

Capstone: Celebrity and The New Media: Fame and Fortune in the Blogosphere

Introduction

According to Andy Warhol, “In the future, everyone will be world-famous for fifteen minutes.” It seems that the future has arrived. Never before has there been such an intense societal obsession with celebrities, nor has there been so many to speak of. Though there may be other factors contributing to this phenomenon, the most important the advent of the new media. Human interaction and the dissemination of information are less restricted than at any previous point in our society’s history. The constant presence of new media and its ability to bring people into close interaction with so many is greatly altering the concept of celebrity as well as how people perceive those that have attained celebrity status. It is a connection that must be examined in order to shed light on the relationship of society and the media, as well as the implications for society. In order to fully examine these implications, it is vital to explore the definition of celebrity and its development over time, as well as the changes being brought about by the new media as exemplified in the celebrity blog.

What Is Celebrity?

Though the term “celebrity” has become ubiquitous in all forms of the American media, a clear definition as well as an exploration of the word is necessary in order to dissect the issues surrounding it. A simple articulation of the celebrity concept is one from Borstin, who defined a celebrity as a person who is known for being known.¹ In order for people to become known, however, there must be a culture where mass media has proliferated. The mass media provides the platform for “mediated visual images to

¹ Boorstin, D.J. The Image: A guide to pseudo-events in America. Harper & Row, New York, 1961.

thrust people into the public spotlight”² which gives people the opportunity to become celebrities. It is clear that the concept of celebrity cannot exist without the presence of mass media as an integral part of society.

Aside from the fact that the platform must exist; there are other factors that are necessary for the celebrity concept. Sayre offers a great deal of information on these factors, but breaks down the concept of celebrity as differing from the concept of the “star” in certain ways that no longer ring true for the current state of society and the entertainment industry. This is because changes in both the industry and the media have transformed most would-be stars into, more accurately, celebrities.

Sayre’s basic conditions for stardom are also the basic conditions for attaining celebrity, namely “a thriving economy in a large-scale society that enables social mobility.” Sayre goes on to say that “As an elite and privileged group, stars cannot know everyone, but everyone can know them; and anyone may become a star.”³ This statement clearly applies to celebrity as well, who require the same conditions to become famous. Upon attaining celebrity status, they are recognized by many people due to the prevalence of their mediated images.

The way in which star is defined comes from the history of the entertainment

² William J. Brown and Benson P. Fraser. “Celebrity Identification in Entertainment-Education”. Entertainment-Education and Social Change: History, Research, and Practice. Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers, 2004: 98.

³ Shay Sayre. Entertainment Marketing & Communication: Selling Branded Performance, People, and Places. Pearson Prentice Hall, 2008: 398.

industry itself. Producing and managing the commodity of the star is what laid the framework for what the concept of celebrity would become. “Stars are defined as a group of people whose institutional power is very limited or non-existent but whose doings and way of life arouse a considerable degree of interest.”⁴ Images of stars come from their body of work, the publicity and promotion that accompanies that work and the critical review or commentary the star receives. “Stars are mediated identities- audiences get images rather than a real person.”⁵ It is the image of the star that is marketed and used within the entertainment industry to draw audiences, create fan bases and sell products or vehicles with which the star is associated. Managing a star’s image is quite difficult because the images “are inherently contradictory: The images make stars appear to be ordinary people, but stars also are shown to be exceptional and apart from society.”⁶ Both the images of stars and those of celebrities consist of identities mediated on a variety of levels because the way in which these people become known to the general public is not through direct person-to-person contact, but instead through a type of medium.

Part of the definition of a star is one who has limited power or control institutionally but is a highly interesting subject for public discourse, and that is a main point in how celebrities differ from stars. In fact, changes in the power structure in the entertainment industry have given stars more power and pushed them into what is more the realm of celebrity. The most blatant example of this comes from the film industry, where the role of stars has drastically changed.

On the outset, the studios that made, marketed and released the films controlled the stars. From the 1920s through the 1950s, Hollywood was dominated by eight studios

⁴ Ibid. 398

⁵ Ibid. 401

⁶ Ibid. 401

that ran a great deal of the business of exhibiting the films as well as producing them. These studios contracted stars, who were given no say in which roles they would be playing or how many films they would make.⁷ Though crucial to the marketing and overall sales of the film, the stars were kept under the thumb of the studios. This can now be contrasted with the current state of the movie industry, where studios no longer own the stars and the relationship is negotiated by agencies. “Stars” now have more of an economic and symbolic power in the industry, they choose which vehicles to participate in and use their unique individuality to broker the best possible deals.⁸ Though the studios still hold the money and wield a great deal of power, the roles have indeed shifted to create a more level playing field.

This shift is one that transforms the role of the star into that of a celebrity, as it brings about the struggles of celebrity production highlighted by Gamson. These are the struggles “between a variety of parties over what a celebrity should do and be over the capacity to make him or her do and be.”⁹ There is a certain amount of autonomy that the celebrity has that does not apply to the concept of the star, as well as a different relationship that the celebrity has with the roles he or she may perform concerning its work. Of this power struggle, Gamson cites that “the result is a push in different directions: both toward and away from a celebrity divorced from her particular vehicles and roles, known for her self alone; and both toward and away from interchangeability.”¹⁰ This has always been an issue with performers to some extent, but is especially an issue

⁷ Ibid. 400

⁸ Ibid. 400

⁹ Joshua Gamson. “The Negotiated Celebration.” Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America. University of California Press, 1994.

¹⁰ Ibid. 81

when it comes to the star turned celebrity, or rather the star-celebrity.

Performers in this environment have the challenge of defining or branding themselves as an individual personality while at the same time not distancing themselves too far away from the roles that they are playing, for which they are making their living. Being able to fit an archetype is vital to the performer's livelihood, yet if they become too interchangeable and do not stand out, they lose the uniqueness factor that allows them to dictate more about their careers.

Actors and actresses with star power are not the only celebrities in this day and age. In fact, they are joined by a variety of other people in the public eye. "Celebrities are generated from the arenas of sports, politics, the arts, religion, business, science, the professions, academia, and, of course, entertainment."¹¹ Indeed, it seems possible that anyone has the potential to become a celebrity for any number of reasons, but how does one cross the threshold from public figure to true celebrity? According to Sayre, "public figures become celebrities at the point at which media interest in their activities is transferred from reporting on their public role to investigating their private lives." He elaborates, stating that celebrity can be described as "a commodity traded by the promotions, publicity, and media industries that produces interest beyond a person's public role."¹²

In this manner, the celebrity is one whose public and private lives are both seemingly on display, working together to weave the narrative of how their mediated identities are understood by the general public. One who gains celebrity status therefore has more autonomy in their career, or so it would seem, because public interest in that

¹¹ Sayre, 404

¹² Ibid.

person goes beyond whatever public roles that he or she might play. Celebrities can be divided into three groups according to how it is that they reach celebrity status. The star-celebrity falls into the category of one who achieves celebrity through competition or showing true talent in their field. This category could also include a Super Bowl MVP like Eli Manning or visionary leader like Martin Luther King, Jr. Others attain celebrity status because they are born a famous family or position, like Prince Harry or JFK, Jr. The third categories of celebrities are those who are attributed the status of celebrity by the media.¹³ People in this category are often those who participate in reality television shows or more like the ultimate attributed celebrity, Paris Hilton.

One who is a celebrity has “a name that, once made by news, now makes news by itself.”¹⁴ The power of the person that actually wields that name therefore increases, which simultaneously increases the risk of investing in a celebrity. Sometimes a celebrity can use this power to their advantage, having more say in what they do or where they go professionally. However, there is also the potential for a celebrity to ruin their reputation or sabotage a project that he or she might be working on with some kind of personal statement or negative behavior.

The power of celebrity stems from the “attention-getting, interest-catching, profit generating value”¹⁵ that is ascribed to their names. This ability to generate responses from the general public that have implications for a variety of industries’ profits is what drives the pursuit and preservation of celebrity identities. Though it is not immediately recognizable to the average consumer of mass media, there is a true business of celebrity and it is a highly profitable industry at that. Though public figures have long been utilized

¹³ Brown and Fraser, 99

¹⁴ Sayre, 404

¹⁵ Ibid.

in a variety of profit-generating ways, the current celebrity industry blurs the line between the public and the private so that many can benefit. It is not only the role someone might play in front of a movie camera or on a concert stage that has major implications for the entertainment business, but the role he or she plays in the afternoon at a grocery store or in the wee hours of the morning at a night club.

Celebrity can therefore be defined as a public figure that has the potential to earn money and influence audiences utilizing both their public role and private persona. Celebrities can come from a variety of arenas, earning their status in several different ways. In order for celebrities to exist, they must be a part of a society greatly influenced by mass media where social mobility is possible. The existence of this media is crucial to the proliferation of the celebrity concept. As media grows, changes and expands, the definition and creation of celebrities adapts with it. The transition of people from stars to celebrities over the course of time is a result of a change in the scope and size of the media. The celebrity concept is therefore contingent on the media through which the general public develops its perceptions and relationships with the persons who are identified as celebrities.

Celebrity-Audience Relationships

When discussing celebrities, it is important to remember that their value is not only dependent on the media, but the consumers of those various types of media as well. Consumers of the many types of media are the targets of publicity and promotions efforts regarding celebrities. Beyond that, without some members of the public providing recognition and consuming the products or vehicles that the celebrities are a part of, the celebrity is meaningless. It is of great importance that the relationship between celebrities

and their constituencies are examined to determine exactly how these connections are formed.

Sayre identifies a model presented by Andrew Tudor that classifies star-celebrity/audience relationships into four categories: emotional affinity, self-identification, imitation and projection.¹⁶ Emotional affinity is a loose attachment of the audience member to the star, where the audience member is motivated to care for the on-screen figures. Self-identification occurs when the audience member puts himself or herself in the person or situation of the star. Imitation is a phenomenon that occurs mostly in younger viewers or audience members, where the star becomes a role model. More common in an adult viewer or audience member is projection, wherein the person bonds psychologically with a star, generating a parasocial relationship or interaction.¹⁷

Emotionally affinity and self-identification can function as part of the parasocial interaction that occurs between a celebrity and the consumer or audience member. These parasocial interactions, or “pseudo-relationships with both real people and fictitious characters to which they are repeatedly exposed through the media”¹⁸ are important in explaining the power of celebrity. Consumers or viewers develop feelings and attitudes towards the celebrities that are encountered in their various mediated forms. Though this sort of pseudo-relationship can occur when the image is a fictional television character, when one forms a pseudo-relationship with a celebrity, it is often about their public and private lives.

Once someone has parasocial interactions with a celebrity, they are able to have their values and behaviors altered by the developed pseudo-relationship. This is part of

¹⁶ Sayre, 411

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Brown and Fraser, 103

how celebrity endorsements or product placements work, but parasocial interaction also factors into things like box office receipts or Nielsen television ratings. People first interact by perhaps going to see films that feature an actor or actress that they like, but soon after they are picking up magazines with stories about that person's latest romantic issues, buying the brand of jeans that person was photographed wearing and donating to the charity that person supports. With celebrities being marketed for both their public and private personas, it makes sense that people will form these kinds of relationships.

Celebrity-focused Media

The public's interaction with celebrities has given way to a wave of celebrity-focused media. This refers not only to outlets specifically concerned with entertainment and celebrity coverage, but the increasing demand for traditional news media outlets to cover celebrity stories as well as the other areas of news. In early 2008, many news outlets picked up on an internal memo sent by Frank Baker, assistant bureau chief of the Associated Press Los Angeles office, that informed his staff that everything pertaining to pop superstar and very public train wreck Britney Spears was important for them to be aware of.¹⁹ Though the A.P. was not publishing pieces about every bit of gossip concerning Britney, they certainly would pursue major stories, as not to be scooped by the less-traditional media. The A.P. also expanded entertainment coverage in general, hiring more staff for entertainment news in response to the demand from media outlets for more celebrity video, photos, and stories.²⁰

Many traditional news sources have had to expand their coverage of entertainment news, and consequently, celebrities, in order to compete with those outlets

¹⁹ Brian Stetler. "A.P. Says It Wants to Know Everything About Britney Spears." The New York Times 14 January 2008.

²⁰ Ibid.

that are mainly concerned with this sort of material. Major sources for entertainment news are the weekly celebrity magazines which include titles like People, Us Weekly, OK!, and In Touch. The magazines, despite competition from each other as well as other outlets, saw major growth in the few years leading up to 2005²¹. It seems this is due to an increasing demand for these types of magazines, with glossy photographs and dedication to discussing the latest celebrity stories and rumors. The magazines continue to do well, with several still making gains despite price increases in 2007, including Us Weekly and OK! Magazine.²² Sales of these magazines are greatly influenced by the attention-grabbing power of the cover, as newsstand sales account for more of the revenue than other types of magazines.

The importance of grabbing the readers' attention causes magazines to have the most sought-after celebrities gracing those covers, and this is just one of the many industries that thrive on the celebrity concept. Without the celebrities to report on and have photos of, these magazines would have no material. This also affects the journalistic merits of these publications, because as pointed out by Gamson, "the more dependent a magazine or program is on celebrity images for sales, of course, the more powerless they are to make editorial evaluation and control content."²³ These types of magazines need to have relationships that are negotiated to mostly portray an image that the celebrity and his or her subsequent handlers are pleased with, at least concerning major stories. To get a traditional cover story, these magazines have to work within the context of what will be

²¹ Project for Excellence in Journalism. "The State of the News Media 2006: An Annual Report on American Journalism." 3 May 2008.

²² Perez-Pena, Richard. "US Weekly's Circulation Rises 10% in Soft Year." The New York Times 12 February 2008.

²³ Gamson, 89.

allowed. Conversely, the magazines that follow a more tabloid model rely on paparazzi pictures and rumors that they often cannot actually confirm.

In terms of the magazines that are seen as more legitimate, they thrive on positive relationships with celebrities, and in some cases, are willing to pay very high prices for exclusive photos. OK! Magazine, one of the most recent to enter and thrive in this segment, is known for paying celebrities a great deal to get exclusive stories or pictures, and is not ashamed of it. Ensuring the exclusivity of their material, regardless of the price, boosts sales and brand recognition.²⁴

Celebrity-focused media goes beyond the newsstand and onto the television. The E! Network is an entire channel focused on celebrity stories, showing documentaries and reality shows while scrolling the latest news across the bottom of the screen. There are also the two daily broadcast shows dedicated to entertainment news, Access Hollywood and Entertainment Tonight. These shows draw millions of viewers with a daily appetite for footage and updates concerning famous personalities.²⁵

Coverage of celebrities takes on an entirely new dimension when it comes to the Internet. Most traditional outlets have companion websites that help feed the constant appetite that people have concerning celebrity news and gossip. In addition, there are many sites unique to the web that provide platforms for more celebrity coverage. Fully exploring the interaction of the new media and celebrity, however, first requires an exploration of the new media itself. The many characteristics that cause web-based outlets to differ from more traditional media, as well as the general media trends created

²⁴ Stetler, Brian. "For Celebrity Magazine, Pregnancy Is a Bonus." The New York Times. 2 January 2008: C1.

²⁵ Brian Stetler. "In Race For Gossip, TV Shows Turn To Blogs." The New York Times 5 January 2008: C1.

by the presence of the new media have great implications upon the current situation of celebrities in society.

Examining the New Media

It is entirely clear that the Internet has revolutionized the way our society does everything, from conducting research to ordering pizza. Some of the most drastic changes brought about by the proliferation of the Internet are those that have occurred in the media world. The ways in which information is disseminated have changed entirely, especially with the advent of what is known as Web 2.0 or the New Media. This new media, also known as social media, encompasses social networking sites, video-sharing sites, blogs, wikis, and other similar areas on the web. In fact, this social media “refers to an intersection of software, marketing, media, information and entertainment.”²⁶ This convergence of so many influences has resulted in the evolution of the Internet as a platform, with application and services specifically tailored to unique aspects of the Internet.²⁷

There are four major trends in the entertainment industry that have been pushed not only by the new media of the internet but also by other technological advances including digitized cable, MP3s and DVDs. The first change is one from mass entertainment to personal entertainment.²⁸ No longer is entertainment seen as a one-size-fits-all situation. The segmentation of audiences has broken down even further, with interactive content allowing for people to have individualized experiences with the entertainment that they are consuming. This includes previews and clips online, or

²⁶ Angelo Fernando. “Social Media Change the Rules.” Communication World Jan/Feb 2007: 9-10.

²⁷ O’Reilly, Tim.

²⁸ Sayre, 22.

playing of online games. Another change is a shift toward user-generated content.²⁹

Through the tools presented by new social media, people have the opportunity to share their thoughts and opinions with other users. People produce videos, author blogs and write fan-fiction for entertainment as well as expressive purposes.

The third major change consists of entertainment now being persistent instead of episodic.³⁰ No longer does everything have a clear beginning, middle and end. With the Internet, cell phones and iPods; we are never out of touch with entertainment sources. There is no allotted time for entertainment, instead there is potential to be reached by the entertainment industry constantly throughout our daily lives. Following this, the fourth change is that technology has allowed for entertainment to become an embedded experience.³¹ There is no longer necessarily a separation between a virtual experience and the physical world. Digital forms of entertainment become a part of the objects we use in our everyday lives.

Many of the components of the social or new media that comprise Web 2.0 have been around since the very beginning of the Internet. However, they are given a different meaning in the current climate due to people as individuals or as part of organizations embracing and utilizing these mediums.³² The meaning ascribed to these applications has changed with the popularity and widespread usage of them. For the individual, this means that there is a new way to become a public figure, to interact with many people around the world in a variety of ways that were previously impossible. Though “the concept of branding your thoughts”³³ is not a new concept, “an individual blogger can be less

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Tim O’Reilly. “What is Web 2.0”. O’Reilly Network: 30 September 2005.

³³ Beth Snyder Bulik. “Web Celebs Leverage Their Online Identities.” Advertising Age

successful at what they do and be more popular at it.”³⁴

However, the true marker of the influence and power of Web 2.0 is how it is now being used in the business world. Companies have embraced the technology in order to ensure that the marketing techniques that are being employed are cutting edge. This technology allows corporations to tap into communities that already exist online, in addition to creating their own communities based around a product or brand. According to those at LiveWorld, a company that specializes in full customer community solutions, “All communities form a culture, even if left to themselves. The best of them develop cultures proactively guided to engage [their] members.”³⁵ Companies want to use the ways in which members of interactive communities are influenced by the platform itself, its messages and relationships with each other to sell products and/or develop their brand. These same corporations also desire to observe the interactions that are occurring in other relevant online communities in order to discern more about the consumers they are trying to reach.

In examining the value of online communities, it is vital to know what it is that motivates audiences on the Internet. Sayre identifies five factors from a study of usage motivations for Internet audiences. These factors are: search factor, cognitive factor, uniqueness factor, sociability factor and entertainment factor.³⁶ Search factor constitutes an enjoyment from locating the latest updates of information, as well as shopping or traveling resources. The cognitive factor of motivation stems from Web-based learning or information seeking, exemplified in the online, user-generated encyclopedia

26 June 2006: 6.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Fernando, “Social Media Change the Rules.”

³⁶ Sayre, 90.

Wikipedia.org. Users are also motivated by the uniqueness factor of a site, whether it has a “new and exciting” appeal and brings something seemingly very different to the user.

The social factor is the main motivation for many of the most popular sites, including blogging and social networking platforms that allow for so many forms of social interaction. Motivation to play games or watch videos online stems from the entertainment factor; as can be seen on the multitude of online poker sites or the now infamous YouTube.com. The most successful websites satisfy many of these motivations for their users. MySpace and Facebook are two examples that both allow for all of these needs to be met. These social networking sites both offer opportunities to search out new information, share information with others, and keep people up to date with the latest information. Combining this with the ability to maintain old social connections, create new ones and be entertained through various applications, these are two of the most popular websites globally. Another website format that has the possibility to satisfy all of these audience motivations is that of the blog. Blogs are especially important sites in regard to celebrity media, and it is vital to understand the specific qualities of blogs that make them such popular outlets.

What About Blog?

In the early days of in Internet, what we have come to know as the blog was slightly different. The term blog stems from the word weblog, and these early weblogs consisted of a record of the different websites a person visited.³⁷ In this way, the earliest pioneers of the web could share links to sites of interest with each other, before the advent of the major blog tools and the refining of search engines. Blogs have been

³⁷ Mallory Jensen. “A Brief History of Weblogs.” Columbia Journalism Review Sep/Oct 2003: 22

generated at an incredible rate over the years. In 1999, there were merely dozens of blogs, and not even ten years later there are millions out there.³⁸ The changes are a result of both the increase in Internet usage as a whole, as well as the creation of blogging tools that have made it easy for anyone to publish their own blog.

The most popular major tool for blog creation is the aptly titled Blogger.com, launched in 1999 by Evan Williams, Paul Bausch, and Meg Hourihan.³⁹ Blogger's popularity stemmed from the ease with which one could create a blog as well as the ability to store it on one's own server and have a personalized URL address. Blogger was bought by Google in 2003 and is the biggest site of this type, but there are many similar blog publishing systems, including: LiveJournal, Typepad, Wordpress and Diaryland.⁴⁰ These tools all allow for people to publish their own blogs on any topic that they choose, be it a diary of what they eat for breakfast or their latest movie recommendations. Blogs allow for interaction in the form of comments, which can function as a forum of discussion in response to a blogger's entries.

Though blogs share many characteristics with the various forms of new media, there are certain aspects of blogs that should be discussed. According to Barlow, "Bloggers don't view themselves as entering a virtual world when they write, but simply as utilizers of a new set of tools for dealing with situation in the 'real' world."⁴¹ Bloggers, according to his analysis, are not conducting themselves in an alternate online universe, but instead are offering reflections, opinions and the general dissemination of information that matters to people in the offline world.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Aaron Barlow. Blogging America: The New Public Sphere. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2008: xi.

He goes on to say that though blogs are changing the relationships people have with technology, making it “more personal and active than ever before,” the cultural phenomenon of blogs also reflects “the changes and needs in society (beyond) simple realization of technological possibility.”⁴² Blogs, it appears, do not exist merely because their creation is possible. Their existence allows for people to relate differently to technology, and more importantly, reflects a need in society for a response to the mass media that does not always recognize individual voices. Development of blogs has changed how information is presented, while providing a platform for an unlimited number of reactions to be published.

Barlow also raises the issue of online communities in relation to blogs. He contends that a blog may expand the number of audience members reached, but does not often bridge gaps to expand to different types of audiences. The opinion is that communities are facilitated by blogs, but not created by them.⁴³ As blogs most often are focused on certain topics with a certain point of view, it is evident that bloggers are not often converting people who previously were not at all interested to become part of their audience. This idea of creating a community may exist in something like Second Life, the virtual game where shared experiences within the context of this alternate world create connections between people. Blogs, on the other hand, are a coming together of a certain community that already exists; reflecting a demographic that can come together to communicate through the medium of the blog about interests that are already common.

As a form of media, a blog clearly comes from a personal voice as opposed to that of the mass media. This personalization of blogs fosters their audiences to interact in a

⁴² Ibid 1.

⁴³ Ibid. 6.

way that reflects a degree of relationship. Businesses have capitalized on this idea, as most companies use blogs in order to connect with their consumers in a variety of ways.⁴⁴ Businesses use blogs to create a face for their company, to help with customer service problems and to humanize their brands.

Another important component of blogs is the way in which they function as aggregators or filters of content on the web.⁴⁵ A blogger has the ability to pick out significant items that are available on the Internet that pertain to that person's (and their readers') specified interests. An exceptionally great and most likely well-read blog will function as place readers to access the most relevant information regarding the topic that they wish to know about. Functioning as an aggregator will allow for the blogger to develop of positive relationship with his or her readers, who will then develop trust in the blogger's ability to inform. The gathering and presentation of information reflects the processes that the reader goes through pertaining to online behavior, and therefore creates more of a link from the blogger to the reader.

The overall format of blogs, as well as their characteristics, make them an ideal candidate for communicating celebrity and entertainment news. Some of the major sites devoted to celebrity include Gawker, DeFamer, TMZ, and PerezHilton. In order to demonstrate how the new media, specifically blogs, relate to the celebrity concept in society, it is most relevant to delve into a specific blog as an example. The specific blog examined will be PerezHilton.com, as it has achieved a volume of success in a short amount of time and maintains a simple blog format that focuses on celebrities. It is also a great example of new media because though it started as and has maintained the feeling

⁴⁴ Ibid. 31

⁴⁵ Ibid. 32.

of a personal blog, it has been extremely successful commercially and has become a major source of celebrity news.

The Queen of Mean: Perez

PerezHilton.com is a great example of the celebrity blog phenomenon, mostly because the author of the blog has developed a personality that has made him a celebrity in his own right. Mario Lavandeira is the man now known as Perez Hilton, author of a blog that draws 2.8 million unique visitors every month, according to ComScore Media Matrix.⁴⁶ Perez, as he is mostly known, formerly worked as a publicist and tabloid journalist before starting his celebrity blog to amuse friends. The first incarnation of the blog was called pagesixsixsix.com, and after being threatened with a lawsuit from the New York Post, he changed it to PerezHilton.com.⁴⁷ It was after the threat of the lawsuit that Lavandeira's blog achieved a great deal of attention, and changing the name to Perez Hilton effectively developed his brand. Perez began his blogging career as a nobody named Mario who was making snarky comments from his laptop, a true example of the mantra that "anyone can be a star."

PerezHilton.com "commands as much as \$ 9,000 a week for a single advertisement and \$ 45, 000 for the most expensive ad package."⁴⁸ His audience consists of mostly females with an average age of 26, whose demographics lure a variety of interested advertisers from fashion, entertainment, and even spirits.⁴⁹ Perez began writing the blog in a coffee shop in Los Angeles because he did not even have internet access in

⁴⁶Mireya Navarro. "Love Him or (He Prefers) Hate Him." The New York Times 29 July 2007: ST1

⁴⁷ Sarah Hampson. "He's 'All About Keeping It Real.'" The Globe and Mail 31 March 2007: R3.

⁴⁸ Navarro. "Love Him or (He Prefers) Hate Him."

⁴⁹ Ibid.

his home, and now enjoys major success that includes a show on VH1 called *What Perez Sez* and potential deal for a division of Warner Brothers Records.⁵⁰ This stems from his ability to drive traffic to artists' websites and subsequently drive music sales with the influence he holds over his large audience.

According to an analysis, PerezHilton has around 40 posts a day, and may have somewhere around 7,000 comments posted to the site over the course of the different daily posts. Though postings do include celebrities across the entire spectrum, including Perez himself, most postings involve either actors/actresses or musicians. Politics and current events are not the most popular of topics, but are still discussed on the site. General celebrity gossip as well as industry information consist of the majority of the posts on Perez.⁵¹ PerezHilton.com constitutes a solid example of the new media's interaction with the celebrity concept.

The Meeting of New Media and Celebrity

The new media has allowed for changes in the way celebrity images are created and maintained. Many of the changes working together have fostered a new level of celebrity obsession and have effected all forms of media, many aspects of the entertainment industry, the lives of celebrities and the values of our very society.

In order for the celebrity concept to work, there must a mass media that influences society and allows for these people to be known through their mediated images. With the development of the new media, there are now so many more platforms for these mediated images to be presented. Traditional entertainment or news sources are relegated to certain

⁵⁰ Jeff Leeds. "Perez Hilton Could Play New Role: A&R Man." The New York Times 26 February 2008: E1.

⁵¹ Tamara Brown. Analysis of Perez Hilton, April 9-11 2008.

times and places. One can only watch Access Hollywood on a television, on a specific channel, at its allotted time slot. New media platforms are not held back by these time or space constraints. Perez Hilton's constantly updated blog is a perfect example of this. Perez discusses the other news outlets and asks why people would bother with them "when you can read about it instantly online on my site? People have a thirst for this kind of information. I feed it for free."⁵² Not only do these types of platforms simply expand the number of places one can access information, but they defy the previous conventions held by traditional media. The content on a blog about celebrities is persistent, demonstrated by the fact that people repeatedly visit websites throughout the day as they are consistently updated.

It is the personal voice with which a blog is written that sets it apart from traditional media, and the relationships readers develop with bloggers are very different from those that they develop with more traditional journalists. Readers go to PerezHilton.com to get celebrity information specifically from Perez, which includes his personal opinions regarding that news. A blog like that of Perez Hilton also is not held to the same content constraints as more traditional sources. There are no specific quotas to fill or certain stories that must be printed for one bureaucratic reason or another, because the blogger operates on his or her own terms.

The main reason new media has promoted celebrity obsession is because all of the characteristics of these devices, particularly blogs, allow for increased parasocial interaction between the reader and celebrities. People seek out information about celebrities because of the pseudo-relationships that they have formed as consumers of

⁵² PR Week. "Journalist Q & A- Mario Lavandeira, [www. PerezHilton.com](http://www.PerezHilton.com)" 4 December 2006: 10.

their mediated images. Readers of a blog like PerezHilton can have persistent access to content pertaining to celebrities, increasing the frequency of their pseudo-interaction with the images and ideas of what that famous person is like.

The parasocial interaction does not occur simply with the celebrity images, but in the case of Perez and other bloggers, the blogger him or herself. Having a pseudo-relationship with this person allows the reader to further invest in the consumption of the material produced. Perez is not just a news source, he instead becomes like your gossip queen next door. His website is shamelessly self-promoting, emblazoned with his name and his image, as well as often cross promoting his other endeavors. Every visit to the site is another interaction for the reader with the concept Perez presents, and therefore the reader develops feelings, attitudes and ideas about Perez. Though they might not always agree with him, most readers have come to rely on him because they trust him as a source but also because they are entertained by his personal image that is reflected on the site.

Parasocial interaction is also occurring between readers through comments and polls on the site. Discussing celebrities with other people furthers the illusion of a relationship with those famous people. Though not all of the comments foster a back and forth discussion, people expressing their opinions as well as reading the opinions of others helps to connect this community to the celebrities themselves. In general, the new media format has encouraged interactions that are not directly between people in the traditional face-to-face sense. Anytime someone is communicating online, whether it be through a blog, social networking, or even via email, they are doing so through a medium. Therefore, what results is often some sort of mediated image of the people with whom we may or may not have relationships with in the offline world. As these types of

communication take on more meaning in our everyday social lives, there is clearly the possibility that people will see less and less of a difference between the parasocial interactions that they have through repeated exposure to celebrities and the mediated interactions that take place in their online social lives.

Perez himself has met some of the celebrities that he discusses on his site, but the majority of the people he shares information about he has limited, if any, person-to-person contact with. Yet, he forms opinions about them and shares these opinions with his millions of readers. His parasocial interactions with these celebrities are seen as legitimate, and readers get the feeling that they “know” Perez and that Perez “knows” these celebrities, even there is hardly any actual person-to-person contact occurring.

Another element of the new media that is changing the realm of celebrity is the alteration and occasional breakdown of the traditional relationship between celebrity publicists and the media. When it comes to press junkets, celebrity-based talk shows, and celebrity magazines, the image of the celebrity is very delicately handled by some form of publicity personnel. The result is a highly controlled mediated image of the celebrity, and this is certainly not always the case when it comes to the new media. This mediated image used to be all that most people saw of celebrities, one that was relegated to certain times and places as well as certain discussion topics or pictures approved by a celebrity and their team.

True to the blog form as previously discussed, celebrity blogs definitely strive to break the traditional mass media’s hold on mediated celebrity images. “ Before, publicists could do damage control, spin things, and use their tricks to make sure that the information that got out was information that they wanted to get out and it (did so in) the

way they wanted to,” says Perez, “ That’s not necessarily the case anymore.”⁵³ Combined with the efforts of the paparazzi, a blog like Perez Hilton is able to gain access to celebrities beyond what the publicists want to give the mass media outlets. Though the image is still a mediated one, it feels to the reader to be more realistic because of this lack of flack presented on Perez. Though he does work with some publicists, many do refuse to talk to him, and his sources are the ones that will get him the best scoop. Though his extreme bias is not indicative of a highly journalistic intention, he speaks of his dedication to finding out the truth to report to his readers. In a way, it presents the idea of getting a truthful piece of gossip from your opinionated friend as opposed to something from the approved corporate mouthpiece.

Conclusions

The concept of celebrity and a fascination with the rich and famous of our society is nothing new. Regardless of how people attain a level of celebrity, there is something about these people that keeps the media and its consumers coming back to learn more. The true differences in this day and age stem from the media and the new ways it can be consumed. Interactivity, persistence and personalization mark the new media brought about by Web 2.0 that allow for people to have closer parasocial interactions with celebrities than ever before. As day-to-day social interactions move to the mediated online world, the lines between the illusion of relationship with celebrities and actual relationships within our social lives become blurred. Celebrities become integrated into a consumers everyday life through this new media. Traditional media focuses more on celebrities to keep up with new media, and new media takes advantage of not having to follow the constraints of the traditional. All of the factors converge, highlighting that not

⁵³ PR Week. “ Journalist Q&A- Mario Lavandeira, [www. PerezHilton.com](http://www.PerezHilton.com).”

only can anyone be a celebrity, but that the perceived distance between “anyone” and “celebrity” is getting smaller with every post on a blog.

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