Celebrity stories, especially regarding Hollywood scandals, have long been regarded as guilty pleasures for both audiences and journalists. Pandering to market tastes has pushed celebrity news to the bottom of journalism’s food chain. “Public consciousness tends to perceive celebrity coverage in terms of a dirty pleasure of sensationalist tabloid reporters who capitalize on exposing the private lives of the famous” (Dubied & Hanitzsch 2014, 137). News audiences consistently tell Pew researchers they pay little attention to celebrities and scandals, and complain that these get too much attention. Yet, they knew more about such stories than about virtually any other category; on average, the public correctly answered 60 percent of the questions dealing with scandal, entertainment, and crime (Parker and Deane, 1997). The popularity—now evident algorithmically—of this disreputable genre notwithstanding, scholars have also treated reporting on Hollywood scandals, especially sex scandals, as unimportant; at best it constitutes escapism, an addictive weapon of mass distraction. But Hollywood scandal coverage can be significant and impactful in explaining and exposing broad vectors in social relations and power structures.

The assumption has been that in circulating gossip about the transgressions of prevailing moral codes by Hollywood personalities, otherwise only famous for being famous, journalists’ goal was only gaining profit-enhancing audiences. This dismissal of scandal reporting is compounded by sensational tabloid stories with bold and literally colorful headlines promising scoops, accompanied by paparazzi shots of celebrities “caught” doing what lots of people do but looking glamorous while doing it. An even more damning viewpoint treats celebrity scandal news in the context of a dumbed-down but essentially conservative industrial manufacture of pop culture and news; it conserves materialist hegemony, preserves social inequalities, and represents audience interests that are prurient at worst, moralizing at best (Conboy 2014). Yet, celebrity news arguably represents a trend to personalize and democratize news. Moreover, scandals turn on celebrities’ private behaviors, highlighting the blurring of the public/private divide. They also expose a blurring across genres: for example, legacy outlets use relatively high levels of information subsidies to provide entertainment news, while entertainment sites carry original coverage.

To highlight important dynamics driving (or disrupting) the journalism/celebrity relationship, this chapter focuses on news of scandals involving film and television industry celebrities. I define “celebrities” as mediated, constructed personae of relatively durable fame, and whose private and off-screen life attract as much attention as their professional work does. Indeed,
their celebrity may partly be achieved through publicized participation in scandalous activity. To point out how the contemporary dynamics of Hollywood celebrity scandal reporting is both similar and different from other scandal domains, I focus on the scandals involving actor and comedian Bill Cosby and the well-known and acclaimed film producer Harvey Weinstein. These scandals opened the floodgates to accusations of sexual harassment and misconduct by other Hollywood figures, bringing down wrongdoers otherwise long protected. It also exposed the workings of power in celebrity, in terms of how secrets are maintained or exposed, who can meaningfully make such accusations stick, whose victimization gets taken seriously, and how journalists can cover interrelated issues turning on sex scandals. The attention precipitated by the exposure of these two scandals is not necessarily permanent. Indeed, the stories were enormously helpful in explaining both why harassment victims might stay silent for decades and why they still might remain silent.

The nature of celebrity news

The concepts of public and private, including as opposites, are modern inventions, but neither celebrity gossip nor celebrity scandal news is new. A mutually constitutive and profitable relationship between fame, celebrities, and journalism goes back to the 1850s, when new technologies allowed for the birth of “mass” circulated newspapers. Rival nineteenth-century mass publications leveraged their own position in reaction to popular culture figures to enhance their profitability (Conboy 2014). In the early twentieth century, the film industry encouraged fascination with stars’ off-screen lives, shifting people’s attention away from information about individual films to stars’ personal lives as a site of knowledge (deCordova 2007). Celebrity managers and public relations representatives for celebrities or for popular culture products employing those celebrities have usually, if indirectly, controlled gossip, working assiduously to eliminate leakage and minimize negative exposure. When the studios controlled Hollywood, they often used gossip to keep stars in line. Columnists regularly protected or damaged individual stars as a favor to studios, lest studios shun the periodical for printing unfavorable or unsanctioned items (Petersen 2014). The demise of the studio system ended the power of gossip outlets and made cover-ups far less efficient; this enabled speculation over stars’ sexual preferences and illicit or illegal activities (Petersen 2014).

Some academics, journalists, and audience members fret that the increasing amount of entertainment and scandal news available from serious news outlets illustrates what is wrong with journalism generally (Dubied and Hanitzsch 2014). Others treat celebrity news as a hybrid, blending the characteristic themes, formula, routines, and styles of news and entertainment. Indeed, a few Dutch tabloid journalists went out of their way to position themselves as “regular” journalists interested in truth-finding, even though they admitted that neither what they do nor how they do it is typically considered “regular” journalism (Deuze 2009). But most others described their work routines as distinctive to gossip (i.e., marginalized or deviant) and serving gossip magazine audiences, and thus unlike working for non-gossip media.

This tension is similar to sports journalism, long derogated as journalism’s “toy department.” Rowe (2007) properly connects such ideological denigration of play (as unimportant) to class-based and patriarchal views of the press and popular culture; it also aligns with complaints that sports journalists, largely abandoning critical investigation, have moved closer to the entertainment and celebrity journalism’s star system, willingly limiting themselves to what Rowe calls “ingrained occupational assumptions about what ‘works’” for fans (400). I treat celebrity news as having the potential to serve audiences; in presenting the ways that Hollywood personalities are both good and bad, it gestures toward social-cultural values (Gorin & Dubied 2011). If various
media platforms have increasingly accepted the responsibility to provide moral orientation, celebrity news provides models for how “to be.” Hollywood and sports heroes have endorsed disease research and promote getting tested for cancer. They illustrate the horrors of drug abuse. As news outlets’ major economic linchpin, sports and celebrity scandal reporting often or even usually avoids confronting problematic social issues. This does not mean that these genres cannot do otherwise.

Theories of interest in bad behavior

Gorin and Dubied (2011) note that American film stars are dynamic evolving icons with Janus-like dual personae: stars represent glamour and vulgarity, the ordinary and the extraordinary, the imitable and the inimitable. To achieve commercial durability, they say, stars embody clear, timely, desirable images incorporating traditional/dominant values: self-fulfillment through social and financial success, love, and family responsibilities. In French-language celebrity news Gorin and Dubied find a new macro-story: wayward behavior and excesses causing meltdown, sometimes with the possibility of a rebound or cycle of fall and rebound. Nonetheless, media are increasingly critical of illegal behaviors, reprehensible morality (including sexual addiction), or disorderly living (violence, loss of self-control, greed). “The stigma does not fall on the privileged world of celebrities itself, but rather on their decline and their inability to overcome difficulties” (ibid., 615). But American celebrities “excommunicated” for scandalous sins can lay low for a while and then later, having repented, be redeemed. What is tolerated among stars—or, conversely, what attracts media scrutiny and public criticism—can also vary by class and gender. To avoid the stigmatizing disapproval of women in public life, late fin de siècle actresses like Sarah Bernhardt deliberately adopted androgynous eccentricity. This way they couldn’t be judged. Unfortunately, this also foreclosed their serving as positive models for women (Roberts 2010). Even now, lower-class women stars are subjected to exceptional levels of public scrutiny and punitive media commentary (Gies 2011).

Sociological accounts of how celebrity scandals humanize Hollywood stars and demonstrate that celebrities are like us fail to explain why understanding that celebrities have the same weaknesses as ordinary people is useful to audiences, who, these days, know celebrities are not moral paragons. Scandal erupts with disclosure of “immoral” private actions simultaneously at odds with cultural norms and a star’s public image. Another explanation for the genre’s popularity relies on the concept of Schadenfreude—the German term (schaden = harm; freude = joy) for taking joy in another’s pain. This sense of disgust with hypocrisy, outrage at excess, and using another person’s downfall to reinforce self-esteem or sense of self-worth (van Dijk & van Koningsbruggen 2011) would be expected to be greater the more powerful the person is. Social comparison theory predicts that high-status people are resented, attacked, begrudged, or criticized specifically because they have been classified as better than their peers (Feather 1989).

Schadenfreude’s moral status is contested. The Book of Proverbs warns: “Rejoice not when thine enemy falleth, and let not thine heart be glad when he stumbleth.” The early nineteenth-century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer condemned Schadenfreude as cruelty. Yet, another’s loss may bring tangible rewards; downward comparison boosts our emotional lives and is justified, especially when Schadenfreude is moderated by empathy and compassion (Smith 2013). Smith uses reality show “humilitainment”—public humiliation as entertainment—to illustrate the pleasurable narrative of deserved downward comparison. More to my point, the misfortunes suffered by others sometimes legitimately satisfy our sense of injustice, when people with power, visibility, and status pretend holiness and then act egregiously. The joy in seeing justice served may be particularly sweet when we feel personally wronged. In the past, celebrities
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gained a degree of sympathy when unscrupulous tabloid journalists and paparazzi (neither were “real” journalists as the boundary work on professional journalists shows) invaded their privacy; because most Hollywood scandals cause no real injury to citizen rights or property, using drones or spying merely for splashy photos provokes outrage. The celebrity who seeks publicity and later hypocritically complains it went too far by revealing something scandalous, however, deserves comeuppance. Celebrities’ complaints about intrusive video and audio, taken with concealed cameras or recorders, cannot always be taken literally, even when the personal behaviors thus exposed are normally kept secret. Public figures’ reliance on publicity makes quoting Queen Gertrude in Hamlet, “the lady doth protest too much,” appropriate here.

Put another way, Shadenfreude’s “shameful” associations can be politicized. Jacquet (2015) advocates shame as a means to regulate social behavior by warning potential or actual deviants about punishment that they will suffer if they are caught failing to conform to group standards. Public shaming, through media exposure and social media and hashtag activism (I suggest that often the media exposure comes first and, in either case, the shaming works better when all these forms bloom), is a nonviolent, effective, and legitimate form of resistance that can promote large-scale political and social reform. Although some individuals and corporations may be impervious to shame, public shaming can push many corporations and even governments to change policies and behaviors. Modern society relies more heavily on personal feelings of guilt, but ineffectively so. Guilt motivates only individuals, and then only sometimes; it won’t work for sociopaths. I suggest here that, although coverage of Cosby and Weinstein’s decades of scandalous sexual harassment and predatory assaults did not solve the problem of sexual harassment, it did galvanize still-continuing consciousness-raising about sexual misconduct at the institutional level—eventually among universities, religious organizations, professional firms, non-profits, corporations, and federal agencies, among others. The New Yorker and New York Times, which won the Pulitzer Prize for public service for “explosive, impactful journalism that exposed wealthy and powerful sexual predators,” represents an extreme but important case of celebrity scandal news causing change. Below, I first highlight relevant details that were prominently and consistently reported to underscore the similarities and differences of the Cosby and Weinstein scandals.

The Weinstein scandal

In October 2017, the New York Times published a 3,500-word story titled “Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades.” Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey’s (2017) investigation found previously undisclosed allegations of sexual harassment and unwanted physical contact by Weinstein. After being confronted, Weinstein had reached settlements with at least eight women. His predatory behavior “wasn’t a secret to the inner circle,” as one assistant put it. Then, in Ronan Farrow’s (2017a) 7,788-word article, 13 women, several “on the record,” accused Weinstein of sexual harassment, assault, and rape. Former and current executives and assistants at Weinstein’s companies told Farrow they witnessed or had knowledge of his unwanted sexual advances, or even abetted him by using subterfuge to make women feel safe about meeting with him.

The stories immediately created a furor, unleashing a torrent of reporting about Weinstein. Within two weeks nearly 50 women had accused him of serious sexual misconduct; the two investigations are widely credited with encouraging at least 80 women, including many celebrities, to come forward with allegations against him. Weinstein subsequently pleaded not guilty to six felony counts in New York involving three women. He (as well as his brother, Miramax, the Weinstein Co., and some board members) faces two proposed class-action lawsuits, as well
as civil suits. Typically, audiences take pleasure in uncovering celebrity secrets “because it is possible rather than because there is any presumption of hypocrisy or venality being exposed” (Turner 2014, 150). Here, however, learning about the venality was horrifying, not pleasurable or amusing. The “lightest” the reporting got was a widely recirculated *Huffington Post* story that Weinstein, sexually rebuffed by a television anchorwoman, made her watch as he ejaculated into a restaurant’s potted plant.

The Weinstein effect also properly refers to a tsunami of stories in other publications across the country and then around the globe about other predators. Even entertainment sources such as *Variety* and the *Hollywood Reporter* and social media produced serious investigations of sexual misconduct and predation and harassment across the industry. By April 2018, more than 200 powerful people had faced public allegations, nearly always involving multiple victims. Entertainment celebrities who were accused included actor and comedian Andy Dick (accused of genital groping and sexually propositioning at least four members of a film production team); Dustin Hoffman (accused of sexual harassing two women); showrunner Andrew Kreisberg (*Variety* found 19 women accusing him of sexual harassment); producer and director Brett Ratner (accused of sexually harassing or molesting six women); and actor and director Steven Seagal (accused of raping two women). Film director James Toback was accused of sexually harassing over 300 women, including some famous actresses. Comedian Louis C.K. represents a rare case in that he almost immediately admitted to irresponsibly wielding power over five women who accused him of sexual misconduct. At least 24 men accused actor Kevin Spacey of sexual misconduct or assault. More importantly, the exposés galvanized the #MeToo movement.

### The Cosby scandal

A 2017 trial of Bill Cosby for drugging and sexual assaulting Andrea Constand ended with a hung jury, despite revelations about a 2005 deposition by Cosby in which he admitted to some of the acts. Constand testified that during a visit to Cosby’s home, the famous celebrity, then more than twice her age, gave her pills that essentially immobilized her. But Constand and 12 other women who described similar assaults were met, mostly, with skepticism, threats, and attacks on their character. Cosby paid Constand $3.38 million in 2006 as part of a confidential settlement of a civil lawsuit. In 2018, however, Cosby was convicted of three felony counts. Many reporters speculated that the cascade of powerful men who fell from grace post-Weinstein (i.e., once women could explain why they might remain silent for years about victimization, including by men who did not “obviously” look like rapists) at least partly accounted for Cosby’s conviction upon retrial, especially given evidence that jurors are highly reluctant to convict in sexual misconduct cases, particularly when the accused is powerful, or when the victim is poor or a member of a minority group (Williams 2018).

By all accounts, Cosby was long protected by his reputation as an upright, if moralizing, paterfamilias, developed especially as the sitcom producer and star, from 1984 to 1992, of *The Cosby Show*. “No one wanted to believe the TV dad in a cardigan was capable of such things, and so they didn’t” (Makarechi 2015). As a sign of how the pre-Weinstein Cosby continued to enjoy work and good reputation, in 2014, he was appearing on television and in comedy clubs, NBC was planning a new sitcom, and a high-profile Cosby biography glossed over the accusations.

The tide turned in 2014 after a reporter uploaded a clip of comedian Hannibal Buress calling Cosby a “rapist.” When he had performed this bit before, Buress complained on stage, it was “upsetting” that people did not take it seriously. This time, the clip went viral on Facebook
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and Twitter, and news outlets also vented. Barbara Bowman described her frustration in a Washington Post op-ed titled: “Bill Cosby raped me. Why did it take 30 years for people to believe my story.” New York published interviews with 35 women who described being sexual assaulted by Cosby. The magazine’s dramatic cover showed the 35, each sitting primly in a chair, plus an empty chair representing still-silent women. (The magazine said it knew of 46 women; eventually more than 50 have accused him.) After reading each other’s stories, finding one another on social media, or meeting in person at the magazine’s photo shoots, many of the women apparently forged a bond, “a sorrowful sisterhood” (Malone 2015).

The complicity machine and other barriers to reporting

Investigative reporting on scandal is difficult, risky, time-consuming (Farrow took ten months), and expensive. Investigating scandals involving rape and sexual assault confront additional constraints. Kantor and Twohey (2017) and Farrow (2017b) expressed considerable concerns about the pain that public truth-telling might cause actresses already traumatized by Weinstein; the reporters worried about endangering sources, some of whom risked their livelihoods by speaking out and most of whom said they feared significant retaliation, given their personal experience or having heard Weinstein brag about crushing enemies and planting derogatory news items about critics. Witnesses’ or victims’ refusal to cooperate had stopped other news outlets’ attempts to expose him (Twohey et al. 2017). Although previously she refused to talk, after Farrow’s first story appeared, actress Annabella Sciorra told Farrow (2017b) that for 20 years she lived in physical fear of Weinstein, who had raped her and repeatedly sexually harassed her. The tabloids’ historic reputation for sensational moralizing produced an additional self-censoring effect. Having revealed both forcible and consensual sexual contact by Weinstein, the Italian actress Asia Argento said, “I was unprepared for the naked contempt, the unapologetically hateful public shaming and vilification” from the Italian tabloids.1

Other challenges were not specific to sexual assault. Both Cosby and Weinstein leveraged relationships with media leaders to fend off negative stories. Weinstein paid a gossip writer to collect juicy celebrity tidbits to barter, if reporters stumbled onto an affair he wanted to keep quiet (Twohey et al. 2017). Weinstein was a close friend of the chief executive of American Media Inc. (which publishes the National Enquirer, Globe, OK!, among others); and the company’s chief content officer gave Weinstein material obtained by one of his reporters, as part of an effort to help him dispute certain allegations (Twohey et al. 2017). The National Enquirer likewise pulled a big story when Cosby gave them an exclusive.

That said, Weinstein’s mastery in deploying power, threats, and charm may have been extreme. Weinstein “commanded enablers, silencers and spies” and “courted those who could provide the money or prestige to enhance his reputation as well as his power to intimidate” (Twohey et al. 2017). Already months before the exposure, Weinstein reportedly drafted a secret list of 91 actors, producers, publicists, financiers, and other industry workers, apparently to figure out who to silence (Townsend 2017). Weinstein also convinced journalists to interview potential or known accusers and supply information that he could use to undermine them. He hired corporate-intelligence and private security operatives who used false identities to extract information from targets, block Farrow, and stop publication; New York abandoned an investigation (Farrow 2017c). News organizations also censored themselves. When Farrow’s original employer NBC News passed on his story, he hired his own camera crew and ultimately switched to the New Yorker.2 The new investigation also inspired others to recall how Weinstein pressured outlets to suppress or radically change stories to suit him, including by awarding book, film, and consulting deals (Raphael 2017).
Who is shocked by the open secret

Conventional wisdom holds that exposure of legal or moral scandal causes surprise and shock. But sometimes many people know about bad behavior and do nothing, which is itself scandalous. Sometimes people say they didn’t know but “suspected.” Hirsch and Milner (2016) suggest that information passes through several stages en route to becoming scandal. A scandal remains safe from exposure if it does not get leaked to outsiders who might publicize it. But inside information (known only to participants) can reach a tipping point that leads to notoriety and infamy as a public scandal. Even journalists who suspect corruption do not generally designate it as a scandal until it passes a tipping point that leads to documentation from more official sources, becoming “public knowledge,” and finally bringing “institutional response.” In Cosby’s case, journalists’ limited attention to women’s allegations prevented the outsider awareness of his alleged behavior from becoming public knowledge. The tipping point occurred only after statements from close to 50 women.

Weinstein’s predatory behavior was certainly an open secret, including with journalists. In a 2001 New York magazine profile of Weinstein, David Carr, the late New York Times media critic, said Weinstein “re-engineered the media process so that he lives beyond its downsides.” Weinstein’s sexual exploitation had been referenced in coded online gossip, a storyline on Entourage, jokes on 30 Rock, and at the 2013 Oscars. In 2015, Gawker discussed New York Times coverage of police questioning of the “supremely powerful” Weinstein about whether he groped a young model (Sargent 2015). After recounting several examples of Weinstein’s creepiness taken from “the internet’s sleazier entertainment gossip blogs” Gawker invited readers to, as the headline put it, “Tell Us What You Know About Harvey Weinstein’s Open Secret.” On October 5, 2017 CNN’s Jake Tapper tweeted: “Shocked it’s taken so long for a Harvey Weinstein behavior expose. One of the most open secrets in Hollywood.”

Many Hollywood stars issued statements professing total ignorance about Weinstein’s predations. But several Hollywood men told journalists they had known something and failed to act. Given what he “sensed,” Steven Spielberg told CNN he was not surprised by the revelations: “I knew enough to do more than I did.” Telling the New York Times that he had heard more than just the normal rumors, Hollywood director Quentin Tarantino explained, “We allowed it to exist because that’s the way it was.” On a PBS “Frontline” documentary, a former Miramax executive admitted he had made “a deal with the devil,” adding, “I think we were all enablers. I think we were all complicit.” Indeed, this widespread complicity may still be daunting when (or if) Weinstein goes to trial. Galloway (2018) predicted Weinstein will argue that not only is he not guilty, but that anyone and everyone who got into his proximity knew the rules of the game. And those rules were that sexism and chauvinism, lewdness and lechery, violence and predation were OK. More than that, they were the order of the day.

Discussion

The intense coverage of actor, comedian, director, and screenwriter Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle—tried three times but never convicted of the rape and manslaughter of an actress in 1921—traded in titillation. The scandal left him ostracized. But there was little potential for public impact. Nevertheless, news of celebrity scandals can effectively illuminate major problems. They can illuminate not merely flamboyant excess and underscore deep societal or cultural anxieties, but also can expose unethical behaviors with larger implications, quite literally exposing issues that
without such exposure cannot be solved. US Weekly’s slogan “Stars: They’re Just Like Us!” proved correct: Like other women, marquee actresses are vulnerable to bullying, intimidation, harassment, rape. Arguably, the stars’ allegations and their accounts of how they were frightened into silence both inspired non-famous women to come forward from professions, crafts, and industries and enhanced their credibility. The scandal news produced disgust, anger, and demands for justice.

Cosby and Weinstein had different ways of controlling open secrets and achieving protection. Cosby was long protected by his paternal form of celebrity. The women he drugged and raped were not A-list stars, or stars at all; lacking a public image they were vulnerable to being disbelieved. Cosby had years to burnish his public persona as a conservative African American family icon; many fans faced a real dilemma about destroying the moral authority of a black hero. The unusual delay in this scandal’s emergence reflects a gradual cultural change, resulting in a new-found willingness to take rape accusations more seriously, to see the casting couch as deviant, and to believe victims, even when going against powerful icons. Nonetheless, once the tipping point was reached, 56 of Cosby’s 70 honorary doctorates were rescinded. Never known as a nice guy, Weinstein had to work harder at this, expending far more money and power to fight off both the journalists and the stars accusing him. He fell immediately. Signaling his excommunication from Hollywood, he was expelled from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Ultimately, both celebrities, once known for philanthropy, lost all their celebrity capital—the accumulated visibility that results from recurrent media representations (Driessens 2013).

Dramatic transformations of the media landscape were also relevant. Reporting on Weinstein immediately (re)inspired the #MeToo hashtag, which went viral on Twitter, and developed into a full-fledged movement. Various social media amplified, magnified, supplemented the testimony of targets. Social media handed a megaphone to those who were previously silent. No wonder the “Silence Breakers” were Time’s Person of the Year. The new online platforms could never have afforded to launch and sustain the original investigations. Getting past the complicity machines and breaking these stories required well-funded, elite outlets with veteran reporting and legal staffs. But new media platforms certainly could carry on the movement, pursuing smaller threads, and offering sisterhood to those who testified, literally and figuratively. Indeed, the leverage that Weinstein and Cosby exerted over more conventional media gatekeepers was irrelevant with social media: their lawyers could not control the new, multimedia, multiplatform “web” where individuals could tweet, glob, and comment on news stories with their own allegations or support for others.

With both of these scandals, as with other Hollywood scandals, news outlets’ approaches varied over the years and differed in ways consistent with their political orientation. In 2014–2015, E! and FOX News highlighted Cosby’s support from the black community and co-stars, whereas CNN highlighted the power of survivors’ voices (Terán & Emmers-Sommer 2018). With Weinstein, not surprisingly, the Wall Street Journal emphasized corporate consequences while entertainment outlets such as Variety’s Hollywood-centric approach entailed emphasizing the implications for job-seeking actors. Either way, sheer courage and persistence were necessary but not sufficient. The investigations also required old-fashioned “shoe leather” investigation, not fancy surveillance technologies. Months of research by many people, protecting sources and journalists, double-checking accuracy, and vetting were crucial to avoiding lawsuits and to ensuring credibility. So, Turner’s (2014) claims that accuracy is irrelevant to celebrity news which journalists merely filter are wrong.

Moreover, Hollywood scandal reporting here shows at least some notable impacts. Initially some cynics wondered aloud if sexual misconduct would have gotten press coverage without
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its celebrity actors. Perhaps so. Nonetheless, the quickly spreading MeToo movement served to shame publicly entire institutions, bringing change and a sense of justice for non-celebrity agents. For example, Ashley Judd was emboldened to sue Weinstein for spreading lies about her, causing her career to wither (Barnes 2018); at least one director acknowledged having removed Judd from a casting list given Weinstein’s “false information” that Judd was a “nightmare.” A Judd victory could have major implications for people who face harassment in “nontraditional” working relationships, where recovering damages for smear campaigns is even more difficult than in conventional workplaces. A Harvard Law professor called Judd’s suit notable for demonstrating that this is not just a sexual issue; beyond physical and emotional harm, “it also involves economic harm” (Barnes 2018).

Whether scandal producer or scandal investigator has the upper hand remains an open question. Further research is necessary to determine how best to encourage and support sustained investigation of such scandals. Clearly, fame no longer inoculates. Yet, the challenges facing Kantor and Twohey and especially Farrow offer a cautionary tale about over-estimating journalistic power. Whether the MeToo movement erupted because people recognized the awfulness of sexual harassment, or because people were frustrated at women’s inability to pursue claims against Donald Trump, is impossible to know. No doubt one concern is the so-called Gawker effect, referring to the chilling effect of Hulk Hogan’s successful invasion-of-privacy lawsuit, which essentially bankrupted Gawker. One theory about Weinstein was that he represented the power of celebrity exceptionalism. Referencing Weinstein and his defense of accused rapist Roman Polanski as a great artist, but also Bill Cosby, Garber (2017) argues that celebrity functions as an American secular religion. Meanwhile, though legacy and social media clearly work best in combination, even this is insufficient. Petersen (2017), a BuzzFeed writer and expert on celebrity gossip, argues that—because of men’s power, the heavy burden of proof on accusers, and the steep price of making accusations—women utilize “whisper networks” and gossip to keep each other safe. Precisely because celebrity gossip enables women to gain knowledge and protect themselves, Petersen says, men often deride and degrade gossip. What is clear is that celebrity is becoming more human, more accountable, and operates in a complicated, dynamic, still-evolving relationship between legacy media, social media, power, and expertise in manipulation.

Notes

1 In an unsettling twist, in 2018 the New York Times revealed that one month after Argento’s allegations became public, an actor and rock musician accused her of sexually assaulting him in a California hotel when he was 17 and she was 37, a decade after he played her son in a movie. Argento agreed to pay him $380,000 in damages.

2 Farrow has not (yet) directly accused NCB of caving in to Weinstein.

3 Three outlets invested months of work investigating R. Kelly’s cult-like hold on young women and then got cold feet, suggesting a post-Gawker fear (Sullivan 2017). In January 2019, however, Lifetime debuted a six-part documentary series, “Surviving R. Kelly”; the new allegations from survivors and people from the singer’s inner circle about his sexual, mental, and physical abuse provoked other celebrities to renounce him and promise never to work with him again.

References


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