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Why do we enjoy seeing celebrities stumble?

By ANNA HANKS Tribune-Herald staff writer

Martha Stewart was in the headlines most of last year for alleged insider trading. Winona Ryder's legal troubles were covered with more enthusiasm than the recent midterm elections. And most of us knew about Michael Jackson dangling his baby off a Berlin balcony faster than we knew that Saddam Hussein had allowed weapons inspectors into Iraq.

These days, it seems like every moment of celebrities' days is covered as actual news by mainstream news outlets. And the closer to a major life meltdown the celebrity is, the more the non-entertainment media seem to cover them.

The fact is, Americans love celebrities. And we love to watch them stumble - not just in the tabloids, but on the evening news, too.

"We get entertainment out of watching celebrities fall," said Robert Thompson, the director for the Center for the Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University.

And recently, the opportunities to catch them falling from glory on traditional news and lifestyles outlets have been plentiful:

- Last week on The Today Show , after stories about murdered missionaries in Yemen and nuclear weapons threats from North Korea, came news of singer Diana Ross' arrest on suspicion of drunk driving.
- Superstar Whitney Houston came clean about her drug use recently on Primetime Live , and morning and evening news shows clamored last fall to get the "real story" behind pop singer Mariah Carey's "breakdown."

- Allegations that domestic diva Martha Stewart engaged in insider trading were discussed in the Wall Street Journal.
- In November, all three 24-hour news channels cut away from midterm election coverage for actress Ryder's sentencing after she was convicted of shoplifting, Thompson said.

Daniel Green, managing editor of thesmokinggun.com, a Court TV-owned Web site full of police reports and court documents on celebrity crimes and misdemeanors, said he thinks the reason people like to see things like mug shots of celebrities is that often a celebrity's public image is manipulated so carefully by public relations people and agents that the public enjoys seeing a side of them that isn't stage-managed.

The yearning to see celebrities' darker sides may be the result of *schadenfreude*, a German term describing a desire to have bad things happen to successful people.

"You might think that a feeling so wicked we don't even have a word for it in English must be a pretty rare thing. But a nasty enjoyment of the misfortunes of others is universal, even though the only word we seem to have for it is in German," said Mary Elizabeth Williams in a 1999 review of John Portmann's book *When Bad Things Happen to Other People*.

"It has a little bit to do with the fact we like dirt," said Dr. Lance Oberg, a Waco psychiatrist in private practice. "It's just a part of our baser nature."

Keith Hankins, a Waco psychologist, thinks there may be two different factors playing into our interest in celebrities doing wrong. One, he said, is our own need to achieve and grow and develop. And in American culture, celebrities have achieved success.

"Celebrities, when they've made it, they've really, really made it," Hankins said.

This achievement creates jealousy, along with the subconscious wish that perhaps this success shouldn't last, he said.

"I kind of wish they'd stumble so there would be room at the top for me," is what people might be thinking about celebrities, Hankins said.

On the other hand, Americans love good rags-to-riches stories, too.

Hankins thinks the popularity of singer-dancer-actress Jennifer Lopez and rap star Eminem might be because their tough roots show that they achieved success on their own. Part of Eminem's mythos is that he rapped his way out of the wrong side of Detroit, as seen in his critically acclaimed movie, *8 Mile*. Similarly, Lopez sang and danced her way up from a rough Bronx neighborhood. These days, her song *Jenny from the Block* is in heavy rotation on MTV, she's starring in the new movie *Maid in Manhattan*, and she's making headlines as the fiancée of *People* magazine's 2002 "Sexiest Man Alive," Ben Affleck.

Increasing coverage

One reason coverage of celebrities may be increasing is that people on TV and in the movies seem like acquaintances.

"If you watch TV, you know these people," Thompson said.

He also thinks the amount of celebrity news coverage is increasing "because there are so many more places to talk about it," he said, naming cable channels E! and Court TV as some of the most popular venues for celebrity gossip.

The type of media coverage of celebrities has also changed since the days when the "Million Dollar Mermaid" Esther Williams and "unofficial World War II pinup" Betty Grable were stars. At one time, access to movie stars was tightly controlled by the studios.

"The Hollywood Press corps then (1950s) was about as autonomous as Tass (the Soviet News Agency) because all the stories published about the stars were dictated by studio bosses and hired press agents," write Sam Kashner and Jennifer MacNair in their book *The Bad & The Beautiful: Hollywood in the Fifties*. "If you printed something about, say, Rock Hudson that wasn't approved by Universal Pictures, you didn't get invited to press conferences anymore. You were blackballed from the Hollywood beat."

Kashner and MacNair explain that the racy *Confidential* magazine burst into this controlled atmosphere, unleashing stories the studios didn't want seen.

By 1957, lawsuits had effectively killed *Confidential*, but its influence lives on.

"For every fawning celebrity profile, there's always an antidote to

be found in the pages of the Star , the National Enquirer , the Globe Ñ Confidential's heirs," write Kashner and MacNair.

Nominal impact

The effects of celebrities' falls from grace on their careers depend on where their crimes fall in community standards, Thompson said.

Examples of forgivable transgressions include addictions and "compromising situations," he said. Actors Matthew Perry and Kelsey Grammer have spun in and out of rehab without missing paychecks. And in June 1995, actor Hugh Grant was picked up by Hollywood police for engaging in lewd conduct with a prostitute. Yet all three stars continue to star in hit movies and TV shows.

Even some legal entanglements, though fodder for tabloid talk, are forgivable in the eyes of the public.

On Dec.12, 2001, Winona Ryder was arrested for shoplifting \$5,560.40 worth of goods from Saks Fifth Avenue in Beverly Hills. She was charged with four felony counts relating to her shoplifting and with possessing controlled substances without a prescription. On Dec. 6, the 31-year-old actress was sentenced to 480 hours of community service, fined \$3,700 and required to pay Saks \$6,355.

A celebrity shoplifting from a fancy store is forgivable, Thompson said, because since most Americans can't afford to spend the same amount of money at a store like Saks, liberating a few luxury goods wasn't a threat to the net of social values - known as the social fabric.

Hollywood watchers even say her legal troubles may boost her career.

"I think that people want to like celebrities," Green said.

Hurting careers

But there are transgressions that can seriously mar a celebrity's reputation. Republican Sen. Trent Lott's remarks at fellow Sen. Strom Thurmond's 100th birthday bash Dec. 5 may be among them. At the party, Lott stated his home state Mississippi was proud to have voted for Thurmond in 1948, when he ran for president on a segregationist platform.

"And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't

have had all these problems over all these years, either," he was quoted as saying.

Many people interpreted Lott's remarks as pro-segregation, a claim Lott denies. Lott lost his chance to regain the office of Senate majority leader following much scrutiny by the media, his Senate colleagues and even President Bush.

Thompson said some misdeeds constitute complete disregard for the norms of society and are too hideous to ever win back the affection of the American public. In general, Thompson said, a celebrity suspected of murder may never be able to regain his or her place on the "A list."

"O.J. Simpson and Robert Blake, for example, were allegedly involved in trouble so disturbing that while their stories made interesting telling, we are not willing to reabsorb them into the cultural bosom," Thompson said. Both ex-NFL star Simpson and "Baretta" actor Robert Blake were accused of murdering their respective wives. Simpson was acquitted following a 1995 jury trial, while Blake is in jail awaiting trial.

But there also are what Thompson describes as the "celebrities of crime," such as figure skater Tonya Harding and Amy Fisher, dubbed the "Long Island Lolita."

Harding made more headlines for her involvement in the 1994 attack on rival Nancy Kerrigan than she did that year for her skating success.

Fisher, a 17-year-old, was best known for shooting her lover's wife in 1992 when her boyfriend, Joey Buttafuoco, refused to leave her. These are celebrities who were known for their stumbling and who only became household names after they landed in court.

"We let the news build up the celebrity equity," Thompson said of such "stars" who are better known for their roles as defendants.

'Yesterday's news'

Robert Jensen, an associate professor of journalism at the University of Texas at Austin, said the the public likes seeing coverage of celebrities gone wrong - whether their missteps are forgivable or unforgivable - because of the nature of our relationship with them.

"It's a depoliticized culture," he said. Working-class people are no longer involved in political or social change the way they were prior to World War II, he said. This lack of involvement means

people are less engaged in relations with people from their community and workplace.

In turn, Jensen said, people are engaged with a culture that steers people toward consumption, entertainment and spectator sports. And when that is the focus of society, the people we look up to come out of those fields.

But, he said, since our involvement with celebrities isn't that deep, and because they aren't being celebrated for their achievements, we have nothing really invested in them.

So, unlike our real friends, when they misstep, we toss them out of our lives like yesterday's news.