

‘Let all man know thee, but no man know thee thoroughly’— *Poor Richard*, 1743.

Some have called Benjamin Franklin the “first American”. Certainly, he was the first American celebrity. Upon his arrival in France in the 1770s, Franklin found not only droves of adoring supporters, but also a personal merchandise range worthy of a present-day star. “My picture is everywhere”, he bemusedly observed: “on the lids of snuff boxes, on rings, busts. The numbers sold are incredible. My portrait is a best seller, you have prints, and copies of prints and copies of copies spread everywhere”. Fame was not an eighteenth-century invention—hagiography and heroism are as old as culture itself. But the period’s unique cocktail of proliferating printing presses, a chattering public sphere, and a nascent news media spawned brand new ways to “Let all man know thee”.

Of course, to be known is the *sine qua non* of celebrity. As Franklin’s contemporary (and fellow aphorist) Nicholas Chamfort observed: “celebrity is the advantage of being known to people who do not know you”. In Franklin’s lifetime, the eruption of technological and cultural change created a vertiginous sense that this “advantage” was suddenly up for grabs. For the first time, the opportunity to “Let all man know thee” was thrown open to whoever could harness the unruly power of a young and feral media. As Franklin’s trip to France illustrated, this new kind of fame was not restricted to any particular geographical area, or social milieu. Antoine Lilti, an historian of the eighteenth century, has shown how celebrity cascaded through an indeterminate network of copiers and sharers, who spread the names and faces of new icons practically overnight (and often forgot about them just as swiftly).

The temptation to compare the eighteenth century’s media revolution to present-day social networks is irresistible. Now, as then, a new and lightly-regulated media form, enabled by technology and energised by immediacy and community, has unprecedentedly accelerated the process of becoming famous. It has never been easier to fulfil the first part of Franklin’s imperative: to “Let all man know thee”—but the risk of becoming too “thoroughly” known has grown, too.

What does it mean to be known “thoroughly”, as opposed to merely known? The distinction is buried in the oxymoronic double meaning of the word “know”, on which both Chamfort’s and Franklin’s aphorisms rely for their pith. To “Let all man know thee” is to be known *of*. We become known in this sense when we broadcast, disseminate, and publish—when we see our faces on every snuff-box, or our tweet on every timeline. It might seem that being thoroughly known is different only by

degree: one should be known only so far, and no further. In fact, the difference is one of kind. As in the introvert impulse of the humanist imperative to “Know Thyself”, being thoroughly known is an inward-facing matter, leaving us vulnerable, and potentially compromised. In becoming known we project ourselves outwards to others; in becoming thoroughly known, we let others in.

There is a further aid to our understanding of what it means to be thoroughly known, in the next line of the aphorism as it originally appears in *Poor Richard's Almanack*: “Men freely ford that see the shallows”. In other words, if we forfeit our inner depths, we run the risk of being walked over. On this understanding, as much as it is about intimacy or familiarity, the difference between being known and being thoroughly known is about power relations, and the threat of exploitation. If we are thoroughly known, we become legible to those who would seek to manipulate us, and susceptible to their influence.

Two hundred years ago, the threshold between being known and being thoroughly known could be easily grasped, and was intuitively rooted in our social experiences. The boundaries of the bourgeois public sphere, new as it was, were relatively clearly defined. The distinction is illustrated by two depictions of Voltaire, another early celebrity, both by the artist Jean Huber. The first was a distinguished-looking silhouette, painted in *trompe-l'oeil* on a board attached to a wooden handle so that it could be carried around. Apparently, the idea was to sit the picture in a seat at the Comédie-Française, giving the impression that the *philosophe* himself was in attendance—an ingenious self-publicising technology, if a rudimentary one, and an exemplary way to “Let all man know thee”. Huber's other image of Voltaire, an engraving, was less flattering. The subject stands in his bedroom on one leg, haphazardly pulling up his trousers, flailing an arm at his secretary as he dictates a letter. The image didn't do Voltaire's celebrity any harm—indeed, he probably colluded in its production as a publicity stunt. Nevertheless, it is hard not to feel that Voltaire had gained a little renown at the cost of a little exposure, the kind of exchange that Franklin's aphorism warns against. With the silhouette, Voltaire let himself be known. In the intimate engraving, he let himself be thoroughly known. The distinction between the two feels palpable and natural: the theatre versus the bedroom.

The obvious analogy with our own era is social media's exposure of our private lives to the public sphere, but the comparison doesn't quite fit. As much as apparent insight into the personal lives of widely-known people might *feel* as if it enables us to thoroughly know them, the scope and nature of such insights are stage-managed. They are flattering silhouettes in the theatre, masquerading as intimate revelations. In terms of the power relations that Franklin thought were so bound up with

knowing and thoroughly knowing, it would be hard to argue that such exposure makes famous people weak or susceptible to manipulation.

In the age of social media, then, what is it to be thoroughly known? The answer cannot be apprehended as intuitively as it could two centuries ago. In Franklin's age, the kind of thorough knowledge that threatened one's agency was individual and personal, rather than collective and anonymous. Paradoxically, in the present day, the reverse is true. Social media platforms are where we make ourselves known, but by collecting data from countless users, they know us, too: where we are at given times, who we communicate with, where we work, what we buy, and how we are likely to vote. Each piece of information is trifling on its own—a “check-in” at a café, an answer to a novelty personality quiz, or a post about a new job. But when such data has been harvested from the profiles of 87 million people, as it was in the Cambridge Analytica episode earlier this year, the power of manipulation afforded to its collectors is formidable. In the 21st-century, we become thoroughly known not in a torrent of scandal, but by a steady drip of data.

Unlike the publication of a compromising bedroom portrait, this process does not feel intrusive, or embarrassing. When it is noticeable at all, it can even be fun. During the 2016 EU referendum campaign, Vote Leave ran a jolly competition offering £50m to football fans who correctly predicted the outcome of every match in the European Championships. All they had to do was sign up with their name, address, telephone number, email, and how they intended to vote in the referendum. Never mind that the odds of winning were roughly a sextillion to one—as Dominic Cummings, Vote Leave's campaign director, later wrote: “Data flowed in”. Now, two campaign groups are accused of sharing that data illegally, and using it to aggressively target thousands of adverts at critical swing voters. The personal information that those voters provided was, in turn, used by expert manipulators to influence their behaviour.

When we sit at computers in our homes, ticking a box or filling in a form, we feel none of the unease or self-consciousness that once came with being thoroughly known. There is no innate regulating impulse that gives us pause when we offer ourselves as fresh data points to an algorithm of which we have no understanding. Researchers call this the “privacy paradox”. When asked questions about their privacy, internet users are concerned and conscientious. Confusingly, when they have the opportunity to do something about it—deleting a profile, or changing their settings—they rarely do, because the inconvenience doesn't seem worth it. As a result, so-called “surveillance capitalism” has flourished: we don't pay for social media services with cash, but with our data.

The nature of privacy breaches has changed since Franklin's day. He could not have foreseen the methodology of mass data collection, but he would surely have recognised those who "freely ford" the public in pursuit of their own agendas. As unlikely as it seems, were he alive today, America's first celebrity might well have deleted his social media accounts.