

## **Star image, celebrity reality television and the fame cycle**

DELLER, Ruth A. <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4935-980X>>

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## **Star image, celebrity reality television and the fame cycle.**

Ruth A Deller, Sheffield Hallam University, UK

### **Abstract**

In this paper, I discuss the phenomenon of celebrity reality television and explore its function for those participating in it. Drawing on the success of their non-celebrity counterparts, programmes such as *Celebrity Big Brother*, *I'm a Celebrity: Get Me Out of Here* and *Dancing With the Stars* have become popular globally and, although arguably no longer at their peak, continue to attract large audiences and significant amounts of publicity. In this paper I discuss the role these shows can serve for celebrities at different levels of their careers. I argue that reality television appeals in different ways to celebrities at different points in the fame 'cycle': 'ordinary' people or 'pre-celebrities' seeking to become known through it; proto-celebrities who wish to expand their fame; celebrities engaged in the work of promotion for their other endeavours; celebrities who wish to remake their existing star image through using reality television as a rehabilitative strategy or an opportunity to develop new skills; and those whose careers are in a period of 'post-celebrity' who seek to renew their fame. I explore how a successful reality show cast is one that combines celebrities who are at a range of points in the fame cycle as the interactions between the cast members and their debates about fame and hierarchy prove a key attraction for audiences.

**Keywords:** celebrity, reality television, fame, star image, reputation.

## Introduction

In this paper, I discuss the phenomenon of celebrity reality television and explore its function for those participating in it. Drawing on the success of their non-celebrity counterparts, programmes such as *Celebrity Big Brother*, *I'm a Celebrity: Get Me Out of Here* and *Dancing With the Stars* have become popular globally and, although arguably no longer at their peak, continue to attract large audiences and significant amounts of publicity. Much has been written about the role of confession (Morreale 2007; Rahman 2008) and of the discourses of the 'ordinary' or 'real' (Biressi and Nunn 2005; Hill 2007) in the appeal of reality formats. However, in this paper I discuss the role these shows can serve for celebrities at different levels of their careers. I argue that reality television appeals in different ways to celebrities at different points in the 'fame cycle'.

As the likes of Annette Hill (2005) and Nick Couldry (2009) have noted, reality television acts as a diverse genre of factual programming, incorporating aspects of sub-genres such as the docusoap, game show, makeover, fly-on-the-wall documentary and talent show. The celebrity variants are no exception to this, taking in fly-on-the wall/docusoap style shows (e.g. *The Osbournes*, *Kerry Katona: Crazy in Love*), travelogues (e.g. *Paddy and Sally's Excellent Gypsy Adventure*), lifestyle swapping (e.g. *Celebrity Wife Swap*; *Famous, Rich and Homeless*); talent/skill based competitions (eg. *Strictly Come Dancing*, *Celebrity Masterchef*); game show/fly-on-the wall hybrids (e.g. *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here*, *Celebrity Big Brother*) and many more sub-genres.

In this article, I focus predominantly on competitive reality shows, as these rely on casting a range of different celebrities in order to be successful, rather than docusoap formats which focus exclusively on one celebrity individual, family or group, because the casting of these shows draws on a pool of celebrities at different stages in their fame trajectory. This has the dual effect of potentially broadening the viewer base through appealing to different generations and giving the programmes a secondary appeal beyond that of the competitive element – the appeal of seeing stars openly discussing and comparing their experiences of fame. Although I draw upon some examples of shows

from other countries where relevant, my primary focus here is on the UK context and I acknowledge that both reality formats and celebrity cultures may vary according to territory.

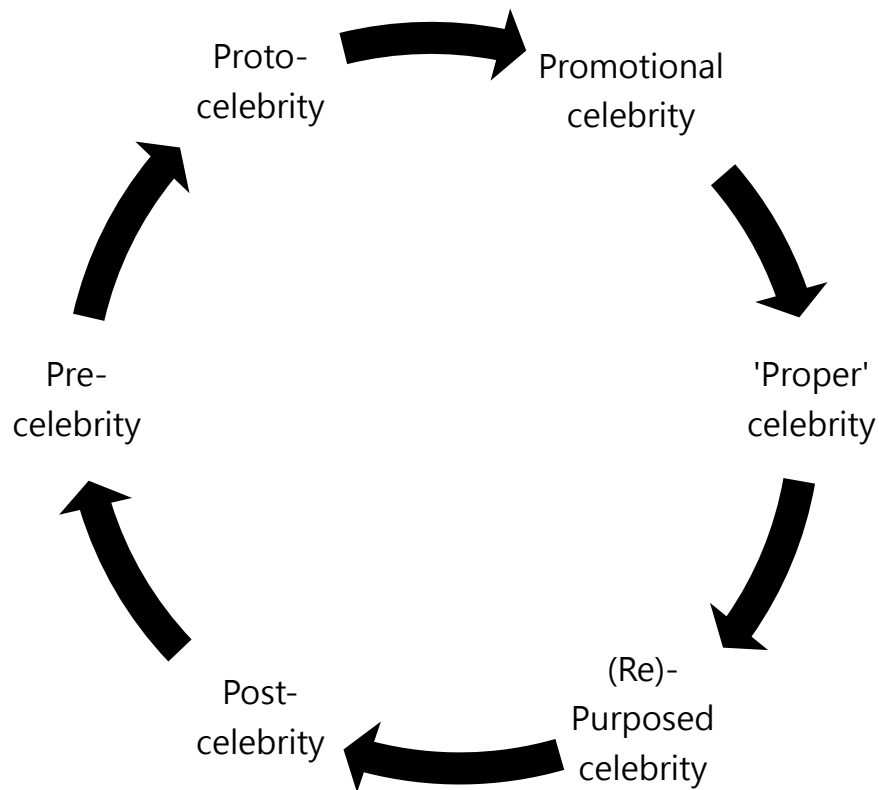
Frances Bonner (2013) and Su Holmes (2006) have noted that there is an unofficial hierarchy of reality television shows in terms of which are seen as having 'prestige' – a number of factors contribute to this: the broadcaster and channel's reputation (in the UK context, BBC One is more highly regarded and seen as more serious/educative than the sensational and 'cheap' Channel 5, for example); the budget of the show and the show's central aims. As Bonner notes, a star who is able to take several weeks out of their schedule to be secluded away in the *I'm a Celebrity...* jungle or the *Celebrity Big Brother* house may be seen as having not enough 'real' work to do. Conversely, someone who has to combine their appearances on a show like *Strictly Come Dancing* or *Celebrity Masterchef* alongside their 'day job' may be perceived as having current success as a celebrity as they are in active, visible work such as acting or singing.

### **The fame cycle**

In order to understand the roles these shows have for celebrities at different stages in their career, I argue that fame operates on a cyclical basis and that this 'fame cycle' (fig 1) has a key bearing on a celebrity's reasons for entering reality programmes. I identify six stages of celebrity and this article will take each in turn to explore the role reality television has for those within each stage.

Considering fame as a cyclical process is not necessarily new. Celebrity gossip columns and other popular media are full of references to 'has-beens', 'wannabes' and so on. Academic articles (e.g. Palmer 2005; Holmes 2006, 2009) likewise note the appeal of speculating on a celebrity's trajectory for audiences and commentators. What I propose here is an idealised model of this cycle of fame, operating in six stages. This model was developed particularly with these reality shows in mind, after with several successive groups of students, analysing many of these shows and the stars'

motivations for appearing in them - repeatedly, the motivations represented here by these six categories recurred in those discussions.



**Fig.1 The Fame Cycle**

*Pre-celebrity* refers to those 'ordinary' people who might use 'civilian' versions of reality shows such as *The X Factor* or *The Only Way is Essex* in order to develop their own star image and hopefully secure fame. *Proto-celebrity* refers to those personalities who might have a certain degree of recognition but are not 'famous' beyond a particular niche. In this category I include a range of people in these early stages of fame, including: a celebrity's family members or partners; those famous in niche or specialised fields (such as minority sports or glamour modelling); celestoids (Rojek 2001) seeking to extend their brief moment of fame - such as people who have recently been featured on 'ordinary' reality shows and who are looking to cement their celebrity status; and those famous in one country seeking to gain recognition in another. *Promotional celebrity* refers to those who are actively working in a professional capacity (e.g. television presenters, actors, newsreaders)

but who would not necessarily be considered 'stars'. These celebrities may be seeking to use reality television as a way of boosting their personal brand and gaining recognition from a larger section of the audience, but they are also often promoting the brand of the programme, organisation or team they work for.

*'Proper' celebrity* refers to the pinnacle of fame – those who are so well-known they don't really 'need' reality television. These household names do not appear as participants on such shows – to do so would damage their star image – but they may use such programmes as promotional vehicles through appearing as guest performers, judges or mentors – offering an idea of what 'real' fame and genuine 'success' looks like to the participants who might aspire to be like them. *(Re)-purposed celebrity* refers to those participants who enter these shows with a very narrative 'journey' of rebranding themselves in some capacity. These may include celebrities seeking to reinvent themselves as being skilled in another field to the one they were originally known for; celebrities whose reputation has suffered damage due to scandal of some sort, and those who are seeking to demonstrate a major life change or seek a change in public perception of them (such as transgender celebrities looking for acceptance in their current, rather than former, identity). The final category I identify is the *post-celebrity*. This is someone who is no longer as publicly visible as they once were. These celebrities are seen as 'has-beens', hoping reality television might restore them to public prominence. As I will explain later, the cycle doesn't necessarily end here – some people's fame may wane to such an extent that their only route back in is to start again from the pre-celebrity stage and appear as 'regular' contestants on non-celebrity versions of reality shows. Not all celebrities will cycle through each stage: some may get stuck on one stage; others may bypass several stages altogether; and some may operate in two stages simultaneously, such as those taking part in skill-based reality shows who may be operating as both promotional and repurposed celebrities at the same time. However, this idea of fame as a process is important to the way celebrity as a phenomenon is constructed and discussed within contemporary culture, and particularly important to the appeal of these reality shows.

### **Entering fame: the pre-celebrity**

Traditional reality television offers the 'ordinary' person a chance to become 'known'; to be afforded the same access into living rooms as the more traditional celebrity (Couldry 2002; Holmes 2004). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, appearance on a mainstream reality television show often proved a springboard for the successful few to 'cross-over' into mainstream fame. As Nick Couldry notes about the first series of *Big Brother UK* (2000): 'it was precisely the transition from ordinary (nonmedia) person to celebrity (media) person that was the purpose of the game... the transition to celebrity was the culmination of the program[me]'s plot' (2002: 289).

Some of the most successful graduates of the genre include pop stars and *X Factor* judges Nicole Scherzinger (*Popstars*, USA version) and Cheryl Tweedy (later Cole; now Fernandez-Versini), (*Popstars: The Rivals*); singer Adam Lambert (*American Idol*); and TV presenters Alison Hammond<sup>1</sup> (*Big Brother UK*) and Ben Fogle (*Castaway*). However, as the 2000s and 2010s have progressed and more and more reality contestants have passed through television screens and gossip columns, the potential of the genre as a launchpad for a celebrity career has diminished (Collins 2008).

Despite the diminished chances of a pre-celebrity successfully transitioning into a fully-fledged star given the proliferation of reality shows, those performers who prove successful in the 'ordinary' reality television genre may well still have a chance at achieving more long-lasting fame as television performers, predominantly via further adventures in reality television. As I argue in this next section, successful reality TV stars who have been tried and tested in 'regular' formats can be immensely valuable to the celebrity reality television genre, and it, in turn, may provide them the springboard into achieving a longer-lasting celebrity status.

### **Expanding fame: the proto-celebrity**

In this section, I discuss the value celebrity reality formats may have for those 'proto-celebrities' on the fringes of fame who might be seeking to gain wider recognition and acceptance as a 'fully-fledged' celebrity. This category can encompass a range of personalities from different spheres, but the thing they all have in common is that they have some degree of public recognition but are not yet 'properly' famous. This category, therefore, includes people who have become prominent in niche areas seeking to broaden their audience; those who are famous primarily through association with another celebrity (e.g. family members and partners); those who are famous in one country but not another, and those who were stand-out performers in 'regular' reality television seeking to extend their moment in the spotlight.

Chris Rojek (2001) has argued that contemporary culture creates a very particular kind of minor celebrity: the celetooid. A celetooid, in Rojek's terms, is someone whose role is to 'receive their moment of fame and then to disappear from public consciousness quite rapidly' (2001: 21). These celetooids comprise a proportion of the cast of many celebrity reality shows, particularly those whose fame came through other reality television formats. There are two key advantages for producers of including these celebrities in the casting mix. Firstly, they are likely not to command huge fees. Secondly, they are already performers who have been 'tried and tested' in reality TV formats (Walter 2009). Such participants are likely to be those who did not win the original reality shows they participated in (if they were in a competitive show), especially when their win was recent (winners should be seen as too 'busy' to do another reality show- particularly when a show's prize is a 'job' of some sort such as *The Apprentice* or *The X Factor*). Instead, they tend to be those but who acted as high-profile controversial or 'comedy' contestants during their tenures on the original shows. As well as these contestants being skilled genre performers, their inclusion has two key areas of appeal for audiences. Those audience members who followed contestants through their original reality show journeys can follow them as they navigate their entry into celebrity and assess whether they build upon their existing 'brand'. Those who didn't follow these people in other shows get the



opportunity to see what the ‘fuss’ is about and speculate on why these particular contestants have been chosen over their peers.

Successful examples are those performers who extend their character from the original show into the celebrity version, thus proving their claim to ‘authenticity’ and reinforcing their star image.

These include *X Factor* contestants John and Edward (Jedward) whose stint on the ITV show led to entry into the *Celebrity Big Brother* house the following summer, followed by their own fly-on-the-wall reality shows in both the UK and Ireland. Despite not being skilled singers – indeed, probably *because of this* - Jedward’s quirky image and personalities remained consistent across reality shows. Their success at creating an ‘authentic’ and unique brand meant they could successfully rise to a level of fame that encompassed modelling, advertisements, representing Ireland at the Eurovision Song Contest twice and meeting high-profile figures like President Obama.

Former *Apprentice* contestants Katie Hopkins and Luisa Zissman and *X Factor*’s Rylan Clark have all forged media careers as presenters, pundits and columnists following appearances on celebrity reality television – in the case of Zissman and Clark as presenters on *Big Brother*, whose celebrity version they both appeared in (Clark won his series; and later participated in *Celebrity Masterchef*). Reality performers who prove big successes in their home country may be exported to another country’s show, such as *The Hills* stars Spencer Pratt and Heidi Montag who enjoyed a headline-generating stint in *Celebrity Big Brother UK*.

For minority programmes and channels, exporting their reality stars to celebrity shows (such as Charlotte Crosby from MTV’s *Geordie Shore* featuring in – and winning - *Celebrity Big Brother*) can not only boost the careers of the proto-celebrities themselves, it can bring audiences’ attention to the shows that ‘discovered’ them and give these shows and broadcasters a claim to legitimacy: having enough kudos and influence to create celebrities. This may elevate them from minority status to serious players in the media economy.

Whilst the reality television star is a useful proto-celebrity for producers, they are not the only type of proto-celebrity cast in these shows. Those who are famous by association with stars can also be a draw, such as Bristol Palin, daughter of politician Sarah Palin, who appeared on the US *Dancing With the Stars*, or Natasha Giggs whose *Celebrity Big Brother* (UK) appearance followed revelations that she had cheated on her husband with his brother, footballer Ryan Giggs. Other forms of proto-celebrity might be those whose fame is in a small or niche field<sup>2</sup>, including glamour models or minority sports stars; or those who are famous in one market but not another – like Indian actress Shilpa Shetty whose infamous experience in the *Celebrity Big Brother* house gave her a short period of visibility as a celebrity in the UK.

In her interview with an *I'm a Celebrity...* producer, Su Holmes notes that 'what apparently unites the participants, as the Executive Producer claims, is that that they are not 'really really famous' people... there's always a ... question mark about why they're famous'. (Holmes 2006: 48) Whilst Holmes' argument primarily centres on those in a post-celebrity state of their career, the same can be argued of proto-celebrities. Part of the appeal for viewers is this question mark surrounding who these people are and whether or not they are (or should be) famous. If a proto-celebrity performs successfully on celebrity reality television, they stand a chance of entering the arena of the 'genuinely' famous, having proved their worth.

### **Enterprising fame: Promotional celebrity**

In this section, I draw on the ideas put forward by Frances Bonner in her discussion of the importance of narratives of 'work' in *Strictly Come Dancing* and *Dancing With the Stars* (Aus). Bonner discusses how these programmes not only raise the profile of the celebrity, they also enhance the brands these celebrities represent:

[R]eality-talent shows enable in-house promotions to be seen at a time when much viewing is done in modes which encourage the excision of ads and promotion slots. In this they parallel the increase in product placement... the products 'placed' within the programmes are the other sites of the contestants' celebrity... Celebrities' own brands are enhanced, too. (Bonner 2013: 170)

The promotional celebrity, therefore, is someone who is (somewhat) well-known and active, and their role in the show is to expand audiences – they may bring in fans of their other work to the reality show, and they may encourage fans of the reality show to follow their other work. This category of contestant is most often seen in skill-based reality shows such as dance or cookery shows, and one-off specials for charity events. The promotional celebrity is often a television performer and Bonner argues that these contestants can act as cross-promotional vehicles for the broadcaster (for example, BBC One's *Strictly Come Dancing* has featured several BBC staff: actors from shows including *EastEnders* and *Casualty*; presenters of factual TV, radio DJs and news readers<sup>3</sup>), although they may also serve to promote other broadcasters' output – for example, several actors from Channel 4 soap *Hollyoaks* have appeared on *Strictly*, presumably in the hope that a) they might entice the young *Hollyoaks* audience to watch BBC One and b) they might lure new viewers to the soap.

A key facet of the promotional celebrity is that they are shown in their 'day job'. This not only acts as a promotional vehicle for the star's other projects, it reminds viewers that the skill-based reality show is only interested in hard-working people. As Bonner notes of dancing shows:

In the segments following the week's training that precede the dances, much is made of how hard the celebrities are working, of how they have to steal time from their families to enable them to keep performing in their soap or hosting their regular shows as well as learn new routines, improve their dancing skills and get inside the character of that week's dance. This is very beneficial for all parties (other than the families) (2013: 176).

In the 2014 series of *Strictly*, one such performer was actress Jennifer Gibney from BBC sitcom *Mrs Brown's Boys*. Her acting work was referenced throughout her tenure, and when eliminated, she didn't appear in the studio of spin-off show *It Takes Two* (as is usual), but instead gave her post-show interview via a video link from the make-up room in the comedy's studio in Ireland. This reinforced the narrative that she had a strong work ethic and the reality show had to fit around her regular, more important commitments. It also reminded viewers that a new series of the sitcom would be forthcoming, acting as an inducement not only for existing viewers to remember to watch it, but as an encouragement for *Strictly* viewers interested in Gibney to follow her career in the 'day job'.

By not taking stars away from their regular work it enhances the skill-based show's claim to be a 'superior' piece of television that can attract a higher calibre of celebrity than the likes of *Celebrity Big Brother* where participants take several weeks out of their (presumably empty) schedule<sup>4</sup>. Such is the importance of work to skill-based shows that even when participants are, in Rojek's (2001) terms, ascribed (famous through family connections) or attributed ('famous for being famous') celebrities, they are presented as 'achieved' celebrities<sup>5</sup>, those who have a skill or talent legitimising their claim to fame. For example, on *Strictly*, Abbey Clancy, most famous for being married to footballer Peter Crouch, was always introduced as a 'TV presenter and model'; Judy Murray, mother of tennis players Andy and Jamie, was cast not as a celebrity mum but for her professional status as a 'tennis coach' and Mark Wright, formerly of *The Only Way is Essex*, was not portrayed as a reality star, but as a 'TV and radio presenter'. This reframing of all participants as achieved celebrities not only lends legitimacy to the contestants themselves and potentially helps boost their own brand, it also gives kudos to the skill-based show's brand as being a piece of superior entertainment with a valid purpose to educate viewers and celebrities-this is particularly a feature of BBC shows, presumably to justify their public service remit.

### Enjoying fame: the 'proper' celebrity

Not all celebrities participate in reality television formats. For some, primarily 'household names' and visible achievers in their fields (e.g. Premier League footballers, chart-topping singers), to be seen as having to compete for attention on reality TV with 'D-listers' (Palmer 2005) would be seen as an admission that their main area of fame was no longer 'enough' whether in terms of its pay or the amount of visibility and status it affords them. For A-list megastars, particularly the likes of Hollywood actors, appearing in these genres would also diminish their mythical status (see Thomas 2014).

These shows are unlikely to be able to afford such stars, but budget is perhaps not the only reason they are not cast. The *I'm a Celebrity...* producer quoted in Su Holmes' work argues that the stars around whom there is a 'question mark' are more interesting than big stars (2006: 48). Those whose fame has to be earned, or has waned, have key narrative hooks – the audience may root for them to come through (if they are likeable), or will them to fail (if they are not); they may want to know their riches to rags tales, or stories about their celebrity loved ones. Celebrities at the peak of their career hold less appeal – what is the narrative arc in a competitive reality show for a talented, successful star who is seen to have 'everything'?

While 'proper' celebrities may not work as reality show contestants, there are still roles within reality television for them. This is particularly true for those who have a particular talent or skill they might be seen wanting to nurture in others (e.g. successful chefs, singers or sports people). For example, high profile pop performers act as guest mentors and judges on reality shows such as *The X Factor* and *The Voice*, offering their wisdom to the next generation who aspire to become like them, and, by their presence, boosting the credibility of the shows (this is perhaps most successful in the US iteration of *The Voice*, which has had mentors such as Pharrell Williams, Christina Aguilera, CeeLo Green and Adam Levine). Musical performers can also benefit from guest performance slots on reality shows – in the UK, a guest spot on a highly rated show such as *Strictly Come Dancing* or *The X*

*Factor* attracts big-name stars such as Lady Gaga and Beyoncé to promote their latest releases or tours, perhaps because there are few other mainstream TV outlets to promote their work. The star thus gets to plug their product to a large audience, and the programme has the added appeal of a megastar appearance to lure in viewers.

### **Enhancing fame: the (re)purposed celebrity**

For some celebrities, reality television provides a means of re-inventing, or re-imagining, their star image. These repurposed celebrities may be: a) seeking to extend their period of fame by branching out into new areas before they run the risk of becoming post-celebrities, b) seeking to rehabilitate their image following a period of scandal, or c) rebranding themselves following a significant life change such as coming out as transgender. Repurposing through reality TV occurs through several strategies, the most common being learning a new skill<sup>6</sup> that can help them transition into a new field of activity (see Payne 2009), or behaving in a manner that might challenge the preconceptions the audience and their fellow celebrities may have of them.

For some celebrities, this strategy has proved successful. Reskilling has allowed several to expand their star image and become recognised as experts in new fields – particularly useful when a star is in a transitional phase of their career, such as an actor leaving a high-profile TV show, a recently-retired sports star, or a pop star whose band has just split up. *Strictly Come Dancing* winner Alesha Dixon competed after her pop group Mis-Teeq ended. She subsequently became a judge on the show and, more recently, on *Britain's Got Talent*. After winning and coming second respectively in conducting competition *Maestro*, presenter Sue Perkins and DJ/musician Goldie then took part in high profile conducting gigs after the show, and each fronted their own reality shows searching for talented musicians. Perkins went on to present (reuniting with Mel Giedroyc, her co-presenter on 1990s' shows *Late Lunch* and *Light Lunch*) *The Great British Bake-Off*, one of the most highly rated

British TV programmes of the 2010s. *Celebrity Masterchef* winners Nadia Sawalha and Lisa Faulkner reinvented themselves from actresses to television presenters, cookery writers and food experts.

Others have made use of reality television to change public perception of their personae. Chaz Bono (see MocarSKI et al 2012) and Kellie Maloney both used reality shows to emphasise their identity as trans\* people, to ensure the public saw them as who they now were and not as their former public identities, and to share their journey with others. In the case of Maloney, formerly a boxing promoter called Frank, her appearance in *Celebrity Big Brother* came just days after coming out as trans\* in the *Daily Mirror*. Model and campaigner Heather Mills appeared on *Dancing With the Stars* (USA) a few years after her high-profile divorce from Paul McCartney saw her mocked and demonised in several sectors of the media. Mills spoke of the reality show bringing her a level of public acceptance she had failed to earn through charity works (whilst emphasising the importance she placed on the former in order that we might incorporate that into our perception of her): 'You clear 21 million sq. meters of landmine-filled land and you fitted 400,000 people with limbs and [people] go on to vilify you. You do two-and-a-half to three dances and suddenly you're amazing. It's crazy!' (cited in Quinlan and Bates 2008: 69).

When comedian Jim Davidson entered *Celebrity Big Brother* in 2014, press comment focused on a series of controversies where he'd been seen as homophobic, racist and sexist as well as on the fact that he had been due to appear in the 2013 series but was unable to, due to being questioned as part of the Operation Yewtree investigation into sexual abuse within the entertainment industry. Davidson spoke frequently in the house about using the reality show as an opportunity to clear his name (he did not face any charges) and he attempted to come across as a largely sympathetic character; although he had several highly charged rows with the more feminist participants (such as Linda Nolan and Luisa Zissman) he was seen as having a paternal role to play in looking after the younger contestants and acted as the house joker. His time in the house was not without controversy or criticism, but he restored himself within enough people's affections to win the show.

Whilst it's clear what the benefits of participation might be for these particular celebrities, they also have potential benefit for the broadcasters. Many of those mentioned in this section have gone on to be successful television performers in other shows, and their renewed profile coupled with their likeability from the reality show may well give a boost to those shows and attract new viewers<sup>7</sup>.

### **Exhuming fame: The post-celebrity**

The final stage of the fame cycle is that of the post-celebrity, those who were once famous (or who may still be famous – or at least recognisable – but are no longer successful). Su Holmes notes that '*I'm a Celebrity* revels in the decline of a merited claim to fame' (2006: 48. See also Hill 2007) and the same is true of many other celebrity reality shows. For these participants, the lure of reality television seems obvious – giving them a platform where they can remind several million viewers what they loved about them in the first place and offering the prospect of renewed fame.

There has long been a fascination within popular culture for those whose celebrity has declined, as can be evidenced in the likes of TV show *After They Were Famous* and numerous 'Where are they now?' articles in magazines and websites. This fascination with life after celebrity drives the narratives of a number of reality shows (both within the shows themselves and in coverage of the programmes in other media), which regularly feature participants whose careers are in a 'post-celebrity state.

*The Big Reunion* (ITV2 2013-14) made this narrative an explicit part of its appeal. The show reunited members of pop groups from the 1990s and 2000s for concerts (and, for some acts, spin-off tours) but whilst these concerts had a nostalgic appeal for fans who could relive their youth (Driessen 2014) and offered bands a way of earning money, the chief appeal of *TBR* was its focus on 'what went wrong', exploring inter-band rifts, the singers' post-fame jobs and lifestyles (frequently



portrayed as unglamorous, with several participants discussing financial troubles, health problems or struggles with addictions) and teasing audiences with the question of 'have they still got it?'.

Some performers state that they are happy with their existing careers (such as the Honeyz' Mariama Goodman, working as a midwife, or Eternal's Kelle Bryan running her own business) and see the show merely as a nostalgia vehicle or an opportunity to get 'closure' on a part of their life. However, *TBR* explicitly questions this discourse and presents fame as both a curse that has had a negative effect on the performers and a prize that they still pursue:

With the world at their feet, six of pop's hugest names suddenly vanished from the charts. Some imploded in a haze of excess and some were shown the door by their record labels... this is the story of unfinished business, one last shot at fame and an epic concert they'll never forget (Series 1 episode 1 voiceover).

One beneficiary of the reality show as a vehicle to reignite fame is Australian singer Peter Andre. Andre, a faded pop star, was restored to prominence following a stint in *I'm a Celebrity...* out of which came a high profile relationship with fellow contestant Katie Price. Their relationship and subsequent marriage and children kept the couple in the gossip columns and led to several spin-off reality fly-on-the-wall shows – their divorce several years later ensured they each remained a media presence, although Andre's celebrity has only been renewed to the extent that he is a famous personality featured in magazine columns and adverts, rather than a revitalised pop star.

Another former pop star to benefit from a stint in *I'm a Celebrity...* is Welsh singer Cerys Matthews. Whilst some were surprised when the former Catatonia frontwoman-turned-solo-artist signed up for the 2007 series, particularly when she entered into a post-show romance with fellow contestant Marc Bannerman, Matthews' return to prominence via reality TV did her no harm. She benefited from a range of further television appearances (including as a guest mentor on reality shows *Goldie's Band* and *The Voice UK*). Her renewed fame (coinciding with her releasing a Welsh-language album,

*Arwen*, cementing her status as an 'authentic' artist more concerned with the love of music than the love of commercial success) led to her taking a guest presenter role on radio station BBC 6 Music – and eventually a permanent slot. Matthews' Sunday morning show is now seen as highly credible – it won a gold Sony award (for 'Music Broadcaster of the Year') in 2013 - and is one of the most listened to on the station. She continues to present features and documentaries for radio and television as well as writing music and children's books and curating arts festivals. By capitalising on her renewed visibility after *I'm a Celebrity...*, she has successfully reinvented herself a credible and knowledgeable arts correspondent and presenter. As with other forms of celebrity discussed, the post-celebrity, if successful, may also be a useful promotional vehicle for new projects upon leaving the reality show.

#### **Exiting fame: from post-celebrity to pre-celebrity**

Of course, the ultimate post-celebrity humiliation is to become so un-famous that the only way to re-enter the fame cycle is to begin again from the pre-celebrity state. *The Voice UK* has featured several former pop stars - including Cleo Higgins from 1990s group Cleopatra and Denise Pearson from 1980s band Five Star - auditioning alongside 'ordinary' people. Pauline Bennett, aka rapper Jazzie P (who once featured on singles by the likes of Kylie Minogue) entered the 2014 civilian *Big Brother* house. These fame re-entry narratives usually end in failure<sup>8</sup>, sealing the lid on participants' fame narratives and condemning them back to permanent obscurity. Linzi Martin, a former member of girl band Girl Thing, was featured in the 2014 series of *The Big Reunion* and shown to be excited by the possibility of re-igniting fame through the reality show. However, when the group did not reform beyond the one-off concert, Martin ended up auditioning for that year's *X Factor*. When her former manager Simon Cowell told her during the audition that it was the end of the journey for her, her story ended with her concurring with him, thus achieving a sense of 'closure'.

*The X Factor* has also featured several other failed pop stars, including members of boy band One True Voice, the male group launched at the same time as Girls Aloud after *Pop Stars: The Rivals*. The narratives of unsuccessful boy band members are contrasted with the success of former Girls Aloud member Cheryl Fernandez-Versini. Fernandez-Versini acknowledges that she was once in their position, but by now operating in the charmed role of an expert judge whilst the auditionees are rejected, she reinforces the aim of the *X Factor* and similar shows - that those people with the mystical 'x factor' will be plucked from obscurity to become stars whilst those without it will remain, justifiably, unsuccessful.

## **Conclusion**

As I have discussed, celebrity reality television can offer a range of opportunities for celebrities at different stages of the fame cycle. Although I have concentrated here on successful examples, there are many for whom reality television has been a failure. These participants have not expanded their fame, reinvented their star image or re-launched their career. Sometimes these failures can be as important as the successes, for they remind us – and the celebrities – that only certain characters, willing to perform correctly according to genre rules - playing the game, being courteous to fellow participants, having a 'journey' and displaying something of the 'authentic' self in doing so (see Holderman 2007; Hill 2007) – are allowed to succeed. Those who fail are doomed to remain in obscurity.

Those who refuse to accept obscurity and/or a negative star image are doomed to repeat the reality television cycle until they get the formula right (or else remain in its cycle eternally as professional reality stars). The professional reality star may be someone who achieved fame through 'ordinary' reality television, or it may be someone who became a celebrity via other means, whether those are ascribed, achieved or attributed (Rojek 2001). These particular individuals become seasoned reality

performers who move from one show to another – including the likes of Bethenny Frankel, Goldie, Amy Childs and Kerry Katona (see Tyler and Bennett 2010).

The **pro-reality celebrity** stage is effectively a ‘side-step’ within the fame cycle – celebrities can enter this stage from one of the other points and either progress from there once they find a point of success – such as Goldie and Sue Perkins achieving career re-igniting success on *Maestro* after both participating in previous celebrity reality formats. However, some seem happy to remain in this genre and receiving its regular income and exposure. The grand dame of pro-reality celebrity is surely actress and former wife of Sylvester Stallone, Brigitte Nielsen, whose credits span several countries’ shows, including: *The Mole*, *The Surreal Life*, *Big Brother VIP* (Denmark), *Celebrity Big Brother* (UK), *Killing Brigitte Nielsen*, *Celebrity Rehab*, *Celebrity Makeover*, *La Ferme Célébrités*, *Let’s Dance*, *Come Dine With Me*, *Aus alt mach neu – Brigitte Nielsen in der Promi-Beauty-Klinik*, *Ich bin ein Star – Holt mich hier raus!*, *Maestro* (Denmark), *Promi-Hochzeitsplanern* and *Promi Shopping Queen*.

A successful cast for celebrity reality TV shows, particularly those such as *Celebrity Big Brother* or *I’m A Celebrity...* which revolve around group dynamics, consists of a range of celebrities of different ages, backgrounds and areas of fame, but also of those who are at different stages in the fame cycle. One notably successful recent cast was that of the January 2014 series of *Celebrity Big Brother* (UK)- comprising proto-celebrities (reality stars Luisa Zissman, Sam Faiers and Ollie Locke; models Casey Batchelor and Jasmine Lennard; journalist Liz Jones), post-celebrities (presenter Linda Nolan; entertainer Lionel Blair<sup>9</sup>; pop stars Lee Ryan and Dappy) and repurposed celebrities (boxer Evander Holyfield; comedian Jim Davidson) – this series, marked by a range of arguments, debates and unlikely alliances between housemates, proved so successful in terms of both ratings and wider media coverage, that it had its initial run extended by five days.

As Nunn and Biressi put it, such shows rely on ‘[t]he inclusion of celebrities across the list: media darlings, faded stars and starlets, survivors of scandal and those with reputations for trouble-

making... The differences engendered here can trigger a brutal unpicking of career histories, veiled aspirations or personal flaws' (2010: 52-3). Indeed, speculation around the fame cycle is embedded into some of the formats and which celebrities are recognised by which other celebrities upon their entrance into a show reveals much about how different hierarchies of fame work.

One of the most interesting examples of the importance of hierarchy to celebrity reality was the 2006 series of *Celebrity Big Brother* in which 'ordinary girl' Chantelle Houghton was planted in the cast and had to convince her housemates she was a pop singer in order to remain in the house. When the celebrities had to arrange themselves in order of fame, Houghton was not placed last, despite none of her housemates recognising her, as they didn't want to appear out of touch. Houghton successfully won her place in the house and by the time she emerged as the series winner, had earned her place as a 'real' celebrity<sup>10</sup>.

Hierarchy-based tasks such as this are a key part of some shows' appeal. Stars negotiate between themselves about who is most famous and they attempt both to appear 'normal' and 'humble' whilst at the same time not wanting to be seen as the 'least' famous. In the 2013 series of *I'm a Celebrity...*, actress Lucy Pargeter and designer David Emmanuel were tasked with arranging their fellow contestants in order of most to least famous, whilst the rest of the camp were set the same task. For the task to be completed successfully, both groups had to agree on the line-up independently of one another. However, for the audience, the pleasure of such a task comes not so much in whether the celebrities succeed or not, but in the negotiations and deliberations that take place. In this case, US actor Alfonso Ribeiro was framed as a source of amusement for fellow celebrities, portrayed as an arrogant, 'has-been' American out of touch both with contemporary audiences and the UK market for wanting to place himself as 'most' famous whilst the British celebrities favoured UK reality star Joey Essex:

Pargeter (to camera): Most famous, in camp, I think it would have been hilarious. Al would definitely have a vision of himself as most famous.

Rebecca Adlington: Famous? Joey, you stand [at] most.

Ribeiro: I don't think that's necessarily true...

Ribeiro (to camera): Joey is very famous in the UK, but the minute you leave the UK, it goes from hero to, I won't say zero, but very little. I've been working for 34 years.

Amy Willerton (to camera): He probably would say he's the most famous, because he's the only one he heard of before this show!

When a celebrity reality television cast works, it offers viewers a range of interesting narratives: conflict between participants; discussions about the nature of fame (both its attractions and its problems); the conflicting dynamics of the 'ordinary' and the 'special'; of the talented and the talentless. It allows audiences to imagine where in the fame cycle participants are, where they 'deserve' to be and affords audiences the power to assign them accordingly.

I have argued that the fame cycle is one particular way in which we can understand the appeal of celebrity reality television, and that this model offers us a way of exploring not only celebrity motivations for taking part in such shows, but also the range of pleasures for the audience. In addition, I have argued that celebrity reality television offers a range of benefits for broadcasters outside of the ratings and coverage of the reality shows themselves – they may uncover a hitherto unknown talent in a celebrity that can then be used to transfer the star's image from one area of fame to another; they may achieve cross-promotion through strategic placing of personnel from another media text in the reality show; they may be able to ascertain the popularity of different celebrities and judge their likely future appeal to audiences, and thus, their 'usefulness'; and they may be able to capitalise on the visibility these shows afford stars by quickly signing them up for new projects

Although there is much more to be said about this still-under-researched area of celebrity culture, I hope that what I have outlined here offers one possible lens through which to understand not only

the phenomenon of celebrity reality television in itself but also the way fame operates more widely as a cyclical process, and as a 'spectator sport' in which audiences, journalists and fellow celebrities alike are continually encouraged to speculate on the 'risky lottery' (Holmes 2006: 47) of renown.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As well as becoming a successful TV presenter following her time in *Big Brother*, Hammond has taken part in several celebrity versions of reality shows, including *I'm a Celebrity...*, *Celebrity Masterchef* and *Strictly Come Dancing*.

<sup>2</sup> Although in this paper I am concentrating primarily on reality show *participants*, proto-celebrities who are well known in a particular field of expertise can also become famous through these shows by taking 'expert' roles – such as professional chefs who feature as experts in programmes like *Masterchef* as part of a profile-building exercise, and the professional dancers on shows like *Dancing on Ice* and *Strictly Come Dancing*. As well as their being professionals in their field, it is worth noting that some professional dancers have also been reality show contestants through, most notably, *So You Think You Can Dance?*, and some of the chefs used as experts on reality cooking shows also compete in programmes such as cooking competition *Great British Menu*. These chefs may develop a profile as media personalities and experts after their capabilities as TV performers are tested through competition and guest appearances – Tom Kerridge, who now helms his own cookery series on BBC Two, being a key example.

<sup>3</sup> This cross-promotion can be amusingly incestuous at times, such as when *Masterchef* judge Gregg Wallace competed on *Strictly* and was judged by Craig Revel Horwood, who himself had competed previously on *Celebrity Masterchef* and been judged by Wallace.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, many celebrities have participated in multiple reality formats, but the skill-based shows prefer not to emphasise this and to concentrate instead on how busy they currently are. For

example, Simon Webbe, part of pop group Blue, took part in *I'm a Celebrity...* in 2008 and featured on *Strictly Come Dancing* in 2014. Both shows came after his group's time as a successful chart act, but as Blue were performing in concerts for post-fame reality show *The Big Reunion* during his *Strictly* tenure, he wasn't presented as a post-celebrity trying to become famous once more, but as an active touring musician whose professional dance partner had to come backstage to his gigs to help him rehearse.

<sup>5</sup> This claim to achieved fame is somewhat undermined within the show, however, as the (more) famous loved ones are continually referenced. Even when a celebrity has a reasonably high profile in their own right, such as actress Anita Dobson or comedian and psychotherapist Pamela Stephenson, their celebrity partner (Brian May of Queen for Dobson and comedian Billy Connolly for Stephenson) is referred to and captured on camera frequently. In these respects, it can seem as though the show is trying to cast the more famous celebrity by proxy and perhaps undermines its own status as a vehicle for 'serious' stars given those it can attract are the less-famous members of celebrity families or pairings.

<sup>6</sup> Actually developing the skill being learned is not, however, mandatory for success in the genre. There is as much pleasure for viewers in watching failure as success, as Payne notes: 'audiences are given additional opportunities for what Jeffrey Sconce (2004: 453) calls 'celebrity schadenfreude', in which we get to spectate as minor stars of questionable talent make fools of themselves, disproving any claim to extraordinary status'. (Payne 2009: 297). Those who accept their failure to learn a skill, but present themselves as a 'trier' or 'good sport' may yet turn it to their advantage - for example, celebrity astrologer Russell Grant appeared as a guest contributor on *Strictly Come Dancing* spin-off show *It Takes Two* for several years after his failure to learn much in the way of dancing technique as a contestant on the main show.

<sup>7</sup> The same benefits may also apply to other arenas of fame as well, of course.



<sup>8</sup> Usually, but not always. Higgins, for example, made the live shows of *The Voice UK* and although she did not re-ignite a pop career, she went on to star in touring musicals.

<sup>9</sup> Blair had previously appeared in a spoof version of *CBB* in the Ricky Gervais show *Extras* (2007), something that audiences, media commentators and Gervais himself were quick to reference upon Blair's entry into the house (e.g. Klompus 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Despite having no specific talent, she has maintained something of a media profile through occasional magazine columns and photoshoots, an appearance in *Ultimate Big Brother* (2010) and a series of high-profile relationships with other celebrities and confessional magazine interviews.

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