

Sociology of Celebrity¹
Spring 2017
Sociology 156b

Department of Sociology
Brandeis University

Class Time: Mondays, Wednesdays, Thursdays 10-10:50am
Location: Mandel Center, Room G03

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1. Course description ... Why take a class on celebrity?

The major premise of this course is that celebrity is one of the *most important social phenomena* affecting human societies (America and globally) today. The

¹ I (as instructor) reserve the right to change this syllabus at anytime (and I probably will). Any changes will be announced in class and via Latte.

problem is that it often does not seem that way. Someone who internet trolls Kanye West and Kim Kardashian's Instagram? That's important? Fanatical TMZ newswatching? Important? Becoming a DIY celebrity by vlogging on YouTube about video games (e.g. PewDiPie) or Kate Middleton's hairstyles (e.g. Zoella)? How can (allegedly trivial) stuff like this possibly constitute one of the "most important social phenomena" affecting human societies at the present moment?

Exhibit one for the (major) importance of celebrity is the American political system, even prior to the election of (celeb extraordinaire) Donald Trump. Political campaigns are organized in nearly identical ways as promotional campaigns for movies, music, or the personality branding of a celebrity. Political power is therefore increasingly a form of celebrity power, and all signs suggest the celebrity and politics will merge even more closely in the future.

Exhibit two is the enormous economic impact of celebrity. Celebrity sells, as we'll talk a lot about, and it employs millions of (non-celebrity) people in good-paying jobs because it sells so well. Celebrity is a product that is industrially produced, legally regulated and heavily monetized. Indeed, marketers will tell you that celebrity is the one thing they (think) they can count on when trying to sell something to a consumer base completely inundated with advertising messages (especially millennials). Self-branding and "promotional" social media use (as we'll talk about) reveal how anyone with internet access has (in theory at least) the capacity not only to gain celebrity but to make money from it.

Exhibit three for the importance of celebrity is the deep significance and meaning that those *without* celebrity status (e.g. ordinary peeps like you and me) attach to those *with* celebrity status (e.g. your favorite celebrity). It is not uncommon for someone to know more about a celebrity's life than a close family member or friend. After all, they ("parasocially" ... we'll explain this) interact with the celebrity more often. It is also not uncommon for them to engage in ritualized behaviors when they *see* a celebrity in the living flesh. Celebrity worship increasingly borders on religious worship in our (kind of) secular age.

So, celebrity has a *pivotal* importance for many different dimensions of society today. All of the activities that involve celebrity are not trivial but possess an essential, even *sacred* significance. Ergo, to paraphrase that pre-Internet pop culture sage Andy Warhol: "everything I know about American society I learned from celebrity." The opening gauntlet of this course is our (tentative) agreement with him. We can learn a lot about American and global society today by understanding celebrity. That could be wrong, of course, and feel free to state your disagreement on May 3 after our last class. But if any of this seems in the slightest bit interesting to you, then welcome aboard!

This course will examine celebrity from a sociological perspective that integrates textual, cultural, historical, political, psychological and media points of view. We'll engage with a variety of theoretical arguments and thematic foci, paying specific attention to case studies of celebrity in a variety of different entertainment genres: films, movies, music, sports, reality TV, social media, etc. While the course is reading-centric, we will also engage with a variety of other media to help us grasp celebrity in all of its many different guises, including films, documentaries, music, photography, maybe even a short story or two if we can find the time.

Oh, one other thing before we get to the boring stuff: celebrity is also an important topic for a sociology course (like this one!) because we are all so familiar with celebrity in our everyday life. This means we think we know a lot about it already, and sociology can teach us nothing. On the contrary, sociology can be *really good* at challenging our preconceptions and making us think more critically about stuff (like celebrity) we think we know a lot about. As the old TV show MTV Cribs used to say: "you think you know, but you have no idea."

Of course, this might not be true in your case. And again, feel free (on May 3!) to state the reasons why you don't think anymore critically about celebrity because you have (or will have) taken this course. But, and here is my point (finally), in addition to learning about one of the "most important social phenomena" affecting human societies today, another incentive to take this course is that good old-fashioned one of *learning to think critically*.

2. Learning goals

Ok, with (all of) this in mind, here are the learning goals for the course:

1. To develop an elementary grasp of core sociological principles as they apply to celebrity. This includes theories of social status, media, culture, social psychology, power and inequality.
2. To gain a better awareness of how celebrity *could be* one of the "most important social phenomena" affecting human societies today and use this awareness to consider ways of harnessing celebrity for social good.
3. To challenge preconceptions (e.g. "common sense") and learn to think critically about celebrity using sociological theories and concepts.

4. To develop and hone writing and argumentative skills (not to mention reading skills ... trust me none of this is trivial even in the age of iPhone and it all pays dividends later).
5. To develop group participation and presentation skills as you attempt to simulate the production of a celebrity phenomenon yourself.

3. Requirements²

And now for what you've all been waiting for: Here is what will be required of you in this class:

(1) Midterm essay exam

After our Feb 16 class, we will do a take-home midterm exam based on the content we've covered to that point (all from the course section "Theorizing Celebrity"). The format for this will be announced in class before the day. What is certain is that I will ask you to write a 5-8 page (doubled-spaced!) paper in response to an exam prompt and this will be due the week we return from the midterm break.

The score on your midterm essay exam will be worth **20% of your final grade**

(2) Final test-style exam

The final will be a comprehensive examination of the course content and will be given during the scheduled time during finals week.

The score on your final exam will be worth **25% of your final grade**

(3) Three (of four) section papers

² You might ask yourself "Why all this writing? Doesn't this guy realize that writing is very rapidly being replaced by TwitterSpeak and that we are wasting valuable time honing what will soon be an antiquated skill equivalent to horse/buggy repair?" Let me explain my reasons. Famous study by sociologists Arum and Roska entitled *Academically Adrift* (2011). Findings: college students learn *surprisingly little* during their undergrad careers, regardless of what college they are at. *However*, students do learn stuff in a class (*any* class) when said class requires two things of them: "more than 40 pages of reading per week and more than 20 pages of writing per semester" (pp. 70-71 of study). We're actually exceeding those numbers a bit in this class. Hence, my hope is that requiring that you do this old-fashioned writing thing will actually help you in ways you might not expect at first.

The course is divided into 5 sections (as listed below). After the first section (“Theorizing Celebrity”) we will take the mid-term essay exam. For each of the remaining four sections, we will do section papers. What does this involve? It involves the following:

I will post a writing prompt on the course website related to what we’ve read and discussed in that section. You will be asked to write a 2-3 page (double-spaced!) response in which you draw from (and cite!) the course readings and in-class discussion to answer the prompt. Your paper will be due the following week by Tuesday at noon.

You will be required to submit 3 of these papers for the 4 sections for which they will be assigned (you can miss one). If you submit less than 3, each missing paper will count as a zero.

The average score on your 3 section papers is worth **30% of your final grade**

(4) Group celebrity project

This project is designed to encourage you to consider how celebrity is actually produced. While I do not expect it to produce any kind of overnight celebrity sensation, I do think the project will make you reflect on you can grab other people’s attention in a way that illustrates both what celebrities are (as “mediated personae”) and what the industry behind them does to generate publicity.

With that in mind, the project is structured as follows:

You will be divided into groups of five. Each group will produce a video on a topic of their choice, upload it to YouTube.com by the beginning of Passover. They will then publicize the video with the goal of competing for the most number of views. At the end of the term, we will count how many views each video gained—the one with the most views wins (a prize to be named later).

All groups will be responsible for a presentation at the end of the course. Here, you will show the video and discuss (using course concepts!) why you thought it might gain attention, how you publicized it, why it failed or why it succeeded, and what you think it might illustrate about celebrity in today’s media landscape.

The project will be worth **15% of your final grade**. I will tally your grade on the basis of the overall grade for your group and the group peer review of your individual contribution to the project.

(5) Participation and Attendance

This course will be interesting only if you actively participate in it. To help motivate you to do this, I will quantify your level of participation in the following way: Did I normally see your smiling face in class? Did you sometimes talk in class when the opportunity arose? Did you submit the homework assignments I periodically assign? Did I have to ask you more than once to put away smartphone, laptop, or other *illegal* (in this classroom MWTh from 10-10:50am) tech device during class?

If I can answer “yes” to the first three questions, and “no” to the last question, you will get 100% participation grade. If I can’t answer yes to them, or if I can answer yes to the last question, then you will get something lower than a 100% participation grade. Wow, that was more complicated than it needed to be.

Really the idea here is to show that you *care* about what we do in the class. It’s that simple. I realize in a class of this size it can be hard to talk *during* class, so you can “participate” in different ways as well: asking questions and/or suggesting ideas, possible topics of discussion, connections between class topics and current events, etc *outside* of class (before or after class, through email, during office hours). This also shows that you care, which is the point.

Your participation is worth **10% of your final grade**.

Other points to mention about grading

Late/Makeup Work: It is your responsibility to make sure that all assignments are turned in on time. With the exception of previously approved absences, late assignments will never be accepted for full credit. Grades will be marked down one percentage point for each hour the assignment is late. If you know that you cannot make a certain deadline, please contact me beforehand so that we can work together (assuming you have good reason to miss the original deadline) to consider alternative options for completion.

Disputed Grades: Contact me in writing if you feel that you have been incorrectly awarded a particular grade on a class assignment. Include a paragraph describing: (a) how your work fulfills the course objectives outlined in the syllabus; (b) why your work is deserving of a higher grade; (c) what texts and page numbers in the required readings you based your paper's content and argument on; (d) what you think your grade should be. If I think your request has merit, then we can meet in person to further review your assignment and discuss the validity of your current grade. However, this meeting will come only after my reevaluation of the assignment in question.

Extra-Credit: In rare situations there might be opportunities for extra-credit. I must approve each individual request, so you should contact me well before the end of the semester if you think you might need extra-credit.

3. Other Course Policies

1. Code of Academic Conduct

All students are responsible for compliance with the Brandeis Student Rights and Responsibilities circa 2016-17. You can access that here:

<http://www.brandeis.edu/studentlife/srcs/rr/2016-17%20RR%20.pdf>.

Academic honesty violations include cheating, forgery, bribery or threats, fabrication, plagiarism, and facilitating academic dishonesty.

2. Academic Honesty

Let's spend a little time with this since you will be writing so much for this class... All of the work you submit for a grade must be your own. Claiming someone else's work as your own is a violation of academic honesty. Duh. We all know this. Please *do not do it*. The penalties for this (at the university level) are not good. If I suspect academic dishonesty, you will automatically fail the assignment. If it happens again, you will fail the course. Trust me, these assignments aren't that difficult anyway.

3. Laptop computers, cell phones, tablets and other tech stuff in class

Per *de facto* Department of Sociology policy, use of laptop computers, cell phones and other "tech stuff" is *strictly forbidden* during class meetings, unless they are involved in an in-class assignment. If you have a medical excuse to use one of these devices, please bring the excuse to me so I can verify it. *Otherwise, no student should use a laptop, phone, tablet, or other tech thing in class.* This might sound brutal, harsh, medieval (etc, etc), but please keep in mind this class is only 50 min long, which means there is plenty of time before and after our (brief, short, not long) class meetings to Snapchat, Facebook and/or Netflix.

4. Disability Statement

If you are a student who needs academic accommodations because of a documented disability, please contact me and present your letter of accommodation as soon as possible. If you have questions about documenting a disability or requesting academic accommodations, you should contact Beth Rodgers-Kay in Academic Services (brodgers@brandeis.edu). Letters of accommodation should be presented at the start of the semester to ensure provision of accommodations, and absolutely before the day of an exam or test. Accommodations cannot be granted retroactively.

4. To Do Well in This Course...

Here are a few tips to help you do well in this course:

- You have to have a **tolerant attitude** toward what we will read and talk about. It is all controversial in some way. Sociology tries to bring a “scientific,” that is to say, a politically and morally *neutral* approach to controversial topics, even those that involve celebrity. But the answers it gives and the facts it provides about these topics can often be interpreted as supporting one political point of view instead of another. Given the potentially controversial material we will be reading and discussing, I ask that you to be tolerant of the opinions of others during our class discussions.
- You have to be prepared to **change your mind** and to **listen** to what sociology has to say. Even if you already have strong opinions about celebrity, this course will still be (very) interesting for you if you are willing to change your mind and/or seek to more effectively defend and understand your own (pre-established) beliefs.
- That said, in order for this to work you need to have some **openness** about arguments that might not conform to what you already believe.
- Finally, you have to dedicate some **perspiration** (sweat, effort, work) to trying to understand a complex and difficult issue affecting American (and global) society. The readings, lectures, handouts, statistics, films, songs, other media (etc) are available for you, but it is up to take advantage of them.

More concretely, in order to be successful in this class ...

You should, like, *read*. You should *take notes as you read*. You should be prepared to *talk in class and ask questions about what you've read*. And you should be able to *summarize, in writing, the essential gist of what you've read and construct coherent arguments about it*. Please note that all of these “keys to success” involve **reading**.

The main point I want get across is very easily stated: **if you do the required reading, you will be successful in this class**. You should be prepared to set aside **at least 5-6 hours of work** (that's reading and writing) for this course every week. An obvious tip for success (at least final grade wise) is that you **show up to class** and **take notes**. This is not to mention that your participation in class is also part of your final grade.

You should also come to class ready to engage with (having read and thought about... at least a little bit) the required material during the in-class discussions and lecture. My educational psychologist friends tell me that this is by far the best way to prep for exams.

5. Course Resources

Only one book required! The rest of the readings will be available as PDF or weblink posted to Latte.

Joshua Gamson. 1994. *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America*. Berkeley: University of California Press. ISBN: 0520083539

6. Course Website

We will be using the normal Latte website for this course. Hopefully it works without too many glitches. This is where you will submit assignments, download readings, and possibly participate in online class discussions.

7. Course Schedule

CTF = *Claims to Fame*

Jan 18 – *Course Introduction*

Jan 19 – *Everything I think know about celebrity I learned from Britney Spears*

Reading:

- Lockett, “The implosion of Britney Spears’ star image”

In-class screening: “Britney’s new image”

Section 1: Theorizing Celebrity
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Jan 23 – *What is celebrity?*

Reading:

- Rojek, “Celebrity and celetoid”

Jan 25 – *Media and celebrity*

Reading:

- Marshall, “New media-new self: the changing power of celebrity”
- Marshall, “Intimately intertwined in the most public way”

Jan 26 – *Welcome to the desert of the real*

Reading:

- Baudrillard, “The precession of simulacra”
- Debord, selection from *Society of the Spectacle*

In-class screening: “I’m still here”

Jan 30 – *Celebrity as text*

Reading:

- Barthes, “The face of Garbo”
- Kincaid, “Hannah Montana’s bare unprotected back”

Feb 1 – *Status: the social core of celebrity*

Reading:

- Milner, "Celebrity culture as status system"

In-class screening: "OJ: Made in America"

Feb 2 – *DEIS' Impact Day*

Topic: "Celebrity and social justice: a double-edged sword"

Reading:

- Meyer and Gamson, "The challenge of cultural elites: celebrities and social movements"

Feb 6 – *Celebrity and "the culture industry"*

Reading:

- Horkheimer and Adorno, "Enlightenment as mass deception"

Feb 8 – *Consuming identity via celebrity*

Reading:

- Cashmore, "Buying Beyonce"
- Cashmore and Parker, "One David Beckham?"

Feb 9 – *Celebrity and disciplining "docile bodies"*

Reading:

- Fairclough, "Nothing less than perfect"
- Oates and Durham, "The mismeasure of masculinity"

In-class screening: TBA

Feb 13 – *The parasocial interaction*

Reading:

- Horton and Wohl, "Mass communication and parasocial interaction"
- Massey, "Your imaginary relationship with a celebrity"

Feb 15 – *Illusions of intimacy in celebrity social media*

Reading:

- Marwick and boyd, “To see and be seen: celebrity practice on twitter”
- Courbet and Courbet, “When a celebrity dies” (optional)

Feb 16 – *Lady Gaga as case study*

Reading:

- Click, Lee and Holliday, “Making monsters: Lady Gaga, fan identification and social media”
- Meyers, “Can you handle my truth? Authenticity and the celebrity star image” (optional)

In-class screening: TBA

Feb 20 - No class (Midterm Break)

Feb 22 - No class (Midterm Break)

Feb 23 - No class (Midterm Break)

Section 2: Being a Celebrity

Feb 27 – *The experience of fame*

Reading:

- Rockwell and Giles, “Being a celebrity”

Mar 1 – *The social consequences of achieved celebrity*

Reading:

- Rojek, “Frontierism: ‘the frontier thesis,’ affect and the category of achieved celebrity”

Mar 2 – *Celebrity as a gloried self*

Reading:

- Adler and Adler, “The gloried self: the aggrandizement and construction of self”

In-class screening: "Broke"

Mar 6 – *When you see a celebrity ...*

Reading:

- Ferris, "Seeing and being seen: the moral order of celebrity sightings"

Mar 8 – *Is there a fame motive?*

Reading:

- Brim, "Differences among us in the desire for fame"
- Brim, "Quest for fame"

Mar 9 – *Celebrity and mental illness*

Reading:

- Pinsky and Young, "Narcissism and Celebrity"
- Young and Pinsky, "Celebrities really are more narcissistic than the rest of us"

In-class screening: TBA

Section 3: Making Celebrities: The Industry
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Mar 13 – *Industrial-strength celebrity*

Reading:

- Gamson, CTF, chap. 3

Mar 15 – *Inside the celebrity industry*

Reading:

- Gamson, CTF, chap. 4

Mar 16 – *Economics of celebrity*

Reading:

- Turner, “The economy of celebrity”
- Mcleod, “The private ownership of people”

In-class screening: TBA

Mar 20 – *Reality TV celebrity*

Reading:

- Hearn, “‘John, a 20-Year-Old Boston Native with a Great Sense of Humor’: On the Spectacularization of the ‘Self’ and the Incorporation of Identity in the Age of Reality Television”
- Deller, “Star image, celebrity reality television and the fame cycle”

Mar 22 – *DIY celebrity*

Reading:

- Marwick, “Instafame: luxury selfies in the attention economy”

Mar 23 – *Microcelebrity and presentational social media use*

Reading:

- Turner, “Mass production of celebrity”

In-class screening: TBA

<p>Section 4: The Appeal of Celebrity</p>
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Mar 27 – *Types of celebrity fans*

Reading:

- Gamson, CTF, chaps 7 and 8

Mar 29 – *Using celebrity culture I: identity*

Reading:

- Allen and Mendick, “Young people’s uses of celebrity”

Mar 30 – *Using celebrity culture II: community*

Reading:

- Hermes, "Reading gossip magazines"

April 3 – *Celebrity worship*

Reading:

- Weinstein and Weinstein, "Celebrity worship as weak religion"
- Elliot, "I want to look like that!"

April 5 - *Celebrity culture as narrative*

Reading:

- Gabler, "Toward a new definition of celebrity"

April 6 - *Celebrity culture as passion*

Reading:

- Redmond, "The passion plays of celebrity culture"

In-class screening: TBA

April 10 - No class (Passover and Spring Recess)

April 12 - No class (Passover and Spring Recess)

April 13 - No class (Passover and Spring Recess)

April 17 - No class (Passover and Spring Recess)

April 19 - No class (Passover and Spring Recess)

Section 5: Politics and Celebrity
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April 20 – *Celebrity style in democracy*

Reading:

- Street, "The celebrity politician: political style and popular culture"

April 24 – *Barack Obama and the political power of celebrity*

Reading:

- Redmond, “Avatar Obama in the age of liquid celebrity”

April 26 – *Celebrity is bad for politics*

Reading:

- West, “American politics in the age of celebrity”

April 27 – *Celebrity is good for politics*

Reading:

- Gamson, CTF, conclusion

May 1 – Film Festival (i.e. group celebrity project presentations)

May 3 – Film Festival (i.e. group celebrity project presentations)

Sometime between May 5 and May 12 – **Final Examination**