

IN GOSSIP WE TRUST

Dissecting the latest celebrity drama unites us all.
Style rounds up the best of the gossipmongers, from the
highbrow to the very, very lowbrow



MEET THE MOGUL WHO CHANGED GOSSIP FOR EVER

Popbitch is the guilty pleasure email
that has arrived in inboxes every
Thursday since 2000. On the eve of
the site's 1,000th newsletter,
Scarlett Russell meets its elusive
founder, Camilla Wright

YOU'VE BEEN PUBLISHING A NEWSLETTER about celebrity gossip, revealing the secrets of the rich, famous and oddly behaved for 20 years. Which star generates the most stories from sources? Jennifer Aniston? Tom Cruise? Another household-name Hollywood A-lister? Think again. "We get so many stories about Craig David, we have to be careful not to use them all in case he thinks we have an agenda against him," Camilla Wright, 49, founder of Popbitch, tells me. "A girl who went home with him told us that, the next morning, he gave her sweets for her journey home. He had bowls of M&M's on every surface of his house. You couldn't make it up."

Herein lies the beauty of Popbitch, the British gossip newsletter that has been landing in readers' inboxes every Thursday since 2000 and has just celebrated its 1,000th edition. Though it breaks scandalous stories, Popbitch's popularity lies in the brilliantly eccentric — "Everyday things you could imagine doing yourself, but when a celebrity does it, it's fascinating," says Wright. Kate Moss is one of her favourite subjects: "Ten years ago she was the epitome of what you wanted showbiz to be — didn't give a f***, beautiful. She just looked like, wherever she went, she had the best time. My favourite Kate story was that she was at a photoshoot in a derelict house and needed the toilet. An assistant said, 'It's over there, but watch out, there's no door.' Kate replied, 'Well, how the f*** do I get in, then?'"

The early Noughties were the heyday for gloriously trashy celebrity gossip. Thanks to Big Brother, Pop Idol and Wags, there was a huge appetite for, and ample material about, C-listers — so Popbitch provided just that. Having worked in celebrity journalism for a decade, the early days of my career involved showbiz reporting inspired by the Daily Mirror's 3am column and inhaling tales of stars' debauchery. A few years later I discovered Popbitch, and so began a weekly love affair. Whether it was its revelation that Girls Aloud's Nicola Roberts has a "fear of stickers", or its ruthless coverage of Kim Kardashian's 72-day marriage to Kris Humphries in 2011, I have been a loyal reader ever since.

Its low-key black-and-white layout (unchanged in 20 years) was chosen deliberately so office workers could read it subtly before scurrying off to discuss its contents at the water cooler. Stories range from celebrity sightings and diva behaviour to world exclusives. In 2002 it broke the story of David Beckham's affair with Rebecca Loos, and in 2000 revealed that Madonna was calling her son Rocco before he had been born. During one gig the pop star dedicated a song to "all you Popbitches out there".

Even if you've never read it, you've likely not escaped Popbitch's influence on pop culture. It helped popularise the terms "gak" for cocaine, "Croydon facelift" for hair scraped into a high ponytail and "tanorexic" for fake-tan addicts, among others, as well as pet names for some

regulars, such as Handsy Andy and ChazBaps (sorry, Prince Andrew and Billie Piper). The newsletter now has 300,000 subscribers, and stories are sent in from sources from all over the world: publicists, make-up artists, taxi drivers, journalists, you name it. “We never pay for stories, which I think encourages people to contribute, because it feels less like they’re selling out,” Wright says. She has developed a sixth sense for what’s true or not, she claims. “If I’m not sure, I’ll check it with other sources. Industry people are reliable, it’s only when anonymous tips come in I’m more wary.”

Brilliantly, Wright still seems to be the embodiment of a Noughties showbiz journalist. We speak over Zoom, her voice husky after years of late nights at the Groucho Club, and she grins while reeling off gossip; after our chat she’s off for a boozy lunch with some of those sources. She studied PPE at Oxford, but was always “obsessed” with pop music. She worked as a journalist after university and started Popbitch as a hobby with Neil Stevenson, her boyfriend at the time. “I always wanted to have a magazine that was like Smash Hits for adults, something that was clever but lowbrow as well,” she says. She and her mates at record labels or in PR would send each other industry gossip, which Wright would collate and send out in an email. The turning point for the business was the Beckham-affair story. “Their lawyers clamped down on us. When the legal letters started coming in, we knew we’d made it. Suddenly we were on the news, the front pages and 100,000 people came to the website to sign up. That’s when we started asking for donations, so we could afford the software and equipment to do this.”

Donations still make up a chunk of revenue. “We’ve had 25,000 people donate anything between £3 to £500,” Wright says. Pre-lockdown, it also made money from hosting quizzes for private parties and a weekly pub quiz in London. “We’ve done a few on Zoom, partnering with a gin brand, where the winners would get free gin.” The bulk of the money comes from advertising: among the list of stories will be bite-sized plugs for booze brands, fashion labels or electricity websites.

It’s a small team, working from an office in Soho. Wright remains founder and publisher, though she stepped down as editor a few years ago to concentrate on commercial deals, including a book to be published in 2021. Day-to-day editorial is managed by editor Chris Lochery, then there’s “someone to do all the live events, a techie, then freelancers,” Wright adds. Plus, lawyers.

Legal letters come with the territory and Wright is largely unfazed. “We’re successful in defending stories because, generally, they’re lawyers and publicists just trying to bully us,” she says. “The super-injunction era — 2010 to 2012 — was a difficult time to navigate because the sums of money were so high and you were going up against multimillionaires. David Walliams is very legally proactive, very complainy. And, recently, so are the young royals, William, Kate, Meghan and Harry. But we haven’t had any real problems for a long time.” Popbitch did lose out once, to the actor Max Beesley in 2008, after it alleged that he tried to encourage three women to have sex with him while at a television-industry party in Cannes. “He got some money off us,” Wright says.

Despite a global pandemic, it’s business as usual. “We’ve got no plans to stop doing this, it’s too much fun,” she says. “There has been a resurgence of gossip. Readers and sources who have grown up with us and are now in positions of power, bigger jobs — suddenly, there’s much more gossip and a media-savvy generation higher up. We’re getting stories we wouldn’t have got 10 years ago because we didn’t have the access.”

And as long as Craig David is still making music, bless him, the future is bright for both M&M’s and celebrity gossip. Phew. @scarlettroserrussell

Popbitch’s best showbiz factoids

In 2009, S Club 3 (Bradley, Jo and Paul) were invited to switch on the Christmas lights in Mansfield. The other booking for that night was “some camels”.

In 2013, Roman Abramovich had a full-time fruit manager on his payroll, whose job was to ensure that fruit aboard his yacht was washed and ready to eat at all times.

The man who inspired the Britney Spears track Toxic is Channel 4’s Supervet, Noel Fitzpatrick — he and Cathy Dennis, who cowrote the song, broke up in 2003.

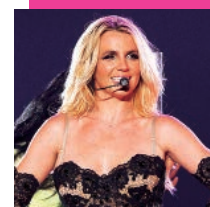
The music over the credits of Lorraine Pascale’s 2011 baking show was written by a pre-big time Calvin Harris.

The Compare the Market meerkat Aleksandr is voiced by Simon Greenall, otherwise known as Michael the Geordie from I’m Alan Partridge.

Richard Whiteley used to have the theme to Countdown as his mobile-phone ringtone.

Richard Gere’s middle name is Tiffany. Billie Piper’s middle name is Paul.

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Love Letters

In honour of St Valentine's day - the day of all things love, sex and romance - we present to you some of our favourite stories of celebrity seduction, superstar shagging and other such shenanigans. We just hope you haven't had lunch yet.



Opposite
Camilla Wright.
Right, from
top S Club 3,
Britney Spears,
Calvin Harris
and Billie Piper