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# True value in the fame economy

By Stephen Overell

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Surveying her new beauty salon and string of properties, Jade Goody tells the Christmas issue of *Now* magazine that her work has endured rather longer than “the expected five minutes” since winning a British reality television show in 2002. “I’ve used my brain for once,” she smiles. “Now I can actually say I’ve succeeded and I’m doing really well.”

The work of celebrities, engaged in the manufacture and maintenance of fame, is clearly not quite the same as the work of others. But what exactly is this “work”, and does its phenomenal growth in recent years have anything to say about the direction the wider world of work is headed? The fame game appears to have spawned a group of elite workers whose labour is only partly understood by businesses seeking to place products, develop brands and analyse social trends.

David Holman, senior lecturer at the Institute of Work Psychology at the University of Sheffield, notes that, in part, celebrities could be classified as “emotional labourers” – a term coined in the 1980s to describe service workers, such as call-centre operatives, required to express, or fake, certain feelings.

But they are also “aesthetic labourers” whose looks are the tools of their trade, as with some bar staff. And perhaps, also, they might be described as “identity labourers” who make lifestyles and sell identities within a specialist branch of the entertainment industry.

It is tempting to think that working with fake emotion is inherently exploitative. But it is not so simple, says Mr Holman. “Not being true to one’s feelings could be seen as a common, even necessary, part of life – think of having to attend awkward parties or of doctors delivering bad news.”

Nevertheless, a “dissonance” between the emotions expressed to do a job and how the worker really feels is a familiar feature of emotional labour, he says.

The labour of celebrities, argues Ellis Cashmore, professor of culture, media and sport at Staffordshire University, who has a book called *Celebrity Culture* due out next year,

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is not so much about acting, singing or sport as about “appearing – their work is presence”.

The celebrity of a star such as Tom Cruise, he suggests, is as much about his serial marriages, his affiliation to Scientology and his strong views on homosexuality, as about his acting. “The widely different values in this labour market are determined not by objective standards but by how much pleasure consumers derive from reading, seeing and hearing about them – from being guilt-free voyeurs,” says Prof Cashmore.

If so, it is possible to view celebrities – “labourers of appearance” – as an archetypal new worker in an advanced service economy often described as “weightless” or being made of “thin air”.

Britain is a world leader in the production, manipulation and disposal of celebrities. This does not mean British celebrities are world class. In Forbes magazine’s annual Celebrity 100 feature, which ranks celebrities in terms of pay and exposure, Brits rarely figure highly because of their relatively low earnings.

Nevertheless, the fascination with celebrity for its own sake, fuelled by voracious demand for material across assorted media platforms, has meant Britain has a lot of celebrities, and has recently started to export the obsession with them to other countries, such as France, by starting celebrity magazine franchises there.

According to the Audit Bureau of Circulation, a UK body that counts print sales, the UK’s 10 best-selling celebrity publications and the 10 best-selling tabloids deliver an audience of 23m readers. One way or another, the celebrity-industrial complex supports quite a number of jobs.

Nick Isles, director of advocacy at the Work Foundation, a think-tank, says that celebrities turning themselves into mini-brands generate significant supply chains of agents, advisers, consultants, make-up artists, photographers, publicists and so on. “The British economy has come on a hugely complex journey, and celebrities offer a good example of how value is created in today’s world.”

This is the kind of value creation that would have bewitched Adam Smith. In *The Wealth of Nations*, he railed against “respectable occupations” that were “unproductive of any value”. Their work “like the declamation of the actors, the harangue of the orator or the tune of the musician perishes in the very instant of its production”, he wrote.

Smith’s model worker, of course, was the factory labourer producing tangible artefacts – a type of work now increasingly carried out on the periphery of the developed world. The great majority of workers in the developed world, from cleaners to management consultants and celebrities, do not produce anything destined to last very long: instant perishability is the hallmark of 21st-century work.

The celebrity labour market, says Diane Coyle, director of Enlightenment Economics, a research consultancy, offers an insight into how difficult it is to square the traditional concept of “productivity” with the actual work that people do. “The price that celebrities command is a reflection of their value, but their product is, in effect, themselves, so it is hard to see how you could measure their productivity. The orchestra that plays fastest is unlikely to be the best.”

Celebrities – both those famous for their talents and those famous for getting out of taxis – demonstrate an increasingly common experience: the way that people become their work.

Ever since the industrial revolution, work has been portrayed as something to be endured for the sake of earning a living. To survive the ordeal, workers needed to have a strict separation between their economic lives and their personal lives – between what they did and who they were. This is not the case with celebrities. Their economic life is inseparable from their personal life. By swapping privacy for money and turning themselves into a public spectacle, they literally become their work. The same applies to a lesser extent to many other ambitious knowledge workers: personhood and livelihood are becoming largely indivisible.

Yet there are also limits to the comparison. Misbehaviour tends to reduce the labour market value of most workers. This is not true for celebrities, argues Todd Kendall, assistant professor of economics at Clemson University in South Carolina in the US. Analysing the causes of the misbehaviour of basketball stars – both on court and off it – Mr Kendall claims in a paper that the “less substitutable” (that is, more famous) the star, the worse their behaviour.

However, the future may be less rosy for celebrity miscreants, he believes. As media technology spreads, celebrities will be more easily replaced, and their tendency to misbehave may be correspondingly checked.

As with much other work, technology explains a great deal about the rise of the modern

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celebrity: the 24-hour media has created demand for the labour of appearance. But now this sort of work exists, says Julian Henry, founder of Henry's House, a publicist, it is up to organisations to figure out how to use it – whether to sell products, improve school meals or end world poverty.

"Business ought to embrace celebrity because there are huge opportunities for companies that use it to gain public access," he says.

#### HOW THE SPOTLIGHT REFLECTS REAL WORK

- A celebrity's "work" is comparable to that of others who are required to express or fake certain feelings, such as "emotional labourers" in the service sector.
- They could be viewed as a paradigm of modern value creation. Unlike, say, factory workers, they do not "produce" anything destined to last very long.
- They illustrate the tendency for knowledge workers to "become" their work, eroding the gap between personhood and livelihood.

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