

Art, Movies, Music / Performing Arts, Sports, TV

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LIFE UNDER A LENS: Actor Brad Pitt was mobbed by photographers on the red carpet during last year's Toronto film festival. Media coverage of stars is now a staple of newspapers, cable TV, and weekly news magazines.
AARON HARRIS/AP PHOTO/CP

Celebrity gossip's siren call grows louder

If 2006 was anything to go by, US tabloid culture is growing ever more mainstream – and reaching increasingly younger audiences.

By Ethan Gilsdorf / *Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor*

In the new FX drama, "Dirt," a snake charmer of a magazine editor says, "This is what the marketplace wants." The character, played by Courtney Cox, claims the public wants celebrity gossip in the form of the fictional publications "Drrt" and "Now."

The show's "People"-meets-"National Enquirer" magazines stray only nanometers from truth. America does desire endless dirt on celebrities, and 2006, the year of Brangelina - or was it TomKat? - seemed the apex (or nadir) of its fixation.

Obsession with star gazing has been a pop-culture mainstay for decades. But lately, the proliferation of outlets for such coverage seems unbridled. Cable news and entertainment shows keep multiplying alongside celebrity-gossip blogs, which have millions of fans. Even staid newspapers, desperate for readers, have added pages chronicling stars' marriages, breakups, and fashion train wrecks.

In large part, the surge in such reportage is being driven by new media. But the demand for even the most trivial of celebrity gossip also reflects a shift in attitudes and beliefs toward fame. In an age when a MySpace page or a YouTube video can give extraordinary exposure to ordinary people, a young generation now believes fame to be one of the most desirable of traits.

Then there's this doozy: 43.4 percent of teenage girls want to become celebrity personal assistants when they grow up, choosing this career path twice as often as "the president of a great university like Harvard or Yale."

"Globally, kids don't know the names of their own heads of government or what their country exports," says Jeff Davidson, author of "Breathing Space: Living & Working at a Comfortable Pace in a Sped-Up Society," via e-mail. "But they do know the name of Tom Cruise's baby."

Fame also appears ever more obtainable to Generation Y. So-called "reality TV" shows such as "American Idol," "America's Next Top Model," and "Making the Band," reveal how stars are manufactured. "Now all of a sudden the process is more transparent," says Hill.

Full-time obsessing about celebs has even become a route to celebrity.

Take Mario Lavandeira, whose blog perezhilton.com attracts 3.4 million hits per day. His influence is rising. He's even cohosted a New Year's Eve party with Christina Aguilera.