And the winner is? Celebrity media should come with a warning label

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...anyone who has suffered the slings and arrows of outrageous media attention without then having to take arms against a sea of reputation troubles, and by opposing end them. Awards season brings out our favorite celebrities and stars for their annual accolades – but it also brings out the cameras. And if you dare to strut the red carpet, or put your head above the publicity parapet, you may take home a shining trophy – but you are also at risk of having your reputation, brand and privacy, blown apart.

Awards season has just concluded. This was the time for entertainers to be showered with Golden Globes, Oscars, Tonys, Grammys and a whole host of shiny embodiments of recognition, applauding the recipient for their achievements in cinema, theatre and music.

But it can also be a time for crowns to slip, for reputations to take a tumble and for privacy to take a bashing. The bastardised adage “live by the camera, die by the camera” is truer today when everyone with a phone is a paparazzi photographer and a publisher, than it was decades ago when stars of the silver screen where still able to maintain some modicum of privacy and to manage the image that they showed to the public.

Today, the insatiable curiosity of the public is served by omnipresent social media and by an omnipotent mainstream media. Any talented individual seeking to secure their fortune through the arts must also be prepared for the fame that is its companion. And while one side of the celebrity coin is accolade and approval, the other can be intrusion and reputational damage. The media, other people, and we ourselves, hold the means of reputational damage on the one hand, or preservation on the other, in our own hands.

Reputation rehab – no, no, no

There are numerous slips and trips for entertainers along the red carpet to stardom. Weeping at the podium – Gwyneth Paltrow takes the award for that; red carpet wardrobe disasters; overlong speeches; jokes that don’t quite hit the mark – all minor mistakes from which a penitent may be rehabilitated. But the oxygen of publicity of Twitter storms and 24 hour rolling news can turn a judgment failure into a catastrophic brand killer.

Today, rehabilitation from the errors of one’s past is hindered by the private desire of many, and the professional need of some, to live our lives online. Inaccurate information, false and defamatory allegations, private information, even postings that were once acceptable but which are now inappropriate and out of date can sink a reputational ship.

Actor Kevin Hart, originally due to host the 2019 Oscar ceremony was unceremoniously stripped of the role after the surfacing of historical tweets criticized as homophobic. Actor Steve Martin – a non-host host of the 2020 Oscars – questioned in introducing the awards, “They don’t really have hosts anymore. Why is that?” Alluding to Hart’s sacking, and seemingly subtly criticizing the reputational damage caused as a result, his co-non-host host comedian Chris Rock quickly responded, “Twitter!”

The sins of yesteryear lurk on the internet to pop up like spring bulbs under the glare of the media spotlight. And the so-called “cancel culture” – a kind of social media mob rule where internet vigilantes call the reputational shots – provides that any such historical transgressor should be censured, castigated and cancelled out as a result.

Turning the other cheek

This year’s host of the 2020 Golden Globes, famously irreverent English actor Ricky Gervais, turned up the heat with his roasting of film producers, joking that they might all be uncomfortably waiting to be implicated in the Harvey Weinstein sexual abuse scandal. Formally to accuse anyone of being involved in such activities would be to invite a multi-million dollar law suit for defamation – even in America where the burden of
proof is on the plaintiff to show that the allegations are untrue, and for the public figure plaintiff, as such producers would likely be, to prove that the allegations were made with malice and without any belief in their truth.

Constantly under the camera, those in the public eye need to learn when to react and when to turn the other cheek. Seasoned professionals such as Leonardo Di Caprio – teased by Jervais at the Globes for dating very young women – can have the confidence, good sense and good grace to laugh at the joke. While those with huge reputations such as Joe Pesce and Martin Scorsese may be big enough to take a verbal hit – again at the hands of Jervais – for being diminutive.

However, those more likely to face reputational harm than the celestial beings who have already climbed to the heady heights of stardom are entertainers at the beginning of their careers. The public and the media have a penchant for putting our nascent stars on a pedestal only to then want to knock them off as they are about to achieve success. Moreover, damaging headlines or inappropriate disclosures about an artist who has yet to establish a significant wind of support under their wings can cut short a career before it has really begun.

Eleven year old English actor Roman Griffin Davis danced with the devil during his onscreen friendship with an imaginary friend Hitler, in the Oscar nominated black comedy Jojo Rabbit. But an enemy more dangerous still, is the press. Careful preservation of his own privacy, and cultivation of an amicable, yet cautious relationship with the media, is a balance that any young entrant on to the media stage needs to learn. At the same time, knowing how to manage the smaller screen and what appears on social media, Instagram and Twitter is a key lesson safely to navigate one’s reputation and privacy along the road to stardom.

Celebrities and civilians – not so different

A brand is how you portray yourself to others; a reputation is how you are perceived by others. Both are vulnerable to attack. Those who earn their living and professional validity from the entertainment industry can face a difficult balancing act between a necessary disclosure of their public personas, and an unwanted exposure of their private selves given they embody the chameleon-like status of being both private person and public property at the same time. Indeed, protecting a brand and presenting a positive persona is part and parcel of the job.

Sympathy for an award winning actor, a celebrated comedian or a millionaire musician as they plead for privacy while banking their checks or carrying off their gongs, can be in short supply. But as we admire them during awards season we can – perhaps just for a minute – see them as human beings like us. As we do so, we may recognise that we can all struggle in a world of 24-hour news coverage and persistent prying social media, where our reputations compete in a competitive, challenging market place but where we all need to find some peace and privacy from time to time. Are there any ways in which we all can help ourselves through these turbulent times? Well yes, there are...

Step one – Information is power

If we are unaware of what is being said about us we can do little to capitalise on the positive and nothing to mitigate the negative. An online audit is like a reputational health check. Taking the time to research, assess and stress-test the information in the public domain will enable you: to understand the position that particular media organisations have taken and will likely continue to take vis-à-vis you and your work; to learn how you are positioned with the public, and the likely direction of social sentiment; and to decide what content you may be content to see online, and what you may prefer to see removed.

Step two – act fast

A raft of remedies is available to those who find information lurking in the dark recesses of the internet, or flashing in sky-high letters across social media. Corrections and clarifications of damaging material, apologies for defamatory allegations, the removal of inaccurate or private data from online sources, legal action, mitigating media campaigns... Whatever the remedy sought, if you’re going to act, act fast. A bad review in the early morning papers may once have been fish and chip wrap – today, information online will remain there to be repeated forever. And fake news told over and over again will soon become the new truth.

Step three – know thyself

While a hostile critic with a poisonous pen may appear to be an entertainer’s worst enemy, it’s not – it’s us. Entertainers can be as caught up as the rest of us in the appeal of immediate publication – especially where engaging with fans and reviewers, magazines and photographers can be part and parcel of the job. But a mis-toned comment or Tweet can sink a reputational ship and cost you your job. Actress Rosanne Barr faced a Twitter backlash in 2018 over an offensive tweet about a former adviser to Barak Obama – despite a public apology for her ‘bad taste’ joke the Rosanne show was cancelled as a result.

Step four – Limit your exposure

Performers perform – that’s what they do. And they need exposure to the public to be able to do so. But, a bit like separating the yoke from the egg, they need also to know how to separate their private life from their public life. So do we all. Privacy is like the sand in an egg-timer; once its grains have flowed from the private side into the public domain bowl below there is generally no turning it upside down again.

Those under the constant glare of the media spotlight – and indeed I would recommend this for us all – need to fix privacy settings high on any social media sites maintained and carefully select and restrict the class of people with whom private photos – as opposed to publicity shots – are shared.

And it’s not just your privacy that can be stolen should you mismanage your social media self. Sofia Coppola’s 2013 film The Bling Ring told the true story of a series of burglaries in the Hollywood Hills by a group of teenagers. Opportunistically relying on information about their victims’ whereabouts from what they posted on social media, the gang was able to target houses when their celebrated owners – including Paris Hilton – were out of town, robbing them of millions of dollars of celebrity goodies.

Step five – gain comfort with confidentiality

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Nothing can be nicer than curling up at home to watch a favourite film or listen to a much-loved piece of music. A Non-Disclosure Agreement, NDA, can serve as a privacy-protecting comfort blanket to protect against the possibility of private lives leaking onto the front pages of the newspapers, or flooding across social media via disclosures from disgruntled staff members or associates whom you have invited into your home and life.

Be kind to ourselves

Benjamin Franklin said, “Glass, china and reputation are easily cracked and never well-mended.” Oscar’s reputation is at its best when he is clean and shiny – but a tarnished reputation can be polished up with some professional remedial reputation work. If Tony’s privacy is shattered altogether, it may be beyond repair – but if you spot a slight crack early enough, it may be mended. And if Grammy sings altogether off-key, he can be impossible to listen to – whereas some early advice on the right reputational tune to sing, can save the performance.

Brad Pitt’s parting words on accepting his Golden Globe for Best Supporting Actor 2020, were “Hey, if you see a chance to be kind to someone tomorrow, take it – I think we need it.” Being kind is not in the arsenal of media organisations motivated by sales. So if you see a chance to be kind to yourself, your reputation and your privacy and to protect them all, take it – you may well need it.
Authors

Andrew Fremlin-Key
ASSOCIATE | LONDON
Litigation and arbitration
☎ +44 20 7597 6068
✉ andrew.fremlin-key@withersworldwide.com

Amber Melville-Brown
PARTNER | NEW YORK, LONDON
Media and reputation
☎ +1 212 848 9813 (NY) +44 20 7597 6408 (London)
✉ amber.melville-brown@withersworldwide.com