The field of celebrity studies is grounded in the notion that studying celebrity offers insight into discursive constructions of the self and identity within a particular cultural moment. This idea of “what it is to be human in contemporary society” emerges from the tensions between the public and private selves of stars as constructed and circulated through media.1 Investigating the cultural power of celebrity, then, necessarily entails a study of how celebrities are represented and their images circulated in mass media at a specific historical moment. In short, understanding celebrity culture means understanding media cultures, and vice versa.

New forms of media and celebrity have appeared throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and nuanced investigations of the complex relationships between celebrity, media, and audiences have helped establish the field as a legitimate area of cultural inquiry. Textual analyses of tabloids, such as Su Holmes’s and Rebecca Feasey’s keen analyses of British celebrity glossy heat; examinations of narratives on celebrity gossip blogs by Kirsty Fairclough and me; and more recent explorations of the rise of social media celebrity by Anne Jerslev and Susie Khamis, Lawrence Ang, and Raymond Welling all focus on the reciprocal relationships between celebrity and media cultures in shaping and reinforcing discourses of identity and authenticity in contemporary culture.2 Other studies highlight the myriad and complex


ways in which audiences engage with and share celebrity gossip media in their everyday lives. Though some cultural critics continue to bemoan the pervasive influence of celebrity content across media, conducting scholarly research into the role of media within celebrity culture presents unique challenges. Celebrity media industries and cultures are largely ephemeral and ahistorical, with gossip media industries, in particular, priming audiences to value the latest dish or the newest trend over any engagement with the past. Because celebrity culture seems to be everywhere, accessing and archiving even very recent celebrity culture is beset by multiple roadblocks rooted in its transitory nature. This short piece details my experience seeking archives of celebrity media texts that are both industrially and culturally ephemeral in order to document and analyze the discursive construction of social meaning through celebrity images.

My recent book, Extraordinarily Ordinary: “Us Weekly” and the Rise of Reality Television Celebrity, aims, in part, to recognize the value of celebrity gossip media for understanding celebrity culture. It traces the role of American celebrity gossip weeklies, specifically industry-leader Us Weekly, in the transformation of reality television participants into celebrities through coverage of their private and public lives. It frames this transformation as a key shift within celebrity culture toward ordinariness as the core of fame. In the early twenty-first century, Us Weekly dominated the American celebrity weekly market, finding economic and cultural success even as the wider print media industry was in decline. Under the editorial leadership of Bonnie Fuller and later Janice Min, Us Weekly set the tone for the “girly template [of] bubbly pastels . . . embroidered with lots of over narration about stars’ foibles and mortality” that was widely copied across the genre and remains standard today.

Heavily reliant on images, particularly paparazzi photographs, Us Weekly highlights the “feminine” concerns of romance, family, beauty, and fashion in ways that connect the glamorous world of celebrity to readers’ everyday lives and concerns. Even the name of the magazine speaks to this imaginary community between stars and readers, connecting “us” to the stars through weekly glimpses of their personal lives. Cover stories, frequently hyped as “Only in Us,” promise an exclusive inside look at the private side of stars rather than stories about their professional endeavors. A hallmark of this

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focus on lifestyle over talent is *Us Weekly*’s regular (and much copied across the industry) paparazzi photo-based feature titled “Stars—They’re just like Us!” This weekly feature depicts stars engaged in the often banal activities of daily life, reassuring readers that stars, despite their glamorous clothes and lifestyle, are actually “just like us.” To fill pages and stake its claim to greater exclusive access to celebrity culture, *Us Weekly* inserted reality television participants into these feminized lifestyle narratives beginning in the early twenty-first century. In the process, the magazine helped expand celebrity culture to include those who are famous for just being themselves, or “like us.” The goal of my study was to unpack this coverage of reality television celebrities, not simply in terms of their increased presence in the magazine but in order to ask how the fame of these “ordinary” individuals reinforced broader norms of identity in contemporary society. A close examination of the physical magazines from the early 2000s was thus a necessary component of my research, but the challenge of accessing even these fairly recent texts was informed by the ephemeral status of celebrity culture and gossip media.

As other contributors to this dossier have asserted, the goal of an archive is not simply to preserve texts as objects but to present those objects as a means to understand wider practices of media production and consumption. In the case of celebrity gossip, the lack of gossip media archives speaks to larger problems of studying celebrity culture. First, despite a broad subfield of research into its social significance, celebrity culture is often decried in both popular and academic circles as fluff and distraction, with celebrity gossip, in particular, dismissed as the province of frivolous feminine cultures. Celebrity-watching audiences themselves frequently frame their engagement as a guilty pleasure, reinforcing the notion that celebrity doesn’t matter beyond entertainment. As Andrea McDonnell reports in her study of readers of celebrity gossip magazines, women readers “often seek out the magazines when they appear in public places, such as the staff lounge, the doctor’s office, or the nail salon; they also pass copies through friends.” Readers value the ability to easily pick up and put down gossip magazines, using them to pass the time or connect with others by discussing the latest celebrity sagas. These magazines are not seen as permanent texts, even by those who read them. Although celebrity gossip may be ephemeral, the in-the-moment experience of engaging with a gossip magazine is nonetheless decidedly material. While my project was not an audience study, access to a print archive remained a central research goal, as it would enable me to engage in the act of flipping through the magazines, which was a central part of the experience of reading celebrity gossip during the time frame covered by my study. More importantly, physical access would offer me a more complete view of how the magazine framed celebrity culture at a moment when *Us Weekly* not only defined the print gossip market but also had a profound influence on the style and form of the burgeoning digital gossip media industry.

Given *Us Weekly*’s ephemeral status, finding back issues of the physical magazine presented a significant challenge. Few university libraries subscribe

7 Meyers, *Extraordinarily Ordinary*.  

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to celebrity gossip magazines and even fewer archive them. My home library at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan, does not even include this title in its current popular magazine holdings and has no access, either physical or digital, to back issues. The University of Michigan, a large research institution nearby, subscribes to *Us Weekly* for its current popular magazine holdings but typically does not archive back issues for more than two years. Alex, the University of Michigan research librarian I spoke to during early phases of my project, said this title often “walks away” from the library while in the current popular media collection, which makes it impossible to archive. That copies of *Us Weekly* disappear from the library could suggest that celebrity media has a strong resonance with the university’s readers, driving some to “walk away” with issues that detail their favorite stars. However, given that celebrity gossip is devalued “as having low culture value,” such theft could also be motivated by a desire to hide one’s interest in celebrity culture. Sofia Johansson’s study of gossip readers notes that many readers, both male and female, internalize the dominant perspectives on celebrity gossip as “pointless” and a “guilty pleasure” that one should not admit to enjoying. Thus, even those who find pleasure in these magazines may feel a need to hide their interest by secreting these titles out of the public space of the library.

However, I argue such theft is more likely motivated by the community aspect inherent to celebrity gossip, with readers seeing celebrity magazines, like celebrity gossip itself, as something to share with others. In her study of tabloid readers at a museum in suburban New York, McDonnell points to the communal reading sessions that took place in the staff lounge and other common areas of the museum as a way for the women to connect with one another, passing the magazine around or sharing specific stories in order to foster group ties. Similarly, library patrons may “walk away” with gossip magazines because they see the physical magazine as a conduit to a social activity rather than a permanent object for preservation. Whatever the reason, lack of institutional permanence made it challenging to assemble a complete physical archive. Interestingly, the University of Michigan does maintain online access to an archive of *Us Weekly* dating back to 2000, but this digital archive is text only. Given the primacy of images to the magazine’s style and its ideological framing of celebrity, an online archive of text articles only offers a very partial impression of its coverage of celebrities.

The celebrity media industry also does not consider celebrity gossip magazines to be worthy of preservation, which is not particularly surprising given the genre’s focus on current trends and gossip. Since Wenner Media purchased the general entertainment magazine *Us* in 1985 and then relaunched it as *Us Weekly* for the celebrity gossip market in 1999, it has been through multiple corporate owners, including the Walt Disney Company (which owned a majority stake from 2001 to 2006) and American Media Inc. (which purchased the title in 2017). None of these corporate entities maintains a

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8 Alex, personal interview, June 19, 2018.
10 Johansson, 348.
publicly accessible archive of the magazine, even for their years of ownership. Savvy internet searches can turn up a few archived articles from the *Us Weekly*’s online portal, but, crucially, these are typically not the same articles that appeared in the magazine. Wenner Media launched the website in 2006 at a moment when the magazine industry was threatened by the increasing popularity of digital gossip forums, such as celebrity gossip blogs. However, the portal generally served to lure readers back to the print magazine by offering teaser articles or bonus content rather than a complete digital reproduction of the magazine. Digital media research is itself beset by multiple material and methodological challenges of archiving, including the issue of how to wade through the overwhelming (and ever increasing) amount of digital media that exists and the fragility of “digital content [that] is so prone to disappearance and loss” due to changing technological affordances and modes of social engagement. Thus, I argue, access to print versions of celebrity weeklies remain an important point of entry into the symbolic power of celebrity during this historical moment and beyond. That is, while celebrity gossip has gone digital in many ways, *Us Weekly*’s initial hesitant entrance into digital gossip spaces reaffirms that print gossip remains a powerful but ephemeral force within celebrity culture.

Additionally, the idea of creating alternative archives drawn from fans’ personal collections was not a viable option for my project. Elsewhere in this dossier, Elana Levine and Meredith A. Bak discuss how soap fan-archivists’ VHS and digital recordings and private toy collections, respectively, facilitated their research. While fans of a particular star may collect media devoted to that star’s image, I found no clear networks of fans collecting a specific gossip magazine title. Even my own personal archive of gossip magazine back issues from the early 2000s were centered around a particular star (Britney Spears) and cut across titles rather than offering a deep back catalog of *Us Weekly* that would support this particular project.

Fortunately, the popular culture periodicals archive at the Ray & Pat Browne Popular Culture Library at Bowling Green State University in Ohio houses an almost complete archive of *Us Weekly* beginning from March 27, 2000, which was just after Wenner Media’s relaunch of the title as a celebrity weekly. According to the BGSU library catalog, the archive is missing several individual issues and one entire volume of archived issues. These issues may have also “walked away,” again pointing to the challenges of archiving popular media, but nevertheless this collection is the most complete print archive of *Us Weekly* available to researchers. The Browne Popular Culture Library does archive other celebrity weeklies, namely *Star* and *In Touch Weekly*, but these archives are much less complete. That *Us Weekly* was chosen, among all possible celebrity gossip weekly titles, to be more fully archived speaks to the magazine’s centrality within contemporary celebrity and media cultures and the library’s goals of legitimizing and documenting those cultures. Unprecedented access to a print archive of *Us Weekly* enabled me to trace changes

over time and offer a more complete picture of how the coverage of reality celebrities in *Us Weekly* served its industrial and economic goals as well as disrupted traditional conceptions of stardom. Such analyses are critical to unpacking the cultural resonance of celebrity as a marker of social identity within a particular historical moment as well as how such framings continue to reverberate in current celebrity culture.

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