

1

Ordinary People: celebrity, tabloid culture, and the function of the media¹

Ordinary celebrities

Let me begin by reviewing the recent trends in the production of celebrity which provoke the kind of questions I want to raise. I am by no means the first to have noticed what has become quite a programmatic shift in the preferred territory for the development of celebrity through particular media platforms – television and the internet in particular. This is a shift from the elite to the ordinary. ‘Ordinariness’, to be sure, has always occupied a place among the repertoire of celebrity discourses as well as within the core programming formats of western television itself (Bonner, 2003). Elsewhere, Frances Bonner, P. David Marshall and I have pointed out the contradictoriness of the discourses of celebrity – their capacity to simultaneously valorize a celebrity’s elite status while nonetheless celebrating their ‘intrinsic ordinariness’ (Turner et al., 2000: 13). It is also true that ‘ordinary people’ have always been ‘discovered’, suddenly extracted from their everyday lives and processed for stardom; both the film and the music industry incorporated such processes into their cultural mythologies as well as their industrial practice many years ago. In recent times, however, the use of this practice has grown dramatically and become far more systematic. Whole media formats are now devoted to it, and the contemporary media consumer has become increasingly accustomed to following what happens to the ‘ordinary’ person who has been plucked from obscurity to enjoy a highly circumscribed celebrity. The *Big Brother* housemates are the most obvious example² and, among these, it has turned out, ‘ordinariness’ is so fundamental to their casting that it is non-negotiable. In some local versions of the format, *Big Brother* housemates have been evicted after they were found to be already working within the entertainment

Ordinary People

industry and thus attempting to merge their new visibility as celebrated 'ordinary people' with a pre-existing media career.

The trend has a broader provenance than the casting of *Big Brother*, however. As Nick Couldry points out, ordinary people have never been more desired by, or more visible within, the media; nor have their own utterances ever been reproduced with the faithfulness, respect and accuracy that they are today (Couldry, 2003: 102).

The explosion of reality TV, confessional talk formats, docu-soaps and so-called reality-based game shows over the last decade has significantly enhanced television's demand for ordinary people desiring 'celebrification'. The expansion of both the demand and the supply side has occurred in a symbiotic and accelerating cycle fuelled by the relatively sudden expansion of the global trade in TV formats. Although the 'reality' of reality TV is of course a construction, what has become significant is the way these formats have exploited the reality effect of television's 'liveness': namely, the foregrounded liveness (as in, what we are watching is happening right now!) enhances the illusion that what is being watched is real or genuine, thus challenging the competing suspicion that it is only being staged for the camera. Indeed, reality TV is often quite exorbitantly 'live': it is occurring in real time as we watch it on a live video-stream via the internet, and those wishing to interact with it directly can do so by accessing one of the web-sites or online chatrooms, or by participating in the audience vote. Stripped across the schedule for months at a time in a set daily timeslot, as it is in many countries, *Big Brother* is not only received as a live media event, it also becomes embedded in the routine daily structures of the audience's everyday lives. (It may well be *that* which is the most significant 'reality' effect of reality TV, not what is actually happening in the house or on the *Idol* audition set.)

Among the consequences of this trend towards developing the ordinary celebrity through the success of reality TV formats is an acceleration of the industrial cycle of use and disposal for the products of such programmes. If performing on *Big Brother* can generate celebrity within a matter of days, this same celebrity can also disappear just as quickly. In fact, it is essential that each crop of *Big Brother* housemates can be easily replaced by the next group if the format is to successfully reproduce itself, series after

Ordinary People and the Media

series. In this regard, television's production of celebrity can truly be regarded as a manufacturing process into which the product's planned obsolescence is incorporated. And that product is manufactured for a particular audience. The replaceable celebrity-commodity (Turner et al., 2000: 12–13) is structurally fundamental to both of the leading primetime formats aimed at the key 14–35 year old demographics in most western markets: reality TV and soap opera. In order to define this particular iteration of celebrity – the individual with no particular talents that might encourage expectations of work in the entertainment industry, no specific career objectives beyond the achievement of media visibility, and an especially short lifecycle as a public figure – Chris Rojek has coined the term 'celetoid':

Celetoids are the accessories of cultures organized around mass communications and staged authenticity. Examples include lottery winners, one-hit wonders, stalkers, whistleblowers, sports' arena streakers, have-a-go-heroes, mistresses of public figures and the various other social types who command media attention one day, and are forgotten the next. (2001: 20–1)

Given what appears to be our culture's appetite for consuming celebrity and the scale of demand for the new stories, gossip and pictures the celebrity media industries generate,³ the accelerated commodity lifecycle of the celetoid has emerged as an effective industrial solution to the problem of satisfying that demand.

In relation to the broader culture within which the consumption of celebrity occurs, these trends have resulted in the idea of celebrity itself mutating: no longer a magical condition, research suggests that it is fast becoming an almost reasonable expectation for us to have of our everyday lives.⁴ The opportunity of becoming a celebrity has spread beyond the various elites and entered into the expectations of the population in general. Among the effects of this, in turn, is the proliferation of various kinds of DIY celebrity; on the internet, in particular, 'celebrification' has become a familiar mode of cyber-self-presentation. As I have discussed in *Understanding Celebrity* (Turner, 2004: Chapter 5), this is sometimes regarded as a reason for optimism,

Ordinary People

a sign of the egalitarianization of celebrity as the means of production are seized by the ordinary citizen.

The more important development, in my view, is the scale upon which the media have begun to produce celebrity *on their own*. Where once the media were more or less content to pick up celebrities produced through a range of sports, news and entertainment contexts, or to respond to approaches from publicists, promotions and public relations personnel, contemporary television in particular has introduced a much greater degree of vertical integration into the industrial structure which produces their celebrities. In addition to exploiting those who have already been established through other means, television has learnt that it can also invent, produce, market and sell on its celebrities from scratch – and on a much larger scale than ever before. Casting ordinary people into game shows, docu-soaps and reality TV programming enables television producers to ‘grow their own’ celebrities and to control how they are marketed before, during, and after production – all of this while still subordinating the achieved celebrity of each individual to the needs of the particular programme or format. The extent to which this is now done, and the pervasive presence its most successful products can establish, make this an extremely significant shift not only in terms of the production and consumption of celebrity but also in terms of how the media now participate in the cultural construction of identity and desire.

Cultural and media studies have responded in a number of ways to these developments. We have had discussions which helpfully problematize the ‘reality’ of reality TV, as well as examining the performativeness of the identities on offer through this newly vertically integrated mediascape (that is, the motivated performance of ordinariness or authenticity is the focus of critical analysis and attention: see Kilborn, 2003). There are post-Habermasian critiques which see the mass production of celebrity as yet another instance of the media’s tendency to produce simulations of the real as spectacles for consumption, and thus as another instance of the diminution of the public sphere. There are also suggestions, as I noted earlier, that the increased diversity evident in the contemporary production and consumption of celebrity contains a political potential that may well be positive (Dovey, 2000). Among the latter formulations is

Ordinary People and the Media

the argument that such programming engages in particularly direct and useful ways with the socio-cultural process of modelling ethical behaviours and identities (Lumby, 2003; Ouellette and Hay, 2008).

The most influential example in this context, and one upon which I want to build, has been developed through John Hartley's deployment of the term 'democrataintment' (1999: see Chapter 12). Hartley has argued in several of his books that we are witnessing the democratization of the media: breaking with more elite formations of popular entertainment, dispensing with the privileging of information and education, and allowing the media to focus on the construction of cultural identities. In *Understanding Celebrity* (Turner, 2004), I challenged the idea of 'democrataintment' by querying the connection it argues between democracy and the proliferation of DIY celebrity, the opening up of media access, and the explosion of 'the ordinary' in media content. I agree with John Hartley that the trends we have both noticed have, among other things, opened up media access to women, to people of colour, and to a wider array of class positions; that the increased volume of media content now available could result in increased powers of self-determination becoming available to media consumers; and that there is every reason why the positive by-products of this increased volume and diversity might excite optimism about their democratic potential.

Nonetheless, I would also argue, the 'democratic' part of the 'democrataintment' neologism is an occasional and accidental consequence of the 'entertainment' part, and its least systemic component. It is important to remember that celebrity still remains a systematically hierarchical and exclusive category, no matter how much it proliferates. No amount of public participation in game shows, reality TV or DIY celebrity websites will alter the fact that, overall, the media industries still remain in control of the symbolic economy, and that they still strive to operate this economy in the service of their own interests. Overwhelmingly now (and this has accelerated dramatically in recent years as governments' support for public broadcasting, in particular, has declined) these interests are commercial. It is worth stating that this fact alone should give us pause in suggesting they might also be democratic, simply because they have multiplied the range of choices available to the

Ordinary People

consumer. Robert McChesney's historical research into the debates about the introduction of commercial broadcasting into the United States in the 1930s provides us with a useful reminder that there is no natural connection between the commercial media and a democratic politics:

Few people thought at the time that corporate-owned, advertising-supported broadcasting was the natural American system. That came later, when the PR industry went into fifth gear after the system was consolidated. Commercial broadcasting certainly was not regarded as inherently democratic. (As the BBC put it at the time, the claim by capitalist broadcasters that commercial broadcasting was democratic was 'outside our comprehension' and, as the BBC politely put it, 'clearly springs from a peculiarly American conception of democracy'.) (2007: 104)

Consequently, and while I might sympathize with more optimistic accounts, I also want to insist that there is no necessary connection between, on the one hand, a broadening demographic in the pattern of access to media representation and, on the other hand, a democratic politics. Diversity is not of itself intrinsically democratic irrespective of how it is generated or by whom. Hence, it is my view that these developments are more correctly described as a demotic, rather than a democratic, turn.

In a recent article, Nick Couldry and Tim Markham exposed an aspect of this issue to some detailed empirical examination.⁵ As part of a broader research exercise, the Public Connection project (Couldry et al., 2007), they focused upon how 'celebrity culture ... (as it intersects with the growth of reality TV, fashion culture and other areas of today's media cultures) offers connection to a world of politics and public issues' (2007: 404). Working with survey groups generating weekly diaries over a period of up to three months, the project developed data on 'media consumption, attitudes to media and politics, and public actions, and also the contexts in which all of these occur' (ibid.: 407). The diarists' accounts indicated that celebrity culture did not seem to connect them with public issues, and subsequent analysis of the groups who made up what the research nominated as the 'celebrity cluster' revealed that this part of the sample was especially disengaged from public issues

Ordinary People and the Media

and questions of the public interest (as they were defined by the project). While the quantity of this group's media consumption was close to the average, there were some clear signs of significant differences in how they made use of it:

Some 25% fewer respondents in the celebrity cluster, compared with the traditional cluster, feel a sense of duty to keep up with what's going on in the world ... It is thus the lack of engagement with news, in parallel with a lack of social and political engagement [in terms of their personal and leisure activities], rather than lack of exposure to news ... which marks the celebrity cluster as distinct. (ibid.: 417)

The research is quite detailed and I am reluctant to rob it of its specificities and nuances by dealing with it too quickly here, but the conclusion of the article makes the point that we need to be careful about how confidently we can rely on any 'presumptions about the resonance of celebrity narratives for whole populations' (ibid.: 418). Indeed, as Couldry and Markham report, there was considerable discussion in the diaries which could be interpreted as 'commentary on how irrelevant [celebrities] were to genuine public issues' (ibid.: 418). Moreover, in the researchers' view, some of the more optimistic readings of the consumption of celebrity as constituting a kind of DIY political activity are very much wide of the mark:

Those who followed celebrity culture were those least likely to be politically engaged. This is of course not surprising, and is certainly linked to the gendering of political culture, itself an important and socially regressive factor. Indeed, all the evidence suggests that following celebrity culture represents a positive choice by this group ... Our argument is not ... that there is anything 'wrong' with this choice, since such a choice can only be evaluated in the context of the wider gendering and polarization of the UK public sphere. Our point is rather that there is little evidence for some optimistic claims that this aspect of popular culture provides any potential routes into political culture, even in an expanded sense. If people's engagement with celebrity culture is part of a turning *away* from concern with issues that require public resolution (away from, in our definition, 'public connection'), then no amount of well-crafted messages will make a difference. (ibid.: 418)

Ordinary People

As a result, the authors say the research does raise questions about the ‘problematic relation between celebrity culture’s “demotic turn” and actual prospects for democratic renewal and political change’ (ibid.: 418).

Producing ordinary identities

If the demotic turn is not producing democracy, then what is it doing? This is not an easy question to answer, and each chapter in this book will have its own angle from which it will try to respond. To start at the simplest level, though, we can say that it is generating content – a lot of content. What the media have to gain from their mining of the rich seam of ‘the ordinary’ is, at the very least, unlimited performances of diversity. Performing ordinariness has become an end in itself, and thus a rich and (or so it seems) almost inexhaustible means of generating new content for familiar formats. A number of media (television, radio, the internet) have developed production techniques which help to ensure that ‘reality’ is satisfactorily performed by the ordinary citizen even when their ‘ordinariness’ – given the processes of selection through which they have had to progress – is at least debatable. One of the means through which these processes are sanitized (that is, through which their implicit hierarchies are disavowed) is by dramatizing the democratizing implications of, for instance, the thousands of ordinary (that is, apparently untalented) applicants turning up to audition for *Idol*. Clearly, the visual spectacle of the audition tells us that anyone has a chance in such a competition. The *vox pop* interviews with various hopefuls which usually make up the first episode of the format reinforce this perception. It is in the interests of those who operate the hierarchy of celebrity in this context to mask its exclusivity in practice, and one of the distinguishing features of the demotic turn may well be the media industries’ enhanced capacity to do this convincingly today. As we have seen, this enhanced capacity has dramatically increased the numbers of ordinary people it can attract and process.

There is more to this, however, and at this point I want to ask how we might think through the implications of what I have been describing. My motivation for asking this question is my

Ordinary People and the Media

sense that we are witnessing the emergence of a role for the media that is slightly different from the one which has been conventionally assumed within the traditional versions of media and communications studies (and more on that in a moment). Importantly, I suspect this is an aspect of the media's contemporary cultural influence which is new. In a conversation about these emerging forms of cultural influence, Chris Rojek once suggested to me that we may need to rethink the notion of the media as a 'mediating' apparatus because the media were operating in ways that were analogous to those we might once have attributed to the state: that is, as a source of power which now, rather than simply mediating between interests, organizes representations in support of their own interests. I thought then, and want to argue now, that there are good reasons why it might be useful to follow that suggestion to see where it leads us: to think about the media more in the way we have become accustomed to thinking about the state – as an apparatus with its own interests, and its own use for power.⁶

Let me clarify the distinction I am attempting to make here – and since it is a heuristic move rather than a substantive case I want to put forward, so I will acknowledge that this next set of explanations is a little crude. What I am trying to do is to compare conventional academic accounts of the media with the kinds of understandings that now seem necessary in response to what, I am arguing, are new and important developments. Let us think back a decade or two, to the conventional arguments we used in media and cultural studies to explain the relation between the media and the state. According to most models, the media were thought to operate as a medium or a carrier rather than as a motivating ideological force; their activities were the product of the interests of other locations of power: the state, largely, or perhaps capital. This reflected earlier versions of the political economies of the media industries, in which media industries were, in principle, independent in relation to the state but also to business. The media typically 'mediated' between the locations of power and their subjects. Among our original tasks in cultural studies was to interpret how the media did this in order to determine whose interests were being served and to what ends. We argued that we could use media texts as a means of accessing that information. Rarely (if ever) did

Ordinary People

we suggest that the texts merely served the interests of the media organizations themselves, although neither did we suggest that the media were always innocent of the uses to which these were put. Mostly, the media were framed as an instrument of the 'ideological state apparatuses' (if it wasn't an ISA itself), or of the nation-state, or of dominant ideological formations/power blocs, or even of the government – contingently and conjuncturally defined. We did not expect the media to simply serve their own interests (and I suspect that we doubted they could).

Moreover, and despite the structural importance of capital to the theoretical models which enabled this kind of commentary, I don't remember too many analyses in which commercial power was offered as the media's ultimate objective – even (I am surprised to recall) when we examined issues such as ownership and control. On the contrary, much of the discussion of the media during the 1970s and 1980s, including that of the concentration of media ownership, seemed to suggest that commercial power was itself only a means to an end: it had to be reducible to something else, something more fundamentally or structurally political, such as class interests or other forms of political or cultural hegemony.

The general point I want to make is that during these earlier formulations, we were interested in media texts for what they told us about the generation of meaning, and in media institutions for what they told us about the production of culture, but we tended not to look at the media as a primary motivating force – as themselves, the authors rather than the mediators of cultural identity. Even when we looked at public service broadcasters and their participation in the construction of national identity, we would normally have examined how individual programmes or network positioning constructed such identities as a means of accessing an ideological cultural or political agenda that was outside of and larger than the programming or its carrier.

Internationally, over the last decade or so, the media landscape has changed in ways that now significantly affect the nature of the media's involvement in the construction of cultural identities. Some of the relevant changes are in those markets where public service broadcasters have been displaced by a commercial and, often, a transnational media organization. Typically, where this occurs, the commercial provider attempts to appropriate the functions of the

Ordinary People and the Media

'national' service, including the construction of citizenship or of membership to the state or national community. In Australia, the market I know best, the leading commercial network (whichever it is) loses no opportunity to stake their claim to being 'the national broadcaster', notwithstanding the fact that there is still a publicly-funded national broadcaster with a national network that is far greater in size and reach, if not in audience ratings, than any of the commercial networks. The point of such a claim, in this instance at least, is primarily commercial – or, more correctly, it serves as a means of extending the network's social and political purchase in order to extend their commercial power. While there may well be ideological consequences to flow from a move such as this, they are by-products rather than a primary concern.

The identities constructed by the media networks I am referring to here are, I would argue, not merely 'mediated'; as I have been suggesting, sometimes they are constructed from whole cloth. Although I would accept the possibility that this observation might apply to public or national identities as well, my primary focus here is on the media's construction of the private identity: the personal, the ordinary, and the everyday. It is not difficult to see how the demotic turn collaborates with this. In its most vivid location, the hybrid reality TV/game-show franchise, the production of celebrity promises a spectacular form of personal validation.⁷ Paradoxically, the format's apparent tolerance of a lack of exceptional talents or achievements is available as long as the person concerned can perform their ordinariness with some degree of specificity or individuality. Reality TV of this kind issues an open invitation to its participants to merge their personal everyday reality with that created publicly by television. The fact that the opportunity is offered and accepted as a validating or empowering process for the 'actual' (as well as the televisually performing) individual shrinks the distance between these two dimensions of everyday life – 'on-television' and 'not-on-television' – even though everyone is thoroughly aware of how constructed the process actually is.

Nick Couldry has provided us with a resonant explanation of the appeal of such a process in his description of the place the media occupy within systems of identity and desire among many of our citizens. Couldry's 'myth of the media centre' refers to

Ordinary People

what he describes as the commonly held belief that there is a centre to the social world and that, in some sense, the media speak from and for that centre (2003: 46). As a result, there are media people and there are ordinary people; crossing the boundary which separates these two categories of person takes one from the periphery to the centre of the social. In the context I am addressing here, the myth of the media centre has been useful to the media industries because it legitimates formations of identity that are primarily invented in order to generate commercial returns. That is, what Couldry sees as the media's perceived social centrality is an effect of an apparatus that has built the media's power, but as a commercial rather than an ideological or political imperative. This is why I am so interested in the extent to which we might argue that the media now play a significantly different role in inventing, popularizing and distributing formations of identity and desire in our societies. The implications of this argument are fairly plain, I would have thought. If the media operate in order to seem like the 'natural representatives of society's centre' (Couldry, 2003: 46), and if they occupy the centre of symbolic production, then the kinds of realities they offer as forms of identity within their programming must have a powerful social and cultural impact. That is the situation to which I am responding.

The media and their interests

Among my responses is to point out that the impact of these new forms of identity seems out of all proportion to the motivations which call them into being. This is not necessarily a critique of what they are, but the scale and penetration of their circulation prompt me to go back to that earlier question – just what kind of cultural apparatus are the media these days? Another way of framing that concern might go like this. What do we make of a situation where a powerful mechanism of legitimation is being mobilized in ways with which we are familiar from other projects – in the service of the construction of the citizenry, for instance, or in developing plausible demonstrations of the homogeneity of the nation – in order to represent forms of behaviour and identity that are motivated simply by a particular business's need to establish their viability as commercial entertainment or spectacle? To

Ordinary People and the Media

address that question (and it is important we do so given its wholesale intervention into the formations of cultural identity today, particularly among the young), perhaps we should be asking some slightly old-fashioned questions of the media as a formation, that is, asking not just in whose interests they operate but what might constitute the media's own interests.

However, I am not going to do that right now. At this point in the conversation, I need to say that I actually don't yet think the media do work exactly like a state, even though this is a helpful way to resituate our thinking about the kind of social and cultural apparatus they have lately become. As a strategy, it does assist in focusing on the media's behaviour and on what that behaviour tells us about the media's objectives and interests. What I notice about the behaviour of the media system I am describing is that it seems utterly short term in its concentration on producing the conditions for commercial success and shamelessly contingent in the tactics chosen to pursue that outcome. In the instances upon which I have been focusing, that means something apparently quite banal: generating audience and participant behaviours which will result in successful television entertainment programmes. Less banal, though, is the possibility that these behaviours, where they occur, are nonetheless the result of a direct and sustained intervention into the construction of people's desires, cultural identities and expectations of the real. As we shall see in the discussion of reality TV in Chapter 2, their effect is not only to generate thousands of applications to appear on *Big Brother* or *Pop Idol*; other effects also spill out beyond the boundaries of the programme as largely uncontained and so far relatively uninspected by-products. As a result, current research⁸ is reporting that 'becoming famous' is now being talked about as a realistic career option by young people even though they have yet to decide in what area of public performance they might pursue their fame. All of that said, the curious thing is that the behaviours we have been discussing seem to have no intrinsic content or necessary politics. I suspect that there is no reason why an entirely different format would not drive entirely different behaviours or be mobilized to generate completely different constructions of cultural identity. Yet I would also accept that it would not be difficult to extract a set of principles of citizenship or an implied and contingent ethical framework underpinning the

Ordinary People

structure and narrativization of much contemporary reality programming; as will become clear from a more developed discussion in the following chapter, I am not suggesting that this is without its own internal argument.

In this chapter so far, I have been raising what seem to be important implications to draw from the rise of a media formation generating behaviours and cultural patterns that reinforce its commercial power and its cultural centrality within a changing public sphere, but the actual content of which is driven (at least in the first instance) by the needs of an entertainment format. It is a system that could be described as operating like an ideological system but without an ideological project. I am proposing that there is now a new dimension of cultural power available to the international media system, and that it has the capacity not only to generate celebrity identities from whole cloth but it may also have the capacity to generate broader formations of cultural identity from whole cloth as well. The media system I am describing is largely multinational or transnational in its semiotic reach and economic organization, but relatively localized in its application, purchase and effects. The design and distribution of formats are locally differentiated and so the effects often are too. However, while the interest in generating the behaviours and audiences I am talking about might be highly localized in terms of specific ratings wars in specific markets, for instance, the celebrity of the formats themselves is increasingly globalized. This suits the large media conglomerates who have learned how to trade their formats across cultural and national differences, but it also means that they may be trading in constructions of identity that are dislocated from any social or cultural context. As we shall see in Chapter 2, that can raise some challenging issues when, for instance, western formats are taken up in non-western locations in ways that immediately generate controversies about their effects on local cultural practices. Interestingly, and to qualify this, there are also many examples of local versions which have modified formats to give them a degree of indigeneity that reverses the flow of globalization, suggesting there is no standard formula to help us understand the basic coordinates of this transaction (Roscoe, 2001a).

Notwithstanding that qualification, the alarming and perhaps surprising thing for someone working in cultural or media studies

Ordinary People and the Media

today is that the forms of cultural identity the media produce are so contingent, that they are so loosely connected to the social conditions from which they emerge, and that they are the object of so little sense of responsibility from those who generated them in the first place. As a result, rather than an increase in access providing the route to a more representative and coherent expression of the will and ambition of the people (which is what we might have hoped), there is a sense in which the demotic turn has unleashed the unruly, unpredictable and irresponsible characteristics of Le Bon's (1960 [1901]) nineteenth-century crowd – the true sense of the demotic in all its unharnessable, exciting but anarchic character: energetic, over-responsive, excessive, and capable of instigating but not easily organizing or managing social and cultural change (Marshall, 1997: see Chapter 2).

I am, of course, aware that these are also the very characteristics upon which the conservative taste-based critiques of *Big Brother* and similar popular programmes have focused: it is easy to slide into this kind of position. My interest in this is not to pursue that taste-based critique, however. Instead my interest lies in what the success of the demotic turn says about the cultural and industrial formation that produced it, and about the kinds of effects this formation may generate in the future. Before going much further, however, I need to flesh these interests out just a little by attempting to clarify the differences between the kind of enquiry that I am prosecuting here, and those more conventional, more moralistic, critiques responding to the widespread phenomenon of 'tabloidization' over the last decade or so – the years of the demotic turn.

Tabloidization

The notion of tabloidization, together with its associated 'laments' (Langer, 1998) and rationalizations (Hartley, 1996), has been around academic discussions of the media for quite some time. It was initially located in 1990s' discussions of shifts in the definitions of 'what counts' as news and current affairs, in which most news outlets (not just those seen to be at the lower end of the taste or 'quality' scale) are widely thought to have headed in the following direction:

... away from politics and towards crime, away from the daily news agenda and towards editorially generated items

Ordinary People

promoted days in advance, away from information-based treatments of social issues and towards entertaining stories on lifestyles or celebrities, and [finally towards] an overwhelming investment in the power of the visual, in the news as an entertaining spectacle. (Turner, 1999: 59)

The notion grew, however, from this kind of specific application to the point where the label of tabloidization was expanded to cover a 'broad-based cultural movement', that was not only evident in media forms but also in the wider culture. Typically, such an application was marked by the 'increasing commercialization of modern life and a corresponding decline in "traditional values"' (ibid.: 60). As a result, the term was widely (and readily) deployed by those who wanted to criticize the behaviours and moralities of the popular media and popular culture in general. Indeed, in an earlier discussion of the phenomenon, I noted the political difficulties cultural studies faced in itself criticizing any of the forms and practices which had become the focus of the tabloidization critique: 'given [this critique's] compatibility with elitist and conservative readings of popular culture', I argued, 'aligning oneself in agreement with any one of its criticisms is to risk being aligned with the whole agenda' (1999: 68). Furthermore, I suggested, the phenomenon of tabloidization had now become 'implausibly inclusive': 'it incorporates lifestyle programming, advice columns in newspapers, afternoon talk shows, viewer video formats, hidden camera journalism, gossip magazines, and much more, into a miscellany of symptoms for a cultural malaise' (ibid.). Consequently, at that time, I took the view that the category was not an enabling one for the kinds of analysis and critique that needed to be done: it was 'too baggy, imprecise and value-laden to be of any use ... in attempting to understand the appeal and cultural function' of the kinds of tendencies I had been examining in contemporary news and current affairs (ibid.: 70).

The category has stuck around, nevertheless, although in its most recent formations it has been much more explicit about its penetration into discussions of changes in the public sphere more generally and about its migration from the original focus on the news media. Martin Conboy's foreword to one of the most recent and developed accounts of tabloidization (importantly, it is not 'tabloidization' any longer, but 'tabloid culture')

Ordinary People and the Media

acknowledges this connection when he notes how 'tabloid values have come to permeate our general media culture' (2008: xv). The editors of *The Tabloid Culture Reader*, Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn, point out that tabloidization was itself originally 'a tabloid term': 'a media industry expression rather than a scholarly concept, denoting a dumbing down of media content and a weakening of the *ideal* functions of mass media in liberal democracies'. As they go on to say, echoing my earlier point, while it was 'originally deployed to describe a decline in journalistic standards [tabloidization] is now increasingly applied to all forms of mainstream media content including talk shows and radio phone-ins, reality television, gross-out comedy, celebrity magazines and even documentary' (2008: 1).

The term, then, has had to do a lot of work, in the context of academic debate, that it was never intended to do. That said, it has been widely and enthusiastically taken up. However, it could be argued that the breadth of its application indicates, on the one hand, how eagerly sections of the community have appropriated it to their own interests rather than, on the other hand, testifying to the precision or accuracy with which it might isolate and identify the characteristics in question. As a term that might be useful within academic debate, it probably never really had that much to offer and so it is not surprising that Biressi and Nunn choose the phrase 'tabloid culture' as their preferred alternative. Rather than focusing attention on a particular market or a particular taste-based media form, they see this choice of descriptor as a means of denoting 'the newer formations of media culture that draw together ... so many of the features that were commonly attributed to older tabloid formats' (ibid.) It is a strategy that I can understand; it seems to me, too, that there clearly common elements in the current formations of media cultures that we need to examine as a cultural conjuncture rather than as disaggregated analyses of particular media or selected attributes of their formats.

Biressi and Nunn are careful to point to the long history of the tabloid press, going back to nineteenth-century newspapers in Britain and the USA, before moving on to analyses of its more contemporary formations. They pick up common elements in the accounts of the tabloid press that appear increasingly

Ordinary People

from the 1970s onwards, and that draw attention to the 'tightening bond between entertainment industries, consumerism and the tabloid press', as well as to the kinds of content that are associated with the 'tabloid profile': 'sexual vulgarity, the use of popular vernacular, and a radical iconoclastic conservatism' aimed at capturing the attention of a 'non-elite audience' (ibid.: 9). Fundamental to the critical response to the growth of this profile across media formats, they argue, was the proposition that it constituted a clear demonstration that the media had surrendered their fourth estate principles to an unrestrained commercialism, pandering to the 'lowest common denominator in order to sell copy and support a free-market ethos':

As such it may be regarded as a process that inexorably erodes serious journalism across all spheres, genres, and platforms such as radio and broadcast news, documentary, political reportage and online journalism. Debate about tabloidization therefore necessarily addresses the tensions between entertainment and information within an increasingly multimedia and globalized consumer environment. (ibid.: 10)

While their collection, as a whole, is appropriately ecumenical about the social and political effects of this, it is the pervasiveness of tabloid culture and its steady migration from its original, specific, media locations that seem to interest them most.

The extent of the pervasiveness of tabloid culture and thus its implications can, of course, be exaggerated. Accounts of tabloidization in the 1990s, such as Franklin's (1998) discussion of 'newszak', could lead to the perception that there was an irresistible juggernaut of bad taste levelling the media landscape everywhere you went. The 1980s–1990s' sprint downmarket was certainly not an exercise in which everybody participated, nor was it the same in every location. Rather, its effects were uneven and significantly market-contingent. In Australia, for example, most of the metropolitan tabloid newspapers had actually disappeared by the end of the twentieth century, while the 'quality' end of the market continued to thrive. Although the provision of (and the audiences for) broadcast news and current affairs has declined dramatically in the UK, for instance, the increased amount of news available through

Ordinary People and the Media

24-hour subscription and online news services could be argued to more than compensate for that. The rise of the news blog (and we will be looking at this in more detail in Chapter 3), the conventional example used to provide evidence for the expansion of a newly democratic public sphere, does seem directly related to the concentration of news media organizations and their dominance of broadcasting and other mass media news. And while it might be true that broadcast television's political coverage has declined in many markets most of the time, more than 70 million US viewers watched the Biden-Palin US Vice-Presidential debate on 3 October 2008, making it the second most watched political debate ever (coming in behind the 80 million people who watched the Carter-Reagan debate in 1980). As Toby Miller (2009) has demonstrated, television was still emphatically the main game for those who wanted to follow the 2008 presidential election campaigns. This is a reminder that we need to keep our eyes on the details as we try to understand these trends.

In terms of tabloid culture's regimes of taste – the so-called vulgarisation of the media, for instance – it is important to acknowledge that there is a significant dimension of popular media content that sets out to offend middle-class standards of taste as a deliberate commercial and discursive strategy, not as the inadvertent or ill-informed consequence of a 'failure' of taste. Jane Shattuc's (1998) discussion of US TV's day-time talk shows described conservative media criticism of programmes such as that hosted by Ricki Lake as an attempt to bully the popular audience into adopting more middle-class standards of taste – something that would have these audience members accepting the denigration, repression and subordination of precisely the regimes of value which rule much of their own everyday lives. She argues that those whose favourite programmes are the targets of such critiques are not unaware of this; hence their adoption of a mode of consumption which does not so much fail to perform in ways that fit with the tastes of their critics as deliberately set out to offend them (cf. Turner, 1999: 72–4). A similar line of argument is developed by Bev Skeggs in her (2005) discussion of the audience for *Wife Swap* which is taken up in the following chapter.

Biressi and Nunn's focus on 'tabloid culture' takes them away from such class- and taste-based critiques towards a

Ordinary People

consideration of what might be the social and cultural implications of the media shifts they bring together by way of that label. From such a point of view, they imply, the conventional 'tabloidization' critique is in many ways simply beside the point. Furthermore, they are sympathetic to the argument that some of the shifts collected under the label of the tabloid have been significantly inclusive in their use of 'non-elite people, issues and values'. The possibility that this might constitute a form of democratic participation needs to be taken seriously:

It could be said that the relationship between 'the popular' and 'the public sphere' has taken a new turn with the advent of first-person media and reality television leading critics to test and sometimes explicitly challenge outright condemnations of tabloid culture ... Many of these arguments emerge from the conviction that even the most denigrated forms of popular culture need to be engaged with at a serious academic level; not merely as vehicles of commercialism and ideological persuasion but also as potential sites of cultural struggle, transgressive pleasures and media visibility for ordinary people and common culture. (2008: 10)

All of that seems eminently sensible and appropriate to me. I am not entirely convinced, though, that the idea of the tabloid gives me the best means of prosecuting the engagement they describe. In particular, its roots in a form of motivated political critique, and the inescapable fact that the judgements involved in deciding what is part of the tabloid and what isn't (who determines what constitutes vulgarity, for instance?) are hopelessly overdetermined by class, gender and other factors, make it highly unstable territory from which to launch the kind of enquiry I have in mind for this book. So, while some of what I want to examine in this book could be located within what Biressi and Nunn call tabloid culture, it is not 'tabloid-ness' that ultimately interests me. Rather, when I examine the popular success of reality TV, of talkback radio, of political blogs, of online journalism, of user-generated content on the Web and of social networking sites, I am interested in understanding what function these media forms have for their participants – the 'housemates', the callers, the bloggers, the posters of comments, the online friends – as well

Ordinary People and the Media

as for those consumers who simply watch, read or listen. I am interested in these functions as the signs of an expanded role for a comprehensively commercialized media in constructing cultural identities through new, often participatory and interactive, forms of entertainment across a broad range of media platforms and formats.

My first port of call, in the following chapter, is to take a much closer look at this through reality TV.

Notes

- 1 This is an expanded version of the material originally published in the *International Journal of Cultural Studies* (2006, 9(2): 153–66) as “The mass production of celebrity: celestoids, reality TV and the “demotic turn””.
- 2 Su Holmes (2005) has an excellent discussion of *Big Brother*, ordinariness and celebrity in Holmes and Jermyn (2005). While her concerns are ultimately quite different to mine, a number of the issues dealt with here are also raised in hers.
- 3 Nick Couldry has made the point to me that we know very little about to what extent this appetite is ‘industry constructed’ rather than the product of some kind of grassroots cultural process (which is how it is customarily understood). It is a fair point and, like him, I am unaware of any empirical work on this area which could answer that question.
- 4 See Chapter 3 in my *Understanding Celebrity*. This is in fact a common theme in many accounts of contemporary TV, such as Bonner’s *Ordinary Television* (2003), Dovey’s *Freakshow* (2000), or the many accounts of reality TV formats such as *Big Brother*. The core location to which I am referring, however, is the ‘GirlCultures’ project currently being conducted by Catharine Lumby and Elspeth Probyn, which is reporting clear evidence of this from their interviews with teenage girls in Sydney. At this stage, most of this work has only appeared in conference presentations rather than in print, but it is referenced in Lumby (2003).
- 5 Nick Couldry and Tim Markham (2007) ‘Celebrity culture and public connection: bridge or chasm?’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10(4) December: 403–22.
- 6 Nick Couldry also investigates the idea of the media as a quasi-state, in different and interesting ways, in his ‘Media meta-capital: extending the range of Bourdieu’s field theory’ (2004).
- 7 This is also a point well made at some length in Holmes (2005).
- 8 See note 3.