

TMZ.com is now the hottest Hollywood celebrity gossip Web site on the planet. So hot, in fact, that when it broke the news of Michael Jackson's death at the end of last month, its world exclusive popped up online six minutes before the singer actually died.

For its many critics this was confirmation that the Web site, which, amid endless surveillance videos of minor celebs parking their cars and walking to their front doors, brought you exclusives on Mel Gibson's anti-semitic ravings at a traffic cop, Alec Baldwin's brutal mobile phone rant at his 11-year-old daughter and the contents of Anna Nicole Smith's bedside table the night she died (Slim Fast and chewing gum), plays fast and loose with the truth.

But for TMZ, the explanation was simple. By the time Jackson was officially declared dead, at 2:26pm Los Angeles time on June 25, one of the site's sources within the corridors of the UCLA Medical Center (it has a vast network that blankets the city) had already tipped it off.

Michael Jackson dead was the scoop of a lifetime for any media outlet, and the apogee of the four-year-old celebrity-obsessed site that boasts its snippets are "even more fascinating than the hype." In that time, TMZ (the name stands for thirty-mile zone, the area of central Los Angeles thickly populated with stars), which is as voyeuristic as it is speedy, has become one of the world's most quoted sources of entertainment news, with rival sites, TV channels and traditional gossip columns, such as the *New York Post's* infamous Page Six, quoting it regularly.

And for all that, we have Harvey Levin to thank. The well-built, 57-year-old former lawyer turned TV journalist is now something of a celebrity himself, popping up on *Larry King Live*, and a bunch of other news magazine shows that dip into celebrity content. When actor Natasha Richardson hit her head while skiing and suffered fatal brain swelling, Levin, who founded TMZ, was all over the news channels and appeared to have been in touch with paramedics that tended to her. The guy is that good.

A polite way to put it is that Levin is a man who polarizes opinion. *I'm a Celebrity* contestant Janice Dickinson called him the lowest form of pond scum, *Radar* magazine's profile on him was titled *Sultan of Sleeze*, while blogging site Gawker said he was a "schlocky managing editor of a thieving celebrity news conglomerate" and accused him of filching stories from the Web site Courthouse News Service and passing them off as their own.

For his part, Baldwin said that Levin "seemed to be that breed of tabloid creature that realized an almost sexual level of pleasure from ruining other people's lives."

Some rival media outlets so dislike and distrust TMZ that they didn't report Jackson was dead until it had been confirmed by the *Los Angeles Times* and Associated Press. "That's typical," Levin told the *Los Angeles Times*. "No matter what they say, people know we broke the story. That's how competitors handle it. There's no issue about our credibility," he added. "Today, I made 100 phone calls, and everyone else made 100 calls," Levin said of TMZ's reporters the day it broke the Jackson story. "Everyone blanketed the city." That seems to be true. The Web site has sources everywhere: its first reports about Jackson variously quoted a cardiologist at UCLA, another source inside the hospital where the stricken star was taken, a Jackson family



Michael Jackson and sisters LaToya, left, and Janet greet fans during a lunch break at a pretrial hearing in Santa Maria, California in 2004. TMZ broke news of Michael Jackson's death six minutes before he actually died.

PHOTO: REUTERS

TMZ rewrites the rules of Hollywood journalism

It had the celebrity scoop of the decade when it broke the news of Michael Jackson's death. It may be crude, but it's fast; and now TMZ.com has more power than ever

BY **STEPHEN BROOK**
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

member and Jackson's father, Joe. Kevin Smith, co-founder of independent news and picture agency Splash News, says that while many newspapers and magazines rely on celebrity content to get sales, but fill their pages with everything from crosswords to horoscopes, TMZ has just cut down to the bone — celebrity is all it supplies. "It is very raw, it is very crude, it's not polished, but it works. A lot of people look at them with envy and think, 'Why didn't we do that?'"

Levin, who gossip sites love to point out is happily partnered to his body-builder-turned-chiropractor boyfriend, trained as a lawyer, but found the lure of TV irresistible. He passed his bar exam in 1975 and taught law before becoming a legal reporter for KCBS-TV in Los Angeles, where he covered the OJ Simpson trial. He later became a legal analyst on *The People's Court* TV show, before dreaming up his own TV concept, *Celebrity Justice*. But the show didn't last; a victim of poor time slots, it was axed after three years.

Undeterred, Levin launched TMZ.com modestly in December 2005 as "a Hollywood and entertainment-centric news site." It was a joint

venture between AOL and Telepictures Productions, a division of Warner Bros, which produces the *Ellen DeGeneres Show* and the *Tyra Banks Show*. Both companies are divisions of Time Warner. The site is said to cost about US\$8 million a year to run, but some have estimated that it could be worth up to US\$400 million.

The site was profitable after the first year, according to Alan Citron, general manager of TMZ.com from just after it launched until late last year. "TMZ was one of the first sites to redefine celebrity coverage. When people were setting their web bookmarks, TMZ was there. I am a big believer in first mover advantage."

According to Citron, Levin was a hard taskmaster who would work all hours. "At the end of the day, he's a really good reporter. When he focuses on the story he is likely to beat the competition."

The site, which attracts about 10 million unique users a month, created waves at Warner Bros in the early days with some of its scoops, according to Citron, now president of Buzznet. "I think that there was some nervousness about that and there were times when people would go, 'Can't you move a bit

to the middle?'" but to their credit they never shut us down."

There are two opposing schools of thought about its success. One, that TMZ is founded on good old-fashioned reporting, wearing out shoe leather in the finest tradition of Hollywood tip sheets. Two, it gets scoops because it pays people.

"If you have a story and you want to get paid then you call TMZ," says Kevin Smith, whose agency is a major supplier to TMZ.

While this is a practice many newspapers would not bat an eyelid over, most traditional US media newspapers find this deeply troubling and refuse to pay for stories. Levin admits that the site pays for pictures and he also admitted to the *New York Times* that he will pay for story tips, but will not pay for unverified stories. "There are times when you have to pay," says Smith. "What if Deep Throat had wanted money and not been acting out of political motivations? Richard Nixon would have remained president."

Citron is quick to defend their use of checkbook journalism. "As long as information is accurate I don't have a problem with that."

It is clear that even before the events of last week, TMZ had changed Hollywood and is starting to change the way the world's media works. In times past other outlets would attempt to confirm a story themselves before running big on it. But with TMZ's scoop last week, Sky News in the UK gave it blanket coverage very quickly, even though for nearly one hour TMZ was the only media organization claiming the superstar was dead. News companies that waited for confirmation, such as CNN and BBC, were roundly criticized. The old rules of double sourcing stories appeared to be being rewritten before our eyes.

"In many ways, publicists ran Hollywood before we came along," Levin told *Television Week*. "They would set the topics, they would set the agenda, they would tell these magazine shows what they could or couldn't do. The power they had would be to say, 'We won't give you the interviews you really want, you play ball with us.'"

But who needs sit-down interviews with celebrities when you can run a harrowing image of pop star Rihanna's face after she was beaten up, for which

TMZ reportedly paid US\$62,000. Keith Kelly, the Media Ink columnist at the *New York Post*, is stumped to think of a major story the site has blown. "It's not a massive profit-maker," says Kelly. "They focus on one thing: breaking news, that's it — and seem to do it fairly accurately. They have definitely had an impact. I don't think that Hollywood agents and the power structure particularly care for them. In some ways, it's a blessing, you don't have to go and suck up to agents and swap favors for access."

When TMZ broke the news of Jackson's heart attack, but before it reported his death, UK news networks had no problem going big on the story, even though TMZ was virtually the only source. But US network CNN refused to report TMZ's claim that Jackson was dead, even though both news outlets are part of the same company.

Levin is certainly hardworking. He works Web site hours, arriving at the office sometimes as early as 6am, and has often hit the gym before that. He wears several hats, cofounder and editor-in-chief of TMZ.com, executive producer and host of TMZ on TV, the successful TV show spawned by the site. The offices of TMZ off Sunset Boulevard double as the set of *TMZ on TV*. "If you went in there you wouldn't find it run by journalists, it is run by young guys who know how to put stuff on the Internet. But they have broken some very important stories," says Smith, whose company is a major supplier to the site.

TMZ on TV is just like the site. In fact, it is like putting *Heat* magazine on television. The format is part squawk box, part bull ring. Levin stands in front of his staff, slurps from a drink bottle, wields a large marker pen and asks his troops in turn, "What have you got?" Just like a real news conference in any news outlet anywhere. But here the stories are different. Staff report on the latest celebrity sitings, often with video. "We caught *Twilight* star Robert Pattinson's butt cleavage!" "Sam Ronson denies Lindsay Lohan pregnancy rumors, 'if she is, it ain't mine.'" It is a lot of shooting the breeze, interspersed with about eight minutes of content. It is also popular. So much so that the Fox TV network, where it airs every weeknight, is now planning a second TV show. *TMZ on TV* will expand with a trial run of a new series called *Beyond Twisted* that starts tomorrow. It is billed as an "irreverent and funny take on jaw-dropping moments from around the world."

It is possible to see the legacy of Walter Winchell, the newspaper gossipmonger who dominated radio and TV from the 1930s to the 1950s, in what TMZ does. Winchell's quick-fire radio and TV shows, where he delivered news and gossip, accompanied by clattering telexes, gave him enormous power, and he perfected the use of slang to avoid legal disputes, promising his listeners each week the lowdown on celebrity and politics, "the very very low down down." But Winchell wasn't really into camera-up-skirt content. In some ways, TMZ is the *National Enquirer* for the Internet age.

It is clear that the site now has the power that Winchell once had. Smith waits to see if TMZ can build on its Jackson success. "The problem is, it's hard to maintain it. The large majority of their stuff is just fluff. I don't have a problem with that because we are supplying most of that fluff," he says.

Keith Kelly sees it as on a mission to expose news that publicists want to keep a lid on. "So in a sense they are outsiders, which in a sense is what journalists should be — they shouldn't be part of the power structure."



This snap of Rihanna's beaten face reportedly cost TMZ US\$62,000 to procure.

PHOTO: AP



Left: Paris Hilton, center, gets up close and personal to Cristiano Ronaldo. Below left: Mel Gibson hit the bottle and then the headlines. Above: Alec Baldwin took tough love parenting to a new level.

PHOTO: AP AND REUTERS

TMZ'S TOP SCOOPS

► July 2006

A police report obtained by TMZ reveals that Mel Gibson launched an anti-Semitic and sexist tirade at traffic cops when arrested in Malibu for drunk-driving

► November 2006

TMZ shows mobile phone footage of former *Seinfeld* star Michael Richards on stage in a comedy club launching a bizarre racist rant at a heckler

► April 2007

TMZ broadcasts an abusive answering-machine message that Alec Baldwin leaves his daughter, 11, during a custody battle

► February 2009

TMZ releases audiotape of Christian Bale going berserk at a crew member on the set of *Terminator Salvation*. Bale gets through 39 "fucks" in four minutes

► February 2009

TMZ posts a shocking photograph of pop singer Rihanna with deep bruises and black eyes after she was allegedly assaulted by her boyfriend on the morning of the Grammys

SOURCE: THE GUARDIAN