

15 minutes of fame? Study finds true fame isn't fleeting

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True fame isn't fleeting. That's what a team of researchers led by McGill University's Eran Shor and Stony Brook University's Arnout van de Rijt conclude in a new study that appears in the April issue of the *American Sociological Review*.

The researchers studied the [names](#) mentioned in English-language newspapers over a period of several decades. What they found was that, contrary to popular belief, the people who become truly famous, stay famous for decades, and that this is the case whatever field they're in, including sports, politics, and other domains.

This is even true of entertainment, where it might appear that fame is likely to be most ephemeral. For example, in a random sample of 100,000 names that appeared in the entertainment sections of more than 2,000 newspapers between 2004-2009, the 10 names that showed up most frequently were Jamie Foxx, Bill Murray, Natalie Portman, Tommy Lee Jones, Naomi Watts, Howard Hughes, Phil Spector, John Malkovich, Adrien Brody, and Steve Buscemi. All have been celebrated for at least a decade and all are still much talked about today.

The finding that true fame isn't fleeting goes against most of the [scholarly research](#) until now. "There is almost a consensus among scholars in the field of the sociology of fame, that most fame is ephemeral," said Shor, an assistant professor in McGill's department of sociology. "What we've shown here that is truly revolutionary is that the people who you and I would consider famous, even the Kim Kardashians

of this world, stay famous for a long time. It doesn't come and go."

Indeed, the annual turnover in the group of famous names is very low. Ninety-six percent of those whose names were mentioned over 100 times in the newspapers in a given year were already in the news at least three years before. The authors point out that this can be explained by the fact that both media and audiences are trapped in a self-reinforcing equilibrium where they must continue to devote attention, airtime, and newspaper space to the same old characters because everyone else does so as well. Talent, resources, or chance events may propel an individual into the spotlight. But, once someone becomes truly famous, they tend to stay that way. Temporary celebrity is highly unusual and is to be found primarily in the bottom tiers of the fame hierarchy, such as when people like whistle blowers become famous for a limited time for participating in particular events.

In general, big names follow career-type patterns of growth, sustenance, and gradual decay over the course of decades. "As with all sociological regularities, our claim is not absolute," said Van de Rijt, an assistant professor in Stony Brook's department of sociology. "We can all think of examples of both types, fleeting and long-term fame. Leonard Cohen is still well known today, over 40 years after he first became famous. But, Chesley Sullenberger, the pilot who received instant fame after safely landing a disabled plane on the Hudson, is a name that will likely be forgotten pretty quickly. What we have shown is that Leonard Cohen is the rule and Chesley Sullenberger the exception."

The researchers, who also include Charles Ward, a software engineer at Google, and Steven Skiena, a distinguished teaching professor of computer science at Stony Brook, acknowledge that there is further work to be done with data from blogs, television, and video sharing sites like YouTube to see whether the same patterns hold true there.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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