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Self-Exposure: Human-Interest Journalism and the Emergence of Celebrity in America, 1890-1940

Charles L. Ponce de Leon

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Few features of contemporary American culture are as widely lamented as the public's obsession with celebrity--and the trivializing effect this obsession has on what appears as news. Nevertheless, America's "culture of celebrity" remains misunderstood, particularly when critics discuss its historical roots.

In this pathbreaking book, Charles Ponce de Leon provides a new interpretation of the emergence of celebrity. Focusing on the development of human-interest journalism about prominent public figures, he illuminates the ways in which new forms of press coverage gradually undermined the belief that famous people were "great," instead encouraging the public to regard them as complex, interesting, even flawed individuals and offering readers seemingly intimate glimpses of the "real" selves that were presumed to lie behind the calculated, self-promotional fronts that celebrities displayed in public. But human-interest journalism about celebrities did more than simply offer celebrities a new means of gaining publicity or provide readers with the "inside dope," says Ponce de Leon. In chapters devoted to celebrities from the realms of business, politics, entertainment, and sports, he shows how authors of celebrity journalism used their writings to weigh in on subjects as wide-ranging as social class, race relations, gender roles, democracy, political reform, self-expression, material success, competition, and the work ethic, offering the public a new lens through which to view these issues.

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