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Guess who Tiger is having sex with now? Celebrity sex and the framing of the moral high ground

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For media and audiences fascinated with celebrities' private lives, insight into their sexual behaviour is the ultimate pleasure as it deals with the most intimate details, the 'real' behind the celebrity construct. A celebrity's sex life is not just food for gossip but may facilitate the articulation of moral, ethical and social views on sexual issues in contemporary society. This is analysed by means of a framing analysis of celebrity sex stories and audience reactions in a sample of three celebrity websites (Flemish *HLN*, British *Heat*, and American *People*). Results reveal that media and readers focus on only a few, highly 'scandalous' stories of married heterosexual men's adultery. While media in their framing of celebrity news refrain from explicit judgments, readers are eager to openly criticise celebrities' adulterous transgressions while taking the moral high ground. Focusing on adultery, seven frames relating to different views in society were found, presenting adultery in either sociological, biological, psychological or religious terms. Only the 'women's fault' frame supports the sexual double standard, claiming women are responsible for a man's adultery.¹

Keywords: celebrity; sexual representations; framing analysis; online news; adultery

Introduction

'Justin Timberlake bedriegt Jessica Biel [Justin Timberlake cheats on Jessica Biel]' (*HLN* 2010d); 'Warren Beatty sliep met bijna 13.000 vrouwen [Warren Beatty slept with over 13,000 women]' (*HLN* 2010a); 'Aniston en Butler hebben fantastische seks [Aniston and Butler have amazing sex]' (*HLN* 2010b); 'Rape case dropped against David Copperfield' (Breuer 2010).

Every day, celebrities' sex lives capture the attention of media and audiences. Particularly since the growth of online celebrity gossip websites, their sexual antics can be followed, discussed and speculated about on a daily, and sometimes even hourly, basis. However, academic interest so far has mainly focused on television or magazines (Ward 2003, Brown 2009) or on – often spectacular – case studies (Butler Breese 2010). This contribution wishes to fill a gap by analysing the day-to-day coverage of and (online) reactions to celebrities' sex lives on three celebrity websites: *HLN*, *Heat* and *People*. These websites were selected for their popularity and the provisions for online audience reactions. The focus on three different national settings allows a comparison between two large global celebrity industries (US, UK) and one small local one, and different cultural settings with their own sexual norms and values. By means of a study of general celebrity-sex

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items and a framing analysis of celebrities' adultery, we wish to investigate two claims often made in celebrity studies: the celebrity-as-commodity thesis (Marshall 1997, Rojek 2001, Cashmore 2006), and the idea that celebrity provides a forum to discuss social and moral issues (Dyer 1987, 1998, Marshall 2006, Butler Breese 2010, Gorin and Dubied 2011).

Celebrity, sex and society

This contribution starts from the conception of celebrity as a construct, resulting from negotiations between a person looking for (and sometimes fighting) fame, his/her entourage, the media and audiences (Turner 2004). Media are crucial to celebrities in their communication with the outside world (Evans and Hesmondalgh 2005) and to audiences for information about celebrities whom they never meet in person (Cashmore 2006). Despite the lack of personal contact, audience members develop parasocial relationships (Horton and Wohl 1956), which can be described as the illusion of a long-term friendship, analogous to social relationships and encompassing an emotional connection, yet which are mediated and one-sided (Claessens and Van den Bulck 2011).

As a construct, a celebrity's image results from the interplay between three personae: the professional persona resulting from actions in public life; the official private persona based on information about the celebrity's private life; and the 'real' person behind the construction, 'off-guard, unkempt, unready' (Holmes 2005, p. 21). In celebrity culture and celebrity reporting, the private and the real are of central importance. Attention to a public person's private life is considered as the main indicator that (s)he has reached celebrity status. Dyer (1998, p. 45) further sees the focus on the private in the media's denial of celebrity's public performances as work. The media construct narratives of stars living in a world without any material problems, making only their private lives, and particularly relationships, potentially problematic. This focus on relationship problems in an otherwise 'perfect' world is ideal to attract media and audience's interest. Moreover, while public performances can only attract attention at irregular intervals – a film release, a sport star's expensive transfer – relationships can be gossiped about on a daily basis, tying audiences to both celebrities and media outlets (Cashmore 2006). It is thus not surprising that relationship issues form a large part of celebrity culture.

If relationships are the staple diet of celebrity journalism, using a 'rhetoric of authenticity' to create a level of intimacy (Dyer 1987, Holmes 2005), then celebrity sex is the ultimate pleasure. How much more intimate and private can media reporting get? At its core, celebrity journalism wants to reveal the real celebrity behind the celebrity façade and, surely, it is in the bedroom that this 'real' celebrity is revealed? Following wider media trends towards sensationalism and tabloidisation (Austin and Barker 2003, Turner 2004), the combination of the search for the real celebrity and of sex as the ultimate intimacy or 'truth' (see Knee 2006) culminates in the heightened media search for and audience interest in celebrity sex scandals (Lull and Hinerman 2000).

Framing celebrity sex

The aim of this article is to provide an empirical analysis of societal views on sex in celebrity (online) news stories and in audience reactions to these stories, comparing the celebrity websites *HLN*, *Heat* and *People*.

This research is part of a wider content analysis (Van den Bulck and Claessens 2011) of three websites devoted to celebrity news: *HLN*'s 'Showbiz' page (Flanders, the northern

part of Belgium, www.hln.be/showbizz); *Heat* (UK, www.heatworld.com); and *People* (US, <http://www.people.com/>). The overall sample consists of 10 constructed weeks from January to October 2010 (one week/month), and includes all celebrity news and – for reasons of feasibility – the first 100 audience reactions to each article. Such reactions may not be representative of those of the general audience as only a selection of people engage in online discussions, yet the online reactions provide useful information on ‘how people present themselves to others’ (van Zoonen 2007).

From the overall sample of 1289 articles and 16,000 audience reactions, all articles covering sex and the accompanying audience reactions were selected, resulting in 51 articles and 685 audience reactions. These are subjected to framing analysis, an approach which, more than other methods, enables the study of both encoding (media articles) and decoding (audience reactions) processes (see Hall 1980). In addition, framing provides direct insight into the essential elements of a message (problem, cause, moral judgment, solution) and is, more than other methods like discourse analysis, suited for large datasets. Finally, as frames relate to general ideas in society, framing analysis enables us to uncover underlying cultural norms and values about sex.

Framing is a process whereby a frame determines which aspects of reality are selected, rejected, emphasised or modified in the production of a media text and, at the same time, provides the audience with a context and suggested meaning (Van Gorp 2004, p. 16). Frames are present in a text through *framing devices* – word choice, metaphors, symbols and stereotypes (Pan and Kosicki 1993) – and *reasoning devices* – problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and treatment recommendation (Entman 1993, p. 52). Researchers have pointed to a list of framing moderators which mediate audiences’ adoption of media frames, including interaction with peers, personal experiences and cognitions, parasocial relationships, and a successful fit between audience and media values, norms and practices (Van den Bulck and Claessens 2012, Gamson and Modigliani 1989).

Whose sex life is discussed?

A variety of 59 celebrities is covered in the items on sex: 33 different celebrities are found in the articles and 51 in the reactions. The top three most-covered celebrities in the sample articles consisted of US golfer Tiger Woods (19.6%), UK footballer Ashley Cole (5.9%) and UK footballer David Beckham (5.9%). The reactions mostly deal with Tiger Woods (20.1%), US reality TV host Jesse James (15.6%) and US actor David Boreanaz (10.2%). Interestingly, these are all men who (allegedly) had an affair that received public attention in 2010. Thus, while sex features in quite a large number of items, media and audiences seem to focus mainly on just a few celebrity cases related to sex which are explored exhaustively, and almost all involve a sex scandal, confirming the importance of (sensational) scandals in celebrity news.

Exploring further, 68.6% of the sex articles and 77.9% of the reactions cover male celebrities. This differs from the overall celebrity sample where women dominate, and refutes Duran and Prusank’s (1997) statement that sexuality is the domain of women. The high percentage of male celebrities is related to the large amount of adultery scandals in which the man is portrayed as the main actor. However, women are often included in these items: as the man’s sexual partner, mistress, wife and so on. This reflects the traditional sexual double standard which portrays men as sexually aggressive – the main actors – and women as sexually passive – the sexual objects or even victims (Oliver and Hyde 1993, Duran and Prusank 1997, Gamson 2001a, Ward 2003). The articles focus most on single (43.1%) and then on married (37.3%) celebrities, and to a lesser extent on celebrities

in a relationship (17.6%). However, audience reactions focus more on married (52.2%) than single (43.2%) celebrities, and very little on celebrities in a relationship (10.3%). The latter suggests that readers, even more than the media, show an interest in scandal as most stories about married celebrities cover adultery. It also implies that, for media and audience, (adulterous) sex stories are more interesting (and scandalous) when covering married celebrities rather than celebrities in non-marital relationships.

The celebrities in the articles and reactions are almost invariably heterosexual (96.1%–99.0%), rooting celebrities' sexual escapades firmly within the heterosexual paradigm that sex should only take place within a relationship and between a man and a woman (Rissel *et al.* 2007). This result reflects the lack of homo- or bisexual sexual relationships found in these magazines' sexual content (Ward 2003).

What sex topics are addressed?

Within the general theme of sex, several topics are discussed. Clearly dominant is adultery, accounting for 39.2% of the articles and 71.1% of audience reactions. Adultery comprises allegations of adultery, the adulterous act itself and its consequences (wife's reaction, public apology and so on). Other topics include multiple sexual partners (for example, Warren Beatty sleeping with over 12,000 women), sex addiction (for example, Tiger Woods in sex rehab), sex abstinence (for example, actor Matthew McConaughey after his wife gave birth), abuse (for example, US magician David Copperfield's rape case), and prostitution (for example, UK TV presenter/model Peaches Geldof being accused of prostitution).

Compared to sexual content on TV or in magazines (Duran and Prusank 1997, Brown 2009), celebrity news appears less prudish and more scandalous. In a comprehensive overview of the field, Ward (2003) found that although sexual content on TV in Western societies has increased over the past decades, it remains mostly verbal and precursory. Further, unlike celebrity news, TV focuses on sex in non-marital rather than marital relationships (Ward 2003, pp. 351–355). In magazines in Western societies, sexual media content has multiplied in the last decades – for example, for US magazines there was an increase from a .17 ratio per page in 1950s to .88 in 1980s (Scott 1986) – is more explicit and direct than TV content, and has become less conservative (Ward 2003). Ward (2003, pp. 355–358) found that magazines focus on the goal for women to be sexually desirable and attract male attention, and often describe relationships as the exclusive domain of women. They tend to portray women as sexually passive and men as aggressive, confirming the traditional sexual double standard, reinforcing it by portraying women as having little sexual desire and needing to be cautious and discrete, and men as in a constant state of sexual desire and readiness (Ward 2003, pp. 355–358). Our results suggest that sexual content in celebrity news and the accompanying audience reactions is less everyday or prudish than the sexual content on television or in magazines. This can be explained by the desire to reveal the 'real' celebrity behind the formal public and private image, providing food for scandal that fits the growing dominance of news values biased toward drama, entertainment and spectacle (Austin and Barker 2003, Turner 2004).

How are celebrities' sex lives evaluated?

While the framing of the sexual topics includes implicit judgements (cf. see below), the articles dealing with sexual topics are mostly without explicit judgment (66.7%) and, when

providing an explicit evaluation, are more negative (27.5%) than positive (5.9%). The readers are far more judgmental (83.9%) in their discussion of celebrity sex scandals, mostly negatively criticising the celebrity (74.6%). The fact that readers are more judgmental than the media can be explained by several factors. First, media want to (at least appear to) adhere to journalistic standards by seemingly bringing factual information rather than judgments, whereas readers are ultimately aimed at expressing opinions. Second, whereas the media have to be careful in their articles to maintain good working relations with celebrities and to avoid lawsuits, the (anonymous) readers have no need to hold back in their reactions because they do not depend on celebrities for their income and cannot be sued.

The mostly negative character of the readers' judgments can be explained by situating it within the notions of gossip and the moral high ground. As Turner (2004, p. 24) states, '[G]ossip [is] an important social process through which relationships, identity, and social and cultural norms are debated, evaluated, modified and shared.' Gossip is often employed to crystallise and reinforce 'community values, thereby furthering the coherence and unity of the social group' (Wilson 1974, p. 93). As part of online communities rooted in American, British or Flemish (Belgian) culture, readers of celebrity news reinforce their cultural values and coherence by being critical of celebrities' sexual antics that are outside of dominant sexual norms. For example, by criticising celebrities' adultery, the readers confirm and even reinforce that it is an act which is considered never justifiable according to 54% of Belgian, 55% of UK, and 70% of US citizens (Halman *et al.* 2008). Gossip further functions as a means to protect individual self-interest and enhance one's moral status (Paine 1976). This can be linked to Goffman's (1959) impression-management theory, which states that an individual represents themselves in the best possible way. In an online environment, people have greater control over their self-presentation as they can act more reflexively and intentionally (Ellison *et al.* 2006), for instance by taking the moral high ground in discussing celebrities' sexual transgressions to enhance their own status as morally 'good' people.

Our analysis so far thus indicates that, at one level, celebrity sex news is mainly about entertainment and providing food for gossip, which is similar to Hermes' (1995) findings on the pleasures of reading women's and gossip magazines. At the same time, though, there are strong claims that it helps audiences make sense of the social world (Gamson 2001b, Evans and Hesmondalgh 2005, Gorin and Dubied 2011). This confirms Feasey's findings that:

Popular star coverage appeals to the reader precisely because it can be used to engage in debates about fundamental moral issues, such as infidelity and the role of violence in society, without passing judgments and making potentially unpopular comments about friends, family and work colleagues.

Feasey 2008, p. 693

Adultery: addiction, sin or the ultimate sign of masculinity?

As adultery dominates both the media and (especially) audience attention to celebrity sex and since the majority of the most-covered celebrities allegedly had adulterous affairs, an in-depth framing analysis of articles and reactions about adultery was conducted. To this end, 17 articles and 366 reactions covering adultery were subjected to an inductive, qualitative framing analysis. This reveals seven frames, next to a few purely factual accounts and some 'none of our business' reports. The factual accounts merely state that the adultery took place, whereas the 'none of our business' reports mention a cause or solution as well

as the statement that one should not judge the adultery: 'He doesn't owe anyone an apology except his family' (reaction to Fleeman 2010b).

A first frame treats adultery as *an addiction*, which should be recognised as such rather than judged and can be solved through treatment in rehab: 'Glad Tiger [Woods] is now stepping up to the plate and is on his healing journey' (reaction to Fleeman 2010b). This frame echoes a growing debate on sex addiction in Western society. Although controversial, there are claims that sexual addiction can be listed among other substance addictions (alcohol, drugs and so on) (Carnes 1983), and between 3% and 6% of the US population is believed to be addicted to sex (Gold and Heffner 1998). The issue has surfaced in celebrity gossip in the past with Hollywood actors Michael Douglas and David Duchovny framed as (recovered) sex addicts.

A second frame describes adultery as *the result of a flawed personality* for which only the cheater and his terrible personality are to blame: 'Ashley [Cole] is the kind of bastard who would cheat and treat people like scum' (reaction to Heat 2010a). Links between personality traits and adultery are often made in society, and psychology scholars (Schmitt 2004) relate infidelity to low agreeableness (that is, no trust or empathy) and low conscientiousness (that is, disorganised and unreliable). The suggested solution in this frame is to get a divorce or for the adulterer to change his personality and become a better person, if at all possible (as psychological traits are considered stable rather than changeable). This frame is similar to the 'addiction' frame, as both link adultery to psychological causes, but the frames differ in terms of judgment (neutral vs. negative) and solution. While the 'addiction' frame sees it as a disease that can be cured in rehab, a flawed personality cannot be cured and only (rarely) changed.

The third frame describes adultery as *a sin*, which is caused by lust and cannot be justified. This frame is often promoted by references to Christian religion, which considers adultery as a mortal sin: 'Tiger [. . .] have you not read your Bible where it says "Thou shalt not commit adultery"?' (reaction to Fleeman 2010a). Although confidence in churches is found to be decreasing and religion is important in the lives of 18% of Belgian, 13% of UK, and 57% of US residents, the frame illustrates that religion still matters to people, confirmed by 2008 data indicating that 49% of Belgian, 37% of UK, and 80% of the US residents get comfort and strength from religion (Halman *et al.* 2008). Further, 43% of Belgian, 67% of UK, and 90% of US respondents believe in the concept of 'sin' (Halman *et al.* 2008). Given these figures, it is not surprising that most references to this religion-inspired frame are posted to the American *People* website. The solution presented in this frame is divorce, which is surprising as religion strongly promotes marriage 'until death do us part'. The promotion of divorce as a solution in this religious frame may reflect the increasingly tolerant social attitude toward divorce in contemporary (Flemish, UK and US) society (Halman *et al.* 2008).

Fourth, adultery is also framed as *a societal phenomenon* caused by a loss of (sexual) norms. This relates to Durkheim's (1951 [1897]) notion of anomie: 'a breakdown of social norms regulating individual behaviour and social interaction' which 'is a property, not of the individual, but of the social system' (Zhao and Cao 2010, p. 1212). In this frame, processes of (sexual) value-liberalisation are evaluated negatively and related to popular claims about the moral decay of contemporary Western society, as secularisation leads traditional restrictions to lose their power (Petersen and Donnenwerth 1997). This can be contrasted to the 'sin' frame, where secularisation processes are not yet dominant and religion remains an important bearer of norms and values. The 'societal phenomenon' frame variably assigns the loss of norms (and thus the adultery) to all mankind or only

to Hollywood (wo)men: ‘WTF is wrong with people? God, it’s like a rash on the ass of Hollywood!!’ (reaction to Garcia 2010).

The fifth frame describes adultery as *part of human nature*, either in the sense that monogamy is not natural or that making mistakes is human. In both variations adultery is considered the natural consequence of human nature, with no evaluative judgement being passed. Fitting the first option, readers state: ‘[M]onogamy is not natural anyway. The man is a hunter by nature and driven by the power to mate’ (reaction to HLN 2010c). The proposed solution is not to get married, as human beings are not programmed to stay with one partner their whole lives. These statements can be related to socio-biology (Oliver and Hyde 1993) and evolutionary psychology (Daly and Wilson 2000), which state that men are not ‘naturally’ fit for a monogamous life but are programmed to spread their genes and have as many sexual partners as possible. In the other variation, readers echo the popular saying ‘nobody is perfect’ and state: ‘I think he’s just human. We all make mistakes, some worse than others’ (reaction to Garcia 2010). The suggested solution here is forgiveness as all humans are flawed and thus destined by nature to make mistakes.

The sixth frame, *the ultimate sign of masculinity*, is the only frame in our sample that frames adultery positively. Here, the adultery is implicitly caused by the nature of men which is predominantly driven by lust and stimulates them to have affairs. Like the ‘human nature’ frame, this is linked to ideas rooted in socio-biology or evolutionary psychology. However, this frame passes a positive judgement: (real) men should fulfil their task of passing on their genes: ‘Tiger=The Man. Anyone saying he would react differently in his position, denies himself’ (reaction to HLN 2010c). As adultery is not considered problematic, no solution is provided, except the continuation of the observed behaviour.

A final frame covers adultery as *the women’s fault*. Here, the women – as wife and/or mistress – are responsible for the man’s adulterous behaviour. The man is evaluated as a victim of circumstances beyond his control, while the women are judged negatively and it is suggested that they should change. In some cases blame is cast on to the wife, accused of being absent too often or not providing her man with enough marital sex: ‘Obviously, Tiger didn’t have enough sex at home’ (reaction to HLN 2010c). At other times, the mistress is seen to have seduced the (seemingly powerless) man: ‘What’s really disgusting though are the women who throw themselves at stars when they know they are married’ (reaction to Garcia 2010). This frame reaffirms sexual double standards by confirming that (sexual) relationships are the domain and responsibility of women and that men can be manipulated into having sex because of their natural appetite (Duran and Prusank 1997). The contrast between the sexually failing wife and the seductive mistress reflects the virgin-whore dichotomy that is often used as a narrative guide in sex scandals, describing women either as young, naive victims (virgins) or publicity-seeking seductresses (whores) (Gamson 2001a, p. 164). While the image of the mistress as a seductress fits this frame perfectly, the virgin-wife image is mitigated in this frame to the extent that she is not described as a victim but seen negatively, as the cause for her husband’s escapades.

Adultery frames: media vs. audience

The different frames are not spread evenly across the sample. In media articles, only the ‘neutral’, ‘addiction’, ‘flawed personality’ and ‘women’s fault’ frames are used, and the latter two dominate. The three websites differ to some extent as *People* is the least judgemental (using the ‘neutral’ and ‘addiction’ frames) and *Heat* the most evaluative (employing the ‘flawed personality’ and ‘women’s fault’ frames), with *HLN* coverage of

adultery in between (framing it within the ‘women’s fault’, ‘addiction’ or ‘flawed personality’ frames). Audiences do not always follow the media’s lead but can be seen to provide counter-frames in negotiated or oppositional readings of the media frames (Hall 1980). As such, audience reactions present the whole variety of frames and the ‘flawed personality’ and the ‘women’s fault’ frames dominate. The ‘addiction’ and the ‘sin’ frames hardly ever occur, except with some *People* readers. Interestingly, only *HLN* readers employ the ‘positive masculinity’ frame. *HLN* readers further promote the ‘neutral’, ‘women’s fault’ and ‘societal phenomenon’ frames, thereby combining judgement-free and negative approaches. *Heat* readers are the most critical, either toward the adulterer or the women, as they mostly employ the ‘flawed personality’ and the ‘women’s fault’ frames. The ‘human nature’ and the ‘none of our business’ frames are mostly used by the *People* readers, who alternate between frames without explicit judgment and the negative ‘flawed personality’ frame.

The readers are thus found to either adopt the frame presented in the media article or to develop a (counter-)frame. Analysing further, it appears audience reactions result from framing moderators, including personal experiences, interaction with peers and parasocial relationships. When readers refer to personal experiences (for example, being cheated on), they mostly frame adultery as a sin or as the result of a flawed personality: ‘They’re always “open and honest” when they’re caught – and not before. Well, except for my ex. He wasn’t even open and honest after he was caught. LOL’ (reaction to Garcia 2010).

In interactions with peers, readers are often found to defend or strengthen their opinion, as can be seen in the following discussion among *HLN* readers on the sexual double standard in response to singer and actor Justin Timberlake’s (alleged) betrayal:

What is wrong with women nowadays? You hardly know the person and sleep with him. Just for a one night-stand. Wow. How do they feel afterwards? That is what I always wonder? Used? Dirty? I’d rather have sex out of love than out of lust.

What do you mean with ‘women nowadays’? Who do you think she had a one night-stand with? This is another perfect example of a double standard. The woman should feel used and dirty and have sex out of love and about the man . . . not a word. If she wants to have sex with someone she barely knows, it is her right. And what to say oft [sic] Justin Timberlake? He is cheating on his girlfriend and lying to get a woman in his bed. But, of course, that is different, he’s a man.

Reactions to *HLN* 2010d

Finally, parasocial relationships with celebrities can encourage the construction of counter-frames. Some readers maintain a negative parasocial relationship with the cheater or mistress and frame the adultery as a sin, employing the frames relating to a flawed personality, or the women’s fault: ‘Wayne [Rooney], u need your fat hairy balls cut off for what you’ve put the MOTHER OF YOUR CHILD through!’ (reaction to *Heat* 2010b). These reactions are often very sexualised and aggressive, suggesting strong negative feelings toward both the topic of cheating and the celebrity. Others maintain a positive relationship with the cheater and frame it neutrally as an addiction or part of human nature, or defend it as the women’s fault or a sign of masculinity: ‘To David and Jaime, you have all of my support and don’t worry what others think, it’s your life and marriage and no matter what, we all make mistakes’ (reaction to Garcia 2010). In the frame of adultery as a sign of masculinity, the reactions are gender-based, as it is mainly articulated by male readers: ‘GO TIGER!!! FERTILISE MORE!!! BE A REAL MAN (reaction to Fleeman 2010a), or ‘I know what a lot of men think while reading this article, never mind guys, it is all natural,

we are born and will die this way, women try to change us, but they won't succeed' (reaction to *HLN* 2010c). We should note that this finding is derived from the readers' online or (in the case of *People*) Facebook names, which are not necessarily truthful representations of their real-life identities, but still are valuable as (online) self-presentations. These findings confirm Oliver and Hyde's (1993) meta-analysis of gender differences and sexual attitudes/behaviour that shows men hold more permissive attitudes toward extramarital sex. Finally, several readers refer to their positive parasocial relationship with the victim (the wife) and employ a negative frame to describe the adultery: 'Colleen, just LEAVE HIM!!!!!! [. . .] Believe it or not, YOU DESERVE MORE' (reaction to *Heat* 2010b).

Celebrity news and societal views on adultery

The in-depth framing analysis of adultery reveals several frames relating to different viewpoints in contemporary Western society, confirming Dyer's (1987) claim that (news about) celebrities relate(s) to general societal ideas. Adultery is either framed in sociological (societal phenomenon), psychological (addiction, flawed personality), biological (human nature, sign of masculinity), or religious (sin) terms. The media only use approaches without explicit judgment and psychological frames, whereas audiences employ a variety of frames to make meaning of celebrities' adultery.

Interestingly, most of these frames stick to conservative rather than liberal sexual norms and values. With the exception of the 'ultimate sign of masculinity' frame, all frames implicitly or explicitly support monogamous marriages as a (sacred) institution. This seems reflective of society's dominant attitudes toward marriage, sexuality and adultery (Halman *et al.* 2008) and of the heterosexual paradigm (Rissel *et al.* 2007). While figures indicate that one third of Belgian, UK and US residents believe people should be able to enjoy sexual freedom without restrictions, this more liberal ideology is absent from our sample and only surfaces indirectly as an inevitable consequence of biological characteristics rather than social norms and values. With this exception, frames do not break with or reshape existing norms and values concerning sex and marriage. Adultery scandals are considered a transgression and evoke very emotional and sometimes coarse comments. At the same time, one of the most conservative stereotypes, the sexual double standard (Duran and Prusank 1997, Ward 2003), was only supported in one frame – the 'women's fault' – in which women (wife/mistress) are considered responsible for a man's sexual behaviour including adultery (Duran and Prusank 1997) and in which aspects of the virgin-whore dichotomy are found (Gamson 2001a, 2001b).

Conclusion

This study shows that news about celebrity sex is not only about entertainment, providing food for gossip, as it also helps audiences make sense of the social world. One dominant thesis interprets this meaning-creation within the notion of celebrity-as-commodity, there to embody capitalist society as 'both objects and vehicles of consumption, encouraging and validating consumer culture' (Cashmore 2006, p. 269). Celebrity sex stories not only contribute to the media and entertainment industries but help keep the capitalist system alive by trying to divert audiences' attention from 'real' problems to the trivialities of celebrities' private lives. Audiences' willingness to engage with these stories and celebrities is seen as compensating for anonymity, alienation and frustrations in capitalist society. In our findings, the readers almost exclusively focus on the scandalous adultery stories. This seems to support – at least partly – the hegemonic capitalist and celebrity-as-commodity claim

that celebrities' sex lives are used as consumer products to attract sensation-loving audiences and distract them from potential criticism of the celebrity and hyper-consumerist systems itself. Our results suggest that most audience members are eager to participate and comment on the scandalous lives of the famous elite.

However, discarding the results as a mere case of capitalist hegemony provides too narrow a view on the role of media and celebrity in processes of meaning-making and understanding of the social world. People may read and engage with such celebrity gossip and at the same time be aware of and concerned about wider political and societal issues. What is more, most authors maintain that celebrity coverage – even its most trivial topics – can provide media and society with a forum to discuss social, cultural and moral issues, values and norms, including regarding acceptable sexual behaviour (Dyer 1987, 1998, Marshall 2006, Austin and Barker 2003, Feasey 2008, Butler Breese 2010, Gorin and Dubied 2011). Indeed, dominant societal attitudes toward sex – both 'liberal' views following the sexual revolution of the 1960s and the remaining importance of the sexual double standard and the heterosexual paradigm – are present in our findings for celebrity-sex news. In the case of adultery, seven frames are found that relate to a variety of societal viewpoints (religious, sociological, psychological, biological). Media coverage of celebrities' sexual antics not only represents society's norms and values but also provides readers with food for thought. Those readers do not simply adopt the media stories but actively discuss sexual issues (mainly adultery) and make strong evaluations (mostly negative) of the sexual actions of celebrities. In doing so, they discuss different views, social norms and values regarding sex in society. However, it should be noted that these discussions mostly reproduce normative values around morality and sexual conduct and only rarely substantively criticise hegemonic ideas of contemporary society.

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