

“There Will Be No Further Explanation:” Celebrity Journalism and Taylor Swift’s *Reputation*

Victoria Sands

ABSTRACT

This article interrogates the changing role of celebrity journalism in the midst of an evolving digital media landscape in which a digital participatory culture drives interest and value in celebrity figures. Looking specifically to singer-songwriter Taylor Swift’s purposeful retreat from conventional celebrity journalism, and indeed her open derision of news media, for the promotion of her sixth studio EP, *Reputation*, a case study of *Reputation*’s release analyzes the emergent practices and platforms that are available to celebrity figures who choose to circumvent the celebrity journalism industry. Critically, however, this article also considers how the performative rejection of the ‘media’ (and traditional celebrity journalism), in fact allows celebrities to cultivate affective narratives and deepen emotional attachments with fans. Furthermore, as evidenced with Swift’s promotional practices, a reliance on digital fan cultures in lieu of traditional media entices fans to increasingly perform emotional labour and broaden networks in which they can circulate news and ‘fact check’ reports and rumours, while anticipating rewards from the celebrity, and participating more directly in popular media.

Keywords: celebrity, participatory culture, convergence culture, celebrity journalism, new media, attention economy

RÉSUMÉ

« Il n’y aura pas d’autre explication » : Le journalisme des célébrités et l’album *Reputation* de Taylor Swift

Cet article s’interroge sur le rôle changeant du journalisme de célébrité au milieu d’un paysage médiatique numérique en pleine évolution, dans lequel une culture numérique participative suscite l’intérêt et la considération des personnalités célèbres. En se penchant spécifiquement sur le retrait volontaire de la chanteuse Taylor Swift du journalisme de célébrité conventionnel, et en fait sa dérision ouverte des médias d’information, pour la promotion de son sixième EP en studio, *Reputation*. Une étude de cas de la sortie de *Reputation* analyse les pratiques et les plateformes émergentes qui sont disponibles pour les personnalités célèbres qui choisissent de contourner l’industrie du journalisme de célébrité. D’un point de vue critique, cependant, cet article examine également comment le rejet performatif des “médias” (et du journalisme traditionnel des célébrités) permet en fait aux célébrités de cultiver des récits affectifs et d’approfondir les liens émotionnels avec leurs fans. En outre, comme le montrent les pratiques promotionnelles de Swift, le recours aux cultures numériques de fans au lieu des médias traditionnels incite les fans à fournir un travail émotionnel de plus en plus important et à élargir les canaux dans lesquels ils peuvent faire circuler les informations et vérifier les faits et les rumeurs, tout en anticipant les gratifications de la célébrité et en participant plus directement aux médias populaires.

Mots clés : célébrité, culture participative, culture de convergence, journalisme de célébrité, nouveaux médias, économie de l’attention.

INTRODUCTION

Starting in early 2019, singer-songwriter Taylor Swift gave numerous interviews to publications discussing the release of her latest album, *Lover* (Hiatt, 2019; Snapes, 2019). This was a marked change from the promotional strategy for her previous effort, *Reputation*, for which she did not grant any major interviews and eschewed the conventional mass media promotional circuit, instead focusing on fan campaigns and viral self-promotion (Kornbacher, 2017). Imbued in the performance, imagery, and marketing of *Reputation*, and in her newly "terse social media missives" (Kornbacher, 2017), was the message that Swift was a woman hunted, misunderstood, and maligned by the press and public, from whom she was supposedly forced to retreat and exact revenge through purposeful silence (Snapes, 2017; Nevins, 2017). Swift's performative rejection throughout the *Reputation* era of traditional 'media' outlets offers a critical opportunity to examine the impacts of a shifting media culture on the role and dynamics of the contemporary celebrity journalism industry.

Looking to the promotional campaign for *Reputation* as a case study, this paper will first illuminate the media landscape in which Swift's *Reputation* was released. It then asks what strategies and practices in particular were taken up by Swift to promote her album and image outside of conventional press tactics. To that point, this study will explore how the role of fans and the cultivation of their labour was used to circulate key texts and ideas. Overall, the case study of *Reputation* intends to gain insight into the messages conveyed by Swift during this time on the utility and value of the press itself; it also leads us to question what the expectations are of journalism when it comes to holding celebrity and stardom to account in a changing media environment in which public figures might find increased value in both rejecting mainstream

press and mobilizing audiences to help circumvent these conventions.

CELEBRITY VISIBILITY AND BLURRED MEDIA BOUNDARIES

The purposeful retreat from the supposed glare of the press is a strategy that has been increasingly popular among high profile celebrities (Caramanica, 2018); promotional activities instead include tactics such as increased engagement with social media, 'interviews' in which personal friends or fans of the star pose questions (Usher, 2015), or 'surprise' releases hinged on viral impact and online word-of-mouth. This can, of course, add to a celebrity's allure; superstar Beyoncé Knowles, for example, has not granted traditional interviews for years (Munzenreider, 2020), and in the public imagination seems characterized by a sense of divine or untouchable mystery, which could ostensibly be compromised by a dynamic in which she is made to answer to the press or cede to expectations of traditional media.

This shift of public attention away from mainstream press can be attributed to a heightened visibility and accessibility of celebrity across multiple outlets and media platforms (Berryman & Kavka, 2019). There are now more places to see and share celebrity. "Gossip websites, fan sites and blogs provide a plethora of new locations for the circulation and creation of celebrity, moving between user-generated content and the mainstream media" (Marwick & boyd, 2011, p. 139), especially given the ubiquity of a variety of social media in which celebrities can invite viewers into their private lives in a seemingly unprecedented way (Usher, 2015). Celebrity, therefore, is folded into everyday life like never before, accessible through, for example, an individual's own smartphone; one can feel a sense of interaction with a celebrity on a personal level. "People do not live, any more, with the media—but increasingly *in the media*" (Dubied & Hanitzch,

2014, p. 140). Society becomes reliant on these different forms of media for attaining information and social networks.

Stories, news, and gossip about celebrities can therefore move and be shared with rapidity across different media boundaries and audiences (Conboy, 2010, 182). Given this breaking down of traditional barriers between the industry of fame and consumers, and the myriad ways to 'experience' celebrities, it follows that conventional press circuits could be presented as outdated, unnecessary, or superfluous. Indeed, it is also possible that celebrities or public figures might exacerbate this sense of disconnect, or feeling that traditional media can 'get it wrong,' to further cultivate a lack of trust between the press and public in attaining valued celebrity news. What's more, mainstream or traditional news outlets have less autonomy over dictating the actual newsworthiness of a story or how it will be shared, given the increased participation of both audience and celebrity in the celebrity news ecosystem.

Boundaries have also blurred between what is considered news that belongs in either the public or private sphere. Kristensen (2018) argues that *culture* itself (which includes celebrity and gossip) is increasingly seen as more relevant, timely, and significant in people's experience of life and society. Thus, our interactions with culture have merged into our other political and public spheres. This change results in an integration of what is considered popular entertainment with what is assessed as being news or publicly significant (Dubied & Hanitzsch, 2104). Entertainment and celebrity analysis is therefore more widely accessible on platforms and outlets once reserved for so-called 'hard' news. In sum, that which the public finds significant, and their access to it, is changing on a social and cultural level and celebrity news is representative of this shift.

THE HISTORY AND ORIGIN OF CELEBRITY JOURNALISM

To place celebrity journalism in this emerging context, it is necessary to understand both its history and how the genre can be defined. In his exploration of the press and its relation to popular culture, John Hartley (2007) describes the latter

as the "true origin of modern journalism," writing that the interweaving of the two was "massively expanded by urbanization, industrialization, and the intellectual ferment of the Enlightenment and Revolutionary Europe" (p. 310). Indeed, journalism and the popular press owes its genesis to the intent of the working class on cultivating a form of mass communication to elevate their voices, thus creating a press of their own, outside the elite. As Hartley (2007) argues, the very idea of journalism is contingent on this popular or "pauper" press, which in turn created a "reading public" allowing journalism to flourish (p. 311). Therefore, "modern journalism is embedded within, representative of, and speaking both for and to, *popular culture*" (Hartley, 2007, p. 312).

Defining Celebrity Journalism

Celebrity journalism is "a widely used industry descriptor for the reporting and commentary on celebrity" (Turner, 2014, p. 145). The characteristics of celebrity journalism which distinguish it from other news media, such as a focus on the image, and a close connection with public relations, allow it to be understood as a genre with its own unique system of reporting. A concise definition of celebrity journalism is dependent on context and media outlet, but is perceived to "comment on the character of those in the spotlight and the attitudes, opinions and norms which they do or do not observe" (Gorin & Dubied, 2011, p. 600). Importantly, celebrity news can be accepted as fictional or bordering on false while still being consumed (Turner, 2014, p. 150), and is thought to "share certain characteristics with...both hard news and fictional genres" (Van den Bulck et al., 2017, p. 46). Its speculative nature is considered part of the genre and, as such, it can be more easily derided by celebrities or audiences as inessential, or even detrimental, to the public's awareness or need to know.

However, popular culture has long been utilized by the press to communicate popular ideals and social values, and historically did so through the scrutiny and mythologizing of famous personalities or even fictional characters. Conboy (2014) argues that underlying this kind of coverage was a fundamental indictment and scrutiny of social stratification and the upper class. Such an

analysis could be applied to modern celebrity reporting, in that it maintains close surveillance of the wealthy elite and continues to fuse moralizing narratives and stories with celebrity lives.

These seemingly conflicting conceptualizations speak to a broader debate as to just how reporting on celebrity can be considered journalism; the term ‘celebrity news’ is rendered by some as an outright “oxymoron” or “contradiction” (Conboy, 2014), an intruder that is “taking” from and appropriating the language and appearance of news for its own purposes (Turner, 2014, p. 151). While it remains an accessible and “inclusive” form of reporting, on the other hand it is widely considered to be on the “bottom of the news food chain” (Dubied & Hanitzch, 2014, p. 1), serving as a distraction from important issues. To that end, celebrity journalism itself can reinforce these hierarchies, given the variance in entertainment media outlets and styles of reporting; the longform, in-depth approach of *Vanity Fair* or *Interview Magazine* contrasts with the tabloid affordances of *People* or TMZ, which are more image and gossip-oriented yet validated through connections with celebrity public relations or entrenched sources (Kalika & Ferrucci, 2019). These platforms might therefore be favoured or accessed in different ways, yet they also exist within a celebrity news ecosystem that might be broadly dismissed or derided by celebrities and audiences alike as inauthentic and low-grade.

Yet, there are also not easily definable and objective standards of what quantifies “journalistic quality” (Van den Bulck et al., 2017, p. 49) in general. The debate over celebrity journalism’s worth is thus often predicated on popular assumptions of a binary choice between the ‘news’ and ‘entertainment’, as well as hard/soft, elite/popular news. However, elements of both intersect with the other; consequently, entertainment reporting might at times be shaped by elements of ‘traditional’ news, and vice versa. Celebrity journalism can thus be conceived as a bridge between news and entertainment, a “hybrid textual genre” (Van den Bulck et al., 2017, p. 45) which consolidates these two fields and their unique approaches, norms, and practices.

Thus, celebrity news tends to provoke and illuminate debates on the value, intent, and purpose of news itself. As such, challenges to

celebrity journalism can perhaps reveal a growing distrust or apprehension toward the mainstream press’s ability to adequately inform the public, or the capacity of the media to deceive or spread unsubstantiated claims. This kind of mistrust can, of course, valuably boost the ability of a celebrity to assert that they have been mischaracterized or made the victim of rumour-mongering in the media (Kanai, 2020), and thus allow them to justify the development of their own messaging and information apparatus without critical input from the celebrity journalism industry.

NEW TRANSFORMATIONS: THE INTERNET, AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION, AND CELEBRITY CONTROL

It is in this context that the genre is being challenged by transformative forces in a digital news environment in which a participatory audience can flex their autonomy from conventional media sources. The ability of consumers or ‘fans’ to participate more deeply in the construction of celebrity, and the news and commentary surrounding celebrities, is indicative of a “new media democracy” (Marwick & boyd, 2011, p. 141). The numerous platforms that house celebrity content include social media (Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, etc.), gossip websites, podcasts, popular culture commentary websites or blogs, fan sites, and existing mainstream celebrity news platforms. Again, given the hybridity of the celebrity news industry, the content in these spaces can be drawn from traditional media outlets. Although the audience functions outside the mainstream entertainment industry, they are nonetheless “contributing to the production and distribution of texts” (Kristensen, 2018, p. 2). To be involved in the generation of gossip or celebrity news is appealing and allows audiences to partake in “the performance of speculation” creating “a pleasurable collaborative fiction” between parties (Turner, 2014, p. 150), which underpins the innate appeal of gossip and celebrity.

This shift is what Marwick and boyd (2011) refer to as a “context collapse” in which different audiences once thought to be separate now function and co-exist in one “social context” (p.

144). Audience and news providers can function together. In this environment, celebrities are constructed by an overflow of information, commentary, and images, shared across many platforms by numerous competing interests. Therefore, forging both an online media presence and connection with online audience is in the best interest of a celebrity who is ostensibly hoping to maintain a semblance of control over their public image and career trajectory.

Celebrities in this landscape must manage their own shifting self-narratives among the “vortex” of information and news about them being shared constantly (Conboy, 2014, p. 182). As different platforms become available to “construct, maintain and sell a star persona” (Feeley, 2012, p. 473), celebrities have started to do their own promotion in the digital world. In doing so, they can circumvent both the news and entertainment industry (Turner, 2014). However, journalists can then surveil the substance of their online, fan-based activity (Usher, 2015). Fans and celebrities, therefore, can produce news together, while mainstream outlets gather and report it.

Celebrity and audience interaction on social media is increasingly common. It fosters a sense of closeness between star and fans, thereby developing increasingly intimate “parasocial relationships” (Marwick & boyd, 2011, p. 147). These connections are cultivated through celebrity’s online activity, specifically: the divulgement of supposedly private or personal information to individual fans; the sharing of personal photos and images; and first-hand denial of popular rumours (Marwick & boyd, 2011). This activity arguably “depathologizes” the parasocial relationship, as stars themselves reify and legitimize their connection with fans through active participation and sharing (p. 148).

For fans and audience members, the belief that they are discovering the ‘real’ person, apparently free from PR or media constraints, is eminently gratifying (Marwick & boyd 2011). Indeed, traditional media starts to be perceived as both an artifice and an interference in accessing the real celebrity. The audience tends to believe that a celebrity’s online persona is more genuine when it is unmediated by media framing and commentary (Usher, 2015). Indeed, journalism is now frequently constructed as being the “safe” (Marwick & boyd, 2011, p. 149) option for

celebrity’s image creation and promotion, whereas sharing private or personal moments online is seen as inherently more authentic or even daring.

However, the idea that social media interaction is unguarded is an illusion, as celebrities frequently maintain control and can personally select who they talk to, and to which questions or comments they respond (Usher, 2015). This is beneficial for the celebrity, as they are given “access to [a] consumer collective” who will validate and promote their image (Usher, 2015, p. 319). Importantly, it also moves promotional activity “out of the hands of other areas of the media machine—such as risky journalists—and into [their] own” (p. 319). On social media or digital spaces, there is more autonomy and authority over the audience, including what they will see and subsequently judge. As Fairchild (2007) asserts, public validation and awareness is crucial in an “attention economy” in which “audience perception” must be controlled, and celebrities must generate new ways to self-promote and self-narrativize (p. 360).

CASE STUDY: TAYLOR SWIFT’S REPUTATION

WHY TAYLOR SWIFT AND REPUTATION?

This “new media democracy” (Marwick & boyd, 2011, p. 155), wherein the trust of conventional celebrity journalism is challenged, and audiences experience greater access to, and interaction with, celebrity, was the environment in which Taylor Swift released and promoted her 2017 album *Reputation*, and cultivated her updated, rebranded self-image. The performance of Swift’s celebrity in the media, and her promotional choices at this time, are notable and relevant for several key reasons.

Firstly, Taylor Swift maintains a heavily constructed and surveilled self-image and brand. She represents a celebrity of the aforementioned “attention economy” (Fairchild, 2007, p. 360), one who can cultivate their persona in the public eye, thereby acting as a “neoliberal entrepreneur of the

self who constantly works on and updates personal biography” (Genz, 2015, p. 549). This is especially resonant when it comes to Swift, who has built a career on music supposedly closely related to real-life experiences (Chittenden, 2013) which unfold in front of the audience. To be sure, she utilizes this concept of the personal in order to connect with the public, another element of a contemporary “brand culture” in which producers cultivate an “emotive bond with consumers” (Genz, 2015, pp. 556, 546). Therefore, the audience’s surveillance and consumption of Taylor Swift is not solely for the sake of consuming, but in feeling an emotional connection. Swift can therefore more deftly manipulate her press activities—or lack thereof—around the personal and intimate.

Swift’s publicizing of her “socially reconstructed self” maintains her “cultural relevance” and marketing techniques (Canavan & McCamley, 2018, p. 2). This is key in the new era of celebrity news, in which both journalism and the audience can “provide material” (Canavan & McCamley, 2018, p. 7) to help her create, reflect on, and share her persona. A fluid, overflowing, and constantly shifting celebrity media landscape is also particularly receptive to a star’s continual regeneration. Therefore, Taylor Swift crafted a promotional and rebranding strategy unique to this environment.

Another key reason to focus on Swift is the existence and practices of her fanbase, a large and intensely loyal community of followers who often congregate in online spaces, where they dedicate themselves to defending Swift from perceived slights (Coscarelli, 2017). These fans are known to be “rabid in their allegiance, especially in [Swift’s] virtual presence” (Coscarelli, 2017). Indeed, Swift regularly interacts with her audience in online corners of the fandom, most notably on the social media site Tumblr. During the *Reputation* era, the use of Swift’s digital fan labour demonstrates just how audience members can participate in news gathering, promotion, and image maintenance. For instance, fans can circulate updates on the album release through their networks, track and publicize Swift’s activity on her own social media accounts, create fan edits and artistic works of Swift or reinterpretations of her songs, and interact with other users to refute alleged false information.

Additionally, Taylor Swift’s popularity and

endurance as a cultural zeitgeist means that her public behaviour and reception serve as vehicles for understanding sociopolitical norms and ideals of the time. Specifically, her interactions with celebrity media and journalism provide insight into the issues and themes surrounding the genre. As Jane Martinson (2017) wrote in *The Guardian*, “If ever there were a celebrity who sums up the two biggest issues for journalism in 2017, control and trust, it is Swift.”

EARLY DIGITAL PROMOTION AND NARRATIVE MESSAGING: SETTING THE STAGE FOR *REPUTATION*

While Taylor Swift had a prominent media personality for much of her career, after numerous scandals and negative publicity in 2016 (Woodward 2016), she retreated from the spotlight (Kornhaber, 2017). In the summer of 2017, she wiped clean her social media accounts and began posting from scratch (Kornhaber, 2017), and in late summer released a new single from the forthcoming *Reputation*, which offered an updated image replete with darker, edgier music and aesthetics (Nevins, 2017). Her first single, *Look What You Made Me Do*, features a spoken word portion in which she declares, *‘I’m sorry, the old Taylor can’t come to the phone right now. Why? Oh—‘cause she’s dead!’* The music video featured Swift standing triumphantly on a pyre of her old selves, in costumes and styling from previous eras. Days before the release of the album *Reputation*, following virtually no promotional circuit, she posted to her Instagram the caption: “There will be no further explanation, only reputation” (cited by Kornhaber, 2017). When juxtaposed next to her imposed media snubbing, this implied not only a maintained silence for the future, but also positions interactions with journalism or media as being a source of “explanation.” That is, Swift’s idea of celebrity journalism here is constructed as a way for her to clarify and elucidate on her celebrity, yet she is apparently also empowered to withdraw from that interaction and instead be governed only by a previously built reputation.

Yet Swift could not have built the marketing of this new identity—an elusive persona who had been forced into hiding—without celebrity media and journalism itself. It is this system which

helped construct her previous personas, and it was the implicit assertion that it had wronged her (Martinson, 2017), which apparently provoked her retreat. This symbiotic surveillance is essential to her brand. “Swift interacts with those who opine on herself as part of a process of crafting and asserting narratives of her own...[she] assiduously monitors and manipulates her reputation” (Canavan & McCamley 2018, p. 6). Her actions in openly repelling the media allowed her to display a performance of autonomy over her image, essentially “killing” (as she states in *Look What You Made Me Do*) her old image herself, before the scrutiny of others could do so (Allen, 2019, p. 2). Next, she herself publicizes this destruction and her re-generation on her own terms. To do so, Swift relied on methods of production and dissemination of information which mimicked traditional journalistic practices, but were crafted to remain under her exclusive control. This was enacted in three key ways, explored below.

KEY PROMOTIONAL STRATEGIES OF TAYLOR SWIFT'S REPUTATION

Cultivating Her Own News Production and Publishing

Upon the release of *Reputation*, Swift included with purchase of the physical CD in store locations a copy of one of two “magazines” (Biedenharn, 2017). These were labelled “Volume 1” and “Volume 2,” styled like traditional magazines, with the word ‘reputation’ as the title print and cover headlines promising the content inside. Both issues featured a different photo of Swift on the cover, and the inside content offered numerous personal polaroid photos that seemed to feature the star in personal moments—cooking, travelling, and lounging in her home. Here, Swift is participating in the intensive production and dissemination of celebrity images which characterizes online celebrity media (Feeley, 2012); sharing these supposedly genuine ‘behind the scenes’ photos challenges the monopolization of the paparazzi industry in capturing these moments of alleged authenticity.

Each book also included lyrics which were handwritten—seemingly by Swift—thus reinforcing the personalized relatability inherent

in celebrity marketing (Genz 2015, 549). The magazines could also enhance commercial profit for Swift, as content was unique to both ‘volumes’ and therefore fans would be incited to purchase both issues and, therefore, two copies of the CDs (Biedenharn, 2017). The magazines served as a substitute for traditional physical print copies of magazines often done for promotion, which fans are used to consuming. In producing a stand-in for news, she becomes “her own publishing industry” (Kornhaber, 2017). This way, Swift could provide the product herself, profit from it, and control the content within it.

Importantly, inside each magazine were poems penned by Swift which alluded to her media disappearance and scandal, entitled “Why She Disappeared” and “If You’re Anything Like Me” (Biedenharn, 2017). The inclusion of self-written poems, which reference the apparent public mystery of her ‘disappearance,’ purport to subtly divulge information that again could not be found in traditional media. Interestingly, the title—“Why She Disappeared”—implies an aspect of ‘explanation,’ which she had previously promised, would no longer be offered. This explanation, however, took place outside traditional journalism practices and therefore involves no discussion or follow-up; rather, Swift both guides the conversation and affirms that she holds the true answers.

Social Media and Fan Involvement

While media and cultural commentary noted Swift’s departure from her usual media strategy and self-dismissal from major platforms (Kornhaber, 2017), she was nonetheless uniquely visible online with fans. This was especially potent on the platform Tumblr. As *The New York Times* observed, “Even in an age of unprecedented connection between stars and their public on social media, Ms. Swift goes beyond typical interaction on Tumblr” (Coscarelli, 2017), deliberately developing parasocial relationships by commenting on or ‘liking’ fans posts, replying to questions or comments in an intimate fashion, and sometimes even mailing them gifts or referring to them by first name. This activity not only allows her to maintain and share a positive persona “without oversaturating...a general audience (Coscarelli,

2017), but the intimacy developed between star and fan encourages loyalty and devotion to the star's perceived cause. This is what Usher (2015) refers to as celebrity "micropublics" that develop online; fans congregate around the celebrity as the group "leader," assessing, then following, the leader's needs, and shaping their behaviour and identity around those needs (p. 318). In doing so, Swift fans could also perform labour for the star; for example, they encouraged each other to report any fellow fans who leaked *Reputation* online to the label (Coscarelli, 2017). The promise of potential rewards—in the case of Swift, "the looming possibility of firsthand contact" entices the audience to stay (p. 318).

This is intensified when it comes to Swift's version of fan reward; that is, as a precedent to her album releases, she hosts fans at her numerous residences to meet her personally and listen to her album before it is heard by the general public. These have been named her "Secret Sessions," highlighting the supposed trust and confidentiality involved in creating a space that seems outside of media intrusion. The fans are ostensibly hand-picked by Swift herself, and she has alleged she chooses them as "Secret Sessions" guests based on their online activity (Iasimone, 2017), thereby further encouraging fans to perform desirable behaviour online. While fans are allegedly restricted in what they can reveal afterward, they are permitted to both share their photos taken by Swift's photographer and discuss general details of the event online.

This online sharing of a private event allows news to circulate about Swift's music, with fans hyping up the anticipation for its release. Such a strategy would be particularly helpful in the *Reputation* era, when fans could perform promotion for a celebrity who has restricted their own participation. Interestingly, while fans produced and shared this 'news' online, news outlets and celebrity journalists then reported on this very material, writing about the glimpses and insights into the upcoming music fans received and shared (Iasimone, 2017), as well as gossip about Swift's personal life (Rosa, 2017). Similarly, media has also covered Tumblr and Instagram fan interactions with Swift (LaConte, 2017). Online sharing and participation among fans, then, becomes its own source of news production, which

is picked up by mainstream sites that in turn pass it off as reporting of their own. Swift, in turn, need only interact with fans in this way and still be afforded space in major media.

This practice, according to Usher (2015), moves the role of the journalist interviewer to that of a "spectator" (p. 318). What's more, this is "on terms dictated entirely by celebrities and their PR teams" (p. 318). They therefore function as witness to ultimately PR-sanctioned, carefully constructed activity. Yet it is produced to appear as the uncovering of insider, 'secret' information.

This activity also creates a dynamic in which fans adopt journalistic techniques of news discovery, presentation, and dissemination. In an analysis of fan Q&As on Twitter, Usher (2015) asserts that the audience takes on a journalistic role, "using techniques which are a familiar part of the thematic patterns of the celebrity interview" (p. 318) and therefore help to promote a promotional agenda and "support the celebrity in the construction of their image" (p. 316). This changes the landscape of social media from "unmediated to mediated performance" (p. 319), lending a feeling of control and regulation to the online realm. A similar analysis could be applied to the Swift fandom. Not only do fans pose—albeit frequently informal—questions to Swift on sites like Tumblr (LaConte, 2017), but they also use social media to provide regular updates and information. For example, a fan-run Twitter page called *Taylor Swift News* promotes Swift's appearances and activities in real time; their bio reads "Your best source for the latest and most reliable news on Taylor Swift for 7+ years" (*Taylor Swift News*). Fans also surveil and dispatch her online activity; Tumblr followers label and track posts Swift has "liked" with the hashtag #taylorliked or #taylurking (Coscarelli 2017), so that this information can be sourced and discussed.

Non-interviews With Conventional Outlets

Lastly, Swift did appear in some mainstream, conventional celebrity journalism outlets during her promotion for *Reputation*, however, this was similarly restricted and dictated on her terms. For example, she was featured on the cover of the January 2018 issue of *British Vogue*, but the content within the pages was not an interview; rather the magazine simply published another

poem penned by Swift titled “The Trick to Holding On,” which enigmatically alluded to personal difficulties and growth (Spanos, 2017). Similarly, in 2018 she was on the cover of *Harper’s Bazaar*, with the feature being an interview conducted by Swift herself, asking questions of fellow celebrity Pattie Boyd (Caramanica, 2018). And while Swift did return to media interviews when promoting her latest album, *Lover*, in 2019, one of the first magazine cover-shots was for *ELLE*, in which she simply published a list of self-written “life lessons” (Swift, 2019). Again, this permitted her to maintain a share of the media spotlight without having to adhere to any other framing of her story but her own.

In placing a celebrity on the cover of a major publication with no interview involved, the magazine concedes to the celebrity an ability to circumvent the editorial autonomy of the outlet. Furthermore, withholding timely questions and analysis within such publications plays into the pessimism surrounding celebrity journalism as a field, such as the belief that it is entirely controlled by celebrity PR, for example (Turner, 2014), or driven solely by market interests (Gorin & Dubied, 2011). Yet this is also an increasingly common practice, with superstars like Beyoncé Knowles and Drake adopting similar promotional strategies, all of which provoked a frustration articulated by Jon Caramanica in *The New York Times* piece, “R.I.P the Celebrity Profile” (2018). Caramanica laments the loss of insight, reflection, or answers that could potentially be offered from celebrities like Knowles and Swift—given that celebrities both reflect social values and help create the cultural worlds in which we live (Gorin & Dubied, 2011)—were they to submit to a sit-down interview with a journalist.

Thus, in allowing stars to monopolize space without a journalistic response, media outlets fail to adequately respond to public interest and assess the socio-cultural importance of the field and its subjects. While celebrity journalism endures, so do the apparatuses in which an interrogative press can be circumvented or even maligned.

CONCLUSION

Taylor Swift’s retreat from conventional celebrity journalism during the *Reputation* era played up a sense of distrust from celebrity and fans toward the news media that traditionally covers them, while also obscuring the ongoing symbiotic relationship that exists between both parties. That is, while Swift’s silence may have been fitting to her epochal rebranding at the time of *Reputation*’s release, and helped to further develop her intimate fan relationships, the press nevertheless remained a participant in the flow of information surrounding both Swift and *Reputation*, albeit one with diminished autonomy. Furthermore, although both fans and celebrity could repurpose and reimagine the affordances and practices of celebrity journalism within their own networks, such practices maintained and reaffirmed the relevance of the genre and its methods of promotion.

Notably, when looking at Swift’s strategy with *Reputation*, the mere concept of the celebrity press itself was vital to construct the affective and compelling image of a celebrity in retreat from said institution, who must instead turn to fans and the public to circumvent the intrusive or untrustworthy media. As such, *Reputation* helps to illuminate the ways in which journalism might not be wholly discarded as a media tool, but rather co-opted or used as a narrative foil, further cultivating interest and online participation. Rather than simply make note of changes to the celebrity journalism industry as inevitable facets of the shift toward new media, it is worth considering how both celebrities and public figures might now find value in maligning and stoking distrust in mainstream press institutions, given the ways this might bolster a desired message and mobilize digital labour from audiences.

This case study of *Reputation* therefore raises critical questions around celebrity journalism’s continued relevance and responsibility in a new media landscape in which celebrities and, indeed, public figures, can bypass conventional approaches to create their own media strategies. While entertainment might be posited as the “sole objective” (Turner, 2014, p. 152) of celebrity journalism, scholarship also reveals that celebrity

news coverage provides a conduit to the discussion, negotiation, and understanding of sociopolitical issues, giving it both social and market value (Kristensen, 2018), and indeed might promote greater “media transparency” (Gorin & Dubied, 2011, p. 605) through its capacity to interrogate carefully constructed messaging of a privileged class. This is, of course, relevant to broader considerations surrounding the responsibility of the press and its ability to articulate its value to contemporary audiences who can source information from myriad outlets and platforms; the changes within contemporary celebrity journalism thus help to highlight these issues.

Therefore, the ability of the celebrity journalism industry to adequately conceptualize its role and intentions in today’s media landscape

is significant. One possibility might lie in a renewed understanding of its centrality to the values of the popular press, and a commitment to further advocating for media accountability and interrogating the social structures upon which celebrity is predicated.

Indeed, while stars and public figures continue to develop networks through which to circulate desired messaging, celebrity journalism might still prove itself capable of not just publicizing and promoting but, rather, closely examining and participating in the important debates and ideas that continue to be provoked by celebrity and popular culture, and thus shape our public consciousness.



Victoria Sands is a PhD Candidate and Contract Lecturer at Toronto Metropolitan University. Her PhD research on Taylor Swift’s promotional campaigns explores intersections of girls’ digital media, networked affect, and postfeminist cultural narratives.

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