

America as a Celebrity Culture

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The genesis of this course was a conversation a few years ago in a class of mine. I asked my students who their heroes were and drew a blank. No one had any heroes; they had celebrities whose lives they assiduously followed. I said that real celebrities should be people *deserving* of celebration for their heroism or accomplishments— their very real contributions to American society.

Many of those students regularly watched “Jersey Shore” and “kept up” with the Kardashians. I think the conversation rather blew my students’ minds. Mine was blown for sure. I realized that the United States had, in many ways, become a celebrity culture. Donald Trump currently leading the Republican presidential polls, a man with zero governing experience but seen as a “celebrity” because of his TV show, might be a current example of the phenomenon.

It seems that fame today largely has little to do with achievement. Or as distinguished historian, Daniel Boorstin, put it in his path breaking book, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (first edition, 1962), America has increasingly become a society fairly worshipping people who are “famous for being famous” but for no accomplishment of value. Boorstin’s idea has been multiplied tenfold in the intervening years. One can hardly get on line at a supermarket checkout without being assaulted by the nine magazines exclusively devoted to so-called “celebrities.”

These magazines are virtually the only ones in America that make money, so they may have one positive effect: keeping print alive. A student of mine worked at *Rolling Stone* for a couple of years. While that quality magazine consistently lost money, its celebrity offshoot, *Us*, kept the parent magazine going. So, while my personal feelings about celebrity culture are largely negative, I intend to keep an open mind: there may be some positive aspects of it that this course will explore. Another possible positive side of celebrity culture might be its democratizing effect? What is the television show, *American Idol* if not a demonstration that anyone with a heretofore hidden talent can become rich, famous, and popular? One can ask the same question about so-called Reality TV shows.

This seminar will study the celebrity phenomenon and ask whether it is a harmless interest or a malignant cancer on the body politic. Does celebrity culture, for example, partially explain the

low turnout at elections, with those students' age being the group that least votes? Do so many Americans increasingly feel a sense of uselessness and an absence of purpose that the deranged, uncommonly driven to find a purpose, not to mention fame or notoriety, shoot little children in elementary schools? Also, is the stalker phenomenon (A.K.A the one way relationship) a function of a culture in which too many people feel worthless? In short, is celebrity culture amusing (see title, nonetheless, of Neil Postman's book in the list below) or something perniciously corrupting our society and a sign of great malaise? 21 people who have appeared on so-called reality T.V. shows have committed suicide during the past decade. Perhaps they didn't know what to do with themselves once they were no longer "celebrities."