

Temporary Celebrity: Media ‘Fodder’ and Diversion

Sam G. Riley
(sriley@vt.edu)

The late artist Andy Warhol has been quoted widely as having remarked, “In the future everybody will be world-famous for fifteen minutes.” His use of hyperbole pointed out the considerable hold that celebrity has on modern culture. His words also hinted at the subject of temporary celebrity.

Much has been written about celebrity in general and about individual celebrities. Almost all of this attention has been directed at major celebrities, whose renown tends to endure over long periods of time, and their roles in our mass mediated lives. On the other hand, very little attention has been accorded the one-shot or temporary celebrity: someone who is as private as most of us until something happens to thrust that individual into the hot glare of the media—but only for a short while. Soon, this “celebrity with a lower-case c,” having served his or her media purpose, is returned to relative privacy or obscurity.

In the late 1970s, James Monaco, author of *Celebrity: The Media as Image Makers* (1978), made cursory mention of accidental celebrities, calling them “quasars.” Such people, whose celebrity often is short-lived, come to the attention of the rest of us without having sought publicity or exposure.

Twenty years later, in the late 1990s, writer David Brode published *Once Was Enough: Celebrities (and Others) Who Appeared a Single Time on the Screen* (1997). This trade book was devoted exclusively to one-time movie actors and actresses.

In 2001, Chris Rojek published *Celebrity*, a book in which he mentioned one-hit singers and other individuals who have gained fleeting celebrity, calling them “celetoids.” He also wrote briefly about other people who have assumed ficti-

tious and usually temporary show-business identities, such as Sacha Baron Cohen, whose first such character was Ali G but who later became a celebrity of much greater wattage as Borat, a movie character through which Cohen skewered some of America’s less fortunate traits. Rojek called such people “celeactors.”

Not one of these new terms—quasars, celetoids, or celeactors—appears to have caught on in the literature, yet all three of these writers commented, however briefly, upon the neglected topic of the temporary/ one-shot celebrity—people who experience the 15 minutes of fame of which Warhol spoke. A chance conversation on my flight from Munich to Washington, D.C., while returning home from the Vienna colloquium produced a German term that neatly fits temporary celebrities: *Eintagsfliegen*, a term in that language for gnat-like insects that live only one day.

I became interested in this topic while editing a reference book about America’s celebrity culture. The book, *Star Struck: An Encyclopedia of Celebrity Culture* (2010), was published by ABC-CLIO. The book contained no entries about individual celebrities, but instead treated many different aspects of celebrity culture in general. *Star Struck* contained 86 entries, of which I wrote 35, including an entry on temporary celebrity. Most of the other entry writers were journalism or media professors.

To begin to identify and examine some of the types of individuals who become temporary celebrities, I have expanded upon what my book entry had to say on this topic by compiling an experimental informational blog, www.celebrityblogsburg.blogspot.com, which lays out a 21-category typology of temporary celebrities. The blog, completed in May 2010 after about a year’s work, contains just more

than 600 posts organized by type—heroes, miscreants, victims, one-hit recording artists, and the like. Each post is about an individual who achieved fleeting celebrity between 1950 and early 2010. Each individual featured in the blog is accorded a brief write-up that describes what he or she did to come to the public eye, and most entries also include a video clip or a photograph of the person. A joy of using a blog for this purpose, so long as it is done on a non-profit basis, is that video and photos are readily available that can be used free of royalty charges.

Some of the temporary celebrities presented in my blog came to the attention of the media-consuming public because of something good they did, others, by way of accomplishments of the notorious sort. Still other temporary celebrities flashed across our awareness because they were victims of some kind.

Many of these temporary celebrities have become known to us via show business, including sports, which is now one of our most popular and profitable forms of entertainment. Others got their 15 minutes of fame via appearing in what we normally think of as the news. Still others came to us as iconic advertising characters in television commercials. All of these individuals are alike in that they have provided part of the “fodder” necessary to fill the constant and considerable time and space needs of our popular media. Our major, enduring celebrities provide a great deal of the material our modern media demand, but even as numerous as these stars and personalities are, they cannot completely satisfy the media’s ceaseless need for new material, and the public’s ceaseless need for diversion. Thus, temporary celebrities help fill the gap between supply and demand.

If I have succeeded in my online efforts, the 600+ figures presented in this blog will help demonstrate what tends to give individuals their temporary celebrity and perhaps will add in a small way to the attention given this topic.

Some of my blog’s categories are more heavily peopled than others, not by design on my part, but due to what one might think of as “natural selection.” For every hero I was able to identify, for example, there were far, far more miscreants. Also, the media-consuming public

simply tends to find some types of people more fascinating than others. A beautiful femme fatale such as Tai Collins or a hunky one-hit male singer such as Billy Ray Cyrus will tend to command far more public, hence media interest than will a far less glamorous whistle-blower or inventor.

That last observation leads me to another reason I took an interest in the admittedly offbeat topic of temporary celebrity. I refer to two related research studies done more than twenty years apart by myself and Professor Gary Selnow, one of the organizers of the Vienna colloquium and in the early 1980s, a Virginia Tech colleague. In 1984, we published an article in the journal *Mass Comm Review* (vol. 11, 36-40) entitled “Faces In the News: Recognition of Public Figures by Today’s University Student.” Using under-graduate students at two U.S. universities as our respondents, we presented the participants in our study with a selection of head shots of a variety of people who recently had been prominently in the news. The photos were taken from *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines. When we examined the results, we were struck by how very well the students did at identifying those individuals whose newsworthiness came from the world of popular entertainment, and in stark contrast, how very poorly our respondents did at recognizing individuals from life’s more sober pursuits: politics, religion, business and finance, the military, serious journalism, and the like. We were startled that a successful contestant on the television quiz show *Jeopardy*, Ken Jennings, was better recognized by our student respondents than was former U.S. President Gerald Ford.

In our more recent reprise of that study, for which we presented our findings in San Francisco at the 2006 convention of the Association for Education in Journalism & Mass Communication, we had made it a point to show our student respondents a sample of faces in the public eye split equally between entertainment-world figures (including sports) and news-world figures. Overall, results were quite the same. Students were deadly accurate in identifying entertainment figures, even though we had purposely tried to stack the deck against them by including photos of four slender, blonde, youthful actresses, all of whom looked very much alike to the two of us. The student respondents, however,

knew them cold. And once again our student respondents showed a woeful information deficit when it came to people who had made the news due to non-entertainment, hard-news accomplishments.

It is likely that many of us who teach journalism might agree with a comment made by former *Newsweek* writer Joseph Cumming, whose book, *Bylines: Writings from the American South* (2010), I recently reviewed. When he retired from his magazine career, Mr. Cumming spent several years teaching journalism to college undergraduates. He remarked in his book that although he was very fond of his students, he could not help noticing that when it came to public affairs, they had a couple of blank spots: the past and the present.

Some future communication researcher might do a similar study on older respondents using photos of temporary celebrities. This researcher might confidently hypothesize that entertainment-world temporary/one-shot celebrities would be better recognized than would temporary celebrities who came to the public's attention from hard- news stories.

He or she might also hypothesize that the "15 minutes of fame" type celebrity whose name or image stays with the public longest might be the most physically unusual, whether beautiful or ugly.

Another hypothesis might be that the temporary celebrity who has an unusual name, such as Fyvush Finkel or Herve Villechaize, might have a longer temporary celebrity "shelf life" than someone having a plain and simple name, such as Bob Smith or Mary Brown.

My blog, of course, does none of this hypothesis testing. My intention in doing the blog was simply to provide the raw materials for examining temporary celebrity. For my present purpose, bringing up hypothesis testing is perhaps getting ahead of myself. Let me, then, describe the categories of temporary celebrities that make up this book-length informational blog.

First, however, a word about modern fame, celebrity and stardom in general. Of these three

terms, fame is the most general in meaning. A measure of fame comes to any public figure, but celebrity to only some. Every politician elected or appointed to high office enjoys a certain measure of fame, but most such individuals fail to stand out enough to gain celebrity. Instead, most politicians are well-to-do people in dark blue power suits, team players who get along by going along with their political party. Only occasionally does a politician come along—John Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, Barack Obama-- who has sufficient good looks, wealth, personality or pizzazz to capture the public's imagination and attain the level of celebrity. Fame brings with it admirers and detractors; celebrity brings free-spending fans, and occasional stalkers. Fame's admiration implies quiet respect, while celebrity and stardom (the movie version of celebrity) bring excited adulation and a specious feeling of intimacy that the hardcore fan feels for his or her beloved celebrity. Fame depends upon solid accomplishment, whereas celebrity, which also normally requires accomplishment, tends to depend more heavily upon the added blandishments of good looks, glitz, glamour, and heavy media exposure.

Celebrity is marked by intense public interest that translates into a desire to know what the celebrity "is really like," and, finally, major celebrity has come to imply the "branding" of the individual so that, like products, celebrities or stars can be used to make money not just for themselves, but also for other people or companies.

In addition, a word or two might be said about the other most frequently cited quotation regarding celebrity. Historian Daniel Boorstin, in his wonderful 1961 book *The Image* (1987), remarked that a celebrity is "someone well known for being well known." As much as I admire Mr. Boorstin's work, I must disagree with this statement. While his remark was glib and marvelously quotable, its contention does not stand up to rational examination. It is, of course, possible for someone to gain celebrity merely by his or her physical beauty or great wealth—think Paris Hilton or Vanna White or the late, plasticized Anna Nicole Smith—but most celebrities have had to do something quite substantial in order to gain their celebrity. It was not by being pretty that LeBron James and Shaquille O'Neal became major celebrities, for example. They

gained their enormous international celebrity through the hard work required in order to hone their unusual athletic skills. This need to have accomplished something substantial or unusual would appear as true of the temporary celebrity as it is of the biggest star.

The temporary celebrities in my blog who came to public recognition from the (non-entertainment) news were placed in 14 categories: heroes, mass/serial killers, other murderers of note, spies/traitors, disgraced political figures, disgraced business figures, disgraced media figures, disgraced religious figures, miscellaneous miscreants, victims, hoaxers, *femmes* (and *hommes*) *fatalis*, whistle-blowers, and inventors/innovators.

The temporary celebrities who came to light from popular entertainment were placed in a smaller number of categories, but nevertheless were considerable in number. The entertainment-world categories are: one-shot recording artists, actors/actresses invariably identified with one iconic TV role, reality television figures, one-time movie actors/actresses, and sports/outdoor figures known for one accomplishment rather than for sustained success.

The two remaining categories of temporary celebrities appearing in this blog are individuals known for their iconic work in TV commercials and, finally, a miscellaneous category for people who did not fit neatly into the other 20 categories.

In all cases, these temporary celebrities bring to the public at least a modest amount of informational value and considerably more entertainment value; yet, viewed in aggregate, they also provide easy distraction from the more complex and vital issues of the day. Given the omnipresence of media—old and new—this element of distraction or diversion is a powerful force. Such distractions have always existed, a human trait skillfully described by Mitchell Stephens in his splendid book *A History of News* as “the whisper of the day”: terrible crimes, monstrous births, strange beasts, witchcraft, and the like. It seems natural enough that most people show more interest in the oddity than *The Odyssey*. Today’s enormous web of media, however, tremendously magnify the effect of this human

tendency to prefer easy information that gives them something to chat about with their friends.

Let us now take a quick look at some examples of these now-you-see-‘em, now-you-don’t celebrities. For a hero, consider Lenny Skutnik, a Washington, D.C., office worker whose name was on every lip for a short while in 1982 when he jumped into the frozen Potomac River and saved a woman’s life following the crash of an airliner. But how many media consumers today would recall his name or his brave deed?

Even more villainous than Skutnik was heroic was Ted Bundy, a handsome young sociopath who murdered around 35 unsuspecting young women in the 1970s. Guilty of only a single murder was Ronny Zamora, who in 1977 murdered an elderly woman who returned home while Zamora was burgling the place. Oddly, his temporary celebrity came not so much due to his crime, but because of the absurd psychobabble defense his attorney mounted for him: that he had been brainwashed by watching too many violent television shows—especially “Kojak.”

A great many people have become temporary celebrities due to other types of misdeeds. Mark Foley was a Florida congressman who in 2006 sent suggestive emails to a congressional page. Father John Geoghan was a pedophile priest who was killed in his cell by a fellow inmate in 2006. Jayson Blair was the fast-track *New York Times* reporter who in 2003 parted company with that newspaper because of plagiarism and fabrication of facts. Douglas Cone of Tampa, Florida long was known for his philanthropy but more recently came to be known for being a bigamist; for many years he had kept two homes and families—only about 20 miles apart.

Among temporary celebrity victims, consider Rodney King, an African American beaten like a drum by four out-of-control LAPD policemen in 1991, causing major rioting in Los Angeles. Nick Berg, a Jewish engineer, in 2004 became the first Westerner captured and beheaded by Islamic militants. Mary Jo Kopechne was a pretty young political worker who drowned in 1969 when Ted Kennedy’s car went off a bridge on Chappaquiddick Island following a beach party.

Elizabeth Chapman was a hoaxer who convinced gullible media that her son Justin had an IQ of 298. She put the boy under so much pressure that he attempted suicide. Another notable hoaxer was Rosie Ruiz, who “won” the 1980 Boston Marathon by jumping into the race just before the tired runners approached the finish line.

A *femme fatale*, who stripped in Washington, D.C., as Fanny Foxe, the Argentine Firecracker, in 1974 brought to an end the long career of House Ways and Means Committee chairman Wilbur Mills; and to give equal treatment, a *homme fatale* who gained temporary celebrity was Scott Thorson, when in 1982 he sued entertainer Liberace for palimony.

Turning to temporary celebrities who have come from the wonderful world of entertainment, a surprising number of singers have had only one big hit. Three examples are Bobbie Gentry, C.W. McCall, and Rick Lewis. Their hits? “Ode to Billy Joe,” “Convoy,” and “Get a Job.”

Actors and actresses who appeared in only one movie include Sonya Wilde, star of the race-oriented movie “I Passed for White,” and child actress Mary Badham, Deep-South lawyer Atticus Finch’s daughter Scout in “To Kill a Mockingbird.”

The history of television is replete with character actors who, although they might have appeared on many a show, are closely identified with the one stellar role of their career. For example, Polly Holliday, no matter what else she might do, will likely be forever remembered as Flo, a smart-talking diner waitress on the show “Alice.” Actor Darren Burrows is similarly tethered to his role as Native-American character Ed Chigliak on the series “Northern Exposure,” as is actress Katey Sagal to her portrayal of the lusty housewife Peg Bundy on “Married With Children.”

People who appear in TV reality shows are tailor-made for temporary celebrity. Anh-Tuan “Cao Boi” Bui was a cast member of “Survivor,” Evan Marriott was on “Joe Millionaire,” and Omarosa Manigault-Stallworth briefly was all the rage for her appearances on “The Apprentice.”

A modest number of sports figures have gained temporary celebrity due to one remarkable accomplishment, such as the 1990 upset win in the boxing ring when relative unknown James “Buster” Douglas beat the formidable heavyweight champ Mike Tyson. Douglas just as quickly lost his title to Evander Holyfield later in the same year. My own favorite example from sports was Eddie “The Eagle” Edwards, who represented Great Britain in the 1988 Winter Olympics as their ski jumper. Somehow his gangling appearance and floundering performance gave him an endearing quality that produced short-lived media attention.

Somewhere in the never-never land between hard news and entertainment is advertising. Temporary celebrities coming from their work in TV commercials include Clara Peller, Dick Wilson, and Benjamin Curtis. These individuals played, in turn, the little old lady who growled “Where’s the beef” in commercials for Wendy’s; the Charmin toilet tissue spokesman Mr. Whipple; and Steven the Dell Dude. Another such temporary celebrity was Frank Perdue, CEO of Perdue Chicken, who starred in his own company’s commercials, which was, to my way of thinking, remarkable in that his facial features were such that he himself actually looked like a chicken.

In the blog’s miscellaneous category appear individuals whose temporary celebrity came from being or doing something out of the ordinary. Perhaps most of all, these people are the modern-day equivalent of what Mitchell Stephens described in *A History of News* as having filled the broadsides, pamphlets, and news ballads that existed prior to the appearance of newspapers.

Among those whose characteristics or deeds were brought into temporary focus by the media was Rosalie Bradford, a woman who once weighed 1,200 pounds and who brought a libel suit against media that had compared her in weight to a baby elephant or small car. U.S. ethnic studies professor Ward Churchill enjoyed short-lived notoriety in 2007 when the University of Colorado fired him for academic falsification and plagiarism. Among other things, Churchill

had exaggerated the extent of his Native American roots.

If the name Larry Fortensky sounds familiar, it is because this husky construction worker was actress Elizabeth Taylor's 7th husband. Brian "Kato" Kaylin was O.J. Simpson's famous houseguest who testified in Simpson's 1994 murder trial and who became one of those temporary celebrities who legitimately can be said to be "famous for being famous." Arthur Kent was the so-called "Scud Stud" of the 1991 Persian Gulf War. The swashbuckling Kent covered the Scud missile attacks of that conflict but fell from grace, and celebrity, for opposing the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Roy Pearson is another occupant of the miscellaneous category of my blog. Pearson was a judge who sued a struggling immigrant dry cleaner—for \$65 million—for losing his suit pants. That frivolous legal action cost Pearson

his judgeship and gave the expression "suit pants" a new meaning.

The name Phillipe Petit was widely recognized in 1974 when this diminutive French tight-rope walker connected New York City's World Trade Towers with a cable and performed on it for gaping onlookers.

Some of our more scientifically oriented colleagues might be tempted to regard this topic as a mere exercise in trivia. My reply would be perhaps so, but only if you consider people trivial. The fact is, temporary celebrities today come and go with such rapidity that one might better speak of people's 15 *seconds* of fame. Whatever all this adds up to, one thing is clear: that these "shooting stars" provide vivid and varied splashes of color on our enormous media canvas. More of them are appearing all the time and are very likely to continue doing so.

References

- BOORSTIN, D. 1987: *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. New York: Atheneum.=
- BRODE, D. 1997: *Once Was Enough: Celebrities (And Others) Who Appeared a Single Time on the Screen*. Secaucus, NJ: Carol Pub.
- CUMMING, J. B., Jr. 2010: *Bylines: Writings from the American South 1963 to 1997*. Bloomington, IN: Author House
- MONACO, J. 1978: *Celebrity: The Media as Image Makers*. NY: Dell Pub. Co.
- RILEY, S. G. 2010: *Star Struck: An Encyclopedia of Celebrity Culture*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO
- RILEY, S. G. AND SELNOW, G. 1984: "Faces in the News: Recognition of Public Figures by Today's University Student," *Mass Comm Review*, 11, 36-40
- ROJEK, C. 2001: *Celebrity*. London: Reaktion Books
- STEPHENS, M. 1988: *A History of News*. New York: Penguin Books
- www.celebrityblogsburg.blogspot.com