

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection

The Website Celebrities Hate

TMZ.com, a Los Angeles–based gossip website, has a knack for creating major scandals. What’s its secret?

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What is TMZ.com?

It’s a gossip website that does a lot more than peddle gossip. While most of *TMZ*’s content consists of paparazzi shots and celebrity tittle-tattle, the site has also published two of the biggest domestic news stories of the year: the recording of then–Los Angeles Clippers owner Donald Sterling spouting racist views and the security camera footage of football player Ray Rice knocking out his girlfriend in a casino elevator. Both scoops had a huge impact: The former prompted the sale of a \$2 billion NBA franchise; the latter ignited a national debate on domestic violence and forced the NFL to launch a major reassessment of its policies. In August the site attracted 58.9 million unique visitors, trouncing E! Online’s 35.2 million. Along with several TV spin-offs, including a reality-TV show following *TMZ*’s staff in action, the site generates revenue of \$55 million a year. “Ninety-nine percent of [*TMZ* content] is frippery,” says Judy Muller of the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School of Journalism. “But that 1 percent of real news that they break means they can’t be ignored.”

How long has TMZ been around?

Named after the so-called Thirty Mile Zone in Los Angeles, where all the major Hollywood studios were originally based, *TMZ* was launched in 2005 by Telepictures, a division of AOL Time Warner. At the time, the growing demand for online celebrity gossip was largely being met by low-budget blogs such as *Perez Hilton* and *Dlisted*. These blogs were popular because, like the *National Enquirer*, they published stories the publicists didn’t want the public to see—some true and some not so true. *TMZ* adopted the same approach, eschewing fawning interviews and celebrity-approved photo spreads in favor of stories and videos that put celebrities’ real lives and foibles under a harsh spotlight. In the words of Harvey Levin, the site’s founder, managing editor, and principal driving force: “We don’t do agenda.”

What’s Levin’s background?

Levin was a lawyer in the entertainment industry for about 20 years. During that time, he came to believe that the legal system—from cops to prosecutors to juries—had one set of rules for the rich and famous and another for the hoi polloi. Levin launched *TMZ* not only to exploit the public’s insatiable appetite for gossip but also to expose the hypocrisy of this two-tiered system. *TMZ*’s first-ever video—which showed police turning a blind eye when Paris Hilton and friends fled the scene after crashing her \$200,000 Bentley—encapsulated this philosophy. “There is no evidence on tape,” the *TMZ* reporter noted, “that the police ever conducted field sobriety tests on the driver.”

When did TMZ hit it big?

At 10:15 p.m. on July 28, 2006. That was when the site published its scoop on Mel Gibson’s misogynistic, anti-Semitic rant as cops arrested him for drunk driving. News of the angry tirade—in which Gibson called a female officer “sugar t--s” and blamed Jews for “all the wars in

the world”—made headlines everywhere and virtually demolished the actor’s career. Since then, *TMZ* has been responsible for many of the most talked-about celebrity stories, from a recording of Alec Baldwin telling his 11-year-old daughter she was a “thoughtless little pig” to video footage of Solange Knowles attacking Jay Z, her brother-in-law, in a hotel elevator. But the site’s biggest scoop came in June 2009, when it beat every other news outlet in the world to break the story of Michael Jackson’s death. In an indication of how good its sources were, *TMZ* published the news six minutes before the singer’s death certificate had even been signed.

How does it get these scoops?

Partly through old-fashioned news gathering and partly by paying for information. *TMZ* staffers sift through local courthouse filings for juicy cases and cultivate a huge network of sources: chauffeurs, cocktail waitresses, cops, paramedics. Sometimes, these sources supply tips for free, but unlike traditional news outlets, *TMZ* has no qualms about paying for these stories (see box). And Levin often barter with celebrities, suppressing damaging stories in exchange for other scoops. When an old video of Justin Bieber using the N-word emerged earlier this year, former *TMZ* employees said that the site had held a copy for four years—during which it published numerous exclusives that clearly involved Bieber’s cooperation. These employees say Levin has a whole digital treasure trove of similar secrets, including sealed testimonies from the Michael Jackson molestation trials.

How do celebrities view TMZ?

As you’d expect, they loathe it. Alec Baldwin has described Levin as a “human tumor” who derives “an almost sexual level of pleasure from ruining other people’s lives.” But while *TMZ* has made a few high-profile mistakes, including publishing a forged photo of John F. Kennedy with two women, it has never been successfully sued for libel. And Levin, for his part, remains defiantly unapologetic for giving the public what it wants. “What we’re doing is not the fall of Western civilization,” he says. “Celebrities are just people who other people invest in. They invest in them by going to movies. They invest in them by buying DVDs, by buying their clothes. They want to know something about them.”

Checkbook journalism

One of the criticisms most frequently leveled at *TMZ* is over its willingness to pay for stories. The site reportedly forked out \$15,000 for snaps of Prince Harry playing strip billiards and \$62,500 for a photo of Rihanna’s bruised and swollen face after a brutal assault by her then-boyfriend Chris Brown. But while newspapers and other traditional media outlets look down on “checkbook journalism,” the practice is as old as journalism itself. In 1912, *The New York Times* paid one of the *Titanic*’s surviving crewmen more than \$1,000—many times his annual salary—for his story. British journalist David Frost spent \$600,000 to secure his 1977 interview with Richard Nixon. And while TV networks today insist they never pay for interviews, they often get around that prohibition by giving interviewees thousands of dollars for “travel expenses” or other supposed costs. “[We’re] no different from any other news operation,” says Evan Rosenblum, head of *TMZ Sports*, “whether they admit it or not.”

Possible Response Questions:

- Should news organizations pay for news?
- Do sites like *TMZ* cheapen our culture? Do they dumb down America? Yes? No? Explain.
- Select any passage and respond to it.