

**News Values, Stereotypes and Widowhood: a  
preliminary investigation into media coverage of  
celebrity widows**

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## **Abstract**

It is well understood that the news media publish stories according to a set of narrowly defined news values. The idea of “personalisation”, “reference to elite persons” and “negativity” as being influential news values are well illustrated by media fascination with celebrity widows. The aims of this paper are two-fold. The first is to explore possible rationales behind media fascination with celebrity widows, in the process exploring how these women illustrate media news values. The second aim is to explore the ways in which reporting of these women is framed through the use of widow stereotypes including the evil – or black - widow, the happy – or merry – widow, the war widow and the widowed mother. Celebrity widows discussed will include Terri Irwin, Anna-Nicole Smith, Coretta Scott King, Jacqueline Kennedy, Courtney Love, Yoko Ono and Mariane Pearl. The celebrity widows referred to in this paper to illustrate both media news values and the stereotypes they perpetuate.

## **Introduction**

The aims of this paper are two fold. Firstly, using the lens of media news values, this paper examines the interest the media has in reporting on celebrity widows. It is contended that in reporting on celebrity widows, three key news values are illustrated: reference to elite persons, personalisation and negativity (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). The second aspect of this paper is the exploration of how the media uses stereotypes of widows to frame these celebrity widow stories. It is argued that celebrity widow coverage tends to comply with three stereotypes: they are portrayed negatively as a black widow, a merry widow, or are treated sympathetically and framed as war widows or the mythic “widowed mother”. It is contended that the use of such stereotypes help stories comply with news values.

## **News Values**

News values are the criteria used by media outlets to determine how much prominence to give to a story. In 1965 Johan Galtung and Marie Holmboe Ruge established the first comprehensive set of news values which listed criteria including “threshold” (i.e., the scale of an event), “unexpectedness” (i.e., “man bites dog” stories) and “continuity” (i.e., whether a story can be followed over a period of time) (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). This paper will focus on three of Galtung and Ruge’s news values including reference to elite persons, personalisation and negativity in order to establish possible explanations for the extensive media coverage, of celebrity widow stories as well as shed light on the framing of these stories.

*Reference to elite persons*

When Galtung and Ruge listed “elite persons” as a news value, given that their article was about coverage of foreign affairs, it is fair to assume they envisaged “elite persons” as world leaders. In contemporary discussions of news values, while the concept of “elite persons” is still highly relevant, “elite” is more likely to mean “fame”. John Hartley in *Understanding News* explains that reference to elite persons is an important news value because “it is assumed [that actions of famous people] are more consequential than the daily activities of ordinary people” (Hartley, 1982, p. 78; see also McCutcheon *et al*, 2002).

Audience interest in the actions and behaviour of celebrities should not be underestimated: numerous contemporary tomes document an apparent cultural “obsession” with celebrity (Marshall, 1997; Orth, 2004; Cashmore, 2006; Holmes & Redmond, 2006; Halpern, 2007). Research similarly contends that this obsession is increasing (Maltby *et al*, 2004) and one with an ever-exacerbating focus on the private lives of celebrities (Powers, 2002; Cashmore, 2006). Ellis Cashmore in his book *Celebrity Culture* contends that media coverage of celebrities has, for many, come to replace “legitimate” news. While it may be obvious that celebrity stories are now commonplace (Bonner & McKay, 2006), in order to understand the coverage of such stories as illustrating news values, and then to comprehend how media coverage of celebrity widows complies within these values, it is important to understand why the media is so dominated by these stories. Two apparent justifications include that such stories create new audiences and appease the assumed wants of existing audiences (Koren, 2003; Morton, 2003).

Media coverage of celebrity widows illustrates this news value of “reference to elite persons” particularly well. Death is a difficult topic to report on: as noted by Sarah

McKenzie in her article on media fascination with death, “[it] one of those things we don’t really like to think or talk about a lot. It’s much too confronting, distressing and mysterious” (McKenzie, 2005, p. 94). When celebrities are connected to the death issue – whether as victim, or in the case of this paper, the bereaved – the story becomes less “confronting, distressing and mysterious” and hence, more marketable. Frances Bonner and Susan McKay in their article on media coverage of Kylie Minogue’s breast cancer for example, noted that when distressing stories involve celebrities, such stories became more “palatable and engaging” (Bonner & McKay, 2006, p. 156). By publishing distressing stories about elite people, not only does the story become personalised with the use of somebody we “know” (the idea of “personalisation” will be discussed further in the next section) but connecting an unsavoury topic like death to something palatable such as a celebrity, the issue becomes personalised, but also the celebrity themselves becomes personalised too, in that they become “like us” (Henderson, 2005). This is a point well made by Bonnie and McKay:

[coverage of celebrity illness] both testifies to the ordinariness of celebrities (celebrity offers no protection and in these important ways they really are no different from ordinary people) and to the importance of celebrity to media coverage (Bonnie & McKay, 2006, p. 157; see also Henderson, 2005).

On one hand, the media coverage of the celebrity widow reflects our interest in the lives of people who we deem more interesting – or at least more *famous* – than ourselves. On the next level, the nature of the story – in this case, the death of a celebrity’s partner – helps audiences relate personally to the celebrity in that the elite person is going through a tribulation the audience understands (Morton, 1997). This latter point, of course, overlaps with the news value of “personalisation”.

### *Personalisation*

A news story becomes of interest when a person – often a person whom the audience knows - is involved, and thus a focal point is created where interest and identification can be pinned. Lance Bennett in *News: The Politics of Illusion* claims that even though the more complicated aspects of a story (such as politics or governance) are more “important”, journalists tend to focus on the people involved in the issue instead. According to Bennett, personalising news stories enables an issue to be easily dramatised and made interesting in the scope of a short story (Bennett, 1998). If one conceives of news values being adhered to because of a financial motivation (i.e., as journalist Jack Fuller suggests, “news values are fundamental to a newspaper’s business success” (Fuller, 1996, p. 212)) then arguably making the medium entertaining to sell papers, is essential. Of course, aside from making news stories more attractive, there are other reasons why personalisation is a value adhered to.

Vettehen *et al* in their study of the presence of “sensationalism” in Dutch news suggest that personalisation is often done to “increase the concreteness of a television news item” (Vettehen *et al*, 2005, p. 289): i.e., through an audience’s ability to associate a story with a person, the story gains validity. Vettehen *et al* claim that the trend towards personalisation is a recent development, and one that is becoming increasingly common (Vettehen *et al*, 2005).

While information on media coverage of celebrity widows is not immediately obvious in existing research, tangential research – such as research on “human interest” stories – helps analyse the celebrity widow phenomenon. Fine and White note that in a similar way to celebrity news stories, human interest stories exist to attract readers. In their research, the authors attempt to explain this process:

the human interest story is particularly effective in bringing a population together, creating what Hughes (following Redfield, 1930) terms a *demos* in that the attention to the topic transcends politics and, often, demography. “Everyone” is interested in the story, and by speaking of it, one participates in the community (Fine & White, 2002, p. 59).

Of particular relevance to celebrity widow stories is Fine and White’s noting of “the emotional resonance of the claimed “reality” of the facts themselves that presumes to give the story power” (Fine & White, 2002, p. 61). The authors’ claim that the popularity of the human interest story is attributable to the fact that “audiences can easily attribute deep personal qualities to media figures, such as sincerity, making mass communication seem like interpersonal communication” (Fine & White, 2002, p. 67). While, as will be discussed later, celebrity widows are not always perceived as “sincere”, for many celebrity widows, their public expressions of grief is something the audience relates to and to a degree, can engage with, thus soliciting empathy: a reaction deemed positive by the news media (Wirth & Schramm, 2005).

Fine and White claim that a hallmark of human interest stories is the involvement of “previously unknown” individuals (Fine & White, 2002, p. 59), and this is an important clarification to make: human interest stories do not involve celebrities, thus limiting the usefulness of Fine and White’s research to this paper. However, given that a celebrity widow story very much complies with the “human interest” genre, *and* features an elite person, the story is exacerbated. This is a point made by Hall *et al* who claim that events which score high on a number of news values – their example being the Kennedy assassinations which combined the unexpected, the dramatic, negativity, elite people, an elite nation and personalisation - possess a special kind of newsworthiness (Hall *et al*, 1978).

In the context of celebrity widows, obviously a tragic event has taken place. The tragic event being framed as a bad news story illustrates the news value of “negativity”.

### *Negativity*

Hall *et al* deem “negativity” the most important of news values (Hall *et al*, 1978) and an examination of the contemporary news landscape would certainly support this idea.

News content analyses illustrate that the coverage of bad news stories exceed coverage of good news stories quite significantly (Haskins *et al*, 1984; Rotberg & Weiss, 1996), and that the number of bad news stories is increasing (Cook, 1998; Cohen, 2005). Stephanie Shapiro in her discussion of “depressing” news items claims that a trend towards depressing stories - or what she terms “emotional journalism” - is contemporary and a trend identifiable since the 1960s and 1970s but one amplified since September 11 (Shapiro, 2006).

Negativity is a news value underpinned by the assumption that bad news sells. The appeal of negative stories needs analysis, particularly in order to understand the appeal of reporting on celebrity widows. The first explanation is that negative stories provide diversion from the norm. As Hartley notes, “bad news is good news... [it’s] unambiguous... it happens quickly... it is consonant” (Hartley, 1982, p. 79; see also Schwartz, 2005).

Negative news stories are also popular because reporting on them is often deemed easier: journalists perceive it simpler to develop an angle in a bad news story than in a more

positive one. John Schwartz illustrates this point in his discussion of the violent death of former Australian cricketer, David Hookes:

While the news of Hookes' death was also entirely negative, it was at least manageable and straightforward to comprehend. It was a local bad news story that had all the essential elements of a classic tragedy (Schwartz, 2005, p. 135).

As Schwartz explains, the story was straightforward and had all the elements of a “classic tragedy”: it was, as Hartley suggests, “unambiguous” (Hartley, 1982, p. 79). The idea of a negative story being a “classic tragedy” is an obvious explanation for the appeal of celebrity widow stories. In Wise’s discussion of the “classic tragedy” it is contended that “[t]he catastrophe of a classic tragedy is a form of denouement or outcome where, in contrast to the happy ending of a comedy, the inevitable climactic event is the death of the hero” (Wise, 1962, p. 44). Perhaps better than many negative news stories, the death of somebody famous, and for the purposes of this paper, the bereaved widow, illustrate this classic tragedy narrative well.

Another explanation for the appeal of negative news stories is that, like the news value of personalisation, an opportunity is created for the audience to relate and/or respond emotionally (Wirth & Schramm, 2005). Shapiro notes that “[m]any readers respond powerfully to these emotional sagas” (Shapiro, 2006, p. 50), contending that coverage of such stories allow a number of angles – i.e., “coping with adversity” and “redemption” – for which the audience can identify with. This is a point also made in Wise’s article on the classic tragedy where it is noted that:

[t]his catastrophe, together with the events leading toward it, was said by Aristotle to produce in the audience an effect of catharsis... With souls thus cleansed, the audience goes forth from the play sobered and saddened, but also renewed for the task of living (Wise, 1962, 44 – 45).

Whether or not audiences like classic tragedy news stories because of the cathartic opportunities, public fascination with death – notably *celebrity* death – is something well established. Sarah McKenzie in her article on the fetishisation of death, notes that this fetish *compounded* with the celebrity obsession blends perfectly in news media:

The other kind of death that we can't get enough of on the news is the celebrity death. And it seems that if they died young, unexpectedly, or in scandalous situations, it's just that bit more juicy and ratings-worthy (McKenzie, 2005, p. 97).

Of particular relevance to a discussion of celebrity widows is one outcome of the death experience: grief. In his article about media obsession with grief, Richard P. Cunningham poignantly asks:

[why are] the news media fascinated with death and, especially, with pictures of mourners at funerals? What makes us so willing to violate the sanctity of one of life's most private moments - the funeral of a friend or relative? (in Cunningham, 1990, p. 10).

McKenzie raises similar questions and, explicitly relevant for this paper, focuses on *celebrities* as the mourners:

It is odd that we feel it is our right to impose cameras on such a private occasion, desperately hoping to catch a glimpse of the star's mother or brother crying... Think of Michael Hutchence's funeral. We got Kylie, Paula Yates and Helena Christensen and we got to see them at their most vulnerable and upset; in other words, looking human (McKenzie, 2005, p. 97).

McKenzie's point highlights three important aspects of the negativity news value as related to celebrity widow stories: i) the opportunity to witness grief provides the audience an opportunity for emotional engagement; ii) the audience has the opportunity to "personalise" the tragedy through the focus on the suffering of someone they "know";

iii) when the grieving person is a celebrity, there is “personalisation” and also increased interest simply because, as discussed earlier, celebrity lives are always deemed more interesting than our own.

### **Widows and Media Stereotypes**

Thus far, this paper has contended that covering stories about celebrity widows enables media outlets to comply with news values including reference to elite persons, personality and negativity. The remainder of this paper will examine three stereotypical media portrayals of widows – the black widow, the merry widow and the war widow/widowed mother. Stereotyping in the media occurs for numerous reasons, but generally speaking it is done to simplify a complicated narrative. Kenneth Prandy in his article about stereotyping notes that “stereotypes are used to simplify and summarize a complex set of related characteristics” (Prandy, 2002, p. 583). Heather M. McLean and Rudolf Kalin similarly explain, “[s]tereotypes are used to make sense of a complex social environment, serving to structure information when too much is present, and to invoke information when too little is present” (McLean & Kalin, 1994, n.p.). More cynically, use of stereotypes have been criticised as an attempt to “get attention but not to provoke meaningful debate” (Hill, 2007, n.p.) and to “fit people into limitations comprehensible to the majority culture” (Visconti, 2007, n.p.). While this paper is not an attempt to explore why stereotypes are used, stereotypes are used in reporting of celebrity widows and this section will examine these and discuss how they relate to the news values explored.

#### *The Black Widow*

“The media, of course, loves the legends of the dragon lady, the iron butterfly, the white witch and the black widow... pitiless powers behind the throne have been credited with plots and policies that mere presidents and caudillos could never execute”, notes journalist Howard Baker in an editorial for *The Nation* (Baker, 1987, p. 311). Media fascination with such stereotypes can be explained in numerous ways: there are the broad explanations for stereotypes discussed earlier, as well as other explanations including it being evidence of engrained media sexism; media interest in casting characters in the “classic tragedy” narratives (Wise, 1962) or simply because the news value of personalisation is aided when a character is framed with reference to a familiar trope. The black widow will be discussed in this section as a favoured stereotype used in coverage of Yoko Ono and Courtney Love.

While the reference to the spider provides a starting point for explaining the black widow stereotype, this stereotype can be defined in multiple ways. Most obviously, calling a woman a “black widow” is a reference to the spider who – at least in folklore (Crump & Crump, 2007) – is known for eating her mate after sex. In crime reports, the black widow moniker is routinely given to female criminals (see Plummer, 1991; Levinson, 2001; Charles, 2004; Grinberg, 2007). The black widow accusation when applied to women such as Ono is of course, rarely so literal, although the perceived callousness of the spider eating her mate underpins the majority of interpretations for the black widow, importantly referring to predatory sexuality as will be later discussed.

Another definition of the black widow is the association with webs and the spinning of them: these ideas connect to phrases such as “web of deceit” and “web of lies”. Linda J. Holland-Toll in her discussion of the novels of William Faulkner, likens one of the characters to a black widow spider on the grounds of “webs of self-spun significance”

and discusses one character as “sucking dry” those around her, with the character being “[f]orever on the hunt for new victims” (Holland-Toll, 1998, n.p.). While it would be presumptuous to suggest that the media framed Ono as an overtly deceitful character, the “sucking dry” idea as related to her deceased husband is not far-fetched, particularly if one considers criticism regarding Ono’s supposed capitalisation on Lennon’s death (a point returned to later). Media condemnation of Ono’s supposed capitalisation is best illustrated through her criticism as a “professional widow” (McGregor, 2000, n.p.). The “professional widow” label – a label which has widespread negative connotations (Orcutt, 1980) - was similarly attached to Courtney Love, widow of Kurt Cobain (Wolk, 2004; Pearson, 2006; Freeman, 2007). Alexis Petridis in *The Guardian* aptly explains Ono’s “professional widow” role:

Long before anyone thought of Jimi Hendrix fizzy drinks, there was Ono, green-lighting John Lennon Walrus Glasses, John Lennon Imagine Curtains, the John Lennon Uplifter Lampshade and the John Lennon Kangaroo Ring Toss, perhaps the most disturbingly-named children’s toy ever (Petridis, 2007, n.p.).

It should be noted that similar accusations regarding capitalising on their spouse’s deaths have been made against Courtney Love, who recently planned to auction her husband’s belongings (“The money will roll right in: Love to auction off Cobain’s belongings”, 2007). In fact, even prior to his death, media accusations of Love being a “no-talent gold-digger” circulated (“A false spring”, 1994, p. 72) and then amplified after Cobain’s death. Anna-Nicole Smith is perhaps the clearest definition of what Jeffrey A. Brown in his feminist analysis of the media coverage of Smith termed “a white trash gold digger” (Brown, 2005, p. 75; see also Stephens & Phillips, 2003).

The description of Smith as “a voluptuous twenty-six-year-old Playboy Playmate [who] married an octogenarian oil billionaire” or describing her as appearing in “the black-and-

white party photos of respectable magazines, where trophy brides appear smiling and dazzling with their balding, sagging, tremendously rich husbands” (in Bowman, 2007, p. 57) aptly illustrate media coverage of Smith being negatively framed as a gold-digger: i.e., as a malevolent widow, as a *black* widow.

At a more dangerous level, the black widow may represent a “deadly threat” (Bal, 2002, p. 195). Eric A. Kreuter in his discussion of psychopathic criminals, quotes a description of a murderer known as “Connie”:

Connie’s former Alcoholic’s Anonymous sponsor referred to her as “a black widow spider” or “the scorpion that goes after people,” and said that “she is highly manipulative and multi-faceted, skilled in the art of deception” (in Kreuter, 2004, p. 30).

Such comments highlight key attributes of the black widow: she is manipulative, multi-faceted and deceptive. In her biography of Catherine de Medici, widow of King Henri II of France, Leonie Frieda describes Catherine as a “black widow” for two reasons. First because she always dressed in black (even though French queens apparently wore white while mourning). Secondly, as Frieda notes, Catherine was seen as black-hearted: “[a] sceptic at heart and a pragmatist by nature, neither morals nor remorse encumbered her fight for the survival of her children, her dynasty and France” (Frieda, 2006, p. xx). Such a description links well with the manipulative, multi-faceted and deceptive traits presented earlier by both Holland-Toll and Kreuter, and certainly help reflect media portrayals of Ono.

The idea of Ono being manipulative is, in fact, the most obvious characteristic of her media construction: she is, afterall, the woman blamed for breaking up the Beatles. (It should be noted that Courtney Love was similarly framed as a “calculating” and

“manipulative” (Wallace & Halperin, 2005) and was described by critics “as a manipulative woman who enslaved a great man and sought to destroy a great band” (Branigan, 2001, n.p.). This idea of manipulation extends to *sexual* manipulation and is something with an obvious connection to the black widow and to Ono: something that will be discussed later in this section.

The idea of Ono being framed as actually dangerous or threatening would be hyperbolic. That said the idea of Ono capitalising on Lennon’s dead and being framed as a dark character, is indeed something illustrated in media coverage: there was the photograph she took of Lennon’s trademark spectacles which were covered in his own blood; the use of this image on her *Season Of Glass* album cover (Newlin, 2007) and her selling prints of the image at auction (“Lennon glasses photo for sale”, 2002). The fact that Ono was an artist before she met Lennon perhaps explains these activities, however, her doing so was framed as a macabre activity. Love was similarly portrayed in this dark, black widow-esque way when she posed for a photograph in David LaChapelle’s book, *Heaven and Hell* (LaChapelle, 2006). In the photograph, Love struck a Virgin Mary-like pose while cradling a Kurt Cobain look-a-like, “making light” of the tragedy that was her husband’s death.

The notion of Ono being likened to an animal, a black widow spider, or as Christa D’Souza notes, her frequent branding as a “dragon lady” (D’Souza, 2007, n.p., see also Smith 2001, Spitz, 2005) are particularly interesting in that both terms have sexist *and* racist connotations. While Ono was dubbed a dragon lady long before Lennon’s death, the label still carries, and it parallels the black widow image in interesting ways: Yen Le Espiritu in research on race, class and gender describes the dragon lady Asian stereotype as being “castrating” (Espiritu, 1997, p. 135), a description with an obvious connection

to the spider killing her mate after sex. John Jung similarly writes of Chinese women portrayed in comic strips as a “sinister and sneaky... dragon lady” (Jung, 2007, p. 130) thus referencing the manipulative actions of black widows discussed earlier. Randy Barbara Kaplan similarly writes of American cinema’s “dagger-nailed Dragon Ladies” (Kaplan, 2006, p. 218) which is an image that can be linked to the threatening nature of the black widow but also, by referencing the fingernails, to the sexual connotation. The idea of the sexualisation of the threatening woman is something Kathryn Ann Farr in her article about women on death row notes claiming that some female prisoners who had killed their partners were often portrayed by the media as “seductive” black widows (Farr, 1997).

While there are obvious racial aspects to the dragon lady moniker with the term referencing the last empress of China who history paints as a tyrant (Smith, 2001), as well, of course, as the label being a broader reference to the importance of dragons in Asian culture, the connection to sexuality, notably *Asian* sexuality, is of integral importance to the media portrayal of Ono and again connects to the black widow stereotype. Andrew Smith in his *Observer* article notes that Ono’s notoriety stems from:

her being not only a woman, but an Asian woman (not long after Pearl Harbor and Korea and during the war in Vietnam) and, worst of all, an avant-garde artist who’d snagged one of the most blindly revered men in the world (Smith, 2001, n.p.).

The idea of public surprise – even contempt – regarding Ono’s ability to “snag” Lennon underpins much media negativity surrounding her. These negative portrayals are perfectly illustrated by a 1969 *Esquire* magazine article where Ono was dubbed “John Lennon’s Excursive Gloupie” (in Beard, 2006, n.p.). While most media coverage was not as

explicitly racist, nonetheless, every time a label like “dragon lady” is used, audiences are reminded of the implication of Ono’s ethnicity and the connotations attached.

Smith’s idea of Ono “snagging” Lennon importantly alludes to the sexual mystique of both the dragon woman stereotype as well as the black widow idea using sex as a lure to cause harm. John Scheinfeld in *The Guardian* writes of the mythology surrounding Ono’s relationship with Lennon, noting that there was a perception that she was “this dragon lady who led [John] around by the nose” (Scheinfeld, 2006, n.p.). While many sexual stereotypes about Asian women exist, one which underpins media reporting of Ono is that Asian women use sex to gain power (Yuxin *et al*, 2007). Lennon himself referred to this very idea when discussing his relationship:

It’s not like I’m some wondrous, mystic prince from the rock-‘n’-roll world dabbling in strange music with this exotic, Oriental dragon lady, which was the picture projected by the press before (in Sheff, 1980, n.p.).

As discussed earlier, media report on celebrity widow stories because they comply with a number of news values. Of course, there is an implicit assumption in the tone of their coverage that there are expectations of the ways widows should act. Primarily, the widow is expected to appropriately – and ideally *publicly* – mourn her partner and that this should be done in a “ladylike” manner. The culturally expected way to express grief is through tears, and as noted earlier, there is a public fascination with seeing others – particularly celebrities – publicly mourning (McKenzie, 2005). In their article on homicide bereavement, M. Regina Asaro and Paul T. Clements note that “many people believe that not crying during the grief process is inappropriate” (Asaro & Clements, 2005, p. 104). By quickly declaring that there would be no funeral only a “vigil” for Lennon (Rosen & Keel, 1980), Ono took away the opportunity for the public to see her

crying, to see her mourn as a widow “should”, and this arguably further hardened her in the minds of the public. A similar situation played out in the aftermath of Cobain’s funeral. Despite being subjected to already harsh media criticism, Love refused to mourn Cobain in a ladylike way, instead shunning the role of grieving widow and declaring “I’m not wearing a funeral shroud and fans shouldn’t either” (“Fearful frolics of a rock’n’roll widow”, 2003, n.p.). Kathleen Jamieson discusses the use of a “womanly narrative” in women’s political campaigns, and notes that at the centre of this narrative is a sense of empathy and connection that women are expected to publicly project (Jamieson, 1995). Jamieson infers that there is a public expectation that women comply with this narrative and when they don’t, as in the cases of Ono and Love, negative audience reaction ensues. Of course, it’s not like Ono actually ever fit a ladylike mould: as D’Souza notes, Ono’s appeal to Lennon lay in the fact that “[s]he is not, and never was, a dolly bird”. Of course, in D’Souza’s relatively positive article, she still manages to note that “there is a geisha-girliness to her manner that suggests Ono could be quite the coquette if she wanted” (D’Souza, 2007, n.p.). Such a comment indicates that even in a comparatively positive piece, there is a high likelihood that reference will be made to both Ono’s race and sexuality.

Just as a racist theme underpinned the coverage of Ono as a black widow/dragon lady, there is, obviously also a sexist theme too. In not being a “dolly bird”, rather, in fact framed as a feminist (Lasky, 1998), Ono’s failure to act in an appropriately feminine way underpinned her black widow status. While a black widow may use her sexuality and feminine wiles to lure the man, the black widow act of murder is anything but feminine. In framing Ono as a black widow, in playing up her feminism and framing her – in Ono’s words – as being “an ugly woman, an ugly Jap” (in Masaoka, 1997, n.p.), the sexist nature of coverage of her is illustrated. It should be noted that Love’s feminism was also

frequently mentioned in the media, arguably adding to her own black widow status (Murphy, 2001; Levy, 2006; Nussbaum, 2006). The media readily framed Love as “rock’s black widow” (Chebatoris, 2006, p. 66) and similarly criticised her unfeminine appearance:

[Love’s look is] child-woman, fucked-up Lolita, innocence disturbed. It is a potent, on-the-edge image which toys with vulnerability and power [and] hints, disturbingly, at a “rape victim” look” (Raphael, 1995, p. xxvi).

Similar to Ono, the black widow label was attached to Love notably because of unladylike behaviour including: drug arrests; court appearances; song lyrics including “I don’t do the dishes, I throw them in the crib!” (Love, 1994); her television breast-flashing escapade (Brooks, 2006) and her music performances which have, allegedly, involved her jumping off stage to attack fans (Eileraas, 1997).

Of critical importance to news media is covering stories that comply with news values (Hall *et al*, 1978). While stories on celebrity widows comply with a number of news values anyway, as discussed, an added element of sensationalism and unexpectedness is added when the widow can be framed in a way that complies to news values and has those persons acting in unusual and interesting ways. The framing of widows such as Ono and Love on black widows, illustrates this idea well.

### *The Merry Widow*

The “merry widow” refers to an early twentieth century German musical which tells the story of a wealthy widow on the hunt for a new husband. The idea of a woman getting on with her life and, in the case of the musical, singing and dancing, is an interesting

stereotype for portrayals of celebrity widows. It should be noted, in a contemporary context, a “merry widow” is also a common name for a strapless corset, and thus as with the black widow, there is a sexual undercurrent to this label too.

While the more subtle references to her being a merry widow will be discussed shortly, the media actually explicitly dubbed Courtney Love “the merry widow of grunge” (Kent, 2002, n.p.). Explicit merry widow slurs were, of course, also attached to Anna-Nicole Smith (“Merry Widow: With \$475 million in hand, Anna Nicole Smith happily drops a lawsuit in Texas”, 2001; “Guess? Bash Attracts Sexy Stars!”, 2002; Silverman, 2003; “Anna Nicole revealed... again”, 2005).

Despite being often framed as the black widow because of her alleged gold digging and the “inappropriate” responses to the death of her husband, media coverage of Love also well-illustrates the image of a widow getting on with her life, even if being “merry” in her case is hyperbole. While this section will largely focus on Love as a merry widow, Mariane Pearl, wife of murdered journalist, Daniel Pearl (who, it will be contended is largely portrayed as a “war widow”) was also painted as a merry widow: illustrated well by media coverage of her “premature” relationship with CNN’s chief news executive, Eason Jordan (Leiby, 2004; Overington, 2004)

In her article about Australian war widows, Marie Cooke discusses the idea of war widows as being “forever wed to an Australian soldier” (Cooke, 2003, p. 467). While Love is obviously not a war widow, the idea of her being “forever wed” to someone dead is certainly applicable. Even though Cobain has been dead for over a decade, any controversy surrounding Love is routinely framed with reference to being his widow, albeit a widow who is simultaneously getting on with her life, i.e., who is “merry”: “The

widow of Nirvana frontman Kurt Cobain appears naked in several pictures” (Lash, 2006, n.p.); “[t]he 40-year-old widow of Nirvana singer Kurt Cobain showed up to her sentencing 15 minutes late” (“Love sentenced to drug rehab stint”, 2004, n.p.); “Bruce [Willis]... was seen getting steamy with the 42-year-old rocker, the widow of Kurt Cobain” (“Paris Hilton buys controversial Dwarf Cat”, 2007, n.p.); “The home where... the widow Courtney Love took a *Vanity Fair* reporter to see her new, surgically augmented breasts” (slate.com, undated, n.p.); “[t]he widow of Nirvana rocker Kurt Cobain appeared naked in the 1996 film *The People vs. Larry Flynn*” (“Love poses nude for fashion magazine”, 2006) or “Courtney Love, widow of Nirvana singer Kurt Cobain, says she plans to sell most of his belongings” (“Love puts Cobain shirts up for sale”, 2007). Indeed, it may be suggested that reference to her widowed status is simply done to remind audiences who the singer actually is. This however, seems unlikely given that Love in fact had fame with her band Hole *prior* to marrying Cobain, and fame that has continued after his death (Sharp, 2001). Continually referring, to her deceased husband however, reminds audiences that Love is a widow who is not behaving in ways expected. Love’s un-widow-like behaviour is the angle the media focuses on, tapping into the news values of both “reference to elite persons” and, of course, “negativity”.

#### *The War Widow and the Widowed Mother*

In this section, media coverage of war widows and widowed mothers will be examined together, given that there is extensive overlap in the manner in which both are covered. While the black widow and merry widow are negative portrayals, the war widow and the widowed mother are given comparatively positive treatment in that they comply perfectly with the news values of personalisation and negativity and at the same time, exploit audience empathy: i.e., by giving audiences the opportunity to respond emotionally to a

story (Wirth & Schramm, 2005). The process of audience empathy is well explained by Wirth and Schramm in their article about media and emotions:

Affective empathy occurs when, for example, the recipients sense more or less the same emotions they have observed in a media figure... one uses the word empathy, too, when a recipient senses compassion with a media person who is sad (Wirth & Schramm, 2005, p. 8).

Audience empathy, can be achieved in numerous ways, however, this is something effectively achieved through personalisation. Anastasio and Costa in their research on media coverage of crime note that “research has found that revealing personal information about oneself garners greater empathy and facilitates feelings of closeness” (Anastasio and Costa, 2004, p. 538). The authors contend that female victims of crime receive greater empathy when personal information about them is revealed (Anastasio and Costa, 2004). As discussed earlier, personalisation can be achieved by the use of any person but by using a *celebrity* – an “elite person” who we already feel we know – this process is sped up. The sympathetic celebrity widow, framed as a “war widow” or the “widowed mother” is the classic illustration of a story achieving three news values (personalisation, reference to elite persons and negativity) through a narrative that is also able to solicit emotional responses.

Cooke notes that there are several characteristics that have persisted in regards to sympathetic war widow images that have crossed different wars and cultures, including: that the widows should be honoured by the state; that they are in need of charity and that they are deserving (Cooke, 2003). Asha Hans in her discussion of women and wars in Kashmir makes a similar point, noting that war widows are often portrayed as being both victims and as protected by the state (Hans, 2000). Hans also notes a trend for war widows to be portrayed as young and as having made an immense sacrifice (Hans, 2000).

The sacrifice idea is amplified in Hans Sande's research on Palestinian war widows who are described as "martyrs" (Sande, 1992). An interesting popular cultural stereotype of the war widow as the "widowed mother" is presented in Liz Reed's research where she refers to the popular image of a war widow "with two young children to care for" (Reed, 1999, p. 111). The "worthy" widow is described by Lisa D. Brush in her article about single mothers in the United States. The "worthy" widow exhibited motherliness, sexual respectability, physical strength, stamina, willingness and ability to support her children and good housekeeping (Brush, 1997). While Brush's article situates "worthy" in the context of welfare recipients, in the context of this paper, this idea is extended to being worthy of sympathy, and it is Brush's list which will be used to examine portrayals of the war widows and widowed mothers in this section. While the widows discussed are not actually wives of soldiers, nonetheless, have been framed as such by their sympathetic portrayals.

The value of sympathy in terms of positive sentiment - and thus potentially favourable media coverage - cannot be underestimated. In a study of "most admired" persons polls, Young and Harris establish a set of criteria to assess the grounds on which a person might be admired. One category was "sympathy": "[sympathy] concerned whether or not the individual was the victim of an obvious and publicized tragedy, sad event, or handicap that would be expected to affect them personally" (Young & Harris, 1996, p. 367). The author's note that only one man (Edward Kennedy) but six women (Corazon Aquino, Helen Keller, Ethel Kennedy, Jacqueline Kennedy, Rose Kennedy, and Coretta Scott King) featured on the most admired lists over multiple decades (Young & Harris, 1996). All but one of these were widows.

Brush's idea of the importance of a widow's "motherliness" is exhibited well in the portrayals of Coretta Scott King, Jacqueline Kennedy and Terri Irwin. These widows were all young women who were left with young children. Perhaps most tragic of all, Mariane Pearl was left pregnant. The idea of these young women being forced to raise their children without their husband renders them highly sympathetic characters. As noted in their research on the family structures of single mother households, in the first half of the twentieth century women were single mothers because they were widowed: contemporarily it is more likely because of divorce (Biblarz & Gottainer, 2002). While this issue cannot be examined in depth in this paper, the idea of greater legitimacy, or greater "worth" being attached to the single mother who is widowed rather than divorced, is a possible explanation for the sympathetic media treatment of women such as Coretta Scott King, Jacqueline Kennedy and Terri Irwin, in a media environment that is otherwise hostile to single-mothers (Bolton, 2003). While the "motherliness" of these women was amplified in the media, the coverage of Kennedy perhaps demonstrates this. A quote from Jacqueline Kennedy cited in Carol B. Schwalbe's research, illustrates this well:

"Jack's always so proud of me when I do something like this," she said after her successful goodwill trip to India and Pakistan, "but I can't stand being out in front. I know it sounds trite, but what I really want is to be behind him and to be a good wife and mother" (cited in Schwalbe, 2005, p. 113).

Brush's article discusses the importance of "sexual respectability" to public perception of "worthiness" and this is also an important consideration for the contemporary celebrity widow: evidently, following the death of a husband, there is an expectation of grieving time and that the widow does not exhibit too much "merriness". Maria M. Talbott undertook research on the attitudes of widows towards remarriage noting that the majority of women exhibited negative sentiments towards the idea (Talbott, 1998). This

would coincide with actual remarriage statistics: Davidson noted that men are much more likely to seek (and achieve) a new intimate relationship than women after the death of a spouse (Davidson, 2002). While it is not an idea that Tablott discusses in her paper, it must be considered that popular perceptions regarding remarriage would likely be an influence on these negative perceptions.

Terri Irwin, widow of entertainer Steve Irwin, has publicly commented that “getting married again is not a consideration” (in Clark, 2007, p. 77), thus, arguably endearing her to the public and explaining her favourable media treatment. Cooke’s idea, discussed earlier, of being “forever wed to an Australian soldier” idea (Cooke, 2003, p. 467) is particularly important to the media coverage of a woman like Coretta Scott King because despite the fact that she was widowed Young, and despite widespread discussion of her husband’s infidelity (Neff, 1998; Dyson, 2000), until her death she remained Martin’s widow, and this arguably explained her enduring popularity: she acted in the way that a widow “should”. Interestingly, while Jacqueline Kennedy remained beloved to her death, arguably her popularity did somewhat diminish following her remarriage. Jan Morris in *New Statesman* discussed a newspaper headline following Kennedy’s marriage to Aristotle Onassis which read “Jackie, How Could You?” (in Morris, 2000, n.p.). As aptly surmised in *American History* magazine:

Although Mrs. Kennedy had already spent five years as the widow of a martyred President and was not yet even forty, the idea of her remarriage offended many who saw it as an affront... to her late husband’s memory (The time machine, 1993, n.p.).

Public disappointment with Kennedy’s remarriage sheds light on negative sentiment extended to Mariane Pearl regarding her relationship with Eason, discussed earlier. As Pearl herself acknowledged, “people want to make you a saint” (in Overington, 2004, n.p.). While Pearl’s comment exaggerates the point, nonetheless it helps illustrate the

virtuous and chaste image the widow is expected to project. This point is similarly made by Kathleen Woodward in her discussion of media representations of older women.

Woodward discusses Joyce Tennesen's *Wise Women: A Celebration of Their Insights, Courage, and Beauty*, a book which included portraits of older women including King (Tennesen, 2002). In Woodward's description of these photographs, she comments:

Dressed or draped in mostly black, some costumed in white, wearing for the most part expressions of equanimity if not serenity, of poise if not beatitude, all of them seem to look alike... (Woodward, 2006, p. 186).

By using the word "beatitude", like Pearl, Woodward is drawing connection to the religious, blessed expectations that the widow is supposed to inhabit: that she should be "poised", dignified and saint-like in her widowhood.

The last of Brush's war widow descriptors that will be engaged with in this paper is her ideas relating to the importance of "physical strength" and "willingness and ability to support her children and good housekeeping". Barry J. Jacobs in his research on the "iron horse" image in American culture, describes a famous image of Kennedy: "with pillbox hat and veil, looking grim but tearless as she stands at the foot of her assassinated husband's grave" (Jacobs, 2006, p. 238). While Ono was not seen crying at her husband's funeral either, and while Ono was never liked by the public or the media, Jacqueline Kennedy benefited from favourable media treatment (Schwalbe, 2005) and has been publicly admired for a very long time (Young & Harris, 1996). This difference meant that Kennedy "looking grim but tearless" was not a negative portrayal, rather, demonstrated her ability to be strong for her family: to be an "iron horse". As Jacobs explains, "[i]n these visual representations of the can-do American mythos, the women appear sad but stoical" (Jacobs, 2006, p. 238). Because of the negative treatment Ono had received, her not having a funeral for Lennon simply added to the rationality of public contempt.

While this section has discussed empathy being an important factor underpinning the extensive (and favourable) coverage of these celebrity widows, it is important to note that such stories may be more complicated than simply being an attempt to solicit an empathetic response. Carolyn J. Dean in her article about empathy makes a very interesting point about responses to the suffering of others as not actually always about empathy: “the display of human suffering no longer necessarily generated empathic identification, but instead invited an often eroticized objectification of pain” (Dean, 2003, p. 91). Dean links the notions of human responses to pornography to responses to pain. While this issue will not be examined in this paper, the idea of the voyeuristic pleasure audiences get from the pain of others is an important point and is one that was discussed earlier in the context of audience enjoyment of celebrity funerals (McKenzie, 2005).

## **Conclusion**

Stories of celebrities are interesting media fodder because they provide material to comply with the news media’s favoured values of reference to elite persons and personalisation. The ultimate tragedy of their circumstances also helps to comply with the value of negativity and provides an opportunity to solicit emotional responses from the audience. In covering stories of the celebrity widows, the media frames them using narratives that we are familiar with and stereotypes audiences know by heart. Audiences are familiar with the black widow and the merry widow narratives. They are versed in the images of the war widow and the widowed mother. By moulding celebrity stories to fit these stereotypes, the media is providing yet another means to enable a story to feel both personalised and relevant.



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