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Celebrity gossip's siren call grows louder

If 2006 was anything to go by, US tabloid culture is growing ever more mainstream - and reaching increasingly younger audiences.

By Ethan Gilsdorf | Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

In the new FX drama, "Dirt," a snake charmer of a magazine editor says, "This is what the marketplace wants." The character, played by Courtney Cox, claims the public wants celebrity gossip in the form of the fictional publications "Drrt" and "Now."

The show's "People"-meets-"National Enquirer" magazines stray only nanometers from truth. America does desire endless dirt on celebrities, and 2006, the year of Brangelina - or was it TomKat? - seemed the apex (or nadir) of its fixation.

Obsession with star gazing has been a pop-culture mainstay for decades. But lately, the proliferation of outlets for such coverage seems unbridled. Cable news and entertainment shows keep multiplying alongside celebrity-gossip blogs, which have millions of fans. Even staid newspapers, desperate for readers, have added pages chronicling stars' marriages, breakups, and fashion train wrecks.

In large part, the surge in such reportage is being driven by new media. But the demand for even the most trivial of celebrity gossip also reflects a shift in attitudes and beliefs toward fame. In an age when a MySpace page or a YouTube video can give extraordinary exposure to ordinary people, a young generation now believes fame to be one of the most desirable of traits.

"Kids see fame as a cure all for problems," says Jake Halpern, author of the new book "Fame Junkies: The Hidden Truths Behind America's Favorite Addiction." "Fame is an attractive fix-it."

Focusing on all things celebrity is also a form of release for many people. Ken Baker, West Coast executive editor for "US Weekly" magazine, looks back to Sept. 11 as a pivotal point, the dawn of a supposed new age of sincerity.

"[Readers] didn't go away from escaping. They embraced escaping," says Mr. Baker. "I'm not a sociologist, I'm a celebrity journalist. I don't know its cause and effect. I don't know if you can tie it to 9/11, but that's when our business took off."

Ironically, publications such as "People," "Star Magazine," "InTouch Weekly," and "Life&Style Weekly" have helped rescue the fortunes of print journalism. "Celebrity journalism" is one of the few sectors not being hammered by the Internet. Before "US Weekly" changed its formula in 2002 to "television in a magazine," says

Baker, it sold about 200,000 on the newsstand. "We now sell a million [each week]." His readership is mostly college educated with a median income of \$70,000.

Also driving society's interest in fame: a perfect marriage between technology and new media. There's a huge demand to cram these growing outlets - MySpace, Internet, cable TV, satellite radio - with content, according to Marc Lamont Hill, assistant professor of Urban Education at Philadelphia's Temple University.

"You can be home at 3 a.m. Googling Brad Pitt. Which of course people do," says Mr. Hill. "Because the Internet is a democratic thing, people can create their own website to Janet Jackson."

The 24/7 availability of blogs makes them irresistible. And with cheap cellphones and digital cameras, even Grandma can join the ranks of the *paparazzi*.

"If you see a celebrity at a bar, well, you can't e-mail 'US Weekly.' But you can e-mail your favorite blog," says David Hauslaib, editor and publisher of the three-year-old website jossip.com

The Faustian bargain for fame and fortune just got a whole lot nastier. And more dangerous. While the public-private divide has evaporated, oddly, scandals make people feel closer to the stars they worship. (The drug rehab comeback story is a classic sin/redemption narrative that never bores the populace.)

The onslaught of increasingly shocking personal details about celebs also creates a perception of increased access - even the illusion that fans have a personal relationship with each of them. Heck, that they all share the same high school locker. Throw into the kettle the breakdown of privacy standards, and the mix-and-match nicknames the tabloids invent for the public's favorite couples - Billary, Bennifer - begin to make sense.

"There is a sense of entitlement to celebrity lives," says Hill. "That all feeds the celebrity frenzy."

When celebrity relationships do implode, fans simply divide stars up like Siamese twins - take a Brad from Jennifer, add part Angelina or Vince, and create a new monster: Brangelina, Vaughniston. Bwah-hah-hah!

But who is the Dr. Frankenstein: publishers and broadcasters or the public? Courtney Cox's claim on "Dirt" raises the question: who creates the desire for all this gossip? Can the media conveniently be blamed?

"It's the chicken and the egg," says Mr. Hauslaib, who assumes some responsibility. "I think there is an innate human interest in private lives of other people."

As a teenager, Mr. Halpern had an inexplicable interest in the show "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous." Intrigued by his celebrity obsessions, he wrote "Fame Junkies," a book that examines everyone from a woman with a shrine to Rod Stewart to the lives of celebrity assistants.

"I wanted to hopefully make broader commentary about how these stories tell us something about us as a culture," he says.

Interspersed among his profiles and expert testimonials are some surprising quotes, like this one from a child actor named Clint, who at age 11 had "retired." Halpern asks him to explain the desire for fame.

"I think people don't want to be lonely," says Clint. "They want companionship, and fame is a substitute for that."

Halpern also commissioned a study polling Rochester, N.Y., teenagers on their opinions about fame. Unsurprisingly, he learned many kids idolize stars, athletes, and singers, not politicians or other heroes. But some of his findings are more alarming. Given the option to become stronger, smarter, famous, or more beautiful, boys chose fame almost as often as they chose intelligence. Girls chose it more often.

Then there's this doozy: 43.4 percent of teenage girls want to become celebrity personal assistants when they grow up, choosing this career path twice as often as "the president of a great university like Harvard or Yale."

"Globally, kids don't know the names of their own heads of government or what their country exports," says Jeff Davidson, author of "Breathing Space: Living & Working at a Comfortable Pace in a Sped-Up Society," via e-mail. "But they do know the name of Tom Cruise's baby."