Celebrity in Thailand: meaning, identity, popular culture

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Contextualizing celebrity studies

What is celebrity? Is it, as some claim, the wayward obsession of media outlets and audiences, leading to trivialization, sensationalism and the dumbing down of culture? Or does it signal, as others suggest, a new form of democratization, where mainstream elites no longer control media content, where especially through new forms of media – reality tv, life-style programming, Facebook, blogs, Twitter – social hierarchies are flattened and new voices get heard and new faces recognized? Some time ago Andy Warhol, the American pop artist offered his own scenario: in the future, he predicted, everyone would be famous, for fifteen minutes. In this paper, we want to argue that these issues have much relevance to Thailand, perhaps moreso now than ever. Evidence of the exponential growth over the past decade of what might

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be described as the industrialization of Thailand's celebrity culture can be seen and experienced in daily life everywhere – ubiquitous talk shows, entertainment up-date segments and reality formats on television; magazines specializing in celebrity gossip; public billboards and product packaging; event launches, fashion shows and charity drives; and more recently on-line star and fan specific websites, Facebook pages, blogs and tweets. Even quality newspapers have begun to set aside considerable space for celebrity career and life-style profiles. Celebrity has been comprehensively incorporated into all aspects of contemporary media production, circulation and consumption. It is important to acknowledge that this tendency, in Thailand as elsewhere, is not simply a cyclical shift in the generation of content and audience preference but a major alteration to how mainstream media operate. As Turner (2010) notes, the focus on, engagement with and representation of celebrity has become a defining feature of popular media forms in the 21st century. [1]

But, and this is the critical factor, it is not just that the 'celebrity system' has expanded at a remarkable rate-its significance resides in a movement into the centre of contemporary life, to become a 'cultural dominant' (Jameson, 1984).

It could even be said that celebrity gossip and celebrity culture more generally, is perhaps the [emphasis in the original] aspect of contemporary popular culture... Because of the dominance of celebrity gossip in contemporary popular culture it is highly possible that something as seemingly banal as accounts of the dietary practices of celebrity

figures could have far reaching conse-quences that we are yet to appreciate. These consequences might well be about what people eat, how they understand food and food preparation, and so on, but could also relate more closely than we might first imagine to social divisions, social conduct and the formation of new hierarchies. (Beer and Penfold-Mounce, 2009: 5.1)

This cultural shift has resulted in much hand-wringing and despair – educators, policy makers, politicians, parents, and even represen-tatives of the media industry itself are all asking if society is going to hell in a handcart (Barry, 2008:251). The pervasiveness of, and apparent fascination with celebrity culture are viewed as symptoms of a social malaise and the erosion of core values with many critics directing accusations at specific media related examples to make their case (see Postman, 2006). Driven by the engine of commerce, what is described as the 'tabloidization' of journalism has overseen the ascendance of 'the trivial over the weighty' the private over the public, entertainment over information, personality over politics, feeling over fact, so that, according to Franklin (in Turner, Bonner and Marshall, 2000: 5), the 'intimate relationships of celebrities from soap operas, the world of sport or the [British] royal family are judged more "newsworthy" than the reporting of significant issues and events of ... consequence'. Thailand has generated its own version of such criticism. The 'Film Annie saga', as it came to be known, generated weeks of headlines, rumours and innuendo: a 'superstar', an 'unwed mother', DNA paternity tests, an entertainment corporation CEO, careers and finances in free-fall, public confessions, accusations of connivance and gold digging were all part of the 'sleazy' mix (Ehrlich, 2010). This

was taken as solid proof of journalism's descent into the netherworld of the tabloid, prompting the National Press Council of Thailand to release a statement 'cautioning media members over their extensive, sensational coverage' (The Nation), and one public commentator to observe that 'in a country with widening income gaps, political instability and other serious societal problems... [the] obsession with celebrity has ... reached unhealthy proportions' (Satrusayang, 2011; see also Thai Health, 2011). This kind of controversy, especially if it ends up in editorials and opinion pieces, inevitably turns towards discussion of media 'effects' and 'negative role models', and, over the past few years, the list of consequences thought to result from the 'influence' of celebrity culture in Thailand has steadily grown longer to include claims of increased levels of anti-social behavior, sexual 'acting out', cosmetic surgery, alcohol consumption as well as the erosion of 'Thai values' (see for example Pinijparakarn, 2010; Editorial, 2009; Laohapakakul, 2007; The Nation. 2006). And with just as much inevitability, this discussion will migrate towards social welfare organizations and policy makers - in Thailand this could be the Ministry of Culture , the Social Development and Human Security Ministry, the Ministry of Public Health, or the Public Relations Department - where new regulatory approaches are instigated and 'corrective' campaigns launched (as examples, see The Nation. 2011; Laotharanarit, 2011; Dasaneyavaja, B. 2009; Phataramawik, 2007).

Despite considerable public circulation and the worthy intentions of such views, this kind of 'normative' account can overlook some of celebrity culture's most significant dimensions, those which might contextualize and offer a more nuanced conceptualization of the notion of 'influence'.

Research in media and cultural studies, over the past decade, has generated a broad ranging analysis of celebrity as a complex and contradictory set of industrial arrangements, social practices, discourses and representations that are inextricably connected both to developments in media organizations that operate within structures of commodity exchange, and to changed formations of communicative and symbolic power (see for example Evans and Hesmondhalgh, 2005; Turner, 2004; Rojek, 2001; Marshall, 1997). Although far from producing a unified body of thought, this work retains a number of common themes. Celebrity and its various manifestations, once mostly regarded as an unworthy contrivance 'for the masses', now operates with a substantial degree of social validation.

Previously, for professional middle-class tastemakers, engaging with gossip and tittle-tattle around celebrity culture was positioned as downmarket, flashy, sensationalist and trashy: as 'common'. Now, to know about it is important, even if this is accompanied by a vestigial sense of distance through irony (Littler in Fairclough, 2008: [2])

The task, then, of the researcher is to investigate under what conditions this legitimation has been accomplished and what its consequences might be. Consequences, however, do not equate to 'effects' in any straightforward way. As Drake and Miah (2010: 57) point out, assertions circulating in popular discourse about celebrity 'influence' are guided, more often than not, by rudimentary hypodermic-needle message models of communication, offering little insight into complex media-audience relations, while supplying rather blunt terms for public response and debate. This is, however, not to deny that celebrity as a cultural formation does not have any

'effect'. But notions of influence, consequentiality, and impact have to be located in a wider range of issues including the ways that celebrity culture, generated and carried in media forms, provides some of the contemporary symbolic scaffolding around which to build meaning into lived experience and to construct social identity. Hermes (1995), to take just one example, suggests that engagement with celebrity news is based on what she calls 'the extended family repertoire' and 'the repertoire of melodrama' whereby the elite and the powerful are displayed in media stories and gossip with a magnified ordinariness that permits audiences to rehearse as well as pass moral judgments on emotional and social predicaments (relationships, integrity, betrayal, parenthood) as they occur or might occur in their own lives. Integrated into patterns of social relations, celebrity becomes 'part of the community's common currency of conversation' (Turner, 2006) embedded in the structures of everyday understandings and the shaping of the social self.

Some scholars carry this approach further. Rather than seeing signs of cultural decline and the corrosion of professional practice, it is argued that the expansion of celebrity and the turn to tabloid, actually results in a more inclusive, democratized media that allows for a more diverse set of voices to speak about issues once marginalized as too personal, too private, too domestic, too feminine, too prone to divert attention from the 'real' concerns of the day (Hartley, 1996, Lumby, 1999). The very public life and death of Princess Diana is regarded as a key instance of this re-formulation, whereby 'significant issues' – gender, class, nation, privilege, duty, the role of the media itself – were observed, discussed and challenged, but from the site of the

microcosm of the domestic and the personal (see Mcdonald, 2000; Kear and Steinberg, 1999). This was a super-sized, somewhat unique occurrence, but lesser localized happenings from the daily round of celerity comings and goings, now a routine part of media content, are also conceptualized as opportunities to hold a community conversations about pressing issues (see Hamad, 2010; Rahman, 2004; Street, 2004). The other example regularly cited in reference to notions of social leveling, democratization and media celebrity is reality television programming. Through the recruitment of 'ordinary people' into leading roles, fame can now be devolved from an established elite to an ever widening pool of 'regular folk' who become acknowledged public voices and recognized 'personalities' (Couldry 2003). Turner (2006: 362) points specifically to Big Brother as a broadcasting benchmark. With its status as 'a popular culture event' in numerous countries around the world and the capacity to 'shrink the difference between the reality it constructs and its audiences' own realities' this program was a pioneer in making 'ordinary people' extraordinary and normalizing the demand to have access to the process of 'celebritization'.

With this shift in the social and cultural dimensions of public communication, it has been postulated that contemporary media need to be rethought in terms of a different set of parameters in the search for an explanation of audience interest in and engagement with popular media. (McGuigan, 2005). The centring of celebrity in all its forms continuation of longstanding attention on entertainers and sports personalities but now incorporating politicians, reality tv contestants, chefs, medical practitioners, judges, Youtube 'sensations', in fact, anyone and everyone, as Warhol predicted is

evidence that the symbolic structures proffered by media, as they connect to the requirements of democratic agency, can no longer be theorized strictly in terms of 'the informational' and 'the rational'. An array of different kinds of knowledge and discourses, what McGuigan (2005) terms 'affective communications', have been developed, circulated and exchanged, and the definition of 'public affairs' has altered substantially. Instead of seeing the prominence of celebrity culture as one more fatal step towards 'amusing ourselves to death' (Postman, 2006), the pleasures and pains of personal lives on display serve as one of the significant locations where 'public virtues' can be assembled, visualized, narrated and rehearsed, where 'writing the truths of our time [happens] on the bodies of th[e] image-saturated...'.(Hartley, 1995: 156).

These are inspiring prognostications; how ever, some might say, not sufficiently grounded in a fundamental condition of celebrity culture: its commodity form. As Gamson (1995:60-61) reminds us, much contemporary celebrity has to be understood as a type of capital, and day-to-day 'production and distribution' activities are logically geared toward building and profiting from the attention-getting properties of those already in the spotlight or about to have it shine on them. To illustrate, he provides a staggering list of celebrity manufacturing specialists: managers, agents, lawyers, publicists, photographers, promoters, journalists, editors, 'coaches and groomers of various sorts'. Hollywood is Gamson's case study (1995: 64) but what he discovers there has been applied widely: 'Celebrity making is clearly... an established commercial enterprise, made up of highly deve- loped and institutionally linked professions and subindustries... As carriers of the central commodity (attention-getting capacity), celebrity performers are themselves products'.

A note on method

This intersection between the commercial imperative and the socially meaningful is a tension that frequently inhabits discussions of popular culture, and the analysis of celebrity is no exception. Perhaps it is this tension which makes the ubiquity of celebrity both lamentable and compelling. As Drake and Miah (2010: 63) explain '[f]or good or ill, celebrity culture [is] connected in complex ways to our sense of identity and belonging, of how we relate to the world, to each other and to ourselves'. These ideas, in the context of the considerations outlined above, were the broad motivating factors for this current research. Its formative moment came from teaching a final year undergraduate course on ethical issues in communication at one of Thailand's larger Bangkok based universities in which celebrity culture featured as a central topic of study and debate. For the purposes of the research, we wanted to explore and make some analytical sense of what was being said about celebrity and to unpack some of the underlying assumptions underpinning these discussions. It was clear from the start that students know a vast amount about celebrity: it is solidly woven into the fabric of their everyday life, providing the threads of social exchange and commentary. In order to access their views and gain some insight into their knowledge of celebrity culture, a series of issues was examined and debated, in-class panels were formed to exchange ideas, and sets of open-ended questions – about celebrity scandal, gossip, branding, product endorsement, cultural impact and commodification – were distributed for written responses. There was also an opportunity to

interview others outside the class to gain some familiarity with a wider range of opinion about celebrity in Thailand. Sixty five students (henceforth referred to as 'respondents') made up the cohort, and all were advised that anonymity would be maintained as part of research protocol. We recognize that the approach taken methodologically may fall outside a more conventional version of media research. The project might be categorized as a type of contingency research, generated out of a mix of pragmatism, topicality, and most importantly, an awareness that celebrities are an undeniably important feature of contemporary Thai culture as product and as social force. Findings, therefore, should be situated as indicative rather than representative and the analysis itself can be regarded as an exploratory step towards problematizing the interface between media and everyday life in Thailand.

The conceptual architecture around which this work is built derives from two sources – one theoretical and specific to media studies, the other historical with a focus on what might be called the complexification of national consciousness and identity. The work done in the area of 'cultural audience studies' was our initial starting point. Broadly committed to a qualitative perspective that rejects the effects or 'truthfulness' models of media in order to concentrate on an investigation into meaning-making and 'the frames within which we conceive of the media and their contents...', the aim of this strand of audience research is to 'get a grasp of our contemporary "media culture", particularly as it can be seen in the role of the media in everyday life, both as a topic and as an activity structured by and structuring the discourses within which it is discussed' (Alasuutari, 1999:

6-7). Drawing from the work done in earlier 'reception research' with its emphasize on audience encounters with media texts (see for example Morley, 1980; Ang, 1985; Liebes and Katz, 1990) this perspective gives priority to the examination of processes, conditions and categories of knowledge production in, through and by way of media as a symbolic resource. Sometimes referred to as a 'constructionist view', more recently, researchers have turned attention to the ways that the proliferation of celebrity is related to the production of meaning and the negotiation of social identity (Holmes and Redmond, 2006; Marshall, 2006). For Alasuutari (1999: 7), a constructionist approach expands the themes of earlier reception studies – the process of audience 'decoding' and interpretation - by its sociological intent: to make 'big picture' issues central to enquiry. Audiences 'read' media texts, actively constructing meaning, but always do so in the context of 'broader societal frames'. And this leads to the second source giving conceptual shape to this current investigation: the seemingly continuous political and social instability which has overtaken Thailand during the past ten years. As of this writing, not three months after a much anticipated 2011 general election, accusations are flying about government incompetence, policy mismanagement and the possibility of further military intervention (see Pongsudhirak, 2011; The Nation, 2011). McCargo (2008) describes Thailand as having been seized by a deep unease, incapacitated by protracted national anxiety. Meanwhile, throughout this same decade, celebrity culture has never been such a pervasive presence in the everyday life of Thais. Is there a connection between these two historical trajectories? While all the lines of possible enquiry resonating in this

'big picture' question clearly cannot be followed here, this study offers some provisional sketches of an under-investigated but increasingly significant aspect of contemporary popular culture in Thailand.

Encountering celebrity

The ubiquity of Thai celebrity is evident when respondents discuss the daily round of their activities. Reflecting on her own experience of a changed media environment, one respondent explained:

> Before I went to the US in 2004, there's no such word as paparazzi in Thailand, no such thing. But when I got back in 2005, there's lots of gossip magazines, gossip TV programs, internet sites, and people pay attention more to celebrity life.

While computer screens, mobile phones, billboards, product packaging, magazines provide a vast array of mediated encounters, television still appears to stand in a special place for the dissemination of celebrity news and gossip. With thirty one programs across the week on free-to-air channels, directly and indirectly linked in to a steady parade of celebrity stories and guest spots, over eighty-five percent of respondents listed television as a major source of celebrity information.

Although widespread 'exposure' to celebrity culture is completely routine, respondents are not 'cultural dopes', passively accepting the media's way of doing things and seeing the world (Fiske, 1987: 309). The cynical manufacture of notoriety was a constant refrain, found in all discussion and written commentary. For respondents the drive for profit was directly responsible for the erosion of journalism's ethical standards:

> Media professionals seek fast cash. The juicer the story, the more they get. Most people don't seek out private things about celebrity but when it's in bold red letters, you read and get shocked. Some aren't even true.

In order to explain a Thai media culture where these kinds of professional lapses were now the norm, one respondent used a particularly vivid metaphor:

> Everything they do, especially if they are [seen] as negative private scandalous things, can end up on the news right away. It's now a live cat and mouse game, where celebrities are the mice chased or put in danger by the media.

A similar view was registered in this comment:

> The media... who sell the stories and images are like stalkers. They follow the celebrities everywhere and create stories, false stories, based on what they see or hear without any proof...

Some felt they were now witnessing a media industry too reliant on cycles of enforced disposability: 'In order to create interest without the public asking', as one put it, 'the new generation celebrity... [has a] come quick, go quick style'. Others pointed to the personal toll of public recognition: 'People want to be a star, but when they get there, they realize it's not that easy being famous. Your life is put on the spot. They have to wear more mask to portray their personalities'. Although all respondents did not express views exactly like these, comments of this kind were typical, widely shared and thematically consistent enough to suggest the operation of a discursive

field that could readily offer specific accounts of the machinery of celebrity production. As these were university students in a course in communication, it would have been surprising if this was not the case. More revealing perhaps was the way in which these unflattering accounts were both supplemented and contradicted by other opinions and actions with regard to celebrity.

Us and them

One distinguishing feature of a constructionist approach to media reception and meaning-making, according to Alasuutari (1999), is the inclusion of a neglected layer of reflexivity: how the audience thinks of itself as 'audience'. In self-other perceptions of media impact, it has been found that people can to apply 'third person effects', judging others to be more influenced by media content than they are themselves (Höijer, 1999:188). When respondents made their case for knowing about the artifice and opportunism of celebrity production, they regularly contextualized discussion through assumptions about the 'weakness' of others as audience.

Celebrities become idols for children and teens... [they are] dangerous because many behave inappropriately and people follow. People become wrapped up in the high-life that these celebrities are living, which often promotes values like consumerism, party-ism, ab baew culture – teens acting cute, caring too much about looks.

Reference to impressionable 'young people' was a recurring motif:

Teenagers... try to be like celebrities. They want to be skinny. They want to have surgery. They want to use what their role-model celebs use

... often kids are focusing on the lives of Thai celebrities and the junk gossips more than their studies'

In the majority of comments, respondents' ascription of vulnerability to others, and not themselves, as audience, tended to apply a relatively under-nuanced stimulus-response view of media content and its 'effects'.

If someone famous breaks down social norms or ethics, people will imitate ... and forget common sense. For example, teenagers might imitate video- taping their sex in order to become close to Paris [Hilton], who they admire. This is just an extreme example, but celebrities have such a strong influence on people.

Just one respondent in the entire cohort used the collective nomination 'we' in discussing the notion of influence: 'We're all to blame because we create the demand for wanting to know about other people's lives and the media first exploited that'.

O'Shaughnessy and Slater (2005: 403) point out that a variety of 'identificatory practices' can be mobilized when audiences encounter celebrity, from simple indifference to over-zealous involvement bordering on the irrational. For many respondents, 'the danger' posed by celebrity culture results from not enough of the former and too much of the latter.

People are obsessed with entertainment news. They want to know scandals all the time and read about those scandals with their friends.

It's true that the public desperately wants to know what's going on, and what their favorite stars are doing.

The consequences are the crazy fan clubs who devote themselves to follow their celebrities... where people use products according to celebrity endorsements, and the culture of treating celebrities as gods and goddesses where everyone worships them...

The picture that emerges so far raises several discussion points. To re-iterate, comments from respondents are not being assigned some kind of truth value. The focus here is on how they come to make sense of celebrity culture in which they are immersed on a daily basis, and in this case they do so by relying on assumptions and making judgments about others as audience. This in turn creates a social location for their own identity as audience which can be conceptualized as different, more informed, less deluded, more knowledgeable. Interestingly, the terms of this discourse draw substantially on a well worn model of media effects that circulates in public contexts – vulnerable members of a mass audience being directly affected, in some cases irrationally so, by media representation of celebrity. These terms also appear to connect with the tabloidization thesis (Turner, 2004): 'obsessed with entertainment news', focusing more on 'junk gossips more than... studies', 'celebrities as gods and goddesses' are allusions that can be incorporated into more universalizing view about the decline of journalism, media standards, and culture more generally.

'Tidbits' and 'the talk of the town'

At the same time that respondent understanding of celebrity culture was being expressed through a type of censure and personal distancing, another discursive mode of meaning-making was at work, one that, paradoxically, seemed to call out responsiveness and involvement. However, as Höijer (1999: 189) explains, 'everyday thinking has a dilemmatic quality, that is, it contains contradicting themes and conceptualizations. Ordinary life, in work and private, is shaped by social and moral dilemmas. Sometimes we are aware of them, other times not'. An example might help to elaborate. Respondents were asked to think about the consequences resulting from the proliferation of celebrity culture in Thailand. One listed 'the needs of wanting to be like celebrities', 'to have what celebrities have', 'undermin[ing] Thai traditional culture' and 'children and young people becom[ing] more westernized'. In order to gauge biographical affinity with celebrity culture, respondents were also asked to recall celebrity paraphernalia used as decoration in their private spaces over the years. This same respondent described her bedroom wall adorned with posters: John Travolta from the film Grease when she was age ten, Britney Spears, Westlife, Backstreet Boys and N'Sync when she was fifteen, and more recently Holland's DJ Laidback Luke, Japan based rock band Deadmans, and Hollywood actor Pierce Brosnan. The apparent disjuncture between a professed concern about the erosion of Thai culture and the specifically non-Thai, mostly western celebrity images inhabiting private space is cited here for the way it precisely illustrates the contradictory consciousness described by Höijer – on the one hand, a reasonably considered appraisal of the detrimental impact of celebrity culture, and on the other, a personal, even intimate,

engagement with it. This pattern of ambiguity was found right across respondent conceptualizations and social practices in relation to celebrity. While critical discernment and distancing were registered emphatically in comments, so also was an active and on-going interest.

A routine part of celebrity news, according to Gamson (1994: 172), involves '[a]udiences ... continually [being] offered... tidbits of the private "selves" of public figures' in order to generate a sense of familiarity and connection. The use of nicknames, coverage of mundane activities, small changes in fashion and body shape, a favorite food, shopping, casual interaction during filming or rehearsing can all be used as part of the process of 'personalization' that keeps celebrity narratives moving. When asked to recount media stories from the previous two weeks centred on Thai celebrities, all respondents, with the exception of three who claimed to have 'no interest', could cite and elaborate on events and personal circumstances in a range of continuing celebrity narratives.

Ploy the actress, her story... is almost always about her love life. She was married to Dome, also a famous celebrity. Now they're separated. Dome didn't say happy birthday to Ploy. She said to the press that she was unhappy.

Fluke and his girlfriend Pang Kwankow broke up. He is a casanova and already has a son, but he changes the women he dates like diapers.

One member of a Thai boy band... was taken to the hospital because his eyes hurt. His eyes were infected because of the cosmetics he used. The doctor stopped him working for a week.

A female celebrity opened a teddy bear business with her boyfriend for their future.

Occasionally, the usual flow of tidbits is punctuated by serious disruption in a celebrity's 'image system'. These moments come to dominate media coverage and elicit an inordinate amount of public attention and speculation. Celebrity narratives such as these are 'fleshed out dramatically with real-world characters, motivations and plots which appear chapter by chapter in news programs, on talk shows, and in the tabloid and mainstream media' (Lull and Hinerman1997: 21). They become, in the words of respondents, 'the talk of the town'.

A big scandal was the sex tape of Oan Sarawat and a Thai actress. He used his mobile phone to record while he had sex with a woman. Later he lost his phone. After that, the video file he recorded was distributed on the internet.

The[re was a] fight between Kaem, the host of At Ten variety show and Aum at Emporium Department Store. They fought about a guy, Nhum Kanchai. It's like cat fighting over a guy. It was so embarrassing to both of them. It was on the news for weeks.

About four years ago, Mam Kataleeya was an all-time hit star in Thailand. She was named the princess of the entertainment industry. She got pregnant before marriage. And she kept lying to the public that she just gained weight. So after everyone found out... the media and many people banned her.

Nattan Oman lied that he was a main actor in the Hollywood movie... But, reporters found out that there was no such movie, and he disappeared. Many celebrities came out to

protect him... After the truth was revealed, these celebrities were silent and refused to talk about him.

Recounting the 'motivations and plots' of these and several other celebrity 'flashpoints' (Turner, Bonner and Marshall, 2000:3) proved no difficulty for respondents, and group discussions of 'a big scandal' were among the most animated. This level of knowledge and engagement was not unexpected, given the promotional zeal of media industries and the age of respondents. Perhaps more noteworthy is the way this kind of scrutiny, configured along with a discourse of negative judgment and third person effects, illustrates the ambiguity found in 'being an audience': not others but respondents themselves appear to exhibit a lively investment in celebrity culture.

'I hate Jenny'

Celebrity narratives, both spectacular and routine, serve as 'conversational touchstones' (Lull and Hinerman1997: 21) for evaluating social expectations, norms and practices. Values attached to publicly displayed behavior can be debated with reference to lived experience and dominant moral codes, and celebrities, in this case, function not as 'role models' to be imitated, but as a cultural source of meaning used to assess the connection and the continuity/discontinuity between publicized celebrity happenings, community based norms and the individual construction of identity. This particular 'conversation' is most apparent in discussions where respondents make comments not about celebrity 'favorites', but those they find particularly disagreeable. Relationship troubles, for example, allow for a delineation of breaches in personal conduct.

The reason that I dislike Tao Somchai Kemklad is because he is a playboy... he broke up with Nat Myria Benedetti. I feel sorry for her because she is such a good person, and [she met] this guy, and her life is falling apart after they got divorced.

I hate Jenny, an actress, because she is a bitch. She steals people's boyfriends.

Sometimes such transgressions are perceived in linked clusters:

Ja Nattaveranuth is a VJ from Channel V. Even though she is very talented in acting and VJ[ing], she still has lots of bad news about her boyfriend. I don't like the way she dresses with inappropriate dress, sometimes too short, too sexy, that is not suitable for Thai culture.

Other types of indecorous behavior provide the grounds for opprobrium : 'Waii is a singer from RS. That girl, the way she does the interview... she's too confident. She doesn't think before she speaks or acts, and she's way too young to party, drink or smoke'. Conversation can also turn to an assessment of some familiar interpersonal scenerios playing out in new contexts.

Ploy Little Voice, she's the one I dislike. The way she used the internet in the fight with another woman over a boyfriend was unacceptable. She can't use the internet that way...

These are individual responses to the publicized behavior of individual celebrities, but this kind of 'conversation' can be viewed as part of a more generalized social discourse about individual and community values: how do we make sense of the

institution of marriage, the increasing autonomy of women, national traditions in a globalized world, personal integrity, male sexual adventurism, changing rules of privacy? This conversation is already underway in public debate (see for example Sutprasert, 2011; Vanijaka, 2011; Likhitpreechakul, 2009; Wattanasukchai, 2008; Taptim, 2007; Sukin, 2007; Editorial, 2004). But focus on what are regarded as unsavory aspects of personalized celebrity behavior allows for this debate to be 'operationalized' in more accessible and experiential terms as a workable methodology for negotiating identity, a pragmatic way, as Tomlinson (1997:73) puts it, 'in which we continuously narrate our "selves" to ourselves'.

Fakes, phoneys and the real thing

When respondents start to juxtapose disliked celebrities with ones who can be appreciated or admired, another discursive strategy is foregrounded, adding a further operationalizing layer that meaningfully connects celebrity culture with issues of identity building. Here the emphasis is placed on locating the celebrity 'fake', a term used to label those whose claim to fame, as respondents see it, has been acquired through faulty assessment and undeserved public recognition. This discourse offers a catalogue of failings and deficiencies by which to detect pretenders and imposters. As opposed to a genuine celebrity, the fake, for example, demonstrates a distinct lack of requisite skills to do the very things that have generated reputation and status.

Tata Young tries to be an international celebrity but she seems like she can't [be]... for example, not being able to dance or sing properly.

Four Mod, the Thai teen idol group, is not at all talented. I dislike their songs, the way they project themselves. No sense of style, trying so hard to be a trend-setter, aeb baew. It forces everyone to listen to bad music.

In some cases, a fake can be identified by an absence of abiding 'deep' talent which is then glossed by fraudulent appeal to the superficial visibility of image.

I dislike most K-pop style bands because I think they're a bunch of cheap MJ imitators who can't sing worth a damn and only sell their looks.

As a corollary, a celebrity's over-investment in a projected image and the calculated attempt to alter that image is read as a sure sign of the inauthentic. Particular distain was directed to those who were seen orchestrating a consciously managed campaign aimed at promotion and popularity.

Nok, the actress has bad manners, and also I found out she does tons of plastic surgery. So, she's not just fake outside, but inside as well.

To make herself beautiful, Aum Patcharapa did so many plastic surgeries. One more thing, she has been trying too hard to be sexy and pretty in public.

The 'terrain' of unreserved criticism generates and secures meaning for respondents by the way it is mapped against its opposite - a more benign 'topography', where genuine worth and positive attributes can be found and praised.

Taew is a new actress. She's also a student... I admire her because she isn't

desperate to become a star. She acts like an ordinary girl.

Dome, Pakon Lum...[is] good looking, gentle, charming, has very nice smile and has a good appearance. He seems very open, for example when he having girlfriend, he always comes out and tell the truth even if that girl is not as pretty as his ex-girlfriend, he still protecting her and saying good things about her.

I've liked Marsha Vadhanapanich for a very long time. She just appeared in a Thai horror film... and I thought she did a good job making fun of herself. Her life's been really tough and she never had good luck with love. She got pregnant at eighteen, but she worked hard to send her son to school in Australia. She's independent and intelligent and I admire her for that.

Again, remarks such as these could be taken merely as specific responses to a particular well-know individuals. Their significance however resides in the way that this discursive strategy centred on delineating degrees of authenticity offers a 'navigational tool' (Turner, Bonner and Marshal, 2000: 14) for exploring parts of the social world that have direct relevance for the negotiation of a social identity: working hard for something worthwhile (send a son to school) /working too hard for something of dubious value (sexy and pretty in public); getting appropriate reward (a good job)/ getting undeserved reward (not being able to sing or dance); demonstrating interpersonal skills (charming, protecting)/ demonstrating interpersonal failings (bad manners); behaving with modesty (acting like an ordinary girl)/ behaving without modesty (the way they project

themselves). Neither an abstract exercise in categorization or a consumer referendum, these conceptualizations produce a type of 'relevance structure' (Tomlinson, 1997: 72) from which to have an ongoing debate about value positions, moral codes and societal ideologies, to uncover 'the real thing' as this might apply to one's own conditions of existence.

A broader societal frame

As this paper began by posing a number of questions, it might be appropriate to finish the same way. So, why celebrity? And, why now? Why expend research energies investigating something as superficial and irrelevant as celebrity culture in contemporary Thailand when there are so many more pressing and serious concerns that need attention? As we tried to suggest at the start, celerity culture is no mere epiphenomenon, an add-on to the consequential dynamics of social and political life in Thailand, but the manner of its functioning, the uses to which it is put, the processes involved in its manufacture and the networks of its circulation have been largely unexamined by scholars. Pundits, policy makers, politicians, educators, lobbyists and other types of opinion leaders have not been as reticent, so that public discussion of celebrity is often shaped by generality and overstatement. Or, celebrity packagers themselves become a primary source of information and opinion. This limited study, despite its rather tentative methodology, is offered as an exploratory probe towards uncovering and analyzing some of the complex layers of meaning embedded in and taken from celebrity as a 'symbolic system' (Gamson: 1994: 198). The approach has focused on the ways in which media audiences/users, in this case a very specific group of young people enrolled in an undergraduate degree

in communication arts, come to understand celebrity and how this understanding might relate to questions of identity formation.

However modestly they stand in their own right as the object of interrogation, these issues are not the full story. Investigation of media culture, audiences and meaning-making, according to Alasuutari (1999), should also be an opportunity to reflect on 'a larger framework'. Celebrity culture in Thailand inserts itself into an historically specific moment. Commentators on Thai affairs of state and national well-being seem to be of one voice in speaking about a kind of irrevocable crisis in the political body and the national psyche. The phrases used to describe this crisis vary in language and emphasis – a 'nation...bitterly divided (McCargo, 2008:333), 'renewed instability' (Dressel, 2010: 445), 'division now runs through families and through villages' (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2008: 21), 'deep-seated and irreconcilable conflict' (Pongsudhirak, 2008: 144). All, however, seem to agree that 'whatever happens, Thai society cannot go back to the old days' (Ungpakorn, 2009: 100). D. Streckfuss (2010: 5) offers an overview: 'Th[e] coup and its aftermath laid bare the particular anatomy of the Thai body politic for close examination, it exposed fissures which previously obscured a clear view of this peculiar social, cultural and political landscape'

This difficult time of national soul searching for Thailand is, however, not entirely about politics. The current historical moment of disequilibrium and uncertainty, we want to suggest, is conjunctural. Particularly over the past decade - the span of years corresponding more or less to the gathering storm - the political has been articulated with and embedded in other powerful social and cultural trajectories.

One of these, of course, is the explosion of media forms and delivery platforms which include both new and reshaped circuits of content production, distribution, circulation and reception. The obvious place to look for these exponential changes is the growth of digital communication, but it might be argued that over the past decade the entire media apparatus, old and new, has become an elemental scaffolding of signification in Thailand for influencing, responding to and underpinning the current historical moment, deeply implicated in reshaping the social, cultural and political landscape (see for example Brooten and Klangnarong, 2009; Lewis, 2005; Langer, 2004). The other social force creating sizable shifts in priorities, outlooks and aspirations has been the process of globalization, which, according to Appadurai (1996: 3), needs to be understood first and foremost as 'the work of the imagination'. The electronic 'mediatization' of the world is one fundamental component of this process. The second is 'mobility', the movement of people, through voluntary or imposed migration and through interaction between those who stay and those who go: '... few persons in the world today do not have a friend, relative, or co-worker who is not on the road to somewhere else or already coming back home, bearing stories and possibilities' (Appadurai, 1996: 4). The resulting rate of change, as Baker and Phongpaichit (2009: 274) observe, has transformed Thailand into a much more complex and fluid society where [o]ld unitary discourses of race, nation, history, national character and culture [have been] fragmented by the diversity of reality'. Those inclined to invoke a postmodern perspective might be pointing to the break-down of Thai metanarratives, where the cultural meaning, once attached to institutions and identity, is itself fracturing (Marshall, 1997: 74). According

to Dressel (2010: 462) present day Thailand qualifies as a 'transitional society', undergoing a particularly arduous contest over legitimacy, where 'a rapidly modernizing and increasingly pluralistic polity with competing values of multiple emerging power centres and social forces are fueling continuing power struggles resulting in formal and once enduring institutional arrangements becoming persistently fragile'. To account for this instability, requires not just a focus on social structures but an approach that looks for the critical role of social actors in 'value formation' and the refiguration of legitimacy (Dressel, 2010).

If Thailand indeed can be characterized as more fragmented, more plural, less bound to 'old unitary discourses', both at the level of institutional arrangements and of lived reality, social actors grappling with value formation, it could be argued, now have a wider range of sites of meaning-making from which to engage in the 'construction of legitimacy', and, possibly more freedom about what to chose from among those sites, to take from them or leave behind. And this is where celebrity culture becomes part of the 'big picture', the broader societal frame. In a culture which has become more unstable and fluid with regard to its social organization and traditions, identity becomes increasingly problematic. Who am I? What am I permitted to do? How should I behave and think, if the rules have changed? Where should I turn to understand the normative and moral parameters of sociality? These questions are less easily answered and settled. Dilemmas arise not from political engagement with the public sphere – even those newly emerging power centres in Thailand can be experienced as remote from the everyday life of ordinary people – but from the way societal

transformations and instabilities have consequences for the personal, the private, the domestic which place 'the individual under siege' (Bauman, 2005). Conditions of action and moral guidelines for constructing social identity used in the past are still available but their claims to legitimacy are less clear-cut and secure. In this context, celebrity culture, despite knowledge of its commercialism, its shallowness and its disposability, may have a kind of 'perceived existential utility' (Sparks, 2000: 27) that leads audiences to seek it out, and come to rely on it, as one type of readily accessible symbol system relevant for everyday meaning-making in, to borrow lyric phrasing from seventies latino rocker Mink DeVille (1977), a mixed up, shook up world.

Notes

1. The word celebrity is not as widely used in Thai parlance as it is in English speaking contexts. Sometimes shortened to 'celeb', this word can refer to individuals who come from well-connected (hi-so) families with 'good last names' and who can garner considerable media attention by appearing at public events. The word 'dara' (star) is often reserved for those with high visibility, sometimes with a large fan-base, who work regularly in the television, film or popular music industries. The word 'khon mii cheu siang', being well know, can be used to refer to either of these categories, but also can apply to any individuals who achieve notoriety. Respondents for this study knew and used these designations in discussions, however they also explained that in their experience, over the past few years, 'celebrity' had become a word with more circulation, applied as a generic term to refer to anyone who became 'famous' and derived 'public

attention'. For the purposes of this study, the term celebrity is used simply for its utility as a convenient tool for the purposes of categorization, analysis and writing. Terminological issues around the word 'celebrity' are not unique to Thailand (see Rojek, 2001), however, and we follow Drake and Miah's advice (2010: 51-2), to approach celebrity as a 'mediating frame' which includes public recognition, image circulation, perfomativity and promotion.

Acknowledgements

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