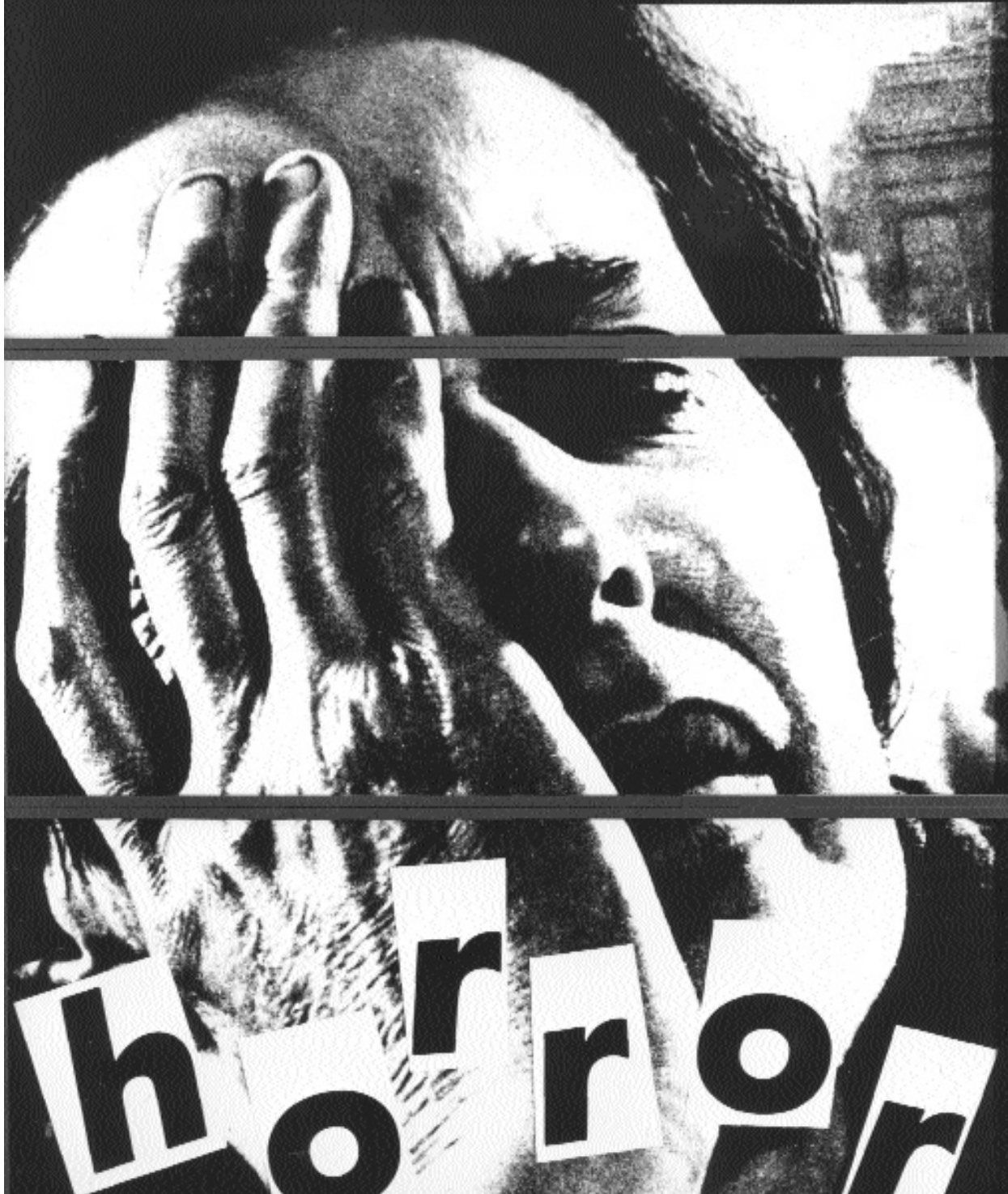


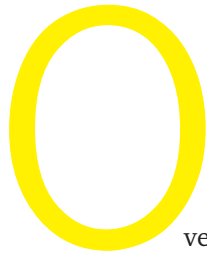
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Taboo You:

WRITING MAGAZINE PROFILES IN A GOTCHA CULTURE

BY LOUISA KAMPS



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ver the last few years, contemporary media have breached what were once the boundaries of privacy, trust and taste with such accelerating speed that the “taboo” in journalism has become not merely rare but positively quaint. In these high-sensation-seeking times, magazine writers covering popular culture in particular seem freer than ever to interpret and amplify facts in order to make them shocking, glamorous or horrifying enough to capture modern readers’ famously deficient attentions. No secret is so dear it must be kept, it often appears, and no anecdote is too vulgar to repeat.

Toe-curling first-person stories in women’s magazines chronicle the “Brazilian bikini wax” at length, and stomach-turning profiles in national general-interest magazines cagily out once-prominent, now-deceased actors (allegedly in the spirit of today’s greater tolerance, but in reality with a familiar tone of homophobia). With stories like these, there’s less space for articles that develop power slowly, that introduce us to fresh ideas and help us see the world around us with greater clarity through the subtle accumulation of details.

Sometimes, it’s tough for the magazine writer who believes in a certain restraint not to climb a mountain and bellow, “Is nothing sacred?” One of the reasons I haven’t (until now) is for fear that the echo—“*sacred . . . sacred . . . sacred*”—would be so hollow and lonely as to make me want to quit my job and open oh, say, a light-bulb shop.

I exaggerate. But as in the entertainment industry, where the green-light requirements for horror movies now include two nude scenes by the lead actress and one by the supporting star (as a film executive unblinkingly explained to a screenwriter friend of mine), too many popular magazines, explicitly or implicitly, have established their own per-issue titillation quotas: X number of references to primary sex characteristics, Y number to secondary, Z to a subject’s sex addiction, incarceration and depression—or, ideally, all three, to really nail the glorious triple lutz of depredation. Even the most fleeting glimpses of newsstands today—with their locker-door collages of male and female flesh and coverlines that surely have Joseph Pulitzer doing multiple 360s (“Yikes! He Saw My Orgasm Face” was one recent humdinger)—underscore the by now conventional wisdom that sex sells magazines. It may be true that, deep down in our primitive brains, we are programmed to rubberneck, to perk up at any anatomical reference or suspiciously acquired snippet of salacious news. But our chronically celebrity-gossip-obsessed media have also succeeded, to an alarming degree, in creating in us the urgent sense that we will be hopelessly out of it—the biggest losers hanging around the water cooler—if we can’t banter knowingly about what spiritual conversion has finally convinced Harry Hamlin to let his hair go gray, or why Aristotle Onassis broke poor, poor Maria Callas’s heart.

Our voracious info-jones might be temporarily sated by what we read beneath the titillating covers: Good God—it was *Jackie* who stole Ari’s heart! The truth is, though, that such purported tell-all stories don’t leave us intellectually or emotionally enriched. Nor do they make us any grander, despite their promise that frotting up against the gossamer wings of the famous through these magical magazines will do just that. Profoundly shallow and

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SHOWED ME HER MEDICATIONS. HER I SHOULD HAVE KEPT TO MYSELF.

more than slightly schadenfreude-istic, with their faux moralizing from the sidelines and non-news news (Jackie and Ari? *C'mon!*), they leave us feeling like lurkers—and suckers. And the sensation, should we pause to appreciate it before reflexively reaching for the next glossy fix, isn't pleasant.

When my own knees go weak and I am overcome by the irrepressible urge to sneak a peak at the gossips on the checkout line, I tell myself that what I want to know—what with my sensitive, inquiring mind and all—is how the tragedy-struck movie star or belletrist of the week is *really* feeling. But I don't find even the eensiest psychological insight, and the grainy telephoto snaps I inevitably find of said sad celeb strolling the beach in Ibiza (or perp-walking out of the L.A. County courthouse, or Hazelden or the Colonel's, toting the big bucket of Extra Crispy) only make me feel like a creep. There's something spooky, not to mention embarrassing, about how much we relish even the manufactured failures and foibles of people who've somehow managed to distinguish themselves.

So what are we magazine writers—who are also presumably readers and therefore probably conscious (at least on some level) of the potentially harmful effects of contemporary no-holds-barred journalism—to do? Is it possible to argue that a story doesn't necessarily need glamour and scandal to be worthwhile? Is there any way to kick the current level of cultural discourse back up a notch or two? Or are we all going down the mudslide together?

To be sure, there are plenty of writers out there who seem able to deliver—blithely or at least prolifically—just what their editors ask them for (and what they believe readers want, judging from the proven popularity of the sex-and-scandal literary genre). As a writer who frequently profiles actors, singers and authors, I find that when I'm holding a potentially hot card in my hand—a quotation with more sting than perhaps my subject intended or a piece of radioactive background information (incest! cancer! exotic dancer!)—

I agonize about whether or not to use the information. I know it will probably trigger my editor's well-conditioned salivary glands. But I also fear it will automatically (by dint of its being the very cliché of juiciness) cheapen the tale I'm trying to tell. Sometimes, I've left out the overly or pointlessly provocative detail, and successfully defended my decision to do so to an editor who had been pushing for more dirt.

But I sure don't feel great about every decision I've made. I regret, for instance, describing in a story the moment when my subject showed me her egg-carton-sized pill box full of psychotropic medications, even though she had become famous, in part, for writing about her mental illness. The deep neediness implied by her gesture—holding up her loaded pill box, apparently as hard evidence of her damaged state—now seems like something I perhaps should have kept to myself. My fear is that I exploited her exploiting herself, without acknowledging that that was what I was doing.

And two wrongs don't make a right, right?

Hoping to find out how magazine journalists have dealt with the particularly tricky responsibility of representing other people's lives in our high-concept, lifestyles-of-the-rich-and-famous-fixated age, I phoned up several writers who frequently profile prominent arts and cultural figures. When I asked one of them how the decisions he'd made in the past might have affected his code of conduct, I was struck by how nonchalantly he described his merciless reportorial policy. After telling me how a piece he'd written about a college buddy had almost gotten his friend fired (he'd knowingly revealed secret information about his friend's job in the article), and how angry his now-former friend had become as a result, he said he'd just been doing *his* job as a writer—and that he'd do it the same way again if he had to. His policy about what to do with palpably “hot” but potentially risky pieces of information about a subject is to throw them into the story and let God sort 'em out.

Or as he more colorfully phrased it, “Take a chance, and shit your pants.”

The too-easy cynicism of this writer’s mantra suggested that, deep down, he must feel a rumble of guilt over the way he’s chosen to work. But it was disturbing to me that, despite the damage done to his onetime friend, he saw no need to change his ways. I was relieved when I found several other writers actively grappling with some of the ethical quandaries they’ve encountered. Most of the writers I spoke to had a cautionary tale (or two or three) queued up, and a ready confession about times when they felt they had transgressed against their subjects and their own moral/professional codes.

Early in his career, *New Yorker* staff writer John Seabrook profiled a television executive for a now-defunct magazine. Because he knew his editor was looking for a story with teeth, he decided to bring down his subject a little further than he deserved, making fun of the way the man spoke. Yet Seabrook told me he now realizes the costs of his actions might have been very dear. “I regret being too mean,” he said. “Shortly after that, [the executive] got fired. It may or may not have had something to do with the piece. I see him around New York, and I feel I should apologize but haven’t, and that haunts me.”

Seabrook understands why he exaggerated when he was starting out: “When you’re not very confident as a writer, you feel a lot of pressure to have a strong point of view, to do an out-and-out hatchet job when that may not be consistent with your feelings about the material. You may be ambivalent, and ambivalence is a hard sell.” Having realized the cruelty of delivering a gratuitous poke just to satisfy a bloodthirsty editor, he said he’s worked hard never to do it again. “Since then, meanness is just something I really avoid. I *don’t* like being mean in print.”

David Rakoff, a radio and magazine reporter, paid a clear-cut compliment to a trio of “extraordinary radio producers who had changed modern radio” in a piece he wrote about them for *Vogue*. To reaffirm what was already evident from the photo of the women accompanying his article, he also vouched for their physical attractiveness in print—but his editor’s requirement

that he add the remark about the producers’ looks caused him to “bloom with anger.” At the time, he had just left a day job to freelance, and after “willfully ignoring the request until it became unignorable,” he told me he finally submitted for the simple reason that he “needed the work.”

Still, he was rankled—and schooled—by the experience. “I felt embarrassed in front of the producers, like I’d sold them out. Of course, it was a double sell-out, because these are people in *radio*. One shudders to think what an editor might say about a double-Nobel Prize-winning scientist: ‘I hear we can’t do anything about Madame Curie because her ass is really big!’”

Whereas Seabrook felt pressure to be tough, Rakoff resented being pushed to gush. Though he admitted it might be a bit disingenuous to be appalled by a women’s magazine’s interest in appearance, he also said that the experience made him realize he’ll probably keep on having to fight frivolity. “I suspect I’m going to run into it again and again,” he said. “Necessarily—unless you’re a soulless dunderhead—the concerns of a magazine and a writer are at best benignly adversarial.”

Since the objective of the magazine profile has become, overwhelmingly, to exaggerate negative or positive aspects of character in order to make a subject ridiculously wretched or fabulously glamorous enough to snag the reader’s purportedly prurient attention, a sub-genre of the modern profile form—the warm-fuzzy martyr story—seems like an effort (albeit a tardy and feeble one) to atone for the luridness and glibness of so much modern journalism. Another writer, who asked not to be identified, described a situation in which she was told to “pretty-up” a story in order to force it into the inspirational-uplift mold.

Knowing that the editor of a major women’s magazine had a soft spot for the odd “triumph over tragedy” story, and sensing that this editor had been struck by a sudden urge to leaven her magazine’s usual mix of gamy and glitzy profiles, the writer headed to Louisiana to interview a young pregnant woman who’d become embroiled in a lawsuit over reproductive rights when she’d sought an abortion. It turned out, however, that the woman was living in a

shelter (because of trouble with her ex-husband's girlfriend back at the trailer park) and couldn't be photographed at home.

When the writer called the editor in New York to report this, she said the editor asked, aghast, "Is this woman not in our demo?"

That phone call "set the tone," the writer said. Since this was supposed to be the once-a-year, home-run, feel-good article, the pregnant litigant had to resemble the magazine's readership as much as possible. "The implication I got was that women aged 18 to 34 can only care about their own kind—someone who drives a Pontiac Sunbird, smokes Newports and spends at least \$200 a year on Enzo Angiolini shoes."

By essentially squinting at her subject—blurring the factual outlines of her life—the writer was able to present the woman in a blandly palatable way that would capture this average reader's heart.

"There were lots of omissions I made along the way to keep the plucky-career-gal reader still rooting for our hapless heroine," she said. "I remember my editor wanted me to give an idea about who she was by talking about what she was wearing, and as I was typing 'acid-washed jeans' I knew it would be changed to 'faded.'"

The writer admitted she may have succumbed to the soft-focus technique in part for her own political reasons: "I knew the woman would be an easy target, and I didn't want to load the gun for the anti-choice people." But she also realized that in telling the story the way she did, she missed the opportunity to stretch her readers' empathy and imagination. Old-fashioned eagle-eyed reportorial realism might have helped them remember that life is not black and white, but complicated and fascinating.

"I regret telling the story so it fit so squarely into the triumph mode," the writer said. "That way, you can't make a character nuanced, warts and all, because the point is to get everyone on your side."

If she had the chance to do it again, the writer said, she would show more of the sometimes contradictory, sometimes not-so-pretty aspects of the woman's life, with the aim of telling a truly provocative story.

"There were so many Dickensian bits in this woman's life—all these resonant details that just didn't make for a sympathetic character. Yet when I tell it as it was to my friends, they are genuinely rapt."

Given that representations of character have become so fungible in contemporary journalism, every person who agrees to be written about does what amounts to a spectacular trust fall into the writer's arms. *New Yorker* staff writer Susan Orlean told me she realized the enormous power of her position when she was profiling a rising gospel singer for the magazine several years ago. Unaccustomed to being trailed by a persistent reporter, the singer began acting increasingly romantic toward her until he finally planted a big kiss on her lips.

"I was in a bind, because if I shut him down totally, it was going to affect the story," she explained. "Part of what was going to work [for the story] was that he was open, inviting, giving me all sorts of access." After she tried to defuse the situation by being "coy and cute, sort of saying, 'You're going to get in trouble, c'mon,'" Orlean regretted not having made clear early on that her role was strictly professional. Looking back, she said, the incident reminded her that the rapport between reporter and subject is "fraught with implied and specific behaviors—and for people who are not written about that often, you have to do your half of the emotional work, and maybe a good part of theirs as well."

It was a watershed moment for her, Orlean said, in "discovering how to deal with a subject and recognize the power of coming into someone's life with a notepad and pencil, with all your attentiveness, and how seductive that is. When you're writing about a celebrity, there's a canniness about the process on both sides. But when you're dealing with people who aren't used to the press, there's a naiveté and vulnerability. And you've got to be a steward of their emotions—or you're an asshole."

Marshall Sella, a contributing writer to *The New York Times Magazine*, described his discomfort with profile writing in broader terms. "There is this huge, idiotic illusion that you can spend a finite amount of time with a person

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and then present them in a narrow frame. My problem with every single piece I do is that I get very familiar with [my subject], we're hanging out like friends, and then when they read the piece, they feel the humor is at their expense—suddenly I'm not the friendly, happy guy they were hanging out with.”

Still, Sella said he's optimistic about the highest potential of a magazine profile: “If they are good at anything, it's that they can capture a person's sublimina—how they move their hands, the strange rhythms of how they think and talk and move.” To clearly acknowledge the limitations of the form (and reduce the risk that his subjects will feel misrepresented), he said he's learned to make an effort to show that what he's offering in his profile is merely a glimpse into a life, rather than a definitive depiction of it.

When it comes to entertainment-industry celebrity profiles for which he gets very little access, he said, “I figure the reader might be interested in what it might be like to spend a couple hours with Julia Roberts. And I try to give them that in the wittiest way possible—not what it would be like to be married to her.”

Despite his best efforts to be fair and circumspect in expressing his opinions, Sella said he still manages to write things that don't fit the subjects' perceptions of themselves. “There's something about seeing the coldness of language that's off-putting, something about that spiky little serif lettering that cuts and stings,” he said. It's the phenomenon—perhaps ingrained in human nature—that makes people uncomfortable when any kind of mirror is held up in front of them. “I think about it every moment of the day. It's really a constant concern.”

Much has been made over the years of Janet Malcolm's dictum, “Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows what he is doing is morally indefensible,” and Joan Didion's famous stinger, “Writers are always selling somebody out.”

It's true there are profound limitations to the profile form. The belief that it's possible to capture a person's essence in 5,000 words (or, given today's haiku-length articles, usually far less) is obviously absurd. But I would also say

that the argument that the cultural profile must always be, by its very nature, an act of voyeuristic, shit-your-pants deceit is equally absurd. Sadly, it's one that may help some writers believe they're off the hook for writing morally indefensible stories. "If everyone's doing it, raking mindless, goopy muck," it's possible to imagine a certain kind of writer's inner logic saying, "then I'm just doing the job right."

The good news, though, is that there are still doggedly scrupulous writers out there, working to uphold not just their subjects' honor but the honor of journalism in general. David Simon, the former *Baltimore Sun* crime reporter whose book about a year on a drug-dealing block in the inner city, "The Corner," was made into an HBO series last year, acknowledged the partial truth of Malcolm's statement in an interview in *The New York Times*, then went on to underscore his belief that writers still have a critical responsibility that's worth living up to. "The only ethic I can find that you can hang your hat on says: 'Now that I have the material, how do I treat my subjects? Do I accord them all the humanity they deserve, or do I write a crude and simplistic exposé?'"

There may be no particularly encouraging signs that mainstream magazines are wising up to the fact that cynical, exploitative, celebrity-entranced stories are not just cheesy and creepy but ultimately uninteresting. But I believe (or at least strongly hope) that they will, sooner or later, for the simple reason that readers will eventually tire of such predictably humorless, heartless stories. As readers have in the past (consider *The New Yorker* in its various heydays), they will begin looking for writing that tells about the mysteries of culture—and in turn, themselves—with curiosity and sympathy and real wit.

It may be spicy sausage that's being churned out these days at many mainstream magazines, but it's sausage nevertheless. And ultimately, as history has proven before, people get tired of the same old chorizo week after week, month after month.

In the meantime, in our present taboo-free era, the challenge for cultural writers is how to keep the faith *and* earn a living. Particularly for those

who believe there's more to our collective experience—and therefore should be more to the magazines that report on it—than who's zooming who.

Most of the magazine writers I spoke to agreed that they try to stay attuned to the rumblings of their own guts, to make sure they don't place their own ambitions in front of their subjects'. And, when necessary, they try to hold back potentially distorting red-flag information they fear may betray the substantial trust their subjects have placed in them.

That's because there's no way to take back a cheap shot. Once those spiky serifs do their damage, the low blow can't be retracted. And if you choose to ignore this fact, then, well, you are an asshole. Bob Dylan wasn't referring to the tawdry state of magazines in America, circa 2001, when he wrote "Brownsville Girl." But a line from the song does describe humanity's old, unfortunate tendency to play dumb while committing a crime and prevaricate about it later—a tendency at the heart of the current problem.

*You always said, 'People don't do what they believe in;
they just do what's most convenient, then they repent.'
And I always said, 'Hang on to me, baby,
and let's hope that the roof stays on.'
Yes, let's hope.*

