

CHISMAX TO THE MAX: THE CELEBRITY GOSSIP ECONOMY

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The focus of this paper is on celebrity gossip, specifically who profit from it and how. Why do Filipinos like showbiz gossip? People want to learn about celebrities and their lives to keep up with the times, to be in the know and be updated. Celebrities' lives bind us as Filipinos all over the globe who can relate to their stories regardless of spatial aspect. This is done through mass media, of course. Filipinos working overseas or migrants now living abroad cross miles try to update themselves with the latest in our country, not just in the field of politics, religion, etc., but also in the world of show business. The presence of cable Filipino TV channels, together with the abundance of online Filipino showbiz sites, forums and discussions has enabled them to connect with the Filipino community. The ideas of showbiz as a reality show, celebrities' lives as a 'commons', the concept of the 'imagined community' as a factor for overseas Filipinos' discussions of celebrities' lives, and the issue on exploitation on the celebrities' part, will be explored.

Proof of Filipinos' having a thing for showbiz gossip, news and the like is the abundance of showbiz-related materials. In tabloids, *artistas'* lives greet the centerfold. Broadsheets have separate sections for updated news and happenings in the show business. Who's hot and who's not, one knows through magazines like *Yes*, *Oh* and *Star Studio*. Being updated will require more than reading newspapers and magazines, because the juiciest news are yet to be revealed in TV showbiz-oriented shows like *Ek Channel*, *S-files*, *Startalk*, and *The Buzz*. Trivia and blind items about showbiz personalities are inserted and serve as cue for breaks in between their news giving and song-playing in AM and FM radio stations. Even TV news shows, whether early morning or primetime, will not be complete without the most awaited showbiz segments like *Chika Minute*. Technology and media have reached the masses to such extent as to developing weblogs, websites and forums with showbiz people and gossip as their main topics, which click to Filipinos, especially to those living and working abroad. Topics of showbiz news range from established facts to very personal matters, which eventually become

public knowledge. Showbiz writers and reporters deem *artistas'* lovelife, health, personality and habits, finances, even family, relatives and close friends' issues newsworthy, so as long as the personalities' names are included in the web of stories somewhere. The realm of *chika* (gossip) in showbiz includes the latest in *artistas'* relationships, break-ups, marriage, pregnancy, debts, sicknesses, even death, gender orientation, characteristics, nasty habits, relations with others, crimes their family members did, etc. in other words: name it, most likely the showbiz gossip world has got it.

This paper was made with my 38-year old cousin in mind. She's the type of person who may very well be described as a no-nonsense woman. She's intelligent, stern, reserved; in one word: intimidating. It's just now in my college years that I got to know her, considering the fact that I had the chance to live with her for weekends and holidays during my stay in Manila. At first, I tried to feel my way through her (*kapa*), and to discover her likes, dislikes, topics of interest, when best to talk to her... and slowly, it occurred to me that despite her seemingly walled-up personality is a side which is just so-Filipino. She loves showbiz. This liking even exceeds the local because she is also into Hollywood and British personalities. Proof: she buys her newspapers only every Sunday, and immediately gets her hands into the Sunday Special sections which chiefly are composed of showbiz items; her world stops on Sundays, every four in the afternoon to tune in The Buzz and S-files (simultaneously, through switching channels every commercial break) to hear the latest in show business; she's a member of numerous forums and groups in the internet that talk about numerous actors (all of which American, Irish, Scottish, or English – she's a self-confessed Anglophile); she has a network of friends who are showbiz-related (talent managers, friends of friends of someone, first-hand *chismis* resources). Talking about showbiz is our bonding moment, she talks and informs me, I listen, react, and question. I think showbiz news-talking is a main component of her sociable side. She finds pleasure in talking about other people (in this case, showbiz personalities) or gossiping, which is what I'm also actually doing right now while I'm talking about her.

It is somewhat surprising to learn that “gossip” came from the word *god-sibb* in Old English, which pertained to a person related to one in God, specially a woman's close female friends at the birth of a child, the child's godparents, or the mother's “god-sisters”; and through the ages acquired its pejorative connotation of sharing secrets and chatty talk about details and personal matters and relationships. Gossip also refers to idle talk and trifling, often groundless rumor, usually of a personal, sensational or intimate nature. But according to academics, there is an evaluative element present in gossip, which is its distinguishing characteristic (Eder and Enke 1991). The bulk of conversations focus on “who's doing what with whom” plus personal views

on the matter or the inclusion of one's opinions and feelings about the information.

The fields of social psychology, anthropology, evolutionary psychology, sociolinguistics and social history would note that gossip is not a trivial pastime. It is vital to human social, psychological and physical well-being and is equivalent to primates' social grooming, an activity stimulating endorphin production, thus, considered as stress relievers and immune system booster (Fox 2001).

Gossip is not only limited to neighbors, friends and family as topics, because celebrities and other public figures can also be talked about. There is certainly a sense in which gossip about celebrities involves treating them and talking about them as though they were members of one's own social group. We talk about celebrities as if we have these close connections with them, as if they're friends or family members, and we try to be updated with the latest happenings in their lives as such. We regard them as pseudo-members of our social network and show interest in gossip about them for the same reasons we value gossip about real members of our social network. So who are in the community that one keeps up with? They are those who are part of "a nation always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, and is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion", these communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style by which they are imagined. (Anderson 1991:15-16).

This paper aims (1) to explore showbiz gossip production and consumption as part of a 'market economy' and 'community economy', (2) to look at how gossip is distributed as a product for profit, (3) understand why it is consumed, and (4) learn about how the 'celebrity gossip economy' works.

The system of celebrity gossip was not how I expected it to be¹. Gossiping among showbiz people didn't involve money as much as I thought it did. It was more than finances the showbiz world was centered upon, it also revolved around relationships among its inhabitants.

¹ The original title of this paper was *Profit in Privacy* because my intention at first was to concentrate on figures, on quantitative data, then on the qualitative after. However, the interview made the paper shift to another direction, which in my opinion was favorable since the data proved to be more ethnographic in nature, with the economic sense still present.

First off, the paper will focus on a famous showbiz personality for examples of gossip stories. The system of celebrity gossip economy will then be analyzed based on information from an insider of the business. And finally, perceptions and assumptions about show business and the reason for the celebrity gossip craze will be noted. Quantitative and qualitative data about the research topic are extracted from various sources. The main source of insights is an interview with a particularly knowledgeable person, a talent manager in the local show business. He gave a thorough description of the system involved in production and distribution and consumption of celebrity gossip to the extent of providing the economic figures involved.

Tetay: Our Kris Aquino

The possible reasons for love of gossip will be discussed later in the paper. For now, let examples of conversations about celebrities found through the internet be cited. This is contained in a blog entry of a certain April, a 20-year old lady, posted June of 2004, and the topic was “what I love about Sundays”. It went:

Today is a very boring Sunday morning.... I'm supposed to go to the CFC Anniversary in QC but then my parents left already.... It's ok though... There's lots of advantages just staying at home on a Sunday... One of these is being able to watch those showbiz oriented talk shows.... Hahahaha call me jologs but I try to keep myself updated with those juicy gossips even if it means that I have to endure the annoying “coniotic” voice of Kris “I have to tell the world about my lovelife” Aquino....

Since Kris' name has been mentioned and hers has a very interesting narrative, let her be the focus as she may very well be the epitome of showbiz celebrities that have ‘gossip value’. She has been mentioned in various newspapers, has been interviewed in talk shows aplenty, has been a constant topic for columns, and has been nominated as a sensational newsmaker for several years now. Kristina Bernadette Cojuangco Aquino was borne to a prominent family. She's the youngest child of assassinated politician Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino, and of former Philippine president Corazon “Cory” Aquino. Kris' life has been an open book since she first entered the public's eye campaigning for her late father. She dreamt of becoming a TV host and movie actress, and these she actually became. More than her film credentials, high-rating shows and numerous commercials, her personality and showbiz doings made her a “highly consumable product”, as described by a certain Dacpano in a Manila Times article. There is the famous series of plastic surgeries, the P80-million libel suit against GMA 7

and former communications executive Tet Defensor, and most especially her share of scandalous stories and troubled lovelife. She had illicit affairs with married but separated men: actor Philip Salvador, with whom she had a son (Joshua), and actor-politician Joey Marquez, with whom she was even more talked about when she revealed to the world on TV about his pointing a gun at her and catching Sexually Transmitted Diseases from him. This was a primetime newsmaker which certainly made the Filipinos tune in to their television sets with either mouths agape or eyebrows raised. With Kris' face focused on the camera, holding back tears, her words were:

... "Sinasabi ko ito sa buong Pilipinas. Joey, alam mo ang ginawa mo. Tinutukan mo ako, kinasahan mo ako. Hindi ko dapat paabutin sa ganito ...Hindi mo gagawin 'yan sa anak ng isang taong in-assassinate. Ilabas na natin yung ibang isyu. Yun ang isyu, tinutukan nya ako ng baril."

(...I'm telling this to the whole Philippines. Joey, you know what you did. You pointed a gun at me, you cocked the gun. I should not have let it reach this point... You cannot do that to the daughter of an assassinated man. Let's bring out these other issues. This is the issue, he pointed a gun at me.)

She said she and Marquez had had many fights. "We fight on an almost weekly basis".

"Parati niya akong minamaliit. Palagi niyang sinasabi, 'you're so lucky to have me. Pasalamat ka na nagtitiyaga ako sa 'yo.' And I took it. Ganun ako ka-tanga. Tinanggap ko lahat yun. Kinalimutan ko ang pagpapalaki ng nanay ko sa akin. ...My mom told me that for somebody so intelligent, bakit pagdating sa lalaki, sobrang boba mo? Nagpakaboba ako para kay Joey."

(He kept putting me down. He kept saying 'you're so lucky to have me'. You should be grateful I'm staying with you. *And I took it.* That's how stupid I was. I accepted all that. I forgot how my mother raised me... *My mom told me that for someone so intelligent, why is it that when it comes to men, you are so dumb? For Joey I allowed myself to become so stupid.*")

Here is a UP Forum Online article mentioning of Kris and Joey's extramarital affairs and scandals being "the news" instead of much worthier topics:

One of last year's most unfortunate stories was of the Filipino public going after the love story not the beheadings. Despite attempts by government supporters and critics to draw the public attention into the debates over the handling of the kidnappings in southern Mindanao, Manilenos preferred to read about Kris and Joey. ... For here is the daughter of one of the country's oldest, politically-powerful, well-educated, and elegant families, falling in love with her antipode, the offspring of a famous womanizing director, a bad actor with hardly a formal education, and a politician who won office not on the basis of his intellect, but on simply being funny. And more. For they were a couple who had decided to fight the odds, lovers willing to brave the censure of family, friends and public and continue with their tryst. The gallant Joey was standing fast against the public irritation over the callousness with which he left the ailing Alma and their four kids and then justifying this in public by invoking the most macho explanations: unhappiness and dissatisfaction with the wife. Kris was also resolved to do the same, confronting public opprobrium that she was breaking up a family, and cashing in on the publicity, simply because she is...well, Kris. (Abinales 2003)

Numerous other personalities like Robin Padilla, Vic Sotto, Pampanga governor Mark Lapid, and many more have been linked to Kris Aquino's name, all of whom if not into showbiz, are in politics. Most of the revelations came from none other but herself, considering the fact that she willingly gives away information on national television. Finally however, Kris settled down with a young basketball star, James Yap. It is now confirmed, after several mentions of pregnancy tests and percentage of probabilities of pregnancy, from her, that she is now on the way. [Editor's note: the next explosive story was the news about an affair between James Yap and a cosmetic clinic attendant. All parties appeared in the media to give their 'sides'.]

The question is not Kris' seemingly media-hungry attitude, but why the masses – the Filipino people, consume it. So why do Filipinos love celebrity gossip?

Before citing the possible reasons for this Filipino liking of celebrity gossip, let us first look at how the system works. The following information

came from an interview conducted over the phone with a very knowledgeable person.

The Interview: Gossip Equals *Gimik*, Equals Popularity?

Mr. Jerome Wang (not his real name) is a young talent manager (25 years old), not of *artistas*, but of models. He's into VTRs and commercials. His talents are included in the shows *Hiram* and *Bora*. He mentioned that among his talents, one who had made a name is Justin de Leon of Viva Hotmen, who also became a model of Calayan Surgicenter. As a talent manager, Mr. Wang's role is basically to ensure that his talents receive projects, to lead them to popularity. Although he isn't in the celebrity world, he is very familiar with the twists and turns in show business, knowing a fair number of people inside who know how "it" works². Here is how it goes:

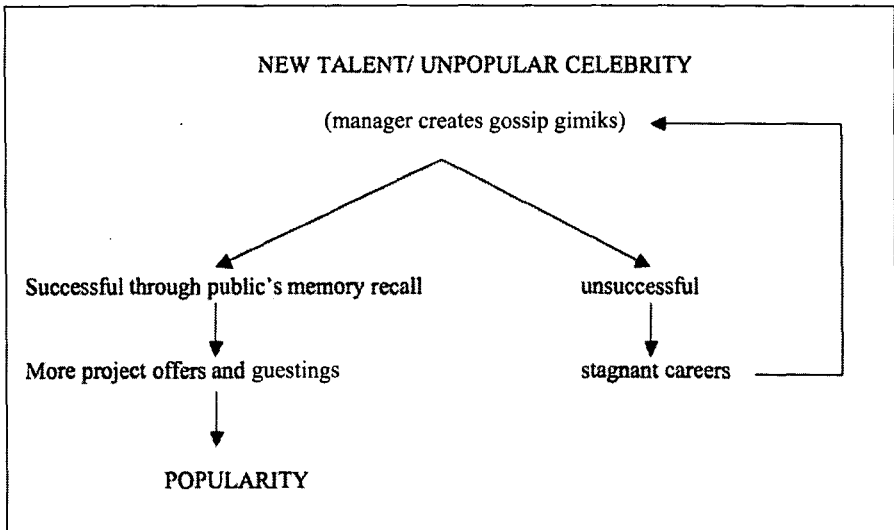
According to him, one strategy for popularizing new talents is through stirring up some news or creating "*gimiks*". These *gimiks* can come in the form of gossip and this is a task assigned to the talent's manager. He makes up some story about his talent dating this someone, his talent doing this and that, etc. all for the sake of "memory recall". He cited the "*no.1 gimikera*" of all as an example, "*yung mahilig mag-split*" (the one who frequently does the [gymnastic or balletic] 'split'). With a mixture of hesitation and excitement, I replied, "*si Mystika?*", and he mumbled in agreement. With the problem of competition amongst newcomers in show business, mainly because of the abundance of talent searches of today, he said that managers have to ensure that their *alagas* be recognized amidst so many new faces. In the case of positive *chismis*, the kind being mentioned above, names are being associated with distinctive deeds or characteristics like splits. Here are a series of examples: splits: Mystika; female escort service: Keanna Reeves; miscarriage and marriage to an eighteen-year old named Archie: Madame Auring. The *gimiks*, publicized through *chismis* or gossip usually apply for the *baguhan* or newcomers and the *laos na* or the not-so-popular-now-but-used-to-be-popular celebrities.

According to Mr. Wang, the money involved in the system of "positive *chismis*" (positive on talent and manager's side because it's beneficial to

² Referral and contacts to the interviewee was possible through my cousin, the one mentioned earlier in the paper. Many schedules for appointments were attempted, however due to time demands his job entails, he had been unavailable for quite some time. Through persistence and constant contacting on my and my cousins part, he gave way. The interview was held in October 2006 while he was in Davao, on location for work, while I, was in my boarding house in Quezon City. We talked over our cellular phones.

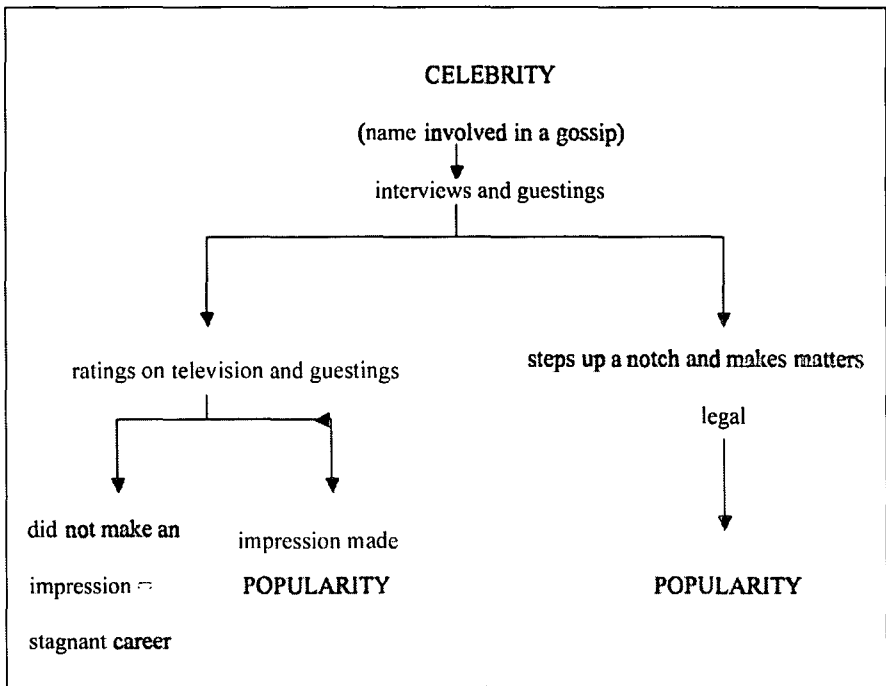
them) more commonly than not, comes from the publicist (usually the columnists) because they're the ones who need to write articles for the tabloids. They pay to write gossip about the celebrities. Apart from this, the talents can also receive money from TV guestings. From these guesting fees the manager gets the standard thirty percent of the talent's earnings. Say, The Buzz gives P5,000 to Ynez Veneracion as honorarium to talk about her alleged relationship with Alvin Aragon, Ynez' manager gets P1,500 from Ynez' P5,000. But how do the columnists earn? Through publication. The more the made-up stories click with the masses, the better.

Diagram 1. Schematic Diagram of the Flow of Made-up or Positive Celebrity Gossip



As Mr. Wang said, "*Kapag mas matunog ang pangalan, mas OK. 'Pag mas mabango ang name, mas sikat.*" ('If the name is more familiar, the more OK. The better the name 'smells', the more popular.') One builds good relations with the press through gift-giving and a well-developed PR (personal relations) department. One negative example is the media worker Christy Fermin. Although many *artistas* refer to her as *nanay* and show immense respect for her, many hold grudges against her news-making, which is mainly the reason why she has libel suits up to her neck. It helps if the manager and the talent are friends with the press people. In other words, *pakikisama* is very much involved between managers and their talents, and the press people. They'll do positive gossiping for free, in the name of good relations.

Diagram 2. Schematic Diagram of the Flow of Real or Negative Gossip



This is the downside of *chismis*, the “negative” kind. Mr. Wang said that there really exists the *chismis* that can be destructive to the reputation, career, or celebrity itself. But why write about such negative stuff? The reasons may either be because it’s just newsworthy, or due to personal matters. The “reliable sources” the writers mention in their columns are gossipy friends who overshare what they know about their showbiz acquaintances, or enemies who know secrets but are embittered to just shut their mouths or let moments pass by. These sources are the publicists’ informants, thus the information they get are passed-around stories and may not be that reliable. Gossip concerning an *artista*’s name may also fly around if a press person doesn’t like you. The case is also true for situations when a close friend of a press person is an enemy of this celebrity, in which case that celebrity will suffer the tragic misfortune of just being gossiped about negatively. At one point, the problem with showbiz was also discussed. He said, “*Ang problema sa showbiz, may makitang butas sa’yo, kasiraan mo na ‘yun. Ang tsismis naman kasi, dagdag-bawas yan - minsan kulang, minsan exag[gerated].*”

(The problem with showbiz is, if a hole can be found, you can be destroyed. Gossip is 'add-subtract', sometimes 'lacking', sometimes exaggerated.)

It is possible that when celebrities feel that the gossip about them is out-of-bounds and begin to feel exploited, they bring the matter to court, and suing happens. The above mentioned criminal case filed by Kris Aquino against GMA 7 and former communications executive Tet Defensor was a libel suit.

Show business is a complicated world. Mr. Wang, towards the end of our conversation, talked about how showbiz seemed to be a beautiful, colorful world, when in fact, it's complicated and difficult to survive in ("...*akala mo lang maganda at colorful ang showbiz. Hindi, sobrang gulo dito...*"). This, he mentioned, was the reason behind his having other jobs besides managing talents. He won't commit full-time and would rather multi-task. He knows that once he enters the showbiz jungle, he'll have to be an underdog first, his reputation will be torn into pieces, and he'll have plenty of enemies.

Celebrity lives and the use value of gossip

Now that the celebrity gossip system in our local showbiz works has been described from an insider's point-of-view, let us attack it from a different perspective, from that of the 'masses', or the consumers. The question still remains, why the liking for celebrity gossips? What is its use value?

To the masses or consumers, showbiz itself may be considered as a 'reality show'. The celebrities portray as their own selves and star in their own life stories, with the masses still the audience. As continually mentioned, the role of showbiz is to entertain. *Artistas* make people laugh and cry and try to paint emotions for their audience through their acting and at the same time making people believe that the tears and laughter are beyond acting. When people begin to thirst for more and let entertainment step outside the screen, then that's the time show business and real life merge to create news and gossip, again for the entertainment of the masses. The showbiz personalities' lives become just another movie or show.

To those fanatics who obsessively follow-up their favorite stars' lives, there may be the notion of intimacy or closeness. Knowing *artistas'* deepest and darkest secrets and personal matters is like the closest thing to being kin. By knowing the star, it's as if you're a part of his/her life, and likewise. Supposedly, only the closest of family members would know you – personality, habits, doings and all. But through sources and informants (media and other *chikadoras*), the need for close connections (blood or otherwise) to gain access to secrets and life happenings of celebrities can be nullified.

Celebrity gossip may also convey social status or social intelligence. It's like the gossip provider or the knowledgeable people who talk about the

celebrities get a share of the limelight experience and gain a certain pride in knowing the latest happening with *artistas*. The phenomenon can be equated to faddism – you're popular if you know the latest; you're *in* if you know what's hot; those not into the mainstream get left behind. The masses consider celebrity gossip as news that one has to be updated upon, for these are the topics talked about in our society; these are the topics anybody who tunes into media (practically everybody) can relate to. That is why current news includes showbiz news and celebrity gossip updates.

Sharing gossip establishes, develops, and maintains social relationships. People gossip with one another to bond with other members of social circles; to clarify social position and status; to assess and manage reputations; to learn social skills; to learn and reinforce shared values; to resolve conflicts; to build support networks; to win friends and influence people. Similarly, in the special case of celebrity gossip, its most functional role is social bonding. One can pass the time through storytelling and what better stories to tell than those of famous, sensational celebrities, whom almost everybody is familiar with. Through talking, relationships are built. Celebrities' lives bind us perhaps pretty much like the traditional epics heroes of the past, our very own *artistas* become national figures who serve as distinctively ours, with their colorful and action-packed stories. Their stories are shared by the whole community, real or imagined. Filipinos working overseas or migrants now living abroad feel like they still have their national roots located in our country through *imagined communities*. They try to keep habits and personalities, which to them are very-Filipino, and that includes having a thing for celebrity gossip. They cross miles trying to update themselves with the latest in our country, not just in the field of politics, religion, etc., but also in the world of show business. The presence of TFC (*The Television Channel*) and the newly created *Global Kapuso*, together with the abundance of online Filipino showbiz sites, forums and discussions have enabled them to still be part of our Filipino community. Let it also be mentioned that this phenomenon of connecting Filipinos abroad through mass communication and media, and establishing stronger relationships among members of our community is a product of globalization and technological advancements.

In Rafael's book, *White Love*, he included a chapter on mourning and gossip entitled, "Your Grief is our Gossip". The chapter mentioned about the national mourning caused by the death of overseas Filipina worker, Flor Contemplacion (Rafael 2000:204-227). She became a 'national figure' whose death caused the Filipinos to come together, not just physically during her burial, but in essence, virtually. In her death, she also became, what Badiday referred to in her newspaper column, 'showbiz property'. Rumors and stories about her relationships with her family, Delia Maga (the overseas Filipina

worker whom she supposedly killed), her family's affair, and a lot more circulated just before a movie about her life and death was made. She became sensationalized. The items which revolved around her spiced up the film version of her life, which in turn, captured the public's interest all the more. As Rafael cited, "Gossip, like spices, is an essential supplement in the preparation of stories for consumption." In a way, Flor Contemplacion became a commodity, by being gossiped about, with her life turned into a film, it also became public property exploited for profit within the showbiz economy. "Gossip anticipates even as it is driven by constant yet dispersed presence of money" (Rafael 2000:26).

Celebrity gossip as an economic system

The columnists or tabloid writers and press people are the **producers** who provide the masses/public or the **consumers** the news, gossips and stories of celebrities which are the **products**. The **means of production** include the good looks, talent, personality, the gossip and *gimiks*, the media technology (tabloids, magazines, internet, radio and television). The **relations of production** are the institutions and links between manager--talent/celebrity, talent/celebrity--press people, manager--press people.

Sometimes, showbiz peoples' lives may seem like a commons, the commons being a thing shared by everybody who has rights of access over it because of being part of the same community. The idea that these entertainers 'work for' the public makes them 'public property'. While money may or may not be earned by showbiz personalities in the gossip-production process, money is spent by the masses for the personalities' lives. There is the impression that because they, the masses are their 'constituents', celebrities owe it to them to tell/share their lives. Therefore, the metaphor "life as an open book" applies. Where should the line of privacy of personalities be drawn in the market of show business, if there was any to begin with? What rights does the public have over their personal lives? For a showbiz starlets/personalities, is the price of stardom enough to let others besmirch their name? If they permit it, up to what extent? Privacy becomes a blur because their personal lives (lives outside show business) become publicized and their roles as entertainers exceeds that which is written in their job description. What the amusement people get is not from their acting anymore but from simply living and sharing their true-to-life stories. There'll be nothing much left for the celebrities to keep through privacy being broken by mass media and other means of communication.

The considering of showbiz personalities' lives as a commons make the public demand directly or in subtle ways their assumed rights over the knowledge of stars' lives. The commoditization of gossip as entertainment is consumed within the reproduction of community because it generates

morally-based debates. From Flor Contemplacion's case as the overseas contract worker executed in a foreign country to Kris Aquino's affairs which are embarrassing for the elite because of her mixing with men of less than equal status (Abinales 2003). The people behind show business and celebrity gossiping likewise are essentially engaging with a lot of issues about ethics, behavior and morality, as members of a shared community.

And for that, I'm contented being a part of celebrity gossip's system, from the consumers' side I'm a member of. I am away from the spotlight, but having fun, from learning about their lives, and keeping connected with the rest of globalized Filipinos in the process.

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