



Room for Debate: A Running Commentary on the News

« Room for Debate Home

« Back to Discussion

Is It Harder to Be a Celebrity Now?

In Hollywood's golden age, stars were sheltered by the movie studios. That's not true anymore.

Last Century's Celebrity Culture

Updated March 24, 2011, 12:40 PM

Elayne Rapping, professor emerita of American studies and media studies at SUNY Buffalo, is the author of "Law and Justice in America."

The death of Elizabeth Taylor — one of the great movie stars of the Golden Age of Hollywood — is a reminder of the celebrity culture of the 20th century. The Hollywood studio system with its methods of controlling their images, when the entertainment media consisted of perhaps several big “movie reporters, is now a thing of the past.

In those more innocent days stars were larger than life icons of glamour and idealization. Their failings and foibles, while certainly noted and often notable, were not subject to the ubiquity of today’s entertainment media. Today, paparazzi and amateur cell phone photographers hound celebrities day and night, as they shop for groceries or walk the red carpet. Their every indiscretion, their every moment of private embarrassment or excess is broadcast to the world in instant international sensationalism as the whole world watches — indeed can’t take its eyes off it.

But is it harder today to be a celebrity? Should we cry for these unfortunate hounded stars? Probably not. I hardly think so.

As much as they moan about it, all this media exposure, more often than not, is a career booster. It can and does. When is the last time you saw Keanu Reeves in public or heard a rumor about him?

But most choose not to take that modest route. And why should they? Look at the case of the recently on-air meltdown. The more bizarre and outrageous his behavior, the bigger his fame. It’s worth it for all it’s worth, even going on tour as a kind of modern day side show, as eager viewers watch him. Even a rumor that CBS may be open to hiring him back. Winning.

So no, it is not harder to be a celebrity today. But the meaning of celebrity has certainly changed. It’s nostalgic for the old days when Liz Taylor’s luminous face on magazine covers masked her private life.

Join Room for Debate on Facebook »

Topics: [Culture](#), [Elizabeth Taylor](#), [filmmaking](#), [movies](#)