Dead men DO tell tales

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You know you're living in a culture of celebrity when the Twitter for the president of the United States ranks No. 6, trailing behind rock stars Justin Bieber and Katy Perry by millions of followers.

But have celebrities always trumped achievers for public attention?

University of South Carolina sociologist Patrick Nolan decided to test the notion that public fascination with celebrities had grown during the 20th century while interest in achievers or producers such as scientists, inventors or industrialists and religious figures had waned.

Using The New York Times obituaries as a cultural barometer, he analyzed 100 years of obits from 1900 – 2000, working from the newspaper's "notable deaths" section. The results of his study, "Dead Men Do Tell Tales: The Apotheosis of Celebrities in 20th-century America," appear in the summer issue of the sociological journal "Sociation Today."

Nolan expected his theory to hold true, but what he didn't expect to find was just how strong the evidence would be.

"Most striking are the simultaneous increases in celebrity obituaries and declines in religious obituaries. They document the increasing secularization and hedonism of American culture at a time when personal income was rising and public concern was shifting away from the basic issues of survival," Nolan said.

"The magnitude of these trends is seismic. While the Greeks may have looked to their gods for guidance and entertainment, we've turned increasingly to our celebrities – entertainers and athletes."

Nolan conducted the study with doctoral student **Timothy Bertoni**. After breaking down the 100-year time period into 25-year increments, they randomly selected 20 days from 1900, 1925, 1950, 1975 and 2000, matching the selected days by calendar year, month and day, and coded the obituaries. The results were stark. Obits of entertainers and athletes steadily rose in rank across the 20th century, moving from seventh in 1900, to fifth in 1925, up to third in 1950 and first in 1975 and 2000, at which point they accounted for 28 percent of obits.

Despite a slight increase in 1925 and 1950 religious obits fell from fourth to last in rank. In fact, Nolan said there wasn't a single notable religious obit in 2000. A similar pattern was seen among manufacturing and industry-related obits, and business/finance obits "halved over the century," he said.

Comparing percentages of obits in the various occupations to employment in those industries revealed a disproportionate amount of celebrity obits in the fields of entertainment and sports. The finding clearly documented a trend toward secular hedonism, he said.

Nolan, who joined USC [College of Arts and Sciences'] faculty in 1979 and whose book ["Human Societies"] is the common college text for teaching macrosociology, said technological advances have played a major role in fueling public interest in celebrities.

"Technology has become so productive that we now generate a surplus. That is, a surplus in the sense that we produce more than what is needed to keep people clothed, fed and housed," Nolan said. "Surplus creates options. A person who once made $5 beyond their basic needs for food and shelter had to decide whether to save it or buy something. A person who makes more than $100 after paying their bills has more options. That's when thinking shifts from survival to how to spend one's time, including leisure activities. The economy has generated this potential." Nolan said science-fiction writers of the 19th-century envisioned a future in which machines would free people from labor and dangerous jobs so that they could spend time refining their minds through literature and philosophy.

"It didn't work out that way. It's easier to lazily cater to our passions, pace and appetites," Nolan said. "Obesity wasn't a major problem 100 or 200 years ago. Then people struggled to get enough food. Now we're talking about banning 16-ounce sodas and cutting down fast-food in school cafeterias."

Nolan plans to continue his work on secularization in contemporary society by turning his attention to the secularization of religion.

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