

Engage Podcast e14.

Celebrities in the Headlines: Celebrity PR in the 1990s

Mark Phillimore

Welcome to this Engage podcast by the CIPR, the Chartered Institute of Public Relations. This podcast is on the rise of spin, power and celebrity in the 1990s and explores the changing nature and influence of celebrities. This is part of a series celebrating 75 years of the professional body and exploring the history of the profession and practice.

I'm delighted that we're joined by author, columnist, historian of film, publicity and influential PR practitioner, Mark Borkowski. Mark, with his knowledge and history of the profession, particularly with his interest in film, publicity and celebrity, is ideally placed to navigate our exploration of the 1990s. I notice his own PR consultancy, Borkowski, now has a strap line, We are a communications agency which truly understands the power of the crowd. Would a statement like this be relevant in the 1990s? We will find out.

I'm also delighted to welcome Rob McGibbon, a journalist, celebrity interviewer, and author. After writing for National Newspaper since 1986, Rob has a unique insight into the workings of the media and a formable network of high-level contacts. Alongside writing, Rob also currently works as a communication strategist for celebrities, leading business figures and brands.

I'm Mark Phillimore, your host for the podcast. I'm a former PR practitioner in the tech and corporate sectors, not celebrity. However, I then became an academic at the University of Greenwich, where I'm based. I've developed courses incorporating celebrity PR and film publicity PR with a particular focus on celebrity culture and the interest in celebrity by other social science disciplines. Let's start and perhaps, Mark, you could give us a scene setting. What was the context of PR and comms in the 1990s?

Mark Borkowski

To understand the 1990s, one has to think about the zeitgeist of the time. It was certainly the rise of celebrity as a brand. I think that the day that Victoria Beckham, when she was asked about her ambition when she was on a junket with The Spice Girls, and she said that she wants to be more famous than Persil Automatic. I think this was the beginning of the age where celebrities perceived that their collateral, their presence could be exploited. That was a lot to do with the work of Lynn Franks's agency at the time with fashion, aligning celebrity endorsement, particularly outside of traditional fashion worlds and the rise of sports figures who were generating a huge amount of attention at the time. This was driven really by the aggressive nature of the tabloids and the Murdoch effect, particularly of publications like The Sun. What was interesting to me, trying to explain to young PR practitioners that in fact, newspapers, pre-digital pre-the-rise of social media channels had incredible reach. That was the mass reach you needed. While the television programs were across only four channels, there wasn't the splintering of broadcast. Saturday Night TV had millions of eyeballs and newspapers like The Sun and The Mail and even The Broadsheets had phenomenal readership because that's how we collected our news. News wasn't free at the time. So all this made what I felt in the 90s and PR was changing was the commodification of celebrity that

actually infiltrated not into the homes through the industrial strengths of newspapers, but also the commercial value of which you could derive from your presence across that media.

Mark Phillipmore

Rob, what's your perspective from journalism at the time?

Rob McGibbon

Well, in the late '80s, I was working as a news reporter on The Sun. I wasn't directly involved in the celebrity market, but I saw certain stories hitting the papers at the time, which I would find out later had a dramatic impact on the connection between celebrities and PR. In 1987, The Sun did their big expose, which was meant to be an exposé, of Elton John and Rent Boys, which collided into the libel action which The Sun lost a year later. I then joined The Sun in 1989 as a showbiz writer. And by then, the landscape had completely or was starting to change completely in terms of the connection with the tabloids and celebrities. There's a lot closer collusion, which was necessitated by the fact that basically the Sun was banned from contacting most celebrities at the time because of the Elton John fallout. Things really started to change in the late '80s, which obviously affected what was to come in the '90s.

Mark Borkowski

I think it's interesting to also talk about that time, is the fact that I think the PR world was very benign. It wasn't very aggressive. In fact, it was built on very cosy relationships. As soon as celebrities were becoming news, hitting the front pages, then that then changed into pretty aggressive tactics because that would bring eyeballs, that would bring readers to the paper. Therefore, a lot of the old school, gentle PR was actually upset by the new aggression that went into that. I remember a journalist called me up one day about a client and saying to me, We don't like your client anymore, Mark. We're going to bring him down. That was a tax that you were having to deal with. The other interesting thing was that the effect of the tabloidisation of celebrity actually leached into the broadsheets. I think that was a lot to do with Julie Burchill and Toby Young's publication, Modern Times, which had a more intellectual point of view on what had been really tabloid culture. So in terms of pop and music, film, they brought a quasi-academic approach and that still had some effect from the old Inkies, like the New Music Express, which by then had trained people like Bertrand and thrown like Sir Tony Parsons into the mainstream. I think when the broadsheets started putting what I would call tabloid celebrities who have the aesthetic looks to make the front page of the Telegraph, I could see a profound change coming then that one had to really be quite cute about how deals were struck and how this became a much more transactional relationship between the power that you had representing people that would get into the papers, as opposed to benignly just facilitating a junket or an interview.

Mark Phillipmore

Just looking at how celebrity was changing in this time, because I think one of the things looking at your book, Mark, about Hollywood, the culture of celebrity there, it was a very controlled one. And I think what's coming through in both your descriptions is this was a very aggressive culture in some ways, but also perhaps was it one that, as you said in your book, that there weren't enough major celebrities? So, of course, we are seeing really the growth of micro-celebrities, reality TV. And Rob, would you say that the newspapers were really deciding who is a celebrity or were they generating this particular focus? Because, of course, there was such a demand from their readership for coverage of celebrities.

Rob McGibbon

I did several big interviews in The Sun that could only have happened with copy approval. There's been certain ramifications from that because their PR has started or certainly did back then get the upper hand. I'm sure Mark has had experience of this where if you've got the right celebrity that has a big appeal to the newspapers, you can end up running the show a bit more than if it's just someone desperate to get in a paper.

Mark Phillimore

Yeah. I mean, Mark, it might be worth what's your perspective on copy approval? It might be worth giving an overview of what copy approval means.

Mark Borkowski

Well, just before I go into copy approval, which is we could do an entire podcast on copy approval and the rules for copy approval. But it's about control, going back to what Rob said there and touching on your introduction, the studio system that existed in Hollywood between roughly the end of the '30s right the way through until post-war, is that the commodity was the celebrity, the big star that a studio owned. They owned that person and therefore they could run that person's life. It was a commercial transaction and therefore protecting those from negative publicity, and therefore the power that the studio publicist had over keeping the negative stories out was a commercial decision because they wanted to keep their staff fresh, so they were popular in Middle of America. What happened as the studio system broke up and the rise of TV, particularly in the '60s and in the '70s, was that the American media became incredibly terrified of British tabloids, and therefore there were less and less access to celebrities without a deal. Then we saw towards the end of the '90s, the rise of what I call the reality show Stars, which was a very cheap commodity exploited by the likes of OK, particularly in extending the life of these.

Therefore, you had to do deals. When an interview took place, you were then left to the interpretation of that journalist to your client in that room. If that journalist, going back to what Rob said, didn't like or was wound up or felt that they could use the interview to generate their own celebrity by taking the interview as a scalp, we lost control. Therefore, if it was an A-list celebrity who could actually put readership on a newspaper, then the deal changed because the trust was lost by the aggression that happened in the late '80s, early '90s. Publicists had to strike a deal. Copy approval means that you get to see, and you can affect any changes to that interview. It started off by asking for accuracy. The fact that whatever was said in an interview, we wanted to double-check and make sure that it wasn't spun or nuanced in a certain way. Then you rose to say, no, that isn't working. I want to see the interview. Sometimes copy approval could mean veto, rarely, but sometimes. Of course, as soon as copy approval came into play, it was a terrible set of set of conflicts between the two professions. It is more prevalent now, and I argue that that is perhaps why you get vanilla, inane interviews that are geographical that actually do not connect with the audience. I used to say to my clients, we've always got to add a little bit of grit in the oyster. You've got to have some remark or story that you throw in that would generate news interest, because for me as a publicist, I wanted to see my clients of the cultural pages, of the celebrity pages, of the... And I wanted them to make news. I wanted to be on the front page. And to do that, then you had to come up with a strategy, work with a client, and actually throw something in that would actually be powerful. But

copy approval, which is even more prevalent today, is some sense, an idea of the hierarchy that the publicist has control. And of course, there are occasions where that has been agreed and not fulfilled. And of course, we have seen blacklists where particularly American publicity companies will actually not allow a certain title. There are still. I was working with an A-list celebrity a couple of weeks ago, and I was dumbfounded that he refused to speak to any Murdoch-owned press. I haven't heard that from a while, and that's because now, celebrities have their control over their own information channels, Instagram in particular, where they can curate their story to their fans.

Mark Phillipmore

That's a very interesting insight for in modern practice. But Rob, coming back to you, did you have experience of copy approval? But take it further on in terms of relationships you found dealing with celebrity PR practitioners? What was your experience in the 1990s?

Rob McGibbon

I've been in celebrity journalism since 1988, so I've worked with hundreds and hundreds of PRs and hundreds of celebrities. PR, journalism, and newspapers is a very strange dance, and it's all about finding a way to move comfortably together. In terms of copy approval, I haven't done much of it. Sometimes there's no alternative, but the way I've always worked is from a position of trust, and the trust is with me and the celebrity.

Celebrity, I work with direct or through the PR, who I know well, that begins and ends with a position of trust. If I do an interview, number one, I'm not going to claim a scalp, which is what Mark referred to, because then the door closes. As a freelance, there's no point. There's hardly one celebrity I've interviewed over the years. I don't think I could probably get to again. I haven't slammed those doors shut. It's about creating a working situation based on trust. If you have that trust, you don't really need to give copy approval. I had a weekly interview column in the Daily Mail for seven and a half years, 370 columns. I think I gave copy approval to maybe two or three people in that whole time, which that's a very small fraction of people. So it's just about finding a position of trust and working together. The journalist and the PRs, we're all trying to get to the same place.

Mark Phillipmore

So just looking ahead in terms of the negotiating skills in terms of working with media, what insights would you have about how that worked in the 1990s, perhaps in terms of how it is different today?

Mark Borkowski

Well, I have an expression which I use all the time, which is everything is different, everything's the same. What Rob touched on there, it is about relationships. It's about strategy, it's about consideration, it's about understanding the media that you work in and understanding people. It is building up trust through relationships. That doesn't change. I don't think that's ever changed at all.

If you understand and you're talking to people and you have a relationship with senior editors, columnists, even interviewers, you know what they like. You've spent time with them. The difficulty that we have here, and I'm standing like a slight dinosaur now, that the speed of communication demands people to negotiate in text message. I refuse to do that. If a journalist rings me up and wants to do something, I said, Here is my number, call me. I have to speak to them, have to understand them. That could be the same as an influencer, that could be the same as someone running an influential Instagram site or whatever it is, TikTok, I need to speak to them. I need to understand who they are as a human and that never changes. It's about building relationship with

people over a time. I am dealing with something at the moment today, and I'm dealing with someone I dealt with when I was 20 years old, who was then on a local newspaper who is now sitting in a very senior role in a broadsheet newspaper. He and I will always break the conversation with it. I try and see him as regularly as I possibly can with all my contacts. Time is very precious, but it's about building relationships. The more technology and publicists and PR people have been the first to embrace technology, whether it was using the Telegram, whether it was a matrix printer, whether it was a mail merge, whether it was a computer, whether it was social, whether it's AI or ChatGPT now, it's about how you use these tools to enhance your ability, not replace, common sense, strategy, experience, and more important, building those relationships, because the people you deal with today are going to be someone who perhaps will go on to other things. Now we're seeing the disintegration of what Rob and I have grown up with that no longer has the impact that it once did.

Rob McGibbon

Speak for yourself.

Mark Borkowski

Come on, I have.

Rob McGibbon

I have plenty of impact, thanks, Mark.

Mark Borkowski

No, you know what I mean? I mean, come on, Rob. We could argue here for hours. A story in the sun is not making the same impact as it did when it was the height of its powers. It's a different type of impact and you have to bring in different elements to ensure that you turbo-charge your message or you control it or deal with a crisis. But the point is, it will always come down to those issues and the way you behave, the way that you help people, because as a publicist, you're enabling. You are there as a conduit and also the way that you have a sensible relationship with your client and whether or not you can actually deliver. I once described the work as protecting my clients from doing really stupid things because now we're seeing many mistakes are driven not only by inexperienced practitioners in the business, but allowing celebrities to be unguarded and doing something off the top of a bat or whatever. Through it, the conciliary, the person that's been close to the client has to earn that trust with the people they're dealing with on the other side of the fence.

It's a two way street and it can be lost in an instant by doing something either that is duplicitous, stupid, self-serving, or lying. One has to find a balance, particularly when a journalist is coming at a celebrity, to be able to deliver back to that celebrity and try and get them to understand what the crisis that they're in a crisis, because there's a lot of people that surround celebrities who are on a percentage. Therefore, if their client is still making lots of money, they're taking a high percentage. They're the first people to desert a celebrity when it no longer can provide the income from that percentage. Therefore, there's a lot of people who will allow celebrities. I'm not saying anything, but we can see certain people in power at the moment who perhaps need guidance because there are plenty of bones bleached on the highway of celebrity for these carcasses that have actually been devoured because of their own stupidity.

Mark Phillipmore

Okay, looking at the press, looking at media, looking at PR as gatekeepers. So Rob, did you sense any change in power of the gatekeeping role of the media during the 1990s, from the start to the finish? Any perspectives from your position?

Rob McGibbon

Yeah, to reinforce what Mark said is all about personal relationships and trust, as I mentioned earlier. But also, I think there has to be a degree of perspective. PRs and journalists dealing in the showbiz, celebrity world, please just keep perspective. Sometimes you get into heated arguments about this, that and the other. We're dealing with a celebrity talking about a product, whether it's an album, a tour, or a book. You've got to keep perspective. And I say that to PRs quite often if they get a little bit fussy about what we talk about, what we don't talk about, I just say, look, I'm going to go there and do an interview. Just calm down, keep perspective. I'm not going to stitch anyone up.

Mark Phillipmore

Rob, what's interesting is you've been a writer of a number of celebrity books. Did that really start in the 1990s? And is that perhaps an indication of how celebrity culture was spreading into other forms of culture, such as printed books?

Rob McGibbon

Well, the celebrity autobiography has been around forever. I started doing it simply because I had a couple of really hot ideas that I wanted to do, so I left the Sun to do a book on New Kids on the Block, which was a massive international success, and that put me on that road. And basically I wanted to get a career in publishing and writing books. In terms of the PR involvement, books aren't really relevant, but in terms of newspapers and media, PRs are ever present by the nature of protecting and advising their clients. I know, Mark, you want to talk about the 90s. I'm trying to really work out what really changed. And I suppose the key thing, and Mark touched on this, the key thing that's really different now from the 90s is that a celebrity does have access to correct the record, whatever's going on through social media, or in fact, to guide the narrative through social media.

What I've noticed lately, and the David Beckham Netflix series brings us right up to date, is there you have the new way of doing PR in the most glorious, ridiculous fashion. Because this Netflix documentary, which I watched the first episode nearly the other night, my goodness, that is one long PRfest. From all the celebrities that he reels out. There's no one asking any tough questions or inquiring as to what really went on at a certain time. So there you go. There's a living embodiment of PR on a grand scale for a celebrity.

Mark Phillipmore

Yeah, the power of streaming media. And certainly, of course, I know Formula One felt that their involvement with Netflix made a huge impact on the US market and the popularity of Formula 1 now in the US.

Rob McGibbon

Yeah.

Mark Phillipmore

One thing we ought to just cover because, of course, in the 1990s, a lot of discussion about phone hacking. And I'm assuming that phone hacking was particularly focused in the celebrity area. And I just wondered, Rob, what's your perception on it looking back now?

Rob McGibbon

It's a bizarre one. I mean, it's nothing that I was involved in, obviously, because I sit down with celebrities and interview them face to face or on the phone. It was essentially a news and a gossip column operation initially, I believe. I don't know. It's such a big subject, Mark.

Mark Borkowski

I think from my perspective, it was a commercial thing. To a certain extent, technology comes in and there's a cynical and an illegal way of bypassing the publicist, bypassing relationships, bypassing the expense account. No longer do you have to go the long route to actually get a story. Also it was the rise of what I call petty publicist, particularly Americans who were not confronting the difficult moment, but just being obstructive. When you set up obstacles, newspapers at the time were ingenious in the dark way to find a way around that, to find a way of actually getting past the barriers that existed because it became much more industrialized there in terms of the way that all celebrities were harvested, the fact that you couldn't get a list. And there was a lot of stories purported were absolute fake. I think newspapers are sick and tired that they couldn't get at the real stories. What we've seen since then, justifiable, is the justice that many people received because many lives were destroyed by the stress of what they went through. Rob touches on the Beckham documentary on Netflix. I think what's quite interesting was the level of hate that existed for David Beckham at the time because of the because of what happened in the World Cup in France. But I think it was a way of undermining the power of PR, which was growing then.

And going back to the other point of Rob, is that there were just some really bad, and there still is, some very bad practitioners in the craft who will not do the difficult thing, which is actually having a sensible conversation with their client and actually being experienced enough to actually say, Come on, let's have a conversation about this. This is a reality.

Mark Phillipmore

Okay. One of the things just picking up on celebrity, and I think, Mark, you raised it early on, but I just wondered, Rob, your perception as a journalist is colleagues at Greenwich have highlighted that there was a lot more use of celebrity associated with brands and the whole what we would call influencer marketing now. And I just wondered, Rob, if you were aware of that in your celebrity stories, perhaps it was coming to you via the brand PR people who were leading the story, the thing that's very common now, but I believe was more innovative in its time in the 1990s .

Rob McGibbon

I remember I was sent up to Glenn Eagles in Scotland to interview Stephen Hendry, the snooker player for Sunday magazine, which was the supplement of the news to the world at the time. I did the interview, took a photographer up there. I just remembered that the agent, not the PR, but the agent absolutely freaked out when the magazine came out because the magazine had airbrushed out the logo on his T-shirt. And of course, what we didn't know, and this comes back to the point Mark mentioned about communicating, what we didn't know the magazine is that he had done a deal with the manufacturer of the T-shirt, the sports brand, to be on the cover of Sunday magazine. And, of course, the whole thing, from the agent's point of view, collapsed because they didn't get the PR they wanted.

Which brings me on to, I think the best takeaway from this conversation is, if you're a PR, it's all about communication and trust. You've got to talk to your client with absolute, be totally frank with them what you can and can't do. And also communicate with the journalist. If you are straight talking with the journalist, he will be straight with you. I just think it really comes down to that. I've survived in the business by being straight with people, being honest. So you've got to have those conversations. I do know a manager of a big influencer run agency, and the deals they do are quite incredible. Quite incredible.

Mark Borkowski

I think that's down to the role of which newspapers and their online titles now are dependent on advertising. Because in the old days it was straight down big advertising campaigns around brand, be it whatever the house or good or a car or whatever. Now, they have to integrate that because advertising just does not have the same impact. The idea that once the advertising department was separated from the editorial department, there's much more integration now, and that was the beginning to happen in what we used to call advertorials in magazines were starting to slip into newspapers. And of course, beer brands particularly, and also tech companies, were dealing with celebrity endorsements. And if that part of the deal would be to promote the brand, that might be an interview. And sometimes that could be something as a name, as a plug at the end of it, or could be integrated into the piece. I think it's a blurring of those lines that started to happen then that accelerated through the naughties are prevalent today in terms of how clever the type of deal that can be done across marketing and advertising within a paper or a magazine or a website.

Mark Phillimore

Now what I want to do is really look forward or look back and see what lessons are there for journalism and also for celebrity journalism, celebrity PR from the 1990s in terms of current practice. So Rob, give us your view in terms of celebrity journalism now. But what would your take be, Rob, on what lessons are there from the 1990s for current day PR practitioners?

Rob McGibbon

The 90s, Mark, in terms of a say as a freelance journalist, were the heydays. I had so much work, there were so many options. You had newspapers that are four times the size they are today, many, many spreads every day. So there's a lot to go for, a lot of money to be earned. It's a completely different landscape now. In terms of the lessons it's just that everything is spread so much more thinly now. The day when the cover on one magazine then a spreader in a newspaper would do the PR with a few bits on radio is long gone. Everything is spread out. It's so spread out you might be able to build something from a piece in the FT or the Times and then one tabloid, and then you've got to do all the social media. So in terms of the lessons, I think you've just got to be nimble. You've got to be ready to work across all platforms. I think you've got to be more inventive. You've got to be able to use Instagram and Twitter as well as you can use The Sun, or The Daily Mail, or Sunday Times magazine.

You've got to be nimble and you've got to be open minded. I think you've really got to just be ready to take on new avenues of challenge. As a journalist now, as a freelancer now, I have to be across so many different things to make something work. And you've got to... It's laughable, Mark, and I talk about it because we are from a certain era, but you have to move for the times or you will die. I know so many freelancers that are no longer in business. They've given up, because all they could do back in the day was a TV listings magazine. Those guys don't pay anymore, so that's finished. So I'd say you've got to be nimble as a PR. You've got to be open minded and move with the times.

Mark P

Great. And, Mark, what's your take?

Mark Borkowski

My take is, again, nothing really changes the medium and the way we use the various channels to communicate has changed, and therefore, as Rob said, you have to integrate every aspect. You have to be not just a single channel focus, but actually how you're going to strategize each of those channels to integrate. The thing now is you've always had to be inventive. You've always had to be creative, really, to be truly successful. But more than anything else, it is the speed of which things work at now, which leads you sometimes so behind the crowd.

I've always believed that the crowd is where we had to communicate to. But the thing is we also have to remember how quickly things dissipate. In the old days, things hung around for quite a long time that you could bathe in the success of your campaign for some weeks no longer. It's gone the next day. You have to find a way of elongating your message, having action upon action upon action because the great unwashed, the masses, the crowd, the herd have a long-term amnesia around issues and a short term attention span.

We are just being funnelled with messages and ideas and memes and trends all the time. So how do you raise your head above that noise and create a profound signal that generates connection and arcs all those different channels into understanding what your client wants to communicate.

Mark Phillimore

Well, thanks very much, Mark. Thanks very much, Rob. I think we've had some very interesting insights for a very important period of time, both for media and for PR in terms of the 1990s. And I'd like to thank, as I say, both Mark and Rob very much for their insights about this. I would also like to thank the CIPR, and I would like to thank all the listeners. Thanks very much.