
Theme : Celebrity and scandal

1. A strain of heroes

COMMENTARY

The concept of scandal is a central trope of today's journalism, ranging from political coverage of the affairs of state down to the state of affairs in the celebrity press and media. Not only is there an apparently inexhaustible public appetite for rumours, speculations and provable dark deeds and saucy goings-on fed by scandals but also a considerable section of professional journalists and photojournalists earn their crust from it. In this introductory commentary some of the key concepts defining celebrity and scandal are introduced and some observations on the current state of public culture in New Zealand are examined.

Keywords: celebrity, fame, heroism, mana, New Zealand, publicity

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A REMARKABLE feature of contemporary media and press culture is the growing evidence of a moral crisis in the institutions of leadership. One aspect of this decline is part of a long-term secular process in which the hero or heroine as a 'doer' of great deeds is replaced or, at least sidelined in popular imagination, by the celebrity as a person with a large media profile. As Daniel Boorstin (1961), summed it up in his book, *The Image*: 'The hero was a big man; the celebrity is a big name' (p. 70).

Boorstin, of course, was writing before such contemporary developments as celebrity journalism, reality television, the internet and social media. To an extent he could scarcely have imagined, his definition of a celebrity as a person known for being well-known has been confirmed in the persons of Paris Hilton and Kim Kardashian, for whom publicity and self-promotion have replaced—or at least marginalised—any actual or substantial accomplishments. Acknowledging the limitations of *The Image*—its pre-feminist equation

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of heroism with masculinity or the over-simplified contrast between real events and pseudo-events staged for the media—it still poses a significant question concerning media visibility and ethics. Do contemporary celebrities really deserve all the attention and prominence and the great wealth that goes with it? In this sense, *The Image* is about the damage to merit in which celebrity, with its minimalist qualification of achievement, plays a significant part.

In one sense, contemporary celebrities are an expression of the times. Generation Y, the most celebrity-engaged sector of the US population—specifically white, young, middle class, 18 to 25-year-olds—said its first goal was to get rich and its second was to get famous (Jayston, 2009). A survey of UK pre-teens found that stars and celebrities had displaced scientists and teachers as role models, with banking and the law no longer figuring in the list of desired careers (Clark, 2009). In such scenarios of aspiration, individual success and a winner-take-all desire for fame emerge as primary life-goals, displacing a once-prominent emphasis on making a contribution to the greater good of the community and family life.

Such findings, of course, predate the financial meltdown, and the spectacle of CEO malfeasance rewarded with million-dollar severance cheques. In retrospect, it is not difficult to imagine what might be called ‘Boorstin’s revenge’ hanging like the sword of Damocles over the heads of these hopeful young people. On an individual level, disillusionment will set in as it becomes apparent that talent, merit and effort play a smaller part in success than inherited social background and access to key social networks. Collectively, the impact of the economic meltdown effect is apparent in data gathered in 2012. This suggests that the ‘Millennium’ generation has overwhelmingly turned its sights away from the pursuit of riches and fame in favour of the smaller objectives of making a good marriage and having a strong family life.

Such a shift suggests a lowering of expectations not entirely surprising in a generation that has high levels of unemployment and job precariousness. Yet such fluctuations have their limitations; in part because they largely reflect only the mood of a white, middle class demographic, but substantially because social inequality, if based on merit, continues to be endorsed and treated as a fundamental tenet of American society (Kohut, 2012). Ironically, the spectacle of CEOs in loss-making or failing investment banks receiving compensation exit packages in the millions—not to mention soft prison terms for corporate malfeasance—make the earnings of celebrities and stars seem modest. So

Robert Downey Jnr's earnings of US\$75 million US seem not entirely outrageous and, moreover, since it is based on box-office performance, almost meritorious. Yet even here the belief in the individual basis of inequality is glamorously perpetuated because the vastly unequal rewards for the star (or for other above-the-line figures, such as the director or producers) rest fundamentally on the appropriation of the fruits of collective labour, past and present (Pomerantz, 2013).

What all this suggests is that the institution of celebrity is indeed fundamentally a moral or ethical discourse, based on judging personal worth. This insight passes beyond Boorstin's concern for public morality, though to be sure that is involved, to questions of the legitimization of inequality. The celebrity system exhibits two basic modes of justification. On the one hand, success provides its own vindication as entrepreneurial 'jerks' such as Donald Trump and Steve Jobs are admired for their arrogance and their preparedness to be nasty to underlings (Salon, 2013). On the other hand, there is the undeniable enthusiasm of ordinary people as viewers and participants for the evanescent moment of fame on reality television; a genre that for all its indignities and humiliations, at least demonstrates that the door to fame is not permanently closed (Gamson, 1998).

Hard and soft scandals

Defined generally, a 'hard' scandal has the following elements:

- It involves actions and events, occurring at least initially in secret, that entail transgression of certain accepted values, beliefs and moral codes.
- This behaviour becomes known to those outside the immediate circle of the perpetrators/associates who, if not directly involved, regard the behaviour as serious enough to warrant condemnation.
- Such behaviour may remain secret but has the potential—if publicly disclosed—to damage the reputation of, or bring criminal action against, the perpetrators.
- If the media become involved, the scandalous behaviour is not just made public but consolidates into a story line which is kept alive on a regular, if not daily basis.

Generally, scandals as news are subject to the same formula as news stories in general—who, what, where, when, why, with whom, and with what consequences? Specific persons must be objectively shown to have intentionally

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carried out their transgressive acts in the advancement of their self-interests and in so doing, to have done actual harm to some individual, group or social category (Thompson, 2000). In celebrity culture, scandals tend to be of the ‘soft’ variety inasmuch as they involve forms of self-damage or more exactly, damage to an established image—reports of unruly behaviour, bad taste and various fashion crimes fall under this category. So does behaviour by celebrity partners—such as infidelity—which calls into doubt the attractiveness of a particular celebrity and perhaps, as in the case of Sandra Bullock, their lack of wisdom in choosing partners. Another reason for ‘softness’ is that sometimes the scandalous behaviour reported is simply false. For a celebrity scandal to fully emerge as hard news usually requires an indictment and credible evidence to go to trial, such as the charges against O J Simpson and more recently, if of lesser gravity, the charges of theft against Lindsay Lohan. John Travolta, for example, was able to avoid serious charges for sexual harassment because the complainants lacked credibility, or at least were prepared to accept an out-of-court settlement (Sinha-Roy, 2011). In such cases, the scandal could be seen by putative victims and significant sections of a morally disturbed public alike as justice not being done.

On the other hand, following conviction, an individual who was not a celebrity may become one, as indicated by the posthumous fame of Ted Bundy, Jeffery Dahmer and the current fame of Anders Behring Breivik (Schmid, 2006). Such ‘dark’ celebrity or notoriety pushes to the limit the dissociation between worth and profile that so exercised Boorstin and indicates that a celebrity name is an abstract value in the attention economy.

A further distinction can be made between kinds of scandals—political scandals, talk scandals, celebrity scandals. Political scandals can be divided into three variants: sex scandals, financial scandals and abuse-of-power scandals. The common feature of such scandals is transgression by someone entrusted with the privileges that come with public or corporate office—such as access to state secrets, salary and perquisites, and the power to enact legislation. Such privileges, governed by the concept of *noblesse oblige*, call for high moral standards and the unflinching pursuit of public or stakeholder interests over self-interest.

Talk scandals originate in utterances that are inconsistent with official agendas and accounts or break with established notions of decorum. They arise less from direct transgressions than from verbal slips or mis-statements

revealed in media interviews. Such discrepancies may in turn reveal an underlying transgression that then becomes a political scandal when something said in an interview or in print inadvertently connects to something said or done elsewhere. Prime Minister John Key's joke about being the dinner if invited for a meal by the Māori Tuhoē iwi, could be regarded as a talk scandal (New Zealand Press Association, 2010).

Lastly, celebrity scandals involve individuals who do not have the special privileges and power entitlements that flow from public office, though they may be exceptionally wealthy. These arise from discrepant behaviour that contradicts the celebrity's established persona, e.g. Tiger Woods' many statements about his commitment to family life conflict with his revealed infidelities. Though not directly political, the celebrity scandal has a political dimension for two reasons. First, politicians today develop a celebrity persona in order to win and keep public office. The 'sexting' scandal with Anthony Weiner is an immediate example (Campanile, 2013). Second, for entertainment celebrities and stars, discrepancies between image and behaviour can jeopardise the relationship of admiration between fans and their 'idols'. For as the celebrity is revealed as unworthy of being admired, the fans are likewise exposed as dupes and fools. Again, for non-fans, the celebrity scandal may provide support for larger political themes, e.g. the decline of moral standards. Once again as with talk scandals, celebrity scandals may turn into political scandals, especially as political office today relies heavily on maintaining a positive media profile (Street, 2004).

If scandals are of different types they tend to have the same fundamental structure. An initial transgression of a moral code is usually followed by a second-order transgression that stems from the attempt to cover it up—through deception, obstruction, lies, suborning witnesses which, as shown by the example of Watergate, may become more important than the initial transgression.

Scandal in a small country

The kinds of scandal outlined above play out differently in different contexts. Celebrity in the US, by virtue of its positioning in a global media system, is intrinsically delocalised and seemingly abstracted from particularity. So it is not so much that the Hollywood star system and its attendant celebrity culture are American, as the fact that American culture has been made universal through the operation of media conglomerates (Olsen, 1999). Indeed, as the

powerful myth of rags-to-riches testifies, celebrity as a condition of being is itself about transcending the limitations of the local. Becoming a star or celebrity in the fullest sense means transcending the individual's circumstances of birth and background, creating an image that appeals to a global market. This ascension myth is a key motivational driver of aspirants to celebrity and stardom in other countries and other cultures.

At the same time, the global is only given a material existence in a specific locality. Vehicles for celebrity creation such as *American Idol*, albeit set in a fixed format, nonetheless tacitly adjust in their micro-operations to local conditions (King, 2009). So too, the concepts of celebrity and scandal are influenced and modulated by the cultural setting in which they occur. In the case of New Zealand, a small population and a small media market tend to compact the celebrity system so that individuals prominent in politics or business automatically acquire a media profile. Conversely, given limited opportunities for employment and earnings in the media, entertainers tend to become business investors when they are not otherwise engaged in pitching for products and performing as personalities. The condition of being a sycophantic celebrity factotum is not unique to New Zealand—global stars and celebrities endorse, even act as entrepreneurs for, products and services. But the careful separation of aspects of a celebrity portfolio found elsewhere is not a feature of New Zealand because it depends on the scale of the market. In New Zealand the different lines of 'business' tend to fuse into an undifferentiated media profile or 'pure' celebrity. In such circumstances, the distinctions between different forms of scandal tend to blur, with talk and celebrity scandals rapidly gaining a political dimension and vice-versa.

Cosy as hobbits

Another feature of New Zealand celebrity is the pervasive sense of a village-like proximity. A small population is automatically assumed to sustain a close, even familial relationship between different individuals and even between different cultural groups. Certainly, given an overall population of about four million and around a third of that residing in Auckland, a culturally diverse 'Pacific' city, New Zealand is a 'multi-cultural' society. Moreover the currents of culture and ethnicity play out in what is, in global terms, a small world. So it seems plausible that the New Zealand population is marked by an exceptional interconnectedness. As Austin Mitchell (2002)

pronounced, connecting closeness and scandal in one florid gesture: New Zealand is incest as a nation (p. 52). The website for the mobile services provider 2degrees puts it in more measured tones:

The name, 2degrees, comes from the theory that everyone in New Zealand is connected through two degrees of separation. In other words, everyone knows someone, who knows someone, who knows them. It's something totally unique to New Zealand. (2degrees, 2009)

The idea that compared to the larger world, in which six degrees of separation is the order of connectedness, New Zealand is an exceptionally close society is a key affective element of the Kiwi imagined community—evoking tolerance, a shared set of values, a cosy, hobbit-like condition of rubbing together. The Pākehā experience of being a colony remote from the 'Mother' country and dependent on neighbours in a similar situation is an important historical factor, reinforced by the experiences of each new wave of immigrants. In addition, the prominence given to Māori culture through the official policy of bi-culturalism suggests a similarly close-knit social texture. Māori and cognate Pasifika cultures are marked by a strong emphasis on the extended family and kinship and a degree of interconnectedness not found in the Pākehā mainstream.

But a small population size alone by no means ensures connectedness and certainly not commonality of vision and purpose. So, for example, a survey of the New Zealand workplace found four degrees of separation, closer than the presumed global average of six degrees, but this closeness was within cliques that excluded others (McGibbon, 2008). The development of the internet and social media is popularly seen as creating a universal gregariousness. Yet even on-line gregariousness is a function of exclusivity. Likewise, a study of online communities found that among professional researchers, the degree of separation was three. But this closeness was once again based on exclusive professional ties rather than a sweeping embrace of everyone (Zang & Tu, 2009).

Such findings are broadly in line with research that suggests that as a general phenomenon, the small-world conception lacks empirical validity. For such a small world to operate would imply that the social capital and strong ties created by social divisions such as class, occupation and race were somehow swept aside (Kleinfeld, 2002). In New Zealand's case, the very fact that bi-culturalism is the keystone of government policy ironically confirms

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the reality of internal cultural distance, not the least because the symbolism of a special compact between Pākeha and Māori hints at the exclusion of other cultures and ethnicities.

New Zealand is geographically compact. But it is not uniformly an open, pervasively neighbourly, society. Steep inequalities of race, class, gender and lifestyle play out in a close proximity much as they do in American cities like Philadelphia. Away from Auckland's urban sprawl, geographically remote enclaves of affluence are forming as ramparts of inequality, fuelled by the ambitions of foreign buyers such as James Cameron and Shania Twain. Social data indicate that socio-economic inequality is growing, yet this remains a 'shamefaced' fact barely acknowledged in the media or the academy and moreover, public opinion shows a trend towards greater acceptance of it (Edwards, 2010). But the divisive consequences of cheek-by-jowl inequalities are obscured by an enduring myth of an imagined community based on ingenuity and world-class achievement.

It is in the media and particularly in the realm of commercial speech that the small-world metaphor has imaginative traction. As a popular television commercial of the 1990s for a locally made soft drink, Lemon and Paeroa, claimed, it was 'world famous in New Zealand'. This slogan has become a kind of Kiwi proverb and a patriotic litmus test. Loyal Kiwis recognise a world-class standard despite the absence of global recognition. Indeed, as the commercial still available on You Tube ironically suggests, if New Zealand were the only nation in the world, L & P would indeed be world famous.

What such a resonant example evokes is a well-established popular discourse of local accomplishment, a kind of roll call of excellence by the reporting media that identifies Kiwi products and firms as world class—ranging from headlines about the beef in an expensive Mayfair burger being from New Zealand to the more substantial examples of Sir Peter Jackson's film-making or the successes of the All Blacks; stories which serve to nurture local patriotism and succour the desire to work together and applaud the accomplishment of global eminence. In the case of a material mass commodity, the concept of achieving a world-class standard can rest on subjectively neutral objective qualities—taste, beneficial ingredients and so on. Indeed what proud Kiwi can forget that in 1969 L & P won the British Bottlers Award? And conversely what proud Kiwi would not sooner forget the damage done to the clean green imagery of '100% pure' by the unfolding Fonterra milk scandal?

But where the celebrity system is a focus of evaluation, notions of worth or desert are complicated. Richie McCaw is objectively a world-class rugby player but how do his undoubted strengths and skills translate into a recommendation for a fast-swiping credit card? This one example can stand for an entire genre of sports stars' endorsements, parlaying the fame of field and track into the earning portfolios of celebrities. Again, nice assessments attend notions of worth and appropriateness—for athletes, the physical toll on the body and an inevitably short career might see endorsements as a form of compensation (Paul, 2013). Again, the dearth of employment opportunities in a small media market means that 'iconic' Kiwi stars—like Karl Urban, Cliff Curtis have to go to Hollywood, or to Australia, like Danielle Cormack—in order to build a career and so become signifiers of absence or deracinated Kiwis. Or conversely, what to say of local celebrity bigwig, Paul Henry, who failed in Hollywood and Australia?

As these examples demonstrate, behind the mantra of 'world class' lurks an ethics of representation, infused by patriotic pride. This conjures up issues of standing for or not standing for, of the legitimacy of transferring the aura of the self or the product into a commercial pitch and the difficult matter of assessing talents, intentions and, even more complex, the strength of loyalty—to the market or to local values. Another way to express this is to ask—How do celebrities use their charisma? Behind which lurks another question—How should they?

Charisma and its uses

Charisma is an ancient Greek term for a gift of grace or of nature, marked by the appearance of individuals whose unique talents, exceptionally attractive personalities and physical attributes command the loyalty of followers and fans. In popular journalism, terms like 'hot' or 'the X factor' are synonyms, though charisma has entered into common usage. Charisma implies a definite social relationship between leaders and followers where power is exercised on a personal basis. In sociology, Max Weber was one of the first to explore the elements of charismatic power which he contrasted with collective forms of authority—those based on pre-modern traditions and, increasingly with the development of capitalism, on legal-rational forms of authority. Weber's overall concern was with the conflicts between these forms of authority: charisma, associated with irrationality, prophecy and social disruption threatened existing religious institutions and traditional values as well the

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rational forms of bureaucracy associated with modernity. On the other hand, should charismatic forms of leadership be stifled by tradition and especially, bureaucracy, then a key source of inspiration and change would expire in the 'iron cage' of the present.

The conflict between charisma and organisation is a key theme in Weber's historical sociology of power and has generated an extensive literature. The main point here is the potential conflict between the individual and the collective that charismatic leadership involves. Classically, the charismatic prophet or leader as an outsider challenges the existing religious or political order and the common-sense view of the world that is engendered by it. Contemporary celebrities, as Boorstin suggests, are not cast in this heroic world-remaking mould. They are rather examples of what Weber called routinised charisma, an organisationally produced image of otherworldly or divine forces (Turner, 2003). Still there remains a trace of the charismatic hero in the image of action stars and even more substantially, in the notion of the divinely inspired entrepreneur or CEO, though arguably in both these cases we have charismatic authority as style rather than the full substance of heroism (Kantola, 2009).

In a Pacific context, and particularly in reference to New Zealand's formal commitment to bi-culturalism and the relative proximity of outstanding individuals to ordinary people, the relationship between the exceptional individual and the rest challenges notions of community. Culturally this is apparent if we consider the Oceanic and Māori concept of mana which despite differences, shares a common view of the sources of the prestige and charisma that attaches to individuals. Mana has three intersecting dimensions. The mana that accrues to one because of his or her family background or whakapapa; the mana that people attribute to one on the basis of accomplishments—though these may partake of a collective contribution; and the mana that accrues to one as a member of a group—for example, of whanau, hapu or iwi (Tikana, 2013). Again, this concept also emphasises modesty rather than enthusiastic self-promotion. As the Māori proverb puts it: 'The kumara does not talk about its own sweetness'.

The decisive feature of mana is that these aspects cannot be compartmentalised but ethically redound on and reverberate with each other in a spiral of honour and virtue. In contrast, the Westernised concept of celebrity defines mana (without using the exact term) as a solipsistic set of individual attributes and properties, which—keeping faith with neoliberalism—is defined by

market performance and commercial effectiveness. A more local consideration of fame as *mana* might avoid the moral puree of self-interest. But, as already suggested, Westernised celebrity only blooms from a divorce from local or contextual obligations. The resultant—a narcissistic form of ‘well-knownness’—trumpets, with help from spin-doctors and personal management apparatchiks, its own sweetness. If a concern for visibility, for celebrity, masks a concern for equality, how is this mask holding up? (Michaels, 2008). How is hobbyist cosiness faring?

A crisis of trust?

Since 2004, *The New Zealand Reader's Digest* has commissioned a public opinion poll to answer the question, ‘Who do we trust?’. Comparing the results over time, certain features stand out. First, that the most trusted professions are those involved in public service (doctors, nurses, emergency rescuers and fire fighters), the armed services—represented by the personal presence of SAS hero Willie Apiata—and sport. CEOs and entrepreneurs consistently (and increasingly, from 2008 forward) rank lower on the trust scale. Again, the poll of 2011 proclaimed celebrity as a profession, rated at 37 out of 50—it then disappeared. Too much should not be made of individual fluctuations but, for example, Sir Stephen Tindall at 28 in 2009 is down to 65 in 2011. He makes a comeback in 2013 to 37 when Graeme Hart, topping the 2013 Rich List, is at 84. Nor is it surprising to hear Eric Watson weighing in at 62 on the most trusted list in 2008, is not even on the list in 2013. It seems a bad time for the captains of commerce and heroes of industry. A comment on the 2009 results detected a trend which somewhat optimistically was blamed on foreign influence:

The group that showed a distinct decline was CEOs ... It's concerning that corporate leaders are where they are, given we need a vibrant, positive economy at present ... However, this could be just a reflection of the fallout from some of the major international business failures and the unscrupulous management practices of many senior managers overseas. (*Readers Digest*, 2009)

One interpretation is that this trend simply reflects the Tall Poppy syndrome:

I've copped a bit of flak since I've been back, usually along the lines of, ‘Any more big bold predictions, Eric?’ It seems some people found

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our media conference last July, where we outlined an ambitious new vision for the Vodafone NZ Warriors, quite controversial. Especially when we went on to drop eight straight games in a row.

Put your head above water in this country and it's inevitable someone will be looking to push it back down in the hope you'll drown in a sea of humiliation. (Watson 2013)

Sport, of course, is a field of dreams where a lack of optimism is unbecoming. Still, the evocation of a politics of envy would be stronger if based on demonstrated success. Public resentment of Eric Watson may depend less on his successes or failures than to the perception of his personality as a media celebrity. The traditional Kiwi preference for a modest and humble demeanour and commitment to public service, evident in the *Readers Digest* polls, is for some the source of a social problem. A taste for modesty might diminish admiration for entrepreneurs—even those who, in a hot-flash of self-congratulation, oversell themselves. Paradoxically, a country perceived internationally as being highly entrepreneurial seems to resent the entrepreneur as a social type (Kirkwood, 2007, p. 367). This returns us to the consideration of how neo-liberalism skews the notion of success towards self-interest and away from stewardship and collective interest—the latter enshrining the connection between the highest levels of trust and the service for others.

If public trust is the central focus then this is not a good time for it. There is an increasing encroachment of scandal into the precincts of the New Zealand rich and famous. For the heroes of investment, 2012 saw an 18 percent increase in investigations by the Serious Fraud Office with eight finance companies—South Canterbury, Bridgecorp, Capital and Merchant, Five Star, Dominion Finance, Belgrave, National and Rockforte Finance—charged or convicted. In addition, Datasouth Finance and Lane Walker & Rudkin have been charged with fraud. These combined cases, involving fraud by high prestige figures (for example, Sir Douglas Graham, Lombard) constituted losses in excess of \$2.2 billion to investors. As the CEO of SFO, Simon Freeley, observed: 'All frauds are crimes against our economy and as such affect us all' (Freeley 2012).

In another high-profile case, Hanover Finance, the SFO has abandoned its investigation because of insufficient evidence to meet the comprehensive standard of proof. However, the Financial Markets Authority is undertaking civil action against six former Hanover directors and promoters—Mark Hotchin, Eric Watson, Greg Muir, Sir Tipene O'Regan, Bruce Gordon and

Dennis Broit—in an effort to compensate investors who put \$35 million into the Hanover consortium between December 2007 and July 22, 2008 (*NBR*, 2013).

Such examples of proven corporate malfeasance, along with other cases of fraud and allegations of cronyism and influence such as the Glenngate and Alan Ross saga, are not just blots on the escutcheon of entrepreneurialism. They suggest the moral infirmity of the corporate self-congratulating espousal of self-interest over responsible stewardship; an infirmity not defused by incantations of populist envy and tall-poppyism. What besmirches the halls of entrepreneurialism finds an answering echo in the realm of media celebrity and talk scandals. Most poignant of all, given the emblematic function of the reality television show *The Apprentice*, that catechism of neo-liberalism, is the case of Terry Serepisos (Couldry & Littler, 2011). Selected for his entrepreneurial charisma as the rising Kiwi surrogate for Donald Trump, Serepisos served for 13 weeks as a poster-boy for business success, inducting aspirants into the rigours of enterprise when not telling them to quit the contest. Alas, when Serepisos was subsequently declared bankrupt, he was revealed as not being the paragon of enterprise his celebrity required. The winner of *Apprentice New Zealand*, Thomas Ben, initially singing the praises of Serepisos, found his job, BMW and luxury accommodation turning to ashes (Jacobson, 2010). Serepisos, when last sighted, was preparing to jumpstart his career in that Valhalla of failed Kiwis, Los Angeles (TV3 news, 2011).

If being a businessman celebrity contains its own risks, professional entertainers have not stinted on their contribution to ‘talk scandals’. Local ‘motor mouth’ Paul Henry has offered his opinions on a variety of topics—the ugliness of facial hair on females, on Susan Boyle’s ‘retarded’ looks, that the name of the Minister for Delhi, Sheila Dikshit, was not only convulsively funny but an entirely appropriate name for an Indian, that the then-Governor-General, Sir Anand Satyand, might not be ‘a New Zealander’ and, during his unsuccessful conquest of the Australian media, that asylum seekers should be accommodated in linen cupboards, provided great care was taken to remove the linen beforehand to prevent soiling. The late Sir Paul Holmes, of revered memory, called the then-Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, a ‘cheeky dardy’, referred to Māori party co-leader, Tariana Turia as a ‘confused bag of lard’; ‘a bully’ who ‘folded under pressure’ and who did not have the ‘guts to vote’; as being ‘all mouth and no trousers, all talk and no walk’ and a ‘complete fool’; and, to round out things Māori, described Waitangi Day

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as ‘loony Māori fringe self-denial day’, underscoring the ‘hopeless failure of Māori to educate their children and stop them bashing their babies’ (Robins, 2012). Tony Veitch, sports commentator, compared the US African-American tennis star, Serena Williams, to a monkey and was later found guilty of assaulting his partner, Kristin Dunne-Powell. He also subsequently misrepresented supporting character references, from apparently gullible, but eminent New Zealanders, in order to seek mitigation at sentencing (*Stuff*, 2008).

What is noteworthy is that these breaches of professionalism by the Knights Templar of Kiwi journalism—not to mention human decency—if followed in Henry’s and Veitch’s cases by resignation, did not ultimately end their broadcasting careers. Holmes soldiered on to a sad end and a knighthood. Such examples of the durability of name despite behaviour pinpoint the triumph of marketability over virtue, of the media profile over mana. What is perhaps more depressing than the behaviour itself is that a significant proportion of the New Zealand public by default, if not positively, supports this forgive-and-forget policy as did the award of the 2010 Qantas’ People’s Choice Award to Henry who exercised his considerable vocal powers to shock in his acceptance speech (*Stuff*, 2010). The ducking and diving and selective recall evident in such examples links back to the dissociation between a colourful personality that is marketable and the actual content of behaviour—a distant echo, to be sure, of the role of the media in blurring fame and infamy.

If we recall that Paul Henry or Paul Holmes have been depicted as populist ventriloquists and all-round cheeky chaps telling it like it is rather than as racist loudmouths, it is striking how far the logic of New Zealand celebrity has progressed from the days of that great Kiwi icon, Sir Edmund Hillary:

I was just an enthusiastic mountaineer of modest abilities who was willing to work quite hard and had the necessary imagination and determination. I was just an average bloke; it was the media that transformed me into a heroic figure. And try as I did, there was no way to destroy my heroic image. But as I learned through the years, as long as you didn’t believe all that rubbish about yourself, you wouldn’t come to much harm. (Hillary quoted by Ward, 2000)

The ultimate scandal of the New Zealand media today may be that there is no ultimate scandal that is not a spiffy media profile and a nice little earner.

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