

Analyzing Heath Ledger's Celebrity Death Narrative



Heath Ledger, 28, 'Brokeback Mountain' Star, Is Found Dead

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one of them," said Paul Sevigny, an owner of the Beaulieu Inn, a West Village club that Mr. Ledger frequented.

"He was really polite and nice," said Mr. Sevigny.

The police said Mr. Ledger's body was found after a masseuse arrived at the apartment at 2:45 p.m. for her regular appointment with Mr. Ledger. A housekeeper let her in and knocked on the door of Mr. Ledger's bedroom. No one answered.

The housekeeper and the masseuse pushed open the bedroom door and saw Mr. Ledger, unconscious, on the floor. They shook him but could not revive him, and then called for help, the police said. The housekeeper told officers that she had heard him snoring in the bedroom around 12:30 p.m., the police said.

As word of Mr. Ledger's death began circulating, fans and camera crews converged on the street outside the apartment, at 421 Broome Street, between Crosby and Lafayette.

Neighbors said Mr. Ledger was friendly. Julie McIntosh, a hairstylist at a salon a few doors down the block from the apart-



Assumptions about tragic celebrity deaths

Induce a sense of **LOSS**

Dale Earnhardt

(Radford & Bloch, 2012)

Capture the **PUBLIC EYE**

*Throngs Gather in City
as News Spreads at the
Speed of Technology*

—New York Times, Jan. 23, 2008

Create **MOURNING COMMUNITIES**

Princess Diana of Wales
(Turner, 2014)

Become **IMMORTALIZED** by a **MEDIA NARRATIVE**

Marilyn Monroe, Jim Morrison, etc.
(Levitt, 2010)



Why study Heath Ledger?

IMPACT

Ledger's death was voted #1 entertainment story of 2008 by U.S. news/broadcast editors (AP, 2008) ... but *why*?

- Established fame prior to death
- Shocking, unexpected
- Strange timing
- Controversial
- **Celebrity image sustained for well over a year by media**

MAIN ARGUMENT

- 1) Different publications had different ways of **framing** and **commodifying** Ledger's celebrity after death
- 2) Combined, these frames can be synthesized into a common (cultural) **celebrity death narrative**
- 3) This death narrative is responsible for immortalizing Ledger's celebrity image within public memory

PURPOSE OF STUDY

Sketch, analyze, and discuss this **celebrity death narrative** as framed by different media publications

Theoretical applications & terms

FRAMING THEORY

Suggests individuals select certain aspects of reality as **presented** within “involvement and experience with events” (Wood, 2011, p. 5).

- Framing is a valuable tool in journalism since it can decrease a topic’s complexity (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).
- Framing practices may be influenced by a publication’s policy or principle (e.g. *People* publishing ONLY celebrity news; *New York Times* publishing ONLY “newsy” news).

POSITIONS

Relative to celebrity publicity firms, media publications are aligned within certain commodity positions that can be **autonomous** or **negotiated** or **both** (Gamson, 1994).

- For example, “newsy” outlets like *NYT* are autonomous since they don’t necessarily work with PR firms; conversely, *EW* “negotiates” its content with PR firms.

CELEBRITY DEATH NARRATIVE

Media-constructed discourse that explains or tells the story of a celebrity’s death and its sub-plots.

Heath Ledger celebrity death narrative

- Headlines
- Subheads
- Lead paragraphs
- Concluding statements
- Some photos



The New York Times

Entertainment

VARIETY

USA
TODAY

People



CELEBRITY REACTIONS & TRIBUTES

Sept. 2007

Heath, Michelle
Williams split

Jan. 22, 2008



Feb. 2008

Autopsy results;
probe; funerals

March 2008

Will revealed;
estate dispute

People

AUTONOMOUS/
NEGOTIATED

Entertainment

NEGOTIATED

VARIETY

PROMOTIONAL

The New York Times

AUTONOMOUS

USA
TODAY

AUTONOMOUS

THE SPLIT



THE PROBE

TRIBUTES
MICHELLE

THE LEDGERS
FUNERALS
MATILDA



THE SPLIT



DRUG ABUSE
THE PROBE

TRIBUTES
MICHELLE

FUNERALS
MATILDA



DRUG ABUSE
TRIBUTES



HEATH LEDGER
THE DARK KNIGHT

FILM AWARDS SEASON

July 18, 2008

The Dark
Knight released

Aug. 2008

Drug probe closes;
no charges

Jan. 2009

Ledger nominated
for Academy Award

Feb. 2009

Ledger wins
posthumous Oscar





FINDINGS & CONCLUSIONS

- Overall, *The Dark Knight* and the *2009 awards season* dominated media representation of Ledger's celebrity death narrative, effectively immortalizing him into contemporary culture as a continuously resurrected villain.

I believe whatever doesn't kill you simply makes you **stranger** ...

— Heath Ledger as the Joker, *The Dark Knight* (Warner Bros., 2008)