

"I believe whatever doesn't kill you simply makes you stranger":

Framing, commodifying, and immortalizing Heath Ledger's

celebrity death narrative

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Abstract

This essay sketches, analyzes, and discusses the celebrity death narrative and its construction through journalistic framing practices. In doing so, this essay approaches the cultural significance of celebrity death, particularly in regards to public memory and the “immortalization” of deceased celebrities. The celebrity death narrative, or media-constructed discourse that explains or tells the story of a celebrity's death and its corollary sub-plots, forms the locus of the study's argument such that these collective narratives are constructed (framed) and commodified by any number of separate publications reporting the event. Furthermore, it is suggested some of these publications generally frame and commodify celebrity death narratives from within specific industrial positions relative to external public relation agencies. In analyzing actor Heath Ledger's death and posthumous celebrity as it is framed by several mainstream publications, this essay explicates the cultural significance of Ledger's celebrity death narrative from the high number of impactful contexts following the actor's death. This significant media coverage in turn allowed Ledger's image to be prominently sustained and resurrected for an extended period of time afterward. For example, this essay finds Ledger's posthumous media visibility being amplified by the release of the mega-blockbuster smash, 2008's *The Dark Knight*, and the following 2009 film awards season, both of which did not occur until long after Ledger had died. These overall findings also suggest how deceased celebrities may be effectively immortalized through the media processes described, such as shown by the relationships between *The Dark Knight's* success, the Joker character within the film, and Ledger's acclaimed performance as this character. This study should therefore offer insights into how celebrity death narratives are produced and sold to the public, as well as how this public remembers the story of the celebrity's death.

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Framing, commodifying, and immortalizing Heath Ledger's celebrity death narrative

The shocking, drug-related death of Heath Ledger was a significant event in contemporary celebrity culture. For this reason, the celebrated Australian actor's Jan. 22, 2008 death was voted that year's top entertainment story by American news editors (Associated Press, 2008). An accomplished, versatile actor in life, Ledger's posthumous celebrity appeared to be publicly sustained long after his death by a number of factors and future eventualities captured by media. These factors include Ledger's preceding celebrity, the speculative circumstances surrounding his death, and especially its timing. Ledger died about six months prior to the release of the heavily-anticipated Batman film, *The Dark Knight*; Ledger had at the time been receiving media attention for his portrayal of the villainous Joker, the film's antagonist. This role would earn Ledger multiple posthumous honors, including an Academy Award. I argue Ledger's death therefore became a profitable commodity for news, entertainment, and tabloid media in the form of an enticing public narrative framed by a number of speculative contexts and events. The purpose of this essay, then, is to sketch, analyze, and discuss this cultural death narrative, one constructed by mainstream news, entertainment, and tabloid publications via routine journalistic framing practices and publication positions.

Tragic celebrity death and the 'public imagination'

Any celebrity's death represents the termination of a crucial aspect of her relationship with the public. This is true regardless of the celebrity's stardom or popularity. Upon death, the celebrity's living performative work is essentially complete, her image now largely relegated to the past. Yet, her image certainly still exists, and this sentiment alone makes celebrity death an

interesting concept for future academic exploration. For my purposes, this section provides four statements that form an overall rationale for the study of celebrity death.

First, celebrity deaths may cause individuals, particularly fans, to experience a sense of loss (Foltyn, 2016; Levitt, 2010; Radford & Bloch, 2012; Wood, 2011). One reason for this is that death – specifically tragic death – defines the celebrity's physical mortality, and by extension our own (Carman, 2008). For example, Dyer (2004) suggests celebrities stand in for society's collective and individual identities, thus providing an ideological commentary about our culture. In the same study, Dyer further suggests a unique interplay of images and symbols that go into constructing a celebrity. These images ultimately define the celebrity as well as mediate society's access *to* celebrities. Therefore, when a celebrity dies, the death becomes a particularly visible cultural moment. This is especially true when a young celebrity dies unexpectedly.

In their analysis of NASCAR fans' *parasocial relationships* with deceased racing star Dale Earnhardt, Radford and Bloch (2012) explain the "genuine connection" and "active identification" (p. 139) felt by many toward a celebrity. As such, people may regard celebrities within modes of friendship or parental presence (Radford & Bloch, 2012) regardless of any direct interaction – social media, for example. Though a parasocial relationship is mainly defined by this lack of direct interaction, an individual may still experience real grief upon the relationship's termination (Radford & Bloch, 2012). Furthermore, Levitt (2010) evinces in her study of Hollywood's "dark tourism" trade that a detached relationship is not necessarily an inhibition to authentic grief. Today, many people continue to visit celebrity grave/death sites as an expression of mourning rather than tourist novelty. In this specific context, we may observe a sense of loss in the form of memorial. For example, a Jan. 23, 2008 photo on the Reuters news website shows the front of Ledger's Manhattan apartment building set up as a public memorial

shrine, complete with flower bouquets, cowboy hats (a reference to 2005's *Brokeback Mountain*), artwork, and an Australian flag. We will revisit this photo shortly.

Second, tragic celebrity deaths capture the public eye. By "tragic", I refer to those celebrity deaths commonly represented by media as unexpected, particularly impactful, and unnaturally caused (e.g. drug overdoses, automobile crashes, suicides). In her study of celebrity corpses as a textual mode, Foltyn (2016) provides a practical set of common elements that guides the "public imagination" (p. 248) of tragic celebrity death. This framework includes such elements like the death's sudden, suspicious, and speculative nature, the corollary investigative process or "forensics drama" (p. 250), the accompanying morality narrative, the magnitude of the death, and finally, the celebrity's posthumous commodification. For example, Ledger's death was initially scrutinized for its unexpected suddenness; this speculation even included a "suicide hypothesis" (ibid., p. 254). An investigative forensics probe followed, which then concluded Ledger's death was due to prescription drug abuse. These findings effectuated a separate criminal probe into how these drugs may have been prescribed and handed to Ledger. Unsurprisingly, this "death by drugs" frame helped transform Ledger's death into a moral cautionary tale. Additionally, Ledger's sudden, unnatural death continues to be a salient factor within his overall celebrity image (Foltyn, 2016).

Third, public attention to tragic celebrity death can evolve into mediated public mourning communities (Wood, 2011). In other words, because drug-related celebrity deaths receive substantial media attention (Just, Bleckween, Schnakenberg, Skatulla, & Weckbecker, 2016), media coverage of these deaths may create public mourning platforms designed to assemble individuals and fans who might share similar attachments to the dead celebrity. This can include strangers, as Wood (2011) notes in her study of drug-related celebrity deaths. Here we may refer

to Turner's examination (2010) of the massive news coverage and unprecedented public mourning processes that accompanied Princess Diana of Wales' 1997 fatal automobile accident. The problem of grief and authenticity that was hotly debated by analysts and scholars within Turner's study (2010) further evinces this coverage's scope, as well as the mourning community's globalization. Also, by revisiting the Reuters photo described earlier, we see textual evidence of Ledger's public mourning community as suggested from the shrine's geographical location and composition of individual artifacts, as well as infer its mediation through the Reuters photo itself.

Fourth and last, tragic celebrity deaths become the site of a media-constructed narrative that encourages cultural immortalization and memory location. Therefore, the existential necessity of media in this context cannot be understated. The suddenness, the scandals, and the speculations that form headlines, public imaginations, and mourning communities are doubly instrumental in compelling the public to visit and revisit the story as developments and future events unfold. This can be inferred from Princess Diana's self-sustaining post-mortem celebrity image – from the crash, the Good Samaritan controversy, the public mourning and state funeral, etc. In Ledger's case, it is the story of his death – its generalizations, particularities, and events – that is recalled and that which contributes to his immortalization. It is here that the *celebrity death narrative* becomes particularly important in forming the locus of the present study. This celebrity death narrative concept will be elaborated shortly, but a general definition will suffice for the present: for my purposes, a *celebrity death narrative* (abbreviated as CDN throughout) is defined as a media-constructed discourse, generalized or specified, that explains or tells the story of a celebrity's death and its corollary sub-plots. With this definition in mind, this study will now describe a few theoretical frameworks.

Framing theory, commodification, and autonomous-negotiated positions

Presenting *framing theory* within a journalistic context may help explicate the celebrity death narrative's construction and commodification process. However, it's first necessary to make some brief distinctions regarding entertainment/celebrity journalism. There clearly has been a marked increase in entertainment journalism as "celebrities' public images are slowly constructed through the representation of their everyday and unsurprising activities in the news" (Breese, 2010, p. 400). Although Breese states the proliferation of entertainment journalism into mainstream newspapers is commonly lambasted for focusing on the scandals and intimacy behind the "the private lives of public people" (p. 397) instead of reporting "quotidian, fact-driven" news (Abrahamson, 2010, p. 667), entertainment journalism can also present objective, uncontroversial content. Unlike "democratic" publications such as the *New York Times*, the "juicy details" of celebrity culture are commonly located within the domain of tabloids and gossip magazines like *People* (Breese, 2010), as we'll soon see. The most important point, however, is the relentless circulation of celebrity news into mass society, suggesting this mass society is always craving for more. This, of course, makes celebrity a "frameable" commodity.

In brief, framing theory developed as a model for understanding how individuals make sense of social reality (Wood, 2011). Specifically, framing theory suggests individuals select certain aspects of reality as presented within "involvement and experience with events" (Wood, 2011, p. 5) in order to make sense of that reality. Therefore, presentation of content is fundamental to framing theory (de Vreese, 2005; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Wood, 2011). In a journalistic context, communication researchers Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) tell us framing is an invaluable mechanism for content production, "a necessary tool to reduce the complexity of an issue" (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 12), especially given that a single

news source cannot feasibly cover every aspect of an event (Wood, 2011). In this sense, Wood explains (2011), news media are prone to presenting single core issues in varying ways. *Frame-building*, therefore, determines the actual structuring of the frame presented (de Vreese, 2005; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Specifically, de Vreese (2005) explains in the author's study of news framing and typology that frame-building is influenced by factors like institutional policies and the type of values placed on its editorial content. The extent to which a frame is built can be seen in the report's headlines and subheads, accompanying photos, leads, and concluding statements (de Vreese, 2005). For example, *The New York Times* might present a celebrity death in a frame that is largely objective, temporal, and spatial (e.g. cause of death, autopsy findings, reactions from around the world). By contrast, *Us Weekly*, a celebrity gossip periodical, may frame a celebrity death more subjectively and in unflattering, oftentimes scandalous ways that allows the reader not so much to acquire new, updated information but, in other words, to encourage the reader to formulate personal evaluations (Brander, 2012).

Furthermore, a news frame can be *issue-specific* or *generic* (de Vreese, 2005). Issue-specific frames are attached to an individual context, whereas generic frames are much broader and typically regard generalized topics. For example, issue-specific frames regarding Ledger's death might include the topic of drugs. A generalized frame, on the other hand, would consider celebrity drug use across contemporary celebrity culture. In this study, I focus primarily on issue-specific frames.

I should note that news framing is typically located within agenda setting theory studies. Briefly, McCombs and Shaw's widely cited framework argues that the media is capable, perhaps responsible, for affecting how the public thinks about particular issues through its coverage (as cited in Brander, 2012). Here Brander (2012) describes framing as a type of "second level" (p.

11) agenda setting in her discussion of celebrity tabloidization such that the manner in which an issue is presented (framing) may influence the importance of this issue as regarded by the common public. For example, Brander (2012) argues that celebrity news tabloidization may be undermining “more serious” news due to the manner in which celebrity news is framed.

However, my focus centers specifically on framing – that is, the presentation of content – and not on its consequences in setting the public agenda. This is an important distinction. Nevertheless, I believe the examples provided bring to bear the philosophy that underpins the commodification process such that specific publications profit from specific frames on the basis of that publication's journalistic principles.

In his landmark celebrity study, Rojek (2001) pointedly writes "celebrities humanize the process of commodity consumption" (p. 14). P. David Marshall offers the additional argument that celebrity culture's most important function is to serve a capitalist economy as a form of commodity (as cited in Turner, 2010). In fact, Foltyn (2016) tells us celebrity death culture is itself a product of this commodification process due to the media's tendency to continually "revive" (p. 258) dead celebrities through products and texts. In this study, for example, Ledger's CDN is viewed within a composition of "information commodities" (ibid., p. 258) produced by mass media via mainstream news and entertainment media institutions. Other commodity practices include the Hollywood "dark tourism" industry (Levitt, 2010), in which participant-consumers tour celebrity graveyards, death sites, or other sites of celebrity infamy and purchase souvenirs. Even dead celebrities may continue to make money; in 2008, Forbes ranked Heath Ledger third on its annual list of top-earning dead celebrities with a price (toe) tag roughly around \$20 million (Hoy & Paine, Oct. 27, 2008). This media capital is part of what makes Ledger's death a unique narrative in contemporary celebrity culture.

In celebrity journalism, dead celebrities appear to be commodified in the context of the frames these celebrities appear in. Because frames "call attention to certain aspects" (Wood, 2011, p. 11), both the exclusion and inclusion of particular frames may help define the publications in which these frames occur. In regards to celebrity journalism specifically, I argue this is largely predicated by publication positions that are relative to public relation agencies and firms. For example, Gamson (1994) tells us in his study of American celebrity culture that entertainment-media institutions are very selective when it comes to the "economy of information" (p. 95). He further elaborates on at least two positions I suggest are typically exemplified by the content featured in these publications. These include *autonomous* positions (inferring little to no collaboration with public relation firms) and *negotiated* positions (inferring frequent collaboration). To use an example, celebrity gossip tabloids like *Us Weekly* also orient itself autonomously. This is evidenced by the evaluative and "unauthorized" nature of the magazine's content. By contrast, a negotiated position serves the interests of celebrity publicists, who in turn symbiotically serve the interests of the publications located within this position (Gamson, 1994). This includes industry publications like *Entertainment Weekly* and *Variety*, where one might generally find consistently thematic reports framed as special feature promotions, previews, reviews, and celebrity economy reports. All these frames, however, are not mutually exclusive, and often overlap.

I believe this assumed autonomous-negotiated framework, once combined, is a practical model from which to articulate the construction of a celebrity death narrative based on the premises of the frames presented. These collective frames and frame-constructions may then be seen as a kind of dialectic between the varying publications' core principles. In other words,

these competing publications operate collectively, perhaps even unintentionally, to create an "immortalized" portrait of a celebrity upon and after death despite any commercial orientations.

The celebrity death narrative and immortalization

To review, a *celebrity death narrative* is defined as a media-constructed discourse, generalized or specified, that explains or tells the story of a celebrity's death and its corollary sub-plots. The CDN's primary cultural function can be seen to characterize celebrities into, in Wood's words (2011), varying identities and memories. By that turn, however, a CDN is first and foremost designed for commercial profit. The CDN is commodified through mediated texts and images produced by the celebrity culture's constituent mainstream media institutions. To this effect, the CDN can be seen as a continuing process of commodified information, as well as an integral chapter in the celebrity's established Hollywood legend. I refer to this observable process as "immortalization".

Radford and Bloch's (2012) discussion of the post-mortem mythological status routinely conferred upon young celebrities may help conceptualize the celebrity death narrative. The authors state, in quoting Hughes' Tupac Shakur study (2003), that, "[s]tars who die young or tragically never really die; they are celebrated and catapulted to the immortal status of icons" (p. 137). For a young celebrity to die unexpectedly at the height of their fame is an important agency in mythological status conferral. This is a specific type of memory commonly attached to tragic and impactful CDNs (for example, River Phoenix and Paul Walker). Therefore, it seems that for the CDN to have any significant public potency, the decedent celebrity first must have accumulated a large degree of fame in life. This idea, in my view, forms the primary basis for how any culturally significant CDN is formed. Levitt (2010) illuminates this point by way of her discussion on the cultural immortalizations of Rudolph Valentino, Marilyn Monroe, James

Dean, and Jim Morrison. Like Valentino (a silent screen celebrity), Monroe, Dean, and Morrison, Ledger was at the time of his death a widely recognized celebrity, especially known for his versatility and resumé of diverse films. This includes *The Patriot* (2000), *A Knight's Tale* (2001), and the progressive *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), the "gay cowboy movie" for which Ledger and co-star Jake Gyllenhaal were nominated Academy Awards.

The meteoric rise to fame adds significant gravity to these respective celebrities' death narratives in the form of a basic introduction or foreword. Prior to his death, Ledger had been routinely described in largely positive ways; he was a "sensitive soul" (Foltyn, 2016, p. 254) and was early in his career typecast as the attractive "heartthrob" (Wood, 2011, p. 24) – a label the actor apparently resented and disavowed (Wood, 2011). Like with Valentino and the rest, Ledger's tragic death seems to have made him – as Carman (2008) declares in his essay on the idolatry of celebrity death – "a face frozen in time, a youth who never grew up, the symbol of the artist whose art is both a blessing and a burden" (p. 29).

Heath Ledger's death was approached by considerable media attention. This media attention was not centralized to the death proper, but was sustained over time by certain circumstances and future events. Furthermore, Ledger's death was accompanied by preceding media representations of an attractive, accomplished, sensitive, and serious Hollywood actor. This all contributed to a unique CDN not commonly seen in contemporary celebrity culture. Therefore, the purpose of my study is to first sketch Ledger's celebrity death narrative as constructed by framing practices across selected mainstream media publications. Methods include extracting particularly issue-specific frames and themes through a textual analysis of headlines and subheads, photos, leads, and concluding statements. This method will help locate and insinuate the relationships these autonomous-negotiated commercial media interests share

such that they operate interdependently and in tension to create this unique cultural narrative. By doing so, I hope to illustrate not only how these publications actually construct a collective, culturally significant celebrity death narrative, but one that effectively immortalizes the celebrity.

Method, analysis, and findings

Method

This study adopts a textual analysis approach to framing and frame-building. Mills and Barlow (2012) describe textual analysis as the process of "examining the formal internal features and contextual location of a text" (p. 60, quoting Hartley). Doing so, a researcher may determine immediate and particular situations that frame an attitude object – or primary subject (Griffin, Ledbetter, & Sparks, 2015) – as well as the frame's intended meaning. My textual analysis of Ledger-related entertainment news reports primarily considers headlines, subheads, leads, and concluding statements and paragraphs. The objects of analysis are coded such: the *New York Times* (NYT); *USA Today* (USAT); *Entertainment Weekly* (EW); *Variety*; and *People.com* (*People*). The time span of the analysis ranges from Sept. 2007 to March 2009.

Analysis

I analyzed approximately 390 individual reports ranging in content from cover story features to news blurbs. I then cataloged each publication's report on a Google Docs spreadsheet; here I extrapolated relevant content by way of omitting extraneous reports significantly minimal in scope and mention of Ledger. This includes the 2007 release of *I'm Not There*, a Bob Dylan biopic, most of which very casually referred to Ledger. Also omitted were several columns due to the nature of its individual commentary in that it offered only peripheral viewpoints. These reports were then grouped by a recurring theme to determine the study's dominant frames. The groupings were then inserted into a separate spreadsheet organized by a

publication/dominant frame axis. This proved useful in quantifying the amount of attention given to the frames by each publication. The publication date of each report was included alongside its spreadsheet position to more or less temporalize the embedded narrative. The approximate disbursement of these reports are as follows: *People.com* (171); *New York Times* (39); *USA Today* (31); *Variety* (25); and *Entertainment Weekly* (20). With the exception of *People*, each report was searched for and located within the ProQuest research database and consists almost exclusively of print content.

Findings: Framing, sketching, and positioning Ledger's CDN

From my textual analysis, I observed, generalized, and categorized 12 primary frames. They are: (1) *the split*, Ledger and actress Michelle Williams' breakup; (2) *the death event*, Ledger's immediate, physical death and surrounding speculations; (3) *prescription drugs*, which contributed to Ledger's accidental death; (4) *the probe*, including local and federal investigations into the circumstances of Ledger's death and the source of the opiates found in his body – this also includes media focus on actress Mary Kate Olsen, a Ledger acquaintance; and (5) *tributes and memoriams*, mainly comments and reactions from across celebrity culture, as well as those who knew Ledger outside the celebrity culture (neighbors, business-owners, etc.). Other frames include: (6) *Michelle Williams*, regarding the actress' follow-ups and developments proceeding Ledger's death; (7) *the Ledgers*, Ledger's immediate family; (8) *the funerals*, consisting of Ledger's numerous memorial services and removal of his remains to Australia (9); *Matilda Ledger*, Ledger and Williams' daughter and beneficiary of Ledger's estate; (10) *The Dark Knight*, coverage related to the Batman film and Ledger's Joker role; (11) *awards season*, which includes the 2009 Golden Globes, Screen Actors Guild, Academy Awards, etc.; and (12) *Dr. Parnassus*,

shorthand for director Terry Gilliam's *Imaginarium of Dr. Parnassus* (2009), Ledger's official, though incomplete, final film role.

By applying my previous definition of the celebrity death narrative, one may see how coalescing these frames might form a relatively coherent narrative, beginning with Ledger and Williams's celebrity breakup and ending, roughly, with the 2009 awards season. One may also see by virtue of these frames why I selected the particular time span for analysis and, more importantly, observe those general corollary sub-plots responsible for prominently sustaining and resurrecting Ledger's media image for well over a year.

The Heath Ledger celebrity death narrative. A fully articulated CDN is beyond the limitations of this study. However, for the sake of reference, the story of Ledger's tragic and unexpected death, and its more direct implications, is generalized here. Shortly after separating from actress Michelle Williams, Ledger was found dead in his New York City apartment. Initial accounts reported visible evidence of drug use, leading to speculations of suicide, depression, and insomnia. Although Ledger's uncle denounced this "suicide hypothesis", Ledger's mental health was reportedly a concern due to his busy schedule, which at this point had included work on *The Dark Knight* and *Dr. Parnassus*. A police investigation began and Williams and Ledger's immediate family were notified. The news media followed Ledger's death closely, reporting on the developing investigation that now involved actress Mary Kate Olsen of television's *Full House* fame. An autopsy concluded Ledger's death to be an accidental overdose of prescription medication, in addition to hydrocodone and oxycodone, two potent opiates that Ledger had not been prescribed. Meanwhile, tributes flowed in from across the celebrity mediasphere, even from celebrities who had never met Ledger, such as Daniel Day-Lewis. A series of funerals and memorial services then followed. Ledger's remains were moved to Australia, his native home,

and cremated. Though Matilda Ledger inherited Ledger's estate, the transfer did not occur until after a variety of disputes that included Ledger's family and the aforementioned suicide hypothesis. Federal investigators tasked with searching for Ledger's opiate source eventually closed the investigation with no charges filed. Such as it was, Ledger's death cast a macabre spotlight over the production of *Dr. Parnassus* and especially *The Dark Knight*, where Ledger's performance as the Joker had been widely hyped in the form of acclaim. The hype surrounding *TDK* proved worth its mettle as the film opened to a record-setting weekend and finished the year off with a box office worth nearly \$1 billion. Ledger's show-stealing performance was inexplicably a part of *TDK's* success, whose appearance is also believed to have shifted typical viewer demographics. Ledger's image was therefore prominently sustained alongside *TDK's* run into awards season. Furthermore, his portrayal of the Joker was almost unanimously predicted to win best supporting actor categories throughout the season. Ledger did indeed win supporting actor awards at the Golden Globes, the Screen Actor Guilds Awards, the British Academy Film Awards (BAFTA), and the Academy Awards, among many, many others. To this effect, Ledger's celebrated and iconic portrayal of Batman's arch-nemesis, a pop culture figure as well-known as Batman himself, is undoubtedly a significant and valorized component of Ledger's posthumous celebrity image. Here this particular CDN as described within this particular time span comes to its conclusion.

Positioning and commodifying the celebrity death narrative

While this particular CDN omits many details and more or less follows an imbricated chronology, the narrative nonetheless establishes a sequence of events that highlight the Ledger CDN's cultural impact and longevity. Additionally, the CDN described here exemplifies the coalescence of media frames responsible for producing this particular narrative. I argue these

frames are significantly articulated by its publication's position within Gamson's autonomous-negotiated model (1994) described earlier. By locating and foregrounding the prominent frames against these positions, I hope to effectively illustrate some of the more immediate relationships occurring between these publications.

People. I must here note my *People* analysis arises primarily as an overlapping referent for the other objects of analysis rather than as another comparative cog in the wheel of relatively positivist, fact-based entertainment journalism. There are two points to consider for this overlap. First, *People* and *Entertainment Weekly*, another object of analysis, are owned by the same parent company, and so there is a biased industrial orientation. Second, the proliferation of varying Ledger content on the *People* website – which is precisely the nature of such a celebrity gossip website – far exceeds the other objects of analysis, all of which are print-derived. This is not to suggest *People* is completely unique within my argument, but rather to acknowledge its privileged contribution to the analysis in terms of its corporate orientation and the myriad of frames the celebrity gossip publication offers. For example, most of the CDN's citations originate from *People*.

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica website (<https://www.britannica.com/>), US-based *People* is among the top-selling weeklies magazines in the world, and currently Time Inc.'s best-selling periodical ("People", 2019). Time Inc. is a subsidiary of the Meredith Corporation, which also owns *Entertainment Weekly* ("Entertainment", 2019). The primary focus of this magazine – and by extension, its website – centers squarely on celebrity news. Although *People* resides within the domain of celebrity tabloidism, it is not generally regarded as seedy, bottom-feeding "tabloid trash" in the same vein such as, say, *The National Enquirer* (Turner, 2014). In fact, *People* appears to operate within a hybrid autonomous-negotiated model

as opposed to an outright "*institutional divorce* from those in the entertainment industry trying to control publicity" (Gamson, 1994, p. 97, emphasis in original). For example, Meyers (2009) touches on *People's* access to the celebrities themselves rather than external hearsay. My analysis of *People's* frame-building practices further suggests the interplays embedded within this publication principle.

For example, *People* accounts for 10 of the 12 primary frames. In regards to Ledger's death, *People's* primary focus appeared to concentrate on, not surprisingly, the outpouring of tributes from *other* celebrities. Additionally, these tributes also came from "ordinary" people that knew Ledger, such as neighbors (see "Neighbors", 2008) and park chess players (see Tapper, 2008). Significant attention is also given to the coverage of Ledger's immediate death, the investigative processes, and also coverage of actress Michelle Williams as she overcomes her heartbreak and loss. The hype surrounding *The Dark Knight*, most visible here in the form of red carpet premieres and celebrity promotion, and the following awards season round out the most prominent Ledger frames featured in *People* within this study's time span. As shown, *People* enjoys a privileged position and introduces an abundance of frames into the overall analysis. Also, this abundance of frames reinforces the value the general public seems to place in celebrity gossip such that *People* can be as profitable as it is. As such, *People* can serve as a useful agency for "filling in the blanks" left open by readers of both mainstream industry publications and its traditional "newsy" counterparts, such as those described below.

Entertainment Weekly. *EW* can best be summarized as a "newsier", watered-down version of *People* by exclusion of the paparazzi images and scandal pieces that appear in its sister publication. This differentiation is also marked by increased attention toward industry news. As such, *EW* can be best positioned within a negotiated framework that serves the

commercial interests of both the magazine and celebrity public relations firms. While a hint of scandal may inevitably seep into discussion of a celebrity, scandal generally does not include itself within *EW's* repertoire.

Ledger's death was the cover story of the Feb. 1, 2008 edition, and follow-ups appeared in subsequent editions. Additionally, *EW* does include at least one brief item regarding Ledger and Williams' split (see Markovitz & Allen, 2007) and an update follow-up concerning a dispute over Ledger's inheritance (see Vozick-Levinson & Allen, 2008). *TDK*, by contrast, was given two cover stories: one on July 11, 2008 and the other was published Aug. 1 of the same year. In fact, the Batman film accounts for nearly 40% of its total Ledger content within this study's time span. In terms of precedence, *TDK* is the clear forerunner. Focus on Ledger's death itself follows close behind, followed in turn by the 2009 awards season.

Variety. The weekly *Variety* magazine and its now-defunct ("Variety", 2019) every-other-day supplementary newspaper counterpart are here regarded as one entity. Despite this separation, *Variety's* (both the magazine and the newspaper) publication principle exclusively promotes the entertainment industry through its "quite thorough coverage in trade" (Abrahamson, 2007). Its negotiated position may even be more accurately described as a *promotional* reading position (Gamson, 1994). Furthermore, these publications, particularly *Daily Variety*, are definitively billed as a US-oriented film industry market periodical ("Daily Variety", 2014). Therefore, one can expect straightforward reports and promotional features. In other words, *Variety* does not even acknowledge celebrity splits, nor the latest scandal rumors, nor anything to do with gossip for that matter.

Variety's distribution of frames clearly indicates this principle. The cover stories reporting on Ledger's death on Jan. 23 and Jan. 24, 2008 do not once mention drugs, despite the

news being circulated at the time. True to industrial form, the lead paragraph of the former article, "Truly tragic end to a promising career" (Garrett et al., 2008), includes mention of both *TDK* and *Dr. Parnassus*. Michelle Williams is mentioned in this report, but only within the context of residential companionship. It is not until the Jan. 28-Feb. 3, 2008 edition of *Variety* magazine featuring Ledger's official obituary that drugs are ever mentioned (see Bolanda, 2008). However, a caveat carefully mentions that the autopsy report was still pending. As for the rest, *Variety* takes its cue from *People* and *EW*, framing Ledger prominently within the context of the 2009 awards seasons (approximately 44%), with *TDK* in a close second.

USA Today and the New York Times. Due to space limitations, and because this particular analysis now shifts away from traditional celebrity publications, the following discussions on *USA Today* and the *New York Times* are combined. In addition, both middle-market, nationally-circulated US newspapers are positioned outside of the autonomous-negotiated framework described. Nonetheless, similarities and differences exist in regards to each newspaper's fact-driven content. For example, whereas *NYT* can "dig or skip the (celebrity) story" (p. 96), Gamson (1994) writes that *USAT* is typically more PR-friendly, even promotional at times. However, the present study did not observe any remarkable differences in the context of reporting Ledger's death and its circumstances.

USAT and *NYT* are the only publications within my analysis that appear to frame Ledger's death as a prescription drug abuse cautionary tale. *USAT* published three stories from early-to-mid Feb. 2008. Each story – "Insomnia fuels a run in drug sales" (Marcus, 2008), "Safe medicines, deadly mix" (Weise, 2008), and "Ledger's death casts a light on polypharmacy" (Rubin, 2008) – clearly frames Ledger's death within the general social problem of drug abuse, as well as provides a portrait of a man afflicted by chronic insomnia. These reports followed the

recent release of Ledger's autopsy results. *NYT* published two similar societal stories, one shortly after the autopsy results (see Cohen, 2008) and the other months later describing comedian Mitch Hedberg's 2005 drug overdose death (see Itzkoff, 2008). Here one may witness the “real news” proscribed – that is, the issue of drug abuse.

While both publications appear to be positioned similarly, *NYT* provides several updates regarding Ledger's death, his funeral and estate, and at least one mention of Michelle Williams. This is not surprising, however, being that Ledger was a visible New York City resident, as was Williams. However, both publications almost perfectly align within the *TDK* and awards seasons frames both in terms of quantity as well as precedence. In sum, one can witness the cultural impact of Ledger's posthumous image within these frames – not only in *USAT* and *NYT*, but also within all the previous publications analyzed. This focus also highlights the general impact of entertainment journalism, even those reports that are located within traditional objective-based news publications.

Discussion

This analysis attempted to explicate the construction and commodification of Ledger's CDN through a journalistic framing process. I argue each publication possesses a relatively unique principle in the reporting of Ledger's death and posthumous celebrity that can work in tandem, even if unintentionally, to construct Ledger's CDN. I also argue the frames and contexts that appear in these publications foreground these respective principles – in fact, one might even say the same of the reverse. As such, the objects of analysis presented share similarities and differences. These similarities and differences are stark in some places, more subtle elsewhere. Also, by no means are these dominant frames symmetrically distributed. One fact is clear, however: all publications here analyzed had something more to say than that Ledger died.

With one exception – that is, *People's* focus on tributes and memoriams – all the publications analyzed in this study had framed Ledger's posthumous celebrity primarily within the context of *TDK* and the 2009 awards season. There are several ramifications for this prominent framing practice that I will discuss as a way of augmenting these publications' relationships and commodification practices. However, it's first necessary to situate this discussion alongside the four earlier statements that form the rationale for this study, particularly in regards to celebrity immortalization.

Briefly, the first and third statements – that celebrity deaths induce personal experiences of loss and influence public mourning communities (Wood, 2011) – are made visible by the tributes and memorial frame. For example, *People* published many remarks from other celebrities glorifying Ledger's talent, particularly fellow Australian actors like Hugh Jackman (see Burleigh, 2008). Conversely, there were also signs of a visible public mourning community in "letters to the editor" from ordinary readers published in *EW* and elsewhere (see Martinez, Barnes, & Gardner, 2008). There is also the example of the Reuters photo mentioned in the literature review. As for the second statement – tragic celebrity deaths capture the public eye – Ledger's CDN appears to configure itself neatly within Foltyn's "public imagination" framework (2016) described in the literature review. I refer back to that section rather than reiterate it here.

The fourth statement regarding media-constructed narratives and immortalization is perhaps the most intriguing aspect of all and, in my view, is the core essence of what makes Ledger's death so unique. By recalling the two dominant frames, *TDK* and the 2009 awards season, one finds an adequate explanation for just why Ledger's image honors its existence today within the realm of celebrity immortality. First, it is difficult, and probably unnecessary, to determine whether *TDK* increased Ledger's media visibility or whether Ledger increased *TDK's*

visibility. However, one can certainly deduce Ledger was inextricably a part of *TDK*'s phenomenal success, thus making Ledger inextricably a part of the film in all its total contexts. Phrases like "stealing the show" come to mind from Ledger's performance as the Joker. In fact, as of Aug. 2018, Ledger's Joker ranks second in *Empire Online's* (<https://www.empireonline.com/>) reader-voted list of "Greatest Movie Villains Of All Time", comfortably behind Darth Vader. It seems simply impossible (and ridiculous) to seriously discuss *TDK* without ever mentioning Ledger. Ledger *was TDK*.

Second, I argue here that the 2009 awards season was an official Hollywood-sanctioned valorization of Ledger's performance as the Joker. Furthermore, this valorization may align with, or even influence, the general public's perception of this performance. In other words, this valorization is in accordance between the elite Hollywood culture and the public, the latter extending to those reports centering squarely on Ledger and his performance. For example, *USAT* published a July 18, 2008 report with the headline, "Ledger's 'Dark' Joker looks to be an Oscar wild card" (see Bowles, 2008, July 18). In other words, Ledger was already a forerunner for the 2009 Academy Awards seven months before the fact. Other examples include the runaway predictions from critics. The overall confidence of these supporting actor predictions was such that they seemed to almost predetermine Ledger's wins.

Third, that Ledger portrayed a highly visible pop culture figure (I tend to say "icon") with a celebrated intertextual history spanning nearly seven decades at the time, I further suggest the Joker character whom Ledger had performed to such wide acclaim is essential to the actor's CDN, and thus his immortalization. By this rationale, if Ledger had *not* portrayed the Joker, I argue here his posthumous celebrity would not have been as prominently sustained as it was at the time, nor even into the present. However, I admit this is a broad leap. Nevertheless, it is

certainly noteworthy that of the approximately 105 observed Heath Ledger-related Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/>) pages available for public viewing as of Jan. 16, 2019, 40 of those pages are either Joker-related or have a Joker-related profile picture, or both. This opens up a new avenue of academic exploration into celebrity death, particularly those death narratives exemplified by notorious “final performances” (or in Ledger’s case, “penultimate performances”) – for example, Vic Morrow’s graphic death on the set of 1982’s *Twilight Zone: The Movie*. It is certainly noteworthy to witness the implication that insofar as Ledger achieved his own fame through his own sense of inherent extraordinariness, as Rojek (2001) might suggest, it is ultimately a fictional character, a popular, colorful, cartoonish, and nightmarish “Clown Prince of Crime” that elevates and immortalizes Ledger’s celebrity the most. Chillingly, this central Joker effect helped fuel the “suicide hypothesis” and associated rumors (see Carman, 2008, for example) such that Ledger had sunk so far deep into psychic chaos and anarchy in order to portray the character that he was now doomed. Ledger’s death therefore perpetuated *TDK*’s hype to the point the production was concerned with how to market Ledger’s Joker without seeming to exploit his death (see Bowles, 2008, Feb. 8). “Intense, gentle, intrepid life resurrected as ghoulish, Glasgow-grinning nightmare clown” is certainly a captivating and profitable death narrative no doubt worth the suggested headline.

A study such as this is bound to have its limitations. One such limitation is within framing theory itself. de Vreese (2005) notes that much of framing research is largely operationalized and defined for the purposes of a particular study; therefore, the definitions themselves tend to shift. Consequently, it is difficult to replicate such research. The present study is just another clear indication of this consequence. Second, there are no doubt hundreds, if not thousands, of other publications and channels to consider within this time span, and so my

admittedly shallow pool of variables should by no means be viewed as a complete representation of Ledger's CDN. Finally, I argued this study's time span is the most key historical moment in Ledger's immortalization process; however, I have only provided a particular CDN within a particular moment in time. Ledger's CDN surely continues to the present, as his image does resurrect itself time and time again. There are definitely scores of recent articles in existence that concentrate on Ledger, particularly with the 2016 release of *Suicide Squad* (where Jared Leto plays the Joker), and the forthcoming *Joker* (2019), another film vehicle starring Joaquin Phoenix. In fact, the *Dark Knight Trilogy*, which includes 2005's *Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight*, and 2012's *The Dark Knight Rises*, was recently re-released in IMAX theaters and tickets quickly sold out (see Aune, 2019). Within this report, Ledger was resurrected once again, that half-cocked scar-ridden mouth smirking at me from my smartphone screen, chaos and deception in his black makeup-slathered eyes. Once again, Ledger's celebrity donned the clown face of anarchy, invoking an ethereal body, both frightening and bringing pleasure to the world from beyond the grave.

Conclusion

In the July 18, 2008 article cited earlier, *USA Today* reporter Scott Bowles could not have stated the immortalization of Heath Ledger any clearer when he writes "[u]nexpected death can ensure a Hollywood legacy." Through the act of death, Ledger transcended a dimension of celebrity seldom seen in contemporary culture. Ledger was effectively immortalized into the Elysium of young, game-changing, meteoric celebrities who suddenly supernova'd into a glittering spectacle made possible only by the magic of media. I have argued the facilitation of this magic through otherwise mundane journalistic practices of framing that are primarily dictated by the principles which these practices are performed. Nonetheless, these "culture

industries" – to borrow Adorno and Horkheimer's use of the term (in Mills & Barlow, 2012) – operated in tandem, often overlapping, to construct a narrative that prominently sustained and resurrected Ledger's posthumous celebrity image long after his actual death. Though Ledger's CDN was entirely media-constructed ultimately for profit, the actor's death *is* a compelling story, and can certainly be discussed in all manners of contexts. Ledger's death *is* truly a story of a mythical Renaissance-like death, irreparable heartbreak, tribal lamentation, unadulterated glorification, and gothic resurrection. No wonder his story should not only be the biggest entertainment story of 2008, but one that should ferry Ledger across the River Styx into cultural immortality.

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