions (Atton, 2003), these studies do not define or elaborate on the notion of hybridity itself. Useful work in this regard has been done in genre studies, looking at both spoken and textual genres (Mäntynen and Shore, 2014) and at factual and reality television genres (Hill, 2007). Therefore, this text combines insights into the characteristics of hybridity, into specifics of celebrity culture and the celebrity construct, and into benchmark criteria for ‘good’, i.e. professional and quality, journalism.

Theoretical building blocks: Hybridity, celebrity, news

Starting point is the idea of celebrity news as a hybrid genre. Genres describe categories of content that share topics, style and communicative modes of address, and that result from certain production decisions and audience expectations (Mäntynen and Shore, 2014; Hill, 2007). Following Mäntynen and Shore (2014: 739), we consider hybridity as ‘an umbrella term for all kinds of blending, mixing, and combining that occur in genres and texts’. Moreover, following Campbell’s (2004: 178) claim that news genres, hybrid or otherwise, are not fixed but ‘broad-brush collective terms for a disparate body of practices’, this contribution aligns with recent journalism studies’ (Atton, 2003) and longer-standing genre studies’ (Mäntynen and Shore, 2014) recognition that genres are fluid categories, both *vis à vis* each other and internally. The first implies that celebrity news can share certain characteristics with

e.g. both hard news and fictional genres. The latter implies that celebrity news as a hybrid genre is considered as a broad category that potentially harbors various subtypes, depending on topic or type of medium, amongst others. We analyze celebrity news as the mixing and blending of facts and fiction, i.e. of the characteristics of factual (news) and fictional (entertainment) genres.

A celebrity is here defined as a well-known, mediated and constructed persona whose private and real life attract at least as much media and audience attention as professional endeavors (Dyer, 1979; Turner, 2004). Many researchers of celebrity culture (e.g. Marshall, 2006; Rojek, 2001) stress the role of mediation in establishing celebrity. This applies to celebrities from the world of entertainment, for whom media provide the main stage on which to perform, but extends to all types of celebrities as the celebrity persona and lasting well-knownness centrally hinges on obtaining sufficient coverage in news media. This contribution explores various aspects of celebrity that contribute to the characteristics of celebrity news.

For news media, celebrity news is popular because of its suitability for short-term news cycles and short news stories, its relationship with PR and press-released news (Rojek, 2007), possibilities for promotion across outlets of multimedia companies (O'Neill, 2012), and the availability of entertainment-based content (Turner, 2010). Indeed, for today's soft news oriented media, celebrities are newsworthy subjects to the extent that Harcup and O'Neill (2001) consider celebrity as a news selection criterion in its own right. Some praise the availability of celebrity news as part of a wider trend towards personalization and popularization of news that creates a more democratic and more inclusive journalistic culture (Conboy, 2014). In contrast, many academics, journalists and audience segments situate celebrity news at the very bottom of the news food chain, colonizing newspapers, and consider it the epitome of what is wrong with today's journalism. Franklin (1997) sees

celebrity as indicative of the increase of ‘newszak’, a notion that relates to news in the same way that ‘muzak’ relates to ‘real’ music.

In journalism studies, this has mainly been a normative discussion as there is little systematic empirical work on the characteristics of celebrity news. This leaves many questions unanswered. Does celebrity news as a hybrid genre adhere to professional standards and values generally considered part of ‘good’ journalism? Does it cover matters of sufficient substance and public relevance? What indications of professional news gathering, selection and verification procedures are there? Does the style and presentation of celebrity news stories meet journalistic ‘quality’ standards (Shapiro, 2010; Dubied and Hanitzsch, 2014)? Celebrity studies, conversely, pays considerable attention to celebrity coverage but focuses mainly on extreme, emblematic cases. This leaves the question: what are typical topics and ways of treating celebrities in day to day celebrity reporting? Finally, much of the literature focuses on media coverage in ‘big’ celebrity cultures such as those of the US and the UK. While influential in the globalization of news dissemination and consumption (Turner, 2004), these cultures are not necessarily indicative of celebrity coverage in other contexts and media landscapes. For instance, the Flemish and many European newspaper scenes have no tabloid press like the UK. This leads Ferris (2010) to call on academics to analyze the workings of local celebrity (news) cultures. Together, these are the issues and questions this contribution aims to address by analyzing celebrity news stories published in a selection of Flemish elite and popular newspapers and celebrity gossip magazines.

Defining and evaluating celebrity news

One aspect through which hybridity can be explored is the content (themes, topics) of celebrity news. According to Gorin and Dubied (2011: 600), celebrity coverage can be ‘categorized as news because journalists write [it] according to a set of principles such as the

“claim to be true” ..., the recording of facts and documentary evidence, even if much of the information manifestly falls under the heading of fiction’. The tension – or hybridity – recognized here between fact and fiction, or between factual truth and truthiness (Schudson, 2009), reverberates in the term ‘gossip journalism’ or in the category of ‘infotainment’ under which celebrity news is often classified. Other typical and defining characteristics of celebrity news, according to Gorin and Dubied (2011: 600-601), are the focus on the private rather than the public life of stars, and the treatment of celebrities as people with a ‘dual persona’ (ordinary and extraordinary, glamorous and vulgar (cf. Dyer, 1979)) and a particular ‘habitus’ that distinguishes them from other people.

In the literature on tabloidization, i.e. the trend towards sensationalism and entertainment in journalism (Esser, 1999; Turner, 2004), celebrity news is considered as problematic, distracting public attention away from ‘issues that really matter’ (Dubied and Hanitzsch, 2014: 137). This criticism suggests that celebrity coverage is not really news because of little substance, but is this correct? Is celebrity news mostly about issues that do not really matter and about people not worthy of public interest? This results in the research question:

RQ 1 Who and what is covered in Flemish celebrity news?

To further explore content as reflecting hybridity, celebrity news must be understood, first, in the context of the specific relationship between the public and the private in celebrity culture. The celebrity image results from an interplay between the public persona based on professional activities, i.e. the roles (s)he plays, endorsement of commercial products or socio-political causes; the private persona based on the ‘official’ private life as presented to the world (births, engagements, weddings, divorce and death); and glimpses of the ‘real’ person behind the construction, i.e. the paparazzi version of a celebrity’s life (Holmes, 2005; Van den Bulck and Tambuyzer, 2008).

Crucially, this celebrity image is (re)constructed in and through media coverage. Several academics (Holmes, 2005; Rojek, 2001; Marshall, 2006) stress that, as part of the journalistic trend to tabloidization and personalization, news media focus on a celebrity's private rather than professional life, and on revealing the 'real' celebrity and creating intimacy rather than on distance and celebrity aura. Celebrity scandals and paparazzi photographs have thus become mainstream news content, according to these authors. While research has convincingly confirmed this emphasis on the private and the real for high profile cases (Butler Breese, 2010; Dyer, 1987; Holmes, 2005) and British tabloids (e.g. O'Neill, 2012), it has not been studied empirically for local and day-to-day celebrity news, resulting in the research sub-question:

***RQ 1a** Does Flemish celebrity news favor the private and the 'real' over the public aspects of celebrities' persona?*

Celebrity news, second, is closely related to how someone obtains celebrity status. Celebrities can work in various domains and their celebrity status can be ascribed (by birth, e.g. royals, celebrities' children), achieved (by accomplishment, e.g. Julia Roberts as actress, Kim Clijsters as tennis player) or attributed (by media attention), with 'celetoid' as a short-term, concentrated form of attributed celebrity (Rojek, 2001; Turner, 2006). In the latter case, achievement is not necessary, as fame is 'given' by the media, for instance to contestants of reality TV shows, generating more temporary, artificial and instable celebrity. Some authors (Ferris, 2010) argue that especially the latter category has gained ground, due to, on the one hand, the proliferation of television channels and the arrival of the Internet and, on the other hand, news media's extensive attention to them. Furthermore, public fame is increasingly generated outside the entertainment sector, resulting in celebrity politicians, business men, academics and journalists (van Zoonen, 2005; Corner and Pels, 2003). News media are instrumental in developing and maintaining all types of celebrity. As such, rather than being

colonized by celebrity culture, journalism can be seen to play a key part in society's celebrification (Rojek, 2001).

The heterogeneity of celebrity culture is also reflected in Flemish celebrity culture (Van den Bulck and Tambuyzer, 2008), that is dominated by achieved celebrities working in television, music, or sports, and a growing number from other domains including politics and law. Attributed celebrities emerged in Flanders with the introduction of reality television in the late 1990s but constitute a smaller segment of the Flemish celebrity population. This results in the research sub-question:

***RQ 1b** Does Flemish celebrity news cover a heterogeneous community of ascribed, achieved and attributed celebrities?*

Third, celebrity culture is characterized by globalization as actors, politicians and reality stars reach celebrity status worldwide. As such, celebrity news can be expected to have a cosmopolitan scope with a high degree of ethnic and sexual diversity. At the same time, local celebrity cultures have flourished (Ferris, 2010; Holmes and Redmond, 2010). For instance, the arrival of Flemish commercial television in the late 1980s helped create the notion of local celebrities by putting the spotlights on its television personalities, thus contributing to a Flemish celebrity culture (Van den Bulck and Tambuyzer, 2008). These celebrities attract media attention because they fit the news value of proximity (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001). This seems confirmed by Conboy's (2014: 178) study showing British celebrity news coverage as characterized by a banal nationalism that highlights the 'best' of Britain's celebrities and is aimed at a 'representation of Britain as a community of interrelated media celebrities'. Other studies indicate this is not necessarily the case elsewhere. US celebrity news tends to highlight the global reach of celebrities, while Van den Bulck and Claessens' (2014) research suggests that Flemish celebrity news covers a mix of local and 'global' celebrities. This leads to two further research sub-questions:

RQ 1c Does Flemish celebrity news have an international or local focus?

RQ 1d Does Flemish celebrity news reflect the gender, sexual and ethnic diversity of global celebrity culture?

Journalistic quality in celebrity news

Apart from *who* and *what* is talked about, celebrity news can also be analyzed as a hybrid genre through *how* topics are discussed, which brings us to the complex issue of journalistic quality. In much popular and academic debate, celebrity news and celebrity journalism is set off against an ideal, a benchmark of ‘good’, quality journalism. O’Neill (2012: 27), for example, considers the increase in the coverage of celebrities in the elite press as ‘no cause for celebration’. Celebrity news topics (see RQ1) are dismissed as banal and focusing on tragedy, while journalistic standards of accuracy, source verification and neutral writing are considered violated. This results in the research question:

RQ2 Does celebrity news in Flemish print media stand up to professional standards of journalistic quality?

Despite the vast amount of press criticism and scholarly literature on the tabloidization and dumbing-down of news, the concept of ‘journalistic quality’ is hard to define and constrained by subjective interpretations. This study takes inspiration from Shapiro’s (2010) framework that organizes various norms and values associated with professional journalistic quality within five categories: discovery, examination, interpretation, style and presentation. Within each category, journalists are expected to know the basic standards of what counts as ‘good practice’ or ‘excellence’. With regard to, first, news discovery, Shapiro (2010: 156) writes that journalists should focus on ‘issues of social importance in order to help citizens understand their world better and to set the public agenda’. A survey of jurors of two Canadian journalism award programs found ‘public impact and benefit to society’ to be a key

criterion for ‘excellence’ (Shapiro et al., 2006). Journalism scholars warn that tabloidization undermines journalism’s public relevance as it leads journalists to confuse consumer demand with citizens’ needs, and to focus on stories of ‘human interest’ rather than public relevance (Franklin, 1997; Esser, 1999). As said, intense media attention for celebrities is often considered as indicative of press tabloidization. Hence, the research sub-question:

RQ 2a Does Flemish celebrity journalism stand up to professional standards of public relevance?

Shapiro (2010) further pays attention to ‘examination’ and ‘interpretation’ in news-making. This refers to professional standards regarding how to use and relate to sources, and how to vet and interpret information gathered. Journalism is often criticized for its heavy reliance on ‘information subsidies’ (Gandy, 1980), i.e. prepackaged information provided to journalists by third parties, including news agencies, other media and sources seeking media attention through press releases, social media and PR activities. Increased use of information subsidies is indicative of so-called ‘copy/paste journalism’ or ‘churnalism’, and thus of journalists’ declining editorial independence (Davies, 2008; Lewis et al., 2008; Jackson and Moloney, 2015). The interdependent relationship between journalists (as gateways to media attention) and celebrities (as news sources) makes celebrity news heavily reliant on information subsidies and, according to Dubied and Hanitzsch (2014: 141), raises issues of journalists’ editorial independence and the impact of public relations on journalism. However, the authors see these issues not limited to celebrity journalism but indicative of the state of contemporary journalism.

Evaluating celebrity news as a hybrid genre further requires attention to journalist-source relationships. This brings us to (the lack of) source transparency in journalism. Sources are not always or systematically attributed to the information in news stories, and, with the exception of investigative reports, details of source checking are rarely disclosed (Rupar,

2006; Shapiro et al., 2013; Van Leuven et al., 2014). A study by Diekerhof and Bakker (2012: 250) suggests that the lack of source transparency may result directly from journalists avoiding it, for instance by deliberately using quotes, ‘thus making the sources responsible for the content’. These insights result in the research sub-question:

***RQ 2b** Does Flemish celebrity journalism stand up to professional standards of source independence, source transparency and verification?*

Journalistic quality further is a matter of style and presentation (Shapiro, 2010). Professional standards require journalists to write in a clear, accessible and engaging way and with a neutral tone of voice. Journalists are expected to avoid ambiguity and sensationalism, for instance by not using conditional tense (‘might, would, could’), to avoid the presentation of opinions or rumors as facts, and to safeguard the separation of news and commercial interests (Shapiro, 2010: 157). Hence, the following research sub-question:

***RQ 2c** Does Flemish celebrity journalism stand up to professional standards of unambiguous presentation of information (e.g. absence of gossip, conditional tense and sensationalism)?*

Differences between media

The insight that genres – hybrid or otherwise – are fluid categories, both *vis à vis* each other and internally, implies that, potentially, the featured topics, journalistic standards and style of celebrity news cannot be considered homogeneous across various news media outlets. Indeed, many of the quality parameters are considered as ‘typical’ of the elite press. This raises the question whether an elite newspaper extends its quality standards to its celebrity coverage, thus differing from coverage in popular newspapers and celebrity gossip magazines, or whether celebrity news erodes quality standards. For Conboy (2014: 173), ‘celebrity, having become increasingly embedded within the popular tabloids, has spread rapidly to all

news media to become an essential structuring device of much of the contemporary information flow'. In fact, O'Neill (2012: 30) points to a somewhat Janus-faced situation where 'quality press can sneak in trivia by "reporting" on the antics of the tabloid press coverage of celebrities, while simultaneously holding their noses about the [tabloid press] news agenda'. This was confirmed in an analysis of the coverage of a local celebrity's suicide by the Flemish gossip and general newspaper press. The latter covered the actual celebrity event while simultaneously discussing the lows of the gossip press, taking the ethical high ground (Van den Bulck and Claessens, 2013).

Nevertheless, continued differences in news selection criteria and coverage between popular and elite media - with the latter focusing more on 'hard news' issues such as economics and domestic and foreign policy, and popular press concentrating on 'soft news' issues including crime, sports, sex and celebrity gossip - may result in differences in topics covered in celebrity news. This implies that elite papers will focus more on the public and official private life or serious topics such as celebrities endorsing socio-political causes, while popular newspapers focus more on the private and the real. Moreover, despite recent claims regarding a class-free society in which everyone has become a cultural omnivore and the high versus low culture distinction has disappeared (Peterson and Kern, 1996), the omnivore thesis is more problematic than assumed (Lizardo and Skiles, 2012). Indeed, popular culture is witnessing a new hierarchy (Gans, 1999), in which the consumption of some cultural forms is accepted more easily than that of others (e.g. quality cinema vs. reality shows). This paradox is reflected in celebrity culture, as celebrities from a culturally more highly esteemed context (e.g. film star George Clooney) are represented differently from those from a context deemed culturally lower (e.g. pop idol Justin Bieber or reality TV star Honey Boo Boo) (cf. Van den Bulck et al., 2015). We assume that this contradiction extends to the amount and way in

which various news media represent and discuss these respective types of celebrities, resulting in the question:

RQ3 *Do the characteristics of celebrity news reporting differ between Flemish elite, popular and celebrity gossip print media?*

Finally, bringing together the answers to the various research questions, we aim to answer the question:

RQ4 *In what ways can (Flemish) celebrity news be considered a hybrid news genre?*

Research set-up

Sample

To explore these issues, we compiled a sample comprising of two Flemish celebrity gossip magazines (*Dag Allemaal* and *Story*), elite newspapers (*De Standaard* and *De Morgen*) and popular newspapers (*Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Het Nieuwsblad*), all with the highest circulation numbers in their category (www.cim.be). A representative sample was created by collecting every celebrity news article published during four constructed weeks. The first week comprised of articles published on the first Monday of January, the first Tuesday of February, the first Wednesday of March, the first Thursday of April, the first Friday of May, and the first Saturday of June. The second constructed week included the second Monday of July, the second Tuesday of August and so on: the same logic was repeated for all four weeks. We further included editions of *Story* and *Dag Allemaal* published during these constructed weeks. Since the magazines come out on Tuesday and we wanted to account for overlapping news stories in magazines and newspapers, we selected those *Storys* and *Dag Allemaals* that came out on the Tuesdays before the Wednesdays of the constructed weeks, i.e. the magazines published on the first Tuesday of March, the second of September, the third of June and the fourth of December.

Every article dealing with a celebrity was included in the sample. Based on the literature review, a celebrity was defined as a well-known person of whom the private and ‘real’ life obtains at least as much attention from media and audiences as his/her professional life, and whose image is at least in part determined by the media. Excluded from the sample were program reviews, columns, opinion pieces and interviews that did not include any newsworthy issues but were simply a conversation that did not bring anything new to the table. Interviews that included new knowledge (or were presented as such) were included. We further excluded articles that reported on the professional functioning of political celebrities or sports stars, since these articles would be considered traditional news rather than celebrity news. Here, break-off point for in/exclusion was the question: would this have been reported if the person was not a celebrity? The total research sample contained 793 articles, of which 202 from elite, 359 from popular newspapers and 232 from weekly magazines.

Coding scheme

The authors developed a codebook based on the research questions and prior knowledge of celebrity journalism and news values. Demographic variables (name, gender, nationality, ethnicity, relationship status, professional domain, age, romantic orientation) assessed which kinds of celebrities were covered. The coding scheme further established which issues featured most prominently in an article, the professional life, relationships, charity, appearance, health... The three most prominent issues featured in an article were determined by focusing on the subjects mentioned in the title or mentioned/elaborated on in the body of the article. Rarely were there more than three topics. In those cases, the three most mentioned/elaborated on were included. Next, the focus on public interest and human interest was coded. The operationalization hereof focused on whether an article appealed to subjects with relevance to public debate or not. Topics were considered as exclusively human interest

when they offered no more than the satisfaction of the reader's curiosity, for instance an item on the red carpet dress of an actress, the decoration of a celebrity's home, or the facial hair of a popstar. An article that focused exclusively on public interest, would stay away from the celebrity's private life and only feature subjects that pertained to public debate, such as an item on a celebrity's endorsement of a good cause, or a celebrity's comment on a political issue. An article that combined human interest with public interest would satisfy the reader's curiosity with regards to the private life of the celebrity, but in addition provide fuel to public debate. For example, an article on a celebrity's experience with sexual violence tells us something about his/her private life yet is also relevant to the debate on domestic violence.

Variables exploring the style and form of the celebrity news included, first, the writing style (sensationalist, ironic or neutral). A writing style was considered sensationalist if it was identified as a style that would never be used in a neutral, factual article. This includes any word choice that dramatizes facts or presents facts in a tendentious or 'juicy' fashion, for instance the heading 'Albert publicly taunts Filip' as title of an article regarding former King Albert giving a television interview without prior consent of current King Filip. Analysis of writing style included, second, the use of speculative language (talk about rumors, use of conditional tense, referring to anonymous sources) and, third, the use of sources (number and nature of sources, whether sources were mentioned, whether the article indicated verification of sources, use of direct quotes).

Coding and analysis

As almost all variables were nominal, great care was taken to appoint the values of the variables in a reliable, consistent manner. To this end, the originally developed codebook was tested by all three authors on a subsample of celebrity articles. The codebook was subsequently adjusted based on coding issues encountered in the test. All categories of all

variables were described as explicitly as possible, including examples, to guide coding decisions. The eventual coding was done by an independent coder, hired for this specific purpose but unaware of the research objectives to ascertain reliable coding. After a test round of this coder on the same sample coded by the authors and a comparison and discussion of any differences in coding, the coder worked through the entire sample. Throughout, the coder was in touch with the authors to discuss any further coding issues, which were few. IBM SPSS Statistics Data Editor was used for coding and SPSS descriptive statistics were used for analysis, resulting in the contingency tables that served as the basis for the data analysis.

Results

As said, our sample contains 793 articles. In the four constructed weeks, the popular newspapers *Het Laatste Nieuws* (n=167) and *Het Nieuwsblad* (n=192) published almost 1.8 times more celebrity news stories than the elite newspapers *De Morgen* (n=79) and *De Standaard* (n=123) while the weekly magazines *Dag Allemaal* (n=106) and *Story* (n=126) produced 232 stories.

What counts as news in celebrity news?

[INSERT TABLES 1a AND 1b ABOUT HERE]

Looking at who and what is talked about in celebrity news stories in Flemish media, Tables 1a and 1b show the gender and ethnic profile of the celebrities covered. While the globalized celebrity culture suggests celebrity news is characterized by a considerable degree of ethnic and sexual diversity, this is not reflected in our data. Over 90 percent of celebrities talked about in Flemish media are white and heterosexual, and six out of ten celebrities are male. No significant differences were found between newspapers and magazines.

As regards the celebrities' nationality, elite newspapers pay significantly more attention to international celebrities as compared to the popular dailies and gossip magazines (Cramer's $V=.141$; $p=.000$). Whereas the latter outlets dedicate 60 percent of their articles to Flemish celebrities, an equal share of the articles in the elite newspapers involves stories about international, mostly American or British, celebrities. It thus appears that proximity is an important news value for popular newspapers and entertainment outlets, while elite newspapers take a more cosmopolitan view on celebrity.

Relevant to the understanding of celebrity news as a hybrid news genre, is its thematic and topical focus. Comparison of celebrity news stories in Flemish media in this regard, reveals some significant differences between newspapers and magazines, as shown in Tables 2 and 3.

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Table 2 gives an overview of the domains in which the celebrities covered in Flemish media became famous. Unsurprisingly, most celebrities are in the entertainment industry: two-thirds (67.7%) of them working in media, including the music, TV and film sector. Twenty-two of the 193 TV or media celebrities in our sample were categorized as celestoids, having become celebrities through reality TV. Royals receive substantive attention as they appear in 10.5 percent of the celebrity news stories. Although articles about professional aspects of politicians were excluded from the sample, almost one out of ten articles deals with a political celebrity, while famous people from sports, arts and fashion receive limited attention. The near-absence of athletes is probably due to the fact that our sample excluded the sports section. Analysis further reveals significant differences between media. Compared to magazines, Flemish newspapers pay significantly more attention to famous politicians, film and music stars, i.e. people with an achieved celebrity status. Popular newspapers more than

other outlets cover royalty, whereas the weeklies show greater interest in TV personalities and sports celebrities.

[INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Differences between newspapers and magazines become even clearer when looking at news topics. As Table 3 shows, elite newspapers take greater interest in the public lives of celebrities, focusing on professional activities and political engagement. Popular dailies and magazines, for their part, publish significantly more about celebrities' private relationships and sex life, and their activities and appearances in showbiz events and on social media (coded as 'media life'). Furthermore, magazines pay more attention to parenthood and health, while newspapers are more likely to report a famous death.

The public relevance— or 'benefit to society' (Shapiro et al., 2006: 435) – of celebrity news stories appears rather low. Most stories appeal to people's curiosity rather than to citizens' need for information. Two-thirds (66.5%) of the articles were coded as 'human interest' stories, 14.2 percent as 'public interest' and 19.3 percent as carrying elements of both. Human and public interest stories are much more in balance in the elite and popular newspapers (with 46 and 37.6 percent of stories respectively evaluated as having some public relevance), as compared to magazines, in which 83.6 percent of the articles were 'human interest stories' (Cramer's $V=.193$; $p=.000$).

Second-hand news?

Important in determining the extent and variety to which celebrity news as hybrid genre blends fact and fiction, are issues of sourcing. Table 4 informs us of the use of information subsidies in Flemish celebrity journalism showing that one out of four celebrity news stories in elite newspapers and 16.4 percent in popular dailies explicitly mention other media as a source. For gossip magazines, this number is significantly lower (Cramer's $V=.176$; $p=.000$):

only 8.2 percent of their articles refers to other media as information source. This suggests that gossip magazines rely more on original news reporting than do newspapers. However, previous research found significant differences between media regarding source transparency policies, so gossip magazines simply may be less obvious about their reliance on other media for information (Van Leuven et al., 2014).

[INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Table 4 reveals interesting trends regarding celebrities as a news source, as indicated by the use of celebrity quotes. First, results confirm that celebrity news makes extensive use of celebrity quotes as a means to authenticate the story. ‘So near yet so far’ is a crucial mechanism in building a celebrity persona, and a celebrity quote indicates to audiences that a story is ‘real’. This becomes more relevant as the old regime of controlled access to and communication from celebrities (Dyer, 1987) is replaced by a celebrity culture in which performers interact directly and authentically with media and audiences through social media (Marwick and boyd, 2011). The results emphasize news media’s dependence on celebrities to contribute quotes, but also suggest celebrities’ willingness to provide them. Interesting is the comparison between the use of verbal and written celebrity quotes. In 14.4% of all articles, journalists refer to written quotes, sometimes statements from official press releases but mostly social media statements posted by celebrities (or their entourage). The latter is representative of a wider trend of celebrity gossip websites referring to tweets and Facebook posts to authenticate stories and create the impression of closeness to the celebrity (Van den Bulck et al., 2014). Furthermore, there is a noteworthy difference between newspapers and magazines: the higher percentage of direct, verbal celebrity quotes in gossip magazines suggest more direct contact with celebrities, a further indication that they produce their own celebrity coverage more than do newspapers.

[INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE]

In evaluating celebrity news as a hybrid between fact and fiction, accuracy is key. In journalism, accuracy is strongly related to the use of sufficient and identifiable sources. Table 5 reveals that, on average, an article refers to 1.5 sources with no real differences according to type of medium. However, there are significant differences in the use of anonymous sources ('insiders', 'a friend', 'someone in the entourage'), which are mentioned in 13.8% of magazine articles compared to 6.4% in popular newspaper articles and just 2.5% in elite newspapers. So, more than the information subsidy rich newspaper coverage, magazines provide original coverage but base these on un-identified, un-authenticated sources. While source protection is at the core of the journalistic profession, extreme cases such as the *News of the World* phone-hacking scandal and countless instances of celebrity news proven wrong raise questions about reasons for source opaqueness. This is confirmed by the results indicating that journalists rarely are transparent about source checking. Elite newspapers explicitly mention source checking more often (11.4% of articles) than popular newspapers (5%) or magazines (2.6%).

In sum, the data show that there is very little original fare in Flemish celebrity news coverage. Newspapers in particular revert to copying stories from other media, and the actual number of articles taken from other media is probably higher than the data suggest, as journalists show little transparency about sources (verification). The most striking difference between newspapers and magazines, however, is in the use of anonymous sources, that dominate in celebrity gossip magazines.

Rumor has it

Combining fact and fiction as a hybrid genre, the frequent use of anonymous sources suggests that celebrity news stories are often based on rumor, gossip and hear-say. This is confirmed by the data in Table 6.

[INSERT TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE]

Table 6 shows distinct use of a rumor as a news ‘fact’ with, strikingly, no significant differences between newspapers and magazines in the number of articles based on at least one rumor. One out of twenty elite newspaper article is based on rumor while for magazines this is one out of ten. The lack of statistical significance is probably due to the relatively low number of articles. Gossip style further transpires from the use of conditional tense (might, could be...) in one out of ten celebrity news stories. This occurs slightly (but not significantly) more often in magazines, but appears to be a trend across media. Combined with the results regarding information subsidies, this suggests that elite and popular newspapers copy/paste a celebrity news item even if its textual characteristics suggest hear-say rather than facts. One significant difference between media is the use of a sensationalist style. It dominates more than one in four (26.7%) celebrity articles in popular newspapers, which holds for only 17.2% of celebrity articles in magazines. In contrast, over 90% of celebrity items in elite newspapers are dominated by a more distant, neutral tone of writing (Cramer’s $V=.190$; $p=.000$). So, while elite papers seem happy to copy celebrity news from other media, they (re)write them in a style that fits their elite profile, while popular newspapers follow a style typical of tabloid journalism.

Conclusion

The article aimed to get a better understanding of the day-to-day celebrity reporting in local (Flemish) media as a counterweight for the dominant research focus on media coverage of extreme cases in large celebrity cultures, and, in the process, to obtain insight into celebrity news as a hybrid journalistic genre. With regard to the first aim, it becomes clear that, first, Flemish celebrity news presents a world of white heterosexuals, slightly dominated by males. This partly can be explained by the considerable attention paid to Flemish celebrities,

especially in magazines, and is reflective of Flemish celebrity culture. Yet, it also points to a particular, bourgeois selection of news regarding the more multi-ethnic and openly sexually diverse US and UK celebrity cultures. Second, while the literature considers the globally dominant US and UK celebrity (news) cultures in the business of creating celestoids, this is not confirmed for Flemish media. Just twenty-two of all covered celebrities were identified as celestoids, reflective of Flemish celebrities whose fame is still mostly ‘achieved’ (e.g. film stars, sports personalities), and of selection criteria within the information subsidy behavior that favor achieved and, to a lesser extent, ascribed (royals) over attributed celebrities.

Different from what the literature suggests, third, Flemish celebrity coverage is not inundated with news about the private and the real, nor with scandal and paparazzi photographs. This confirms earlier findings (Van den Bulck and Claessens, 2014) that, despite the influence of international celebrity reporting styles, Flemish celebrity culture remains quite ‘gallant’ and especially gossip magazines avoid paparazzi photos or highly gossipy stories when covering Flemish celebrities. The latter points to the fact that magazines wish to maintain good working relationships with and thus access to local celebrities. They represent Flemish magazines’ main coverage and provide a unique selling proposition to compete with international celebrity gossip. Nevertheless, fourth, gossip and rumor are key to celebrity news in Flemish media, although numbers remain rather low, suggesting a more careful use of sources than the literature suggests. Magazines are more likely than newspapers to refer to undisclosed sources (‘a friend’, ‘a person in his/her entourage’).

With regard to the second aim, it is safe to say that celebrity news has pervaded all types of news outlets, confirming Harcup and O’Neill’s (2001) notion that celebrity is a news selection criterion in its own right. The results refute the notion of celebrity journalism as an oxymoron but instead give evidence that it is a hybrid news genre that combines characteristics of entertainment with those typical of journalism. The study further confirms

the idea that genres have a level of internal fluidity or hybridity, as celebrity news characteristics differ according to the type of outlet: between the entertainment-based celebrity gossip magazines and news-based newspapers, but also between elite and popular newspapers. The differences, however, are not black and white but show the hybrid nature of celebrity news as a genre that combines the characteristic themes, formats, routines and styles of the two categories of news and entertainment. Results indicate that celebrity news is a hybrid genre in at least three ways.

First, celebrity news is a hybrid news genre in that it provides a mix of human interest and public interest stories. Results show considerable attention paid to ‘stories that matter’, a key characteristics of journalistic quality. Importantly, the distinction between human and public interest cannot be equated with the distinction between the private and the public life of celebrities. There are examples of news stories about a celebrity’s public life with little more than a human interest relevance (e.g. dress worn on the red carpet), and stories about a celebrity’s private life with high public relevance (e.g. suicide of a celebrity that ignites attention to taboo topics like depression).

The results provide evidence of celebrity news as hybrid genre, second, in the way it deals with facts and rumors. Across media types, we can see how celebrity coverage ‘effortlessly’ combines facts and rumors. While, traditionally, journalistic quality puts considerable emphasis on the need to stick to facts, entertainment revolves around fiction (rumor). Celebrity news mixes both. What is more, gossip takes up a relatively limited part of all coverage. It appears that celebrity journalism’s reputation is based on extreme cases such as paparazzi’s role in the death of Princess Diana or the *News of the World* phone-hacking scandal, while, on average, this reputation does not do justice to day-to-day celebrity journalism.

Third, the hybrid nature of the genre becomes clear from the apparent contradictory observation that, while for traditional (hard) news genres elite newspapers thrive on scoops and original contributions to public debate, their celebrity news is characterized by high levels of information subsidies. Entertainment-oriented gossip magazines, traditionally not known for their efforts to provide original contributions to public debate, can be seen to provide much more original coverage. The latter can be explained by the fact that, to compete with daily, online gossip websites and newspaper coverage that focuses on global celebrities, local celebrity gossip magazines need to present original news on local celebrities as a unique selling proposition (cf. Van den Bulck and Claessens, 2014). Elite newspapers' high level of information subsidy in celebrity coverage, in turn, is less surprising than it appears at first sight, as newspaper journalism in general is characterized by diminishing numbers of 'original' journalism at the advantage of so-called 'churnalism'. In this regard, we uphold Dubied and Hanitzsch's (2014) suggestion that much of the criticism on celebrity journalism relates to issues that apply to traditional forms of journalism as well. What is wrong with celebrity journalism, may well be wrong with the entire profession.

Overall, acknowledging celebrity news as a hybrid journalistic genre, rather than an oxymoron or the 'dark' side of a dichotomy between good and bad journalism, helps to create academic and public recognition for a form of journalism that constitutes a significant section of all news media, and allows for an understanding of the rich complexity and fluidity (cf. Atton, 2003) of journalistic genres that goes well beyond the boundaries of celebrity journalism.

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Biographical notes

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Appendix: Tables

Table 1a. Gender and sexual identity of celebrities covered in the news.

gender	sexual identity (n=670 ^a)
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	male	female	hetero-sexual	LGBT
elite newspapers	133 (65.8%)	69 (34.2%)	155 (92.8%)	12 (7.2%)
popular newspapers	218 (60.7%)	141 (39.3%)	283 (94.6%)	16 (5.4%)
magazines	134 (57.8%)	98 (42.2%)	193 (94.6%)	11 (5.4%)
Total	485 (61.1%)	308 (38.8%)	631 (94.2%)	39 (5.8%)

^a number of missing values=123; N=793.

Table 1b. Nationality and ethnicity of celebrities covered in the news.

	nationality ^a				ethnicity		
	Belgian	European (not Belgian)	North American	other	white	black	other (Arab, Asian, Hispanic)
elite newspapers	79 (39.1%)	47 (23.3%)	69 (34.2%)	7 (3.5%)	176 (87.1%)	17 (8.4%)	9 (4.5%)
popular newspapers	221 (61.6%)	59 (16.4%)	71 (19.8%)	8 (2.2%)	327 (91.1%)	24 (6.7%)	8 (2.2%)
magazines	139 (59.9%)	31 (13.4%)	61 (26.3%)	1 (0.4%)	210 (90.5%)	13 (5.6%)	9 (3.9%)
total	439 (55.4%)	137 (17.3%)	201 (25.3%)	16 (2.0%)	713 (89.9%)	54 (6.8%)	26 (3.3%)

^a Cramer's V=.141; p=.000; N=793.

Table 2. Domains of celebrity.

	elite newspapers	popular newspapers	magazines	total
music	63 (31.2%)	101 (28.1%)	62 (26.8%)	226 (28.5%)
TV / media	34 (16.8%)	78 (21.7%)	81 (35.1%)	193 (24.4%)
film	41 (20.3%)	40 (11.1%)	36 (15.6%)	117 (14.8%)
royals	13 (6.4%)	52 (14.5%)	18 (7.8%)	83 (10.5%)
politics	29 (14.4%)	42 (11.7%)	4 (1.7%)	75 (9.5%)
arts and fashion	12 (5.9%)	15 (4.2%)	5 (2.2%)	32 (4.0%)
sports	2 (1.0%)	8 (2.2%)	17 (7.4%)	27 (3.4%)
business	0	11 (3.1%)	2 (0.9%)	13 (1.6%)
other	8 (4.0%)	12 (3.3%)	6 (2.6%)	26 (3.3%)

N=792

Table 3. Topics covered in celebrity news.

	elite newspapers ^b	popular newspapers ^b	magazines ^b	total ^b	χ^2 (df=2)
professional life (job-related) ^a	139 (68.8%)	191 (53.2%)	111 (47.8%)	441 (55.6%)	20.772 (p=.000)
private life (relationships, sex)	29 (14.4%)	89 (24.8%)	111 (47.8%)	229 (28.9%)	63.942 (p=.000)
beauty and lifestyle	36 (17.8%)	86 (24.0%)	45 (19.4%)	167 (21.1%)	3.376 (p=.185)
media life (events, social media) ^a	26 (12.8%)	66 (18.3%)	20 (8.6%)	112 (14.1%)	11.335 (p=.003)
parenthood ^a	16 (7.9%)	46 (12.8%)	52 (22.4%)	114 (14.4%)	19.672 (p=.000)
health ^a	16 (7.9%)	31 (8.6%)	43 (18.5%)	90 (11.3%)	16.714 (p=.000)
crime	14 (6.9%)	24 (6.7%)	21 (9.1%)	59 (7.4%)	1.345 (p=.510)
politics ^a	25 (12.3%)	23 (6.4%)	2 (0.9%)	50 (6.3%)	24.453 (p=.000)
death ^a	14 (6.9%)	32 (8.9%)	1 (0.4%)	47 (5.9%)	19.334 (p=.000)
charity	3 (6.2%)	10 (2.8%)	11 (3.0%)	24 (3.0%)	4.033 (p=.133)
other	29 (14.4%)	65 (18.1%)	27 (11.6%)	121 (15.3%)	4.774 (p=.092)

^a Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level; N=793.

^b Sum of column percentages exceeds 100% since articles could be assigned to more than one topic.

Table 4. Information subsidies in celebrity news.

	articles mentioning other media as source ^a	articles containing a verbal quote of a celebrity ^a	articles citing a written statement of a celebrity ^b
elite newspapers	52 (25.7%)	120 (59.4%)	35 (17.3%)
popular newspapers	59 (16.4%)	203 (56.5%)	50 (13.9%)
magazines	19 (8.2%)	168 (72.4%)	29 (12.5%)
total	130 (16.4%)	491 (61.9%)	114 (14.4%)

^aCorrelations are significant at the 0.01 level; N=793.

^b No significant correlation (Cramer's V=.052, p=.343).

Table 5. Source transparency in celebrity news.

	average number of sources per article ^b	articles referring to anonymous source ^a	articles explicit about source verification ^a
elite newspapers	1.3	5 (2.5%)	23 (11.4%)
popular newspapers	1.4	23 (6.4%)	18 (5.0%)
magazines	1.7	32 (13.8%)	6 (2.6%)
total	1.5	60 (7.6%)	47 (5.9%)

^a Correlations are significant at the 0.01 level; N=793.

^b No significant correlation.

Table 6. Style of celebrity news reporting: gossip, conditional tense, sensationalism.

	articles (partly) based on rumor ^b	articles using conditional tense ^b	sensational writing ^a
elite newspapers	10 (5.0%)	14 (6.9%)	17 (8.4%)
popular newspapers	28 (7.8%)	33 (9.2%)	96 (26.7%)
magazines	24 (10.3%)	25 (10.8%)	40 (17.2%)
total	62 (7.8%)	72 (9.1%)	153 (19.3%)

^a Correlations are significant at the 0.01 level; N=793.

^b No significant correlation.