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# The shifting conception, construction and consumption of celebrity

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THE SHIFTING CONCEPTION, CONSTRUCTION AND  
CONSUMPTION OF CELEBRITY

by

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University of British Columbia,  
Vancouver, British Columbia, April 2005.

A thesis presented to Ryerson University and York University  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
in the Joint Program of  
Communication and Culture  
Ryerson University and York University

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## Abstract

The Shifting Conception, Construction and Consumption of Celebrity  
by Rebecca Malka Adam Rosenberg  
Communication and Culture  
Master of Arts  
Ryerson University  
2007

How have relatively new technologies changed the way in which the celebrity system and tabloid culture function in North American culture? With access to technologies, such as the Internet and digital film and photography, and websites, such as Youtube.com, the average citizen is now able to actively participate in the world of celebrity and even turn themselves into a celebrity figure. The world of celebrity (online, at least) has become do-it-yourself and has, in many ways, democratized the process of fame. Through the rise in online readership and recognition, even the creators of online tabloids have themselves become celebrities and active members in the star system they seek to critique. This thesis will demonstrate that the technologies used to demystify the celebrity through perpetual surveillance have, at the same time, succeeded in turning ordinary people into celebrities, thus placing them squarely within the star system they never intended to inhabit.

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I must thank all my friends and family for supporting me emotionally (and sometimes financially) over the last two years. I appreciated all your kind words of encouragement more than I can say. I am absolutely convinced that this work would not have been completed without the loving help of everyone who surrounded me during the pre-research, the research, the writing, the editing, and the whining.

## Dedications

I would like to dedicate this work to my loving parents, Sheryl Adam and Richard Rosenberg, who have encouraged and supported me throughout my life, from 3<sup>rd</sup> grade book reports to my most recent academic successes. Thank you is not nearly enough.

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## INTRODUCTION

When I find myself discussing the topic of my research with various willing (or polite) listeners, I am often confronted with animated responses: “Our society’s obsession with celebrity is completely out of hand” or “well, why do you think that people care so much about Paris Hilton’s life?”. I also wonder these very things; however, attempting to explain why Miss Hilton captures international media attention is a more difficult and complex issue to pinpoint than one might assume. I will approach the topic of online tabloid and celebrity from another perspective: avoiding the illusive question of why *certain* people are famous, I will focus on the role of the online media sphere to deconstruct traditional notions of mainstream celebrity. Furthermore, I will explore the ways in which various sites on the Internet are actively constructing new online celebrities and situating them outside of the realm of the traditional media sphere.

In *Self-Exposure: Human Interest Journalism and the Emergence of Celebrity in America 1890-1940* (2002), Charles L. Ponce de Leon suggests press coverage of actors and entertainers grew significantly when promoters and theater managers realized that they could draw larger crowds (and larger profits) if public interest was produced through publicizing the cast members. Thus, promoters developed relationships with newspaper editors and reporters in order to secure large turnouts to their shows. Between 1910 and 1920 publications composed completely of celebrity profiles, photographs and features emerged. With the development of movie fan

magazines, by the early 1930s, the intertwined world of celebrity obsession and tabloid culture continued to grow (214). Ponce de Leon suggests that while celebrities used the media for their personal gain, journalists played a significant role in creating public opinion regarding the popular culture industries through their celebrity-focused profiles and features, stating:

More than any other medium, newspapers and magazines played a pivotal role in the growing appeal of popular culture...not only directing public attention toward the products of the expanding popular culture industries, but also lifting its stars to unprecedented heights of celebrity. (239)

Currently, nightly television programs, weekly magazines and daily newspaper columns continue to detail every move of the most popular celebrities. The relationship between the media and the construction of celebrity is becoming further complicated by the introduction of online tabloids and portable technologies, which allow celebrities to be watched and reported on at all times. My research seeks to explore how these relatively new media technologies, such as digital photography and the Internet, have re-aligned the star system and changed the ways in which tabloid culture functions.

Celebrity obsession and tabloid culture have generally been looked down upon by cultural and critical theorists (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1972; Boorstin, 1962; Sparks, 2000). It is often suggested that the celebrity system only reinforces false promises of a capitalist system and that tabloid news sources contribute nothing to the life of the average citizen. And yet, with access to technologies, such as the Internet and digital film and photography, and websites, such as Youtube.com, the average citizen is now



able to actively participate in the world of celebrity and even turn themselves into a celebrity figure. The world of celebrity (online, at least) has become do-it-yourself and has, in many ways, democratized the process of fame. Through the rise in online readership and recognition, even the creators of online tabloids have themselves become celebrities and active members in the star system they seek to critique. For example, Perez Hilton, a tabloid blogger, has managed to become friends with many celebrities, including his namesake Paris Hilton and is often featured in various magazines and television shows. Thus, it is the same technology that turns the average person into a celebrity, which, paradoxically, also seeks to humanize the mega star by placing them under constant surveillance in an effort to expose them as “real people.”

At the core of my research is this question: how have relatively new technologies, such as digital photography and the Internet, changed the way in which the celebrity system and tabloid culture function in North American culture? Through an examination of online tabloid culture, I will demonstrate that the technologies used to demystify the celebrity through perpetual surveillance have, at the same time, succeeded in turning ordinary people into celebrities, thus placing them squarely within the star system they never intended to inhabit.

## **Methodology**

My approach towards an analysis of online celebrity-focused tabloids will require several methodological approaches as emergent themes such as online communications, celebrity, technology and tabloid cannot easily be understood from

only one perspective. According to Norman K. Denzin, in the introduction to *Online Social Research: Methods, Issues and Ethics* (2004), “online qualitative research is an *interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and sometimes counterdisciplinary...it is multi-paradigmatic in its focus.*” (4) With Denzin’s words in mind, I will now explore the possible application of three methodologies in an attempt to better understand the digital world of celebrity tabloid: direct historical approach, discourse analysis and ethnography.

My research will first be grounded and structured within an historical framework, which serves to place online tabloids as part of a continuum of gossip/celebrity focused media, such as newsprint, magazine and television and the phenomenon of fame squarely within a long historical trajectory. This direct historical approach will demonstrate not only the similarities between earlier representations of celebrity, as well as how it has been theorized, but will also situate the ways in which “celebrity” as a cultural concept has evolved due to technological and social changes. This historical grounding is crucial in terms of allowing for comparison and, as a methodological approach, sets the groundwork for my second methodological approach: discourse analysis.

Discourse analysis, as a methodological approach, can take many forms and is used by many disciplines to explore a variety of topics from a critical standpoint. Inspired by Foucault, Kress (1985) offers the following definition of discourse analysis: “a discourse provides a set of possible statements about a given area, and organizes and gives structure to the manner in which a particular topic, object,

process is to be talked about.” (6-7) My research will explore online discourses surrounding celebrity, specifically found within celebrity-focused blogs and other websites that contribute to the discourse on celebrities. Understanding how celebrity is being discussed and described online alongside with how celebrity is being talked about in print and television media will also help illuminate some of the recent developments in terms of tabloid coverage. For my research purposes, I plan to consider several celebrity events in terms of their coverage in print, television and online tabloid. Through the exploration of the various discourses, I will demonstrate that online tabloids and technologies are actively and effectively producing a new understanding of celebrity culture not by merely describing celebrity, but by the very act of re-defining what a celebrity is and can be.

As part of an interpretive social science framework, I intend to utilize field research (in this case, the “field” is online), in an effort to make sense of the ways in which celebrity is being constructed online “through the direct detailed observation of people in natural settings in order to arrive at understanding and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social worlds.” (Newman 2003: 7) Within this interpretive paradigm, my observations, claims and conclusions will describe and interpret how various online bloggers (and the technologies they make use of) are actively negotiating celebrity via online celebrity-focused tabloids and self-representation.

Field research brings with it a distinct set of methodologies (observation, interaction, participation) and allows for “a focus on the everyday, face-to-face social

processes of negotiation, discussion and bargaining to construct social meaning” (Newman 2003: 366), thus replacing the positivist emphasis on “observable facts”. Ethnography, a methodology belonging to field research, requires an exploration of the explicit and tacit knowledge that exists in reference to any cultural experience. As part of ethnography, the process of *thick description*, that is, a rich, detailed description of a particular social process (as opposed to summary, standardization, and generalization) provides the researcher with a method through which a sense of what occurred can be recorded. Field research and ethnography require that one gains access to a particular social site and become a member of said site. The notion of the “field” or social site in terms of the Internet has been established as valid through the works of various theorists, and while it may differ from traditional fields, it is “both enabled and constrained by the technological possibilities, the ideological markers established by the participants, and the negotiation of self operating within, through, and outside these contexts.” (Markham 2004: 145) As someone who is already involved in reading online tabloids for personal, rather than academic, purposes, I feel I have already gained insider knowledge regarding the sphere of celebrity gossip online, which will be expanded upon and utilized throughout my research.

In summary, my exploration into online social research will be interpretive and will fall under the broader umbrella of “cultural studies” which tends to make use of a variety of methodological approaches. My methodological approaches will be appear as follows: at the outset of my research, I will be grounding my research within a broader history of celebrity and the ways it has traditionally been covered in

the media, allowing for new notions of celebrity to be compared to earlier conceptions. I will then utilize field research, in general, and ethnography and thick description specifically, as my methodological approach for gathering data and immersing myself within the world of online celebrity coverage. Finally, I will utilize discourse analysis as my analytic tool for unpacking various assumptions regarding celebrity and understanding the ways in which print may produce celebrity in comparison to the ways in which digital technology may produce celebrity. Critical discourse analysis, specifically, provides a “transdisciplinary” (Fairclough 2004) methodology for exploring discourses surrounding social change. While this type of analytic approach is more often concerned with more serious elements of social change (i.e. serious journalism), rather than the “pithy” world of celebrity gossip, I intend to demonstrate that online celebrity and the ways in which it is discussed and covered is a potentially important site of meaning making and negotiation which has real-world implications.

In Chapter 1 (Literature Review) I will explore some of the major approaches taken towards the study of celebrity, tabloid and online culture. A brief history of the growth and development of the weblog will also appear. The sphere of celeblogs will be discussed in Chapter 2 (Online Tabloids) and will detail the ways in which celebrity-focused weblogs are restructuring the discourses surrounding modern celebrity. Chapter 3 (Online Celebrity) examines the changing nature of celebrity developed within the online sphere and considers the benefits and limitations to this kind of achieved fame. In my concluding section, I will bring these themes together

and consider the possibilities of fame in the future, as various media spheres converge.

## CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of celebrity is a widely researched subject and covers many disciplines within the social sciences and humanities. Tabloid journalism has played a significant role in the development of the modern celebrity and its historical growth must be considered here. The shift from print to online tabloids and the emergence of “cyberspace” as a new field of production must also be taken into consideration when considering the ways in which celebrity is established in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As such, my literature review will be divided into three subject-based modules: celebrity, tabloid, and online communications.

### **i) Celebrity in Society**

Leo Braudy’s text *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* (1986) provides a detailed historical positioning of the concept of fame and demonstrates that the concept of fame was shifted as its historical contexts has changed. With case studies focusing on fame in ancient Rome to Marilyn Monroe and James Dean, Braudy suggests that technology has performed a major role in re-inventing the ways in which fame is configured. In pre-modern human history, slower to almost non-existent communication technologies made it close to impossible for celebrity to emerge beyond its local context, and fame occurred for individuals in retrospect, rather than “real time”; however, today’s communication technologies allow for almost instantaneous fame, ultimately reconfiguring the earlier concepts of fame and what it takes to become a famous individual. Most importantly, Braudy’s work

provides a rich background against which current configurations of celebrity can be seen as part of a larger continuum, rather than a new(ish) phenomenon.

While Braudy lays out a historical context for the study of celebrity, a modern concept of celebrity did not evolve until the mid-nineteenth century, when the notion of the mass audience emerged and with it, ideas of individual value and worth. P. David Marshall states it is the celebrity that “embodies the ideal type of hero that emerges from the mass audience,” (1997:8) suggesting that the concept of celebrity and fame relies on a notion of a mass audience to participate in the manufacturing of a famous individual. The linking of a mass audience as consumers and the celebrity as commodity emerged in the early twentieth century, with the growth of movie fan magazines. By the late 1930s and early 1940s, both cultural conservatives and Marxist critics began considering celebrity status in terms of its relationship to consumer culture. Horkheimer and Adorno developed staunch critiques of what they labeled the “culture industries” that produced celebrities. Their thesis, that the individual is reassured through the actions of the celebrity/star is explored in their now-classic essay, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” (1972) Horkheimer and Adorno both emphasized the notion that the masses’ consciousness was easily malleable, the system of celebrity an explicit example of this concept. They suggest that the star is meant to epitomize the potential of everyone in American society, when, in reality, the star is part of a system of false promise within the system of capital, which offers the reward of stardom to a random few in order to perpetuate the myth of the potential universal success.



Herbert Marcuse, writing twenty years after Horkheimer and Adorno, points to the sustaining power of Marxist critique, as well as the manipulation theses that situates the celebrity as a locus of false value, serving to placate the individual into an acceptance of the modern condition. Marcuse proposes that the modern condition of an advanced industrial society, which actively creates false needs results in a “one-dimensional” universe, devoid of critical thought and oppositional behaviour. It is within this context that Marcuse sees the role of celebrity and entertainment as carriers of prescribed attitudes and habits which bind “the consumers more or less pleasantly to the producers and, through the later, to the whole,” (1992: 13) thus pacifying the masses and saving them from a sense of alienation (which could lead to critical thought and dissent).

Leo Lowenthal, another affiliate of the Frankfurt school, participated in the academic critique of contemporary public personalities. Lowenthal recognized a marked transformation from idols of production (business leaders, politicians, captains of industry) to idols of consumptions (stars) as figures of media attention. Again, Lowenthal, like his colleagues, suggested that the system of modern heroes succeeded only in reinforcing the status quo. These critical theory perspectives on celebrity, while valid, consistently ignored the complex structure of popular culture and the various uses mass audience make of popular culture artifacts. Their assessments tended to drastically oversimplify the system of stars and celebrities to simple “instantiations of a system of manipulation.” (Marshall 1997:17)

By the 1950s, a more conservative cultural reading of fame emerges. Daniel Boorstin (1962) suggested that consumerism was at the root of a decline in the authenticity of public personalities. Stating that “a star is well-known for his/her wellknownness,” (1962:5) Boorstin outlines the postmodern “condition of absence of absolute meaning well before it is defined as such” (Marshall 1997: 12). Boorstin’s perspective tends to, much like the Frankfurt school, view the development of celebrity as an indication of a decline in societal values and norms. This perspective can aid in an understanding of why celebrities rise to fame, then disappear in such a successive and rapid way as it is the succession of public human identities rather than individual human value that become significant within the star system. Boorstin’s work draws heavily on the theoretical framework put forth by Jean Baudriallard in various works (1968; 1970), in which he suggests that signs can detach to and from objects at will (using the fashion industry as a specific example of the detachability of signs). Understanding the system of celebrity as an expression of the mobility of exchange value allows the star system to be understood through a semiological approach that explores the ways in which objects are encoded within a system of signs and meanings. However, while the Frankfurt school of thought, as well as a more post-modern and semiological perspective provide means through which to approach the system of celebrity, none of the above manage to make the explain *why* celebrity is such an active area of negotiation in our contemporary culture.

The power of the star has been analyzed from a much different perspective by film scholars who have utilized psychoanalytical approaches to study the power and

pleasure of film and celebrity. Christian Metz, utilizing the theories of Freud and Lacan, suggested that the lead character of a film represents a more “complete being.” (1982:14) Metz’s reworking of Freudian and Lacanian theory suggests that the film lead (celebrity) represents the ego ideal, which, in the context of a darkened theater, pulls the viewer in and creates a sense of temporary satisfaction (1982:8). The psychoanalytic approach presents a much different conception of power from the traditional understanding of celebrity; for, while psychoanalysis relies mostly on “the text”, the celebrity is actively engaged with an external world (the public sphere), requiring film-based psychoanalytic approaches to move beyond the text of the film and consider other aspects from the “outside world” which relate to the celebrity. The psychoanalytic approach does not necessarily provide a deep enough understanding of the outside factors that effect the state of celebrity; as such, sociological readings have provided a much broader understanding of celebrity in their ability to consider the film star with respect to the audience and surrounding cultural conditions.

French sociologist, Edgar Morin, in *Les Stars* (1972), treats the study of the star as a serious subject of social study (focusing specifically on the star system), which was considered groundbreaking at the time. (Marshall 1997:14) Morin thus made a link between the text and the public sphere, stating that the star embodies “the exceptional with the ordinary, the ideal with the fundamentally everyday.” (Morin 1972: 29) Morin is still operating from a Marxist perspective in his formulation of stars as tools to be used to move film from lower-class setting to a legitimate

entertainment medium for the middle class. Once again, the celebrity is formulated as actively placating the masses, thus staving off a proletariat uprising. Sociologist Francesco Alberoni, provided one of the first interpretations of celebrities in terms of a concept of power. His article “The Powerless ‘Elite’: Theory and Sociological Research on the Phenomenon of the Stars” (1972) distinguishes between stars and other public figures, suggesting that they are an elite “whose institutional power is very limited or non-existent, but whose doings and way of life arouse a considerable and sometimes even maximum degree of interest.” (Alberoni 1972) Stars then become subjects of envy and members of a secondary elite community who function as “visible community” through their openness and accessibility via the media. “Visible community” is a central concept in Alberoni’s formulation as he sees society as lacking community, thus needing the star system to provide it for them. These new perspectives, from film studies and sociology, have helped create an understanding of why celebrities are at the forefront of public interest but still fail to consider celebrities beyond their apparent ability to placate the masses.

More recent critiques of the celebrity system have considered fame and celebrity in a much more nuanced fashion. Richard Dyer has been instrumental in developing specifically a study of stars (as a sub-discipline of film studies) that deals with the connection between audience and the constructed star image. In his text *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (1986), Dyer explores the audiences’ almost obsessive and incessant search for the “real” and “authentic” star persona. Focusing on three case studies (Paul Robeson, Judy Garland and Marilyn Monroe), Dyer

attempts to demonstrate the ways in which the audience constructs the celebrity and suggests that there are many, shared readings of one celebrity, rather than one overarching meaning. Dyer's formulation that the meaning of the celebrity is made by the audience allows the audience agency not granted in earlier theoretical approaches to celebrity. While Dyer does not deny that celebrities are commodities, he goes much further in his analysis, considering factors such as the star's construction of self via films, promotions, pin-ups, public appearances, interviews, biographies and journalistic coverage, thus fully acknowledging the intertextual nature of contemporary celebrity. Dyer's earlier text, *Stars* (1979) lays out a theoretical framework for considering the intertextual nature of celebrity and seeks to understand the star in three distinct ways: as social phenomenon, as image and as signs. Drawing on Weber's theory of "charisma" (1968), Dyer considers the ways in which stars function ideologically and explores their "privileged position in the definition of social roles and types." (1979: 8) Furthermore, Dyer is instrumental in considering the importance of the off-screen lives of the celebrity in terms of its constructed and calculated nature. The study of the star as both an on-screen and off-screen sign is particularly relevant when considering the ways in which celebrities are portrayed in tabloids online.

P. David Marshall's text *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (1997) provides the analytical tools to be used for the study celebrity. As the concept and practice of celebrity is intertextual by nature, tools of analysis must be interdisciplinary to a certain extent. Marshall outlines three analytical tools for

understanding celebrity: rationalization, semiotics and audience-subject relations. As a way of combining these three theoretical frameworks, Marshall utilizes a Foucauldian conception of the term “power” as a binding force and views celebrity as allowing for the organization and dispersion of certain discourses about individuality and the individual in our culture, which in turn, reinforces various institutions and organizations of power. Viewing celebrity as a discourse provides a theoretical structure for better understanding the multidimensional aspects of celebrity and celebrity culture. While Dyer provides celebrity-specific case studies, Marshall provides useful approaches to the study celebrity that combines many of the previously discussed methods, while focusing on various mediums of celebrity production (i.e. television, film and radio). Marshall is careful not to dismiss celebrity as many previous theorist have done, but searches for the cultural value and importance of the star system.

Graeme Turner’s *Understanding Celebrity* (2004) is a thorough and useful text for considering the production and consumption of contemporary celebrity. Turner deals with celebrity as a “media process” (20) that is coordinated by industry and is consumed by audience and fans. His exploration of the industrial structures on which celebrity is based (political, economic, discursive, and cultural) also takes into account the social function of celebrity and Turner is explicit in exploring both sides of the celebrity “coin”:

To argue that celebrity has a social function, that it’s products are open to semiotic analysis and that it participates directly in the negotiation of cultural identity, is not to deny that the celebrity is also a

manufactured commodity, that is development is commercially strategic, and that its trade is one of the fundamental transactions within the cultural and media industries today. (26)

This particular approach is evident throughout his text, as he considers both the cultural relevancy as well as the economic process of contemporary celebrity. As I will later discuss in this chapter, Turner is one of the few recent fame theories that has considered the role of newer technologies, such as the Internet, in the consumption and production of celebrity. Turner utilizes John Hartley's concept of D.I.Y citizenship and celebrity (1992) to explore the ways in which the Internet allows individuals to create their own celebrity.

## **ii) Tabloid Culture**

The history of tabloid has been considered by some to be as old as the history of journalism itself. (Ornebring and Jonsson 2004) Approaches to the study of tabloid have consistently undervalued its' importance in terms of its role within contemporary society as a means through which information can be shared and cultural recognition can occur. Approaches to tabloid culture, in order to be more than dismissive takes on trash journalism, must actively consider the ways in which tabloid content is a relevant conduit of social knowledge. Jurgen Habermas, while not focusing on tabloid content specifically, provides a fundamental framework in terms of conceptualizing the *public sphere* as a method to both describe and evaluate the role of the mass media (especially news) in public life (1989). The public sphere model, however, tends to focus on the ways in which mass media function in terms of

political power and traditionally bourgeois values. As such, more contemporary re-workings of Habermas' theses provide much more useful frameworks through which to consider the realm of tabloid content.

Nancy Fraser's work (1989, 1992) points to an alternative understanding of Habermas' public sphere which "stresses the singularity of the bourgeois conception of the public sphere, its claims to be *the* public arena, in the singular." (Fraser 1992: 122. Fraser's work, coming from a different perspective than Habermas, is significant in its stance against traditional criteria of political power. Fraser suggests that continually marginalized groups have created alternative public spaces, what she calls "subaltern counterpublics", in order to form a parallel discourse to the mainstream. Fraser's approach to alternative media and public spheres is thus relevant and important when analyzing the role of tabloid in contemporary culture, as it is often viewed as valueless based on traditional criteria, when, in fact, tabloid content may be providing cultural recognition for marginalized people, communities and issues.

Henrick Ornebring and Anna Maria Jonsson's essay "Tabloid Journalism and the Public Sphere: a Historical Perspective on Tabloid Journalism" (2004) is a useful text when considering both the history of tabloid as the journalistic *other* and the role of tabloid content to serve the public good, at times, in a better way than "respectable" journalism. Coming from a historical perspective, Ornebring and Jonsson explore several instances in which tabloid journalism has served a public good, as well as pioneered new journalistic techniques (such as the interview). Their



formulation of tabloid as alternative public spheres is based on Fraser's re-working of Habermas and provides a clear theoretical framework through which the social importance of tabloid can be analyzed based on the cultural recognition it provides rather than explicit political change.

Colin Sparks' introduction to *Tabloid Tales: Global Debates Over Media Standards* (2000) provides a useful history of the tabloid and attempts to defend the tabloid stating that it should not be judged on the same merits as "serious" journalism. Sparks makes an important distinction in terms of how various types of journalism should be viewed, yet he tends to undervalue the cultural importance (and, at times, political importance) of tabloid journalism and remains very critical of the success of the tabloid :

There is no doubt that the success of the tabloid form demonstrates very clearly that it can address the individual as consumer, but there can be equally little doubt that it has little or nothing to contribute to the life of the citizen. (2000: 29)

Thus, while Fraser actively acknowledges the power of alternative public spheres and medias, Sparks comes from a distinctively more critical Marxist perspective, which in no way acknowledges the potential of the tabloid in his analysis. However, he does provide a clear overview of tabloid history and does acknowledge that there is some cultural value as "deeply subversive texts." (25)

While Sparks tends to devalue tabloid content, Graeme Turner's essay "Celebrity, The Tabloid and the Democratic Sphere" (2006) suggests that tabloid content is, in fact, allowing consumers to play a part in "the production of cultural

visibility.” (2006: 494) As an example, Turner points to Princess Diana, the “People’s Princess”, and suggests that she was jointly owned by the people who “consumed her image, the readers of *Hello!* magazine, the media and Diana herself.” (494) Turner points to various theorist who have explored the ways in which the audience has been able to gain control over their own citizenship via the construction of cultural identity based on “motivated media consumption” (494) which allows the citizen to construct their own cultural identity. Tabloid content is often controlled by the readers, and allows the readers to have control over their own self-imagining based on their personal relation to a celebrity. This view of tabloid culture seeks to elevate the tabloid from valueless journalism to a locus of the democratic political possibilities evidenced by the increased visibility of ordinary people in the media. For Turner, tabloid content (in various mediums) has allowed ordinary media to be “opened up dramatically to offer us multiple versions of class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity.” (497) This perspective allows for tabloid content to be considered in a more serious light, and avoids being dismissed as a leisure-time filler.

A text which incorporates the theoretical frameworks of celebrity offered by Baudrillard, Stuart Hall, John Fiske, Foucault, Bourdieu, and Habermas is Kevin Glynn’s *Tabloid Culture: Trash Taste, Popular Power and the Transformation of American Television* (2000). While this text is theoretically all over the map, it does provide a detailed account of the development of tabloid culture, specifically focused on television as a medium. Glynn’s work is important, as it considers tabloids in a serious light and avoids dismissing them as irrelevant cultural goods. Issues of race,

sexuality, socioeconomics and normality are explored with reference to the world of tabloid culture.<sup>1</sup> Marsha Oregon take on tabloid culture in her article “Making It in Hollywood: Clara Bow, Random and Consumer Culture” (2003) does a compelling job of linking many of the themes and theoretical approaches discussed thus far. Oregon’s exploration of Clara Bow’s rise to fame places fan magazines at the center of her accent, as they served as “crucial repositories of information about celebrity making and unmaking in the 1920s.” (2003:76) Fan magazines, which can be viewed as precursors to celebrity-focused tabloids, also played a role in commodifying women for consumption by the mainstream audience. This article suggests that the fan magazine is an extension of the film, serving as a “department store, selling images of the stars.” (94) Coming from a feminist perspective, Oregon tends to view fan magazines as exploitive tools but, nevertheless, makes a compelling argument for the intertwined world of film, celebrity and celebrity-coverage in the public sphere, which remains the focus of my research project.

Finally, Su Holmes’ article “‘Off-Guard, Unkempt, Unready?’:

Deconstructing Contemporary Celebrity in *heat* Magazine” (2005) provides an excellent example of the ways in which tabloid is actively deconstructing the celebrity and points to useful methods of analysis to be applied to online tabloids. Holmes focuses on a British tabloid that walks the tenuous line between both constructing and deconstructing celebrity (24) and considers the ways in which *heat*

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Sloan’s *I Watched a Wild Hog Eat My Baby: A Colourful History of Tabloids and Their Cultural Impact* (2001) is a non-academic text that provides an insider’s perspective on the production of tabloid content. While it provides no theoretical framework, it may be used for anecdotal evidence of various aspects of tabloid production.

portrays the ordinary and extraordinary nature of celebrity. This ordinary/extraordinary paradox provides a framework for analyzing the ways in which celebrities are portrayed online as both mundane, boring people and larger-than-life stars. This approach to tabloid coverage of celebrity considers the tabloid as a site of celebrity discourse and suggests that *heat*, in particular, seeks to expose the manufactured nature of celebrity while continuing to acknowledge the “extraordinariness” (35) of certain celebrities. This analysis suggests that contemporary tabloid inhabits a paradoxical position, which aptly describes the state of online tabloid and provides a theoretical framework for considering the ways in which celebblogs expose the economically structured system of celebrity while continuing to produce contradictory celebrity signs.

### **iii) Theoretical Approaches to Online Culture**

There is an overwhelming abundance of academic literature on the subject of online technology, communications and development. For the purposes of my research I have limited my literature review to more recent and relevant articles, rather than attempting to briefly describe the history of academic theories and works surrounding the growth and development of the Internet since its inception. This literature review will be divided into two main sections: the first will focus on approaches to studying online culture and the second section will focus on specific research regarding blogging and recent developments in online cultural studies. I will also include several articles that specifically discuss online celebrity culture, such as

Graeme Turner's work on DIY celebrity (2004) and P. David Marshall's brief exploration into the role of new technologies in terms of celebrity coverage (2006). Cultural Studies is a multi-paradigmed and multi-methodological field of study; as such, my literature review does not follow one specific theoretical approach to the Internet. Instead, I have chosen to highlight the various and varied ways of approaching the study of Internet-based phenomena, both methodologically and theoretically.

### **Part 1: Online Culture (General)**

Much of my general background was taken from David Bell's edited volumes *CyberCultures: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies* (2006). Bell has compiled many seminal articles regarding the study of online culture, specifically from a media/cultural studies approach. A lot of these works are preliminary and raise more questions than answers when discussing theoretical approaches to the Internet. "Cultural Studies In Cyberspace", which appeared originally in Bell's text *An Introduction to Cybercultures* (2001) provides an outline for understanding the ways in which cultural studies have (or could) approach the study of cybercultures. This article points to many theorists and ideas that are particularly suited to the study of Internet cultures. Bell stresses, along with Sterne (1999), that it is important to view the Internet as everyday, rather viewing the Internet from a "millennial" perspective, which can be both technophilic and technophobic. Bell's essay provides an overall framework for issues to consider when studying the Internet and cybercultures from a cultural studies perspective. Pointing to key theorists and ideas,

such as Baudrillard and simulations/simulacra, Bell highlights the varied ways of theorizing the net, under the very broad umbrella of cultural studies (14). Bell points to Foucault and his study of the disciplinary society and work on discourse, power/knowledge and the subject as key to the study of the Internet in terms of understanding the ways in which the Internet is active in propagating various hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses, as well as exploring the role of the Internet in terms of surveillance (20).

Sterne's essay "Thinking the Internet: Cultural Studies Versus the Millennium" (1999) provides an agenda for a "cultural" study of the Internet, which seeks to examine these issues:

- Why study the Internet?
  - What is at stake in how the Internet is studied?
  - Where does the Internet fit into social and cultural life?
  - What counts in a study of the Internet?
  - How should we think about and represent the Internet?
  - What theories are useful to describe the Internet?
- (1999:261)

Sterne points to Raymond Williams' *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1974) as an example of how cultural studies should approach and analyze new technologies, stating that:

It engages the dominant discourses about a medium without taking them at face value: it considers past and present historical and institutional conjunctures shaping the medium; and it considers the politics and the future of the medium without, again, taking available discourses on their own terms. (268)

I have chosen to quote this section at length as it provides a useful structure in terms of suggesting how Internet studies should be approached theoretically. Sterne

cautions that there must be more localized and specific studies than were employed with reference to television studies. The Internet must be approached as a productive cultural site and element of social relations (282) and must be treated as “one site among many in the flow of economics, ideology, everyday life, and experience.” (282) The development of a working agenda for cultural studies in cyberspace makes Sterne’s essay is relevant and important in this context.

David Silver’s essay “Looking Backwards, Looking Forwards: Cyberculture Studies 1990-2000” (2006), originally appearing in 2000, provides a brief history of some of the most relevant works regarding the Internet over the last decade from the time he was writing. Silver divides cyberstudies into three stages: popular cyberculture, cyberculture studies and critical cyberculture studies (61). Popular cyberculture, according to Silver, refers to the early writing about the Internet done by journalists and other non-academics. This early work is significant in its documentation of trends and developments surrounding the growth and development of the World Wide Web. However, suggests Silver, much of this work was over-descriptive and suffered from “limited dualism” (62), either viewing cyberculture as evidence of a dystopic or utopic future. The second stage of writing about cyberculture emerged from academia and focused on online communities and virtual identities and continued the trend of dualistic writing about the Internet. Silver points to two seminal texts that exemplify this era of academic writing about the Internet.

The first, Howard Rheingold’s *The Virtual Community* (1993) defined a virtual community as “a group of people who may or may not meet one another face-

to-face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks.... We do everything people do when they get together, but we do it with words on computer screens, leaving our bodies behind” (58).

Rheingold’s text provides a social history of particular online communities and comes from a highly enthusiastic perspective in its optimistic view of the Internet. Sherry Turkle’s *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1995) is the second seminal text examined in Silver’s exploration of the second stage writing about cyberculture. Turkle’s ethnographic approach to cyberstudies ushered in an ethnographic methodology for cyberculture studies and suggests that many use the digital domain to exercise a more true identity or multiplicity of identities. Turkle, like Rheingold, views the Internet in a largely enthusiastic way, seeing it as a place for various people to negotiate an identity they may feel true to and may not be able to express in the “real world”.

By the mid-1990s, critical cyberculture studies emerged, and according to Silver (2006) covers four major areas of focus:

- The exploration of the social, cultural, and economic interactions that take place online
- Unfolding and examining the stories we tell about such interactions
- Analyzes a range of social, cultural, political and economic considerations that encourage, make possible and/or thwart individual and group access to such interactions
- Assessing the deliberate, accidental and alternative technological decision and design-processes, which, when implemented, form the interface between the network and its users (67)

In its most thorough manifestations, critical approaches explore the intersections between these four areas of study. Silver’s exploration of key issues in terms of a



critical approach and examples of pertinent studies/essays suggests that a critical approach is a more all-encompassing and theory-rich way of studying cyberculture. Silver concludes that cyberculture is best understood as a “series of negotiations that take place both online and off...and it is crucial to broach issues of discourse, access and design.” (74)

While Silver suggest a critical approach, Peter Lyman and Nina Wakeford explore issues of online anthropology in their work “Going Into the (Virtual) Field” (2006) which first appeared in *American Behavioral Scientist* in 1999. The aim of this article is to provide a methodological guide for the analysis of virtual or network societies (225). Briefly exploring various approaches, this article suggests that theorists must often reconstruct traditional theory to make it applicable in online contexts. Based on Marcus’ work (1995), Lyman and Wakeford suggest that the field and method must be viewed as two ways of describing the same thing: method is the activity of the researcher, while field is “the mental model constructed by method” (227). Thus, researchers must be ready and willing to discuss the issues they faced, both practical and ethical, while researching online phenomenon, as it is these issues that were relevant while constructing their method and conception of field. Lyman and Wakeford also urge that virtual reality be viewed as both a material system and a digital world, in order to fully explore a community and a context online. Wherever boundaries are formed suggests a certain methodological and political stance that must be acknowledged and understood by the researcher. Lyman and Wakeford take an anthropological approach to the study of online, establishing a clear, but shifting

methodology which can be applied to the online context, if correctly modified by the researcher for his or her specific area of study. Significantly, Lyman and Wakeford do not suggest one specific methodological approach, but contend that each research project must consider various themes, such as identity, social relations as defined by the user and the construction of place, in order to place boundaries (and with this, methodological and political claims) on their virtual fields of study.

Ananda Mitra and Elisia Cohen's essay "Analyzing the Web: Directions and Challenges" points to some of the fundamental characteristics of the web that make its study challenging. These characteristics, documented here about eight years ago, are often taken for granted at this point; however, it is useful to re-illustrate them as a means of re-examining the Internet and possible methods of study. Intertextuality, non-linearity, reader as writer, multimedia dimensions, global span and "the disappearing hypertext" (248) are suggested to be fundamental features of Internet-based subjects of study. Mitra and Cohen suggest that each researcher must consider these unique characteristics prior to embarking on an Internet-focused project, particularly because the unique hypertextuality of the web can lead to important questions, such as where to begin and limit research and how to theorize disappearing text (the "404, URL Not Found" phenomenon). Again, each researcher must take these issues into account before attempting a methodical examination of a particular web-based instance/subject. This article is substantial in its clear formulation of the unique features of online "texts", in their multitude of forms, and aids in re-clarifying how the Internet must be approached and understood as a new field of research.

Finally, Stephen G. Jones' "Understanding Community in the Information Age", originally published in 1995, points out some of the key issues and concerns regarding computer-mediated communication (CMC) in general and online communities in specific. Jones' essay answers his own question:

Can CMC be understood to build communities and form a part of the conduct of public life, as many other forms of communication seem to, or does CMC problematize our very notions of community and public life? (1999: 219)

Jones aptly points out that connections ushered in by the electronic era do not automatically make for communication nor does it lead to the sharing of information, meaning and sense making (221). Referring to prior research into non-online communities, Jones suggests that CMC re-constructs traditional notions and definitions of community, which rely on conceptions of geographic locality (229). Online communities, according to Jones, need to be viewed as social networks rather than spatially bound groups. Focusing on online communities as social networks allows two important aspects of community to emerge: interaction and spacelessness. While Jones concludes that CMC can be community building, he cautions overly optimistic and utopic visions of online community, which could cloud some of the potential problems and concerns surrounding online identity and communication and states that CMC cannot be viewed as a community in the traditional or mainstream sense.

This small sample points to some of the texts that cover important and foundational issues regarding online-focused research, such as approaches,

methodologies, and concepts of community, communication and network. While it is by no means exhaustive, these sources provide theoretical frameworks and suggest that the Internet must be approached from a multi-methodological and multi-theoretic perspective, as the Internet is itself a multi-faceted technology, which requires a variety of analytic approaches. My next section will be focused on specific research projects that have concerned themselves with blogging and online networking. Here, specific methods of analysis will emerge as useful tools for understanding and analyzing this specific online phenomenon, which is central to my research surrounding online celebrity-focused blogs.

## **Part 2: Blogging and Online Cultural Studies.**

Recent technological developments have led to the explosion in popularity of blogging and facilitated web-based publishing for all sorts of computer-users, regardless of their computer-literacy skills. Blogging has emerged as the most popular method of producing web content: as such, blogs and blog users (either reading or writing) have become a subject of study within the academic context. Since blogs have become a sort of go-to format for most average web-based content producers, I have decided to gear the second aspect of my literature review towards this specific aspect of Internet-based content production, while also including a brief explanation of the blogging phenomenon.

In the strictest and earliest definition of the term, a blog<sup>2</sup> was someone's record of all the sites he or she had visited in one day- literally a web log<sup>3</sup>. The very first weblog is also the very first website, built by Tim Berners-Lee. This site would literally post updates of all the new sites were being put up on the web. In the year 2000, it was estimated that there were roughly 7 million unique sites contained on the web. Currently, there is estimated to be at least 60 million blogs<sup>4</sup>. The concept of Berners-Lee's site is particularly absurd now, considering the sheer volume of pages and the speed at which they are being posted. However, in 1992, when Berners-Lee's site went up, it was possible to keep a record of all the websites, and this is can generally be considered to be the inception of the first generation of weblogs. By 1994, several other weblogs were being posted, which would track new sites and provide brief commentary about each site, including Netscape's "What's New" and NCSA's "What's New" pages. The commentary provided for each website is an important feature of the earliest weblogs, which set the groundwork for the personal/critical voice present in most blogs today.

This first generation of blogs may have been the starting point, but by the mid-1990s, a new blog movement emerged, spearheaded by Justin Hall, who began eleven years of personal blogging in 1994<sup>5</sup>. Hall is generally recognized as one of the earliest bloggers and developed the more personal diary style of blog, in which his

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<sup>2</sup> Much of my information on blogging was found on Wikipedia.org. While there is still much debate as to the validity of Wikipedia as a credible source, in the world of blogging, it is many of the same people that were at the forefront of the blogging movement who are contributing content to the Wikipedia entry on blogs. As such, I consider Wikipedia to be a valid source in this context.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blogs>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.technorati.com/about/>

<sup>5</sup> [Wikipedia.org/wiki/Justin\\_Hall](http://Wikipedia.org/wiki/Justin_Hall)

entries would appear in diary format, with a strong focus on daily and personal activities/thoughts. That is not to suggest that other forms of blogs did not exist prior and concurrent to the early days of Hall's website, [www.links.net](http://www.links.net). The "Drudge Report", founded by Matt Drudge (who dislikes the classification of blogger), was one of the first news-based weblogs<sup>6</sup>. The Drudge Report started off as an email newsletter, but by 1996 had transitioned into a website focused generally on entertainment and political gossip.

The Institute for Public Accuracy was another early news-based weblog, which "seek[ed] to broaden public discourse...providing news releases that offer well-documented analysis of current events and underlying issues...and promotes the inclusion of perspectives that widen the bounds of media discussion and enhance democratic debate."<sup>7</sup> The IPA's goal, of enhancing democratic debate, points to one of the suggested benefits of blogs: their ability to provide alternative perspectives and voices. This issue will be discussed in further detail later.

The turning point in the history of blogging occurred in 1999, as web tools were developed to simplify and streamline the process of blogging. Earlier bloggers were forced to manually update and archive their pages. In order to simplify the process, these blogging pioneers built tools that anyone could use, no matter how computer-literate he/she may be (Jenson 2003: 22). Andrew Smales, a programmer based in Toronto, developed one of the very first do-it-yourself blogging tools. In July of 1999, Pitas.com was launched, allowing, for the very first time, a relatively

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<sup>6</sup> [Wikipedia.org/wiki/Blogs](http://Wikipedia.org/wiki/Blogs)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.accuracy.org/>

inexperienced computer user to create their own websites (Jensen 2003:22). Smales accidentally fell into the world of blogging in his quest to develop software that would more easily allow him to update his personal website and also “facilitate the “online diary community he had envisioned.” (22) Personal websites are not generally listed in a prominent position on most internet search engines, and Smales thought it would interesting if “I could just click around and read what other people were saying” (22), rather than search around blindly for their sites. While Smales was developing his software, he would often post updates on his site, prompting his visitors to offer their opinions and suggestions. One particular comment from a visitor alerted Smales to the-then budding community, and he set off to work on a blogging tool that would become Pitas. Smales also developed Diaryland, an online diary-building site: both sites have grown steadily since their inception.<sup>8</sup>

Smales’ sites were by no means the only early blogging tools; Xanga, launched in 1996, was at the forefront to blogging software development and was one of the first sites to host weblogs (Stone 1994: 14). In 1997, it only had about 100 accounts, but by December 2005, Xanga was hosting roughly 20 million blogs. The huge explosion in popularity can be directly attributed to simplified process of creating and maintaining a blog. Open Diary, launched in 1998 and became the first blog community where readers could add comments to other bloggers’ entries; LiveJournal, started by Brad Fitzpatrick, was launched in 1999; and also, in 1999,

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<sup>8</sup> Both [www.pitas.com](http://www.pitas.com) and [www.diaryland.com](http://www.diaryland.com) are still active websites that create websites for user. While Smales originally had different aims for each, their content is now indistinguishable. The distinctions between personal website, blog and online diary are blurry, to say the least.

Blogger.com was released<sup>9</sup>. Probably the most popular of these tools, Blogger.com, was developed by Pyra Labs and launched in 1999 by Evan Williams, Paul Bausch and Meg Hourihan. Blogger.com is fairly unique in that it lets users store blogs on their own servers, rather than on a remote base. This allows the user to have a personalized address (such as [www.whateveryouwant.com](http://www.whateveryouwant.com)), whereas many other blogging tools require that your address start at the remote server (Jensen 2003:22). It should be noted that there are many other blogging tools in existence: those listed above are merely a few examples of some of the more popular sites.

### **Blogging Technology**

Blogging has been pigeon holed by many, as a sort of online diary consisting of mostly personal exegeses on daily events and random thoughts. I would suggest that the blog has shifted from a diary form to a new way of conceptualizing the web and the way in which websites are designed. Blogs are set up to allow user comments, and include several features that allow for easy navigation through the site and links to other related websites. There are three features in particular which are seen as essential to the use and maintenance of blogs: blogrolls, permalinks and Trackbacks. These features allow for a consistent format throughout most blog-type websites, as well as an organized and simplified way of organizing a mass amount of content. What follows is a brief description of each feature:

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<sup>9</sup> [http:// www.wikipedia.org/wiki/blogs](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/blogs)



**Blogrolls:** a collection of links to other weblogs, most often found on the sidebar of the first page<sup>10</sup>. Often, these links are *syndicated*, meaning that a feed is made available from the linked site to the blog, which provides a summary of the linked website's most recently added content. Blogrolls are the simplest way to situate yourself within a community of bloggers, through simply referring to other relevant or related sites on your own personal site.

**Permalinks:** a “URL that points to a specific blogging entry even after the entry has passed from the front page into the blog archives”<sup>11</sup>. This feature means that links remain unchanged, and will avoid “link rot”, in which a link disappears/changes as time goes on. The permalink feature is set up in different ways, depending on the website, but it generally includes the year, month and day the posting went up, as well as the article name. For example, Blogspot, a popular blogging facilitator site, formats their permalinks as follows:

`http://<username>.blogspot.com/<4 digit year>/<2 digit month>/<article name>.html`

It has been suggested that there should be some sort of standardized format for permlinking; however, some within the blogging community are concerned that standardized permlinking would allow for information about articles to be taken from the URLs, rather than the associated RSS stream/tags stored within the actual content, resulting in a superficial representation of the website content. Regardless of the controversy surrounding standardization, permlinking is an essential aspect of blogging, as it easily allows other bloggers to link to your content, and it is the linking between blogs that allows for blogging communities to develop and maintain relationships.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blogroll>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Permalink>

**Trackbacks:** a method for website creators to request notification when somebody links to one of their documents<sup>12</sup>. It allows for “pings”, that is, notifications via network signal from Site A to Site B, if Site A refers to Site B. Both Site A and Site B must be Trackback enabled in order for this communication to take place. Again, this feature allows for relationships to be created between bloggers who are referring to each other’s content. Notably, Blogger.com does not employ the Trackback, although it does have a similar feature under a different name. This decision to not use the Trackback software could be due to the fact that the feature has been used to insert links on some blogs, and as Blogger.com is generally ad-free, the increased spam due to Trackbacks could prove to be problematic.

Blogrolls, permalinks and trackbacks can be found on most blogs. Each of these features facilitates and simplifies the process of sharing, receiving and acknowledging information from other bogs and websites. Considering the vast size of the *blogosphere* (a term used to describe the online world created and maintained by bloggers and their blogs), the advent of blogrolls, permalinks and trackbacks was seminal in terms of creating connections from one blog to another. These tools, while present in other sites, have become popularized in blogs, suggesting that the blog format of website design is informing general website organization.

If we consider the format of a blog, including its standout features described above, as symptomatic of larger changes throughout the web, then we must acknowledge how blogs demonstrate/contain key features of the new web-world.

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/TrackBack>

Web 2.0 is a concept that points to the ways in which the web-world is morphing into a more collaborative and shared environment, as evidenced by the advent of “second generation services, such as social networking sites, wikis, communication tools and folksonomies”<sup>13</sup>. As Tim O’Reiley describes in his seminal essay on the concept of Web 2.0:

If an essential part of Web 2.0 is harnessing collective intelligence, turning the web into a kind of global brain, the blogosphere is the equivalent of constant mental chatter in the forebrain, the voice we hear in all of our heads. It may not reflect the deep structure of the brain, which is often unconscious, but is instead the equivalent of conscious thought. And as a reflection of conscious thought and attention, the blogosphere has begun to have a powerful effect... The world of Web 2.0 is also the world of what Dan Gilmour calls “**we, the media**”, a world in which the “former audience”, not a few people in the back room, decides what is important.<sup>14</sup> [bold not in the original]

This is the brave new world of Web 2.0, in which users decide on the content, and format their sites to best fit their own interests and desires.

The importance of the role of RSS, Really Simple Syndication, cannot be understated in terms of understanding the ways in which blogs communicate with each other, and their readers. As mentioned previously, blogrolls are often syndicated, meaning that a news-feed updates links with short descriptions based on the updates on the linked site. This would not be possible without the implementation of RSS, which allows someone to link not just to a page, but to subscribe to it, with notification every time there is a change to the linked-page. An aggregator allows for the subscription information to be “translated” into summary style breakdown of the website content. RSS aggregators, such as Bloglines, are web-based, while others are

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<sup>13</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web2.0>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.oreillynet.com/lpt/a/6228>

desktop and some are even formatted for portable devices, allowing the users to subscribe to constantly updated content. This software facilitates the personalization of websites/blogs and streamlines emerging content coming out of the growing web-world, allowing for users to take control and self-manage blogs in a way only made possible through the development and implementation of RSS feeds. As O'Reilly suggests, the "blogosphere can be thought of as a new, peer-to-peer equivalent to Usenet and bulletin-boards, the conversational watering holes of the early net"<sup>15</sup>, and these "conversations" are being made possible through the use of RSS feeds, trackbacks, permalinks, and blogrolls.

Although blogs are typically thought of as diary-format websites produced by a single author, there are in fact many different types of blogs. They can be classified based on content, media focus, or device:

**Media:**

Vlog: blog consisting mostly of videos

Linklog: blog consisting mostly of links to other sites or blogs

Photoblog: comprised mostly of photos

\*Podcasts are sometimes considered audioblogs

**Device:**

Computer-based blogs are the norm, however there are moblogs, which is a blog written on a mobile device such as a cell phone or PDA

**Genre:**

Blogs can easily be categorized based on the general subject of the content, such as a travel blog, political blog, or celebblogs.

However, no matter what the focus of the blog, there are three significant features of blogs, across the spectrum: chronology, frequency and focus (Stone 2004). The

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.oreillynet.com/lpt/a/6228>

*chronology* of a blog is perhaps one of its most standout features, serving to remind us of the early diary roots of the blog. In a blog, every entry or post is stamped with the date and time of its publication, and each blog will have an “archive” section, which generally organizes the posts by month (it is here that the permalink feature is used). Organizationally, the most recent post always appears at the top, a natural nudge for the blogger to keep posting. This “nudge” pushes the blogger to post at a fairly frequent rate, the second major feature of blogs. Most bloggers post at least once a day, if not many times. This *frequency* alters the way in which people compose their posts, resulting in briefer entries, sometimes consisting of only a line or two. However, depending on the focus of your blog, your posts may be more detailed, essay oriented, rather than brief “what I am thinking/doing right now” types of posts. The *focus* of the blog, the third feature, distinguishes one general blog from another. Each blog always has a specific focus, whether it is the author’s personal life, technology, world music or news. And, perhaps the most unique feature, no matter what the topic of the blog, the writing almost always includes the author’s personality, perspective and opinion. As a result, the blogging environment is one in which content, such as news, can be delivered openly with an opinion and a perspective.

There have been some defining moments in blogging, in which blogs (and the attached bloggers) were responsible for breaking important news stories: Sept 11, 2001 is considered to be a catalyst for the journalistic blogging community. Stone suggests that “television, print, and major news sites couldn’t keep up with the

thousands of reporters doing original reporting, digging up links to quality information online and adding their own voice and commentary to what was happening.” (2004: 35) The second Iraq war was the first war in which blogs played a major role in disseminating information about the events. Both Iraqi civilians and American soldiers (warblog/milblog) were posting blogs, giving the world new ways to look at and understand the war, from varying perspectives. Blogs have also played significant roles in breaking news stories that had been missed or ignored by mainstream news sources, including Dan Rather’s “Rathergate”/“Memogate” scandal, the censorship of Bill Maher on CNN, and the offensive comments of former Senator Trent Lott. Recently, TMZ.com, a vlog-type site, reported on the racist rants of Michael Richards, breaking a news story that may have otherwise been ignored or missed by the mainstream media sources. Yet, many remain critical of the actual impact of blogs (the Pew Research Center suggests that only 4% of online Americans report going to blogs for information and opinion)<sup>16</sup>, while others suggest that blogs serve only to narrow the consumers view by allowing for specialized opinions and limited perspective.

As blogging is a somewhat more recent phenomenon, there has yet to emerge a key academic theory, approach or figure to be associated with theorizing blogs. As such, the articles I have chosen to explore each tend to take a slightly different approach to the study of blogs. The first article, “A Framework for Analyzing and Understanding Online Communities” by de Souza and Preece is not focused

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<sup>16</sup> [http://www.pewtrusts.org/pdf/PIP\\_Bloggers\\_071906.pdf](http://www.pewtrusts.org/pdf/PIP_Bloggers_071906.pdf)

specifically on blogs; however, it provides an analytic framework for the study of online cultures, and is a useful transitional article from general to more specific issues surrounding online research. De Souza and Preece present a theoretically based online community framework (OCF) in conjunction with a semiological approach as ways to approach the study of online communities. There are 4 key components to the OCF approach: people, purposes and policy, with software as an overarching theme. These 4 factors influence the sociability and usability of each online community. De Souza and Preece are also proponents of a semiolocial approach in terms of understanding what signs software designers utilize when creating new systems, and what some of these choices may reflect (i.e. status setting on MSN). On pages 10 and 11 of their article, de Souza and Preece provide graphics depicting online relations and the factors that can influence them, which illustrate the complex and interactive nature of online communication. While this approach tends to be less interpretive and highly specified, it does provide useful boundaries to consider when making qualitative choices regarding online cultural research and makes available a specific approach to online studies. De Souza and Preece also point to the importance of the software in structuring and framing online communications in diverse and unique ways: this attention to the role of software in framing communications is often left out in other analyses.

Huffaker and Calvert's "Gender, Identity, and Language Use in Teenage Blogs" (2005) takes a quantitative approach to blog research. This study is an examination of gender differences and similarities among blogs created and

maintained by teenagers (defined in this study as those under 18). Content analysis was the main method used in this study as a means through which to analyze how adolescents present their identities online, as well as the ways in which they use language to express themselves, their experiences and feelings. Roughly 70 blogs were examined and were equally distributed between males and females. The front page of each blog was analyzed and scored for “personally identifiable information, emotive features, sexual identity, and gendered language.” (2005) A computer software package, DICTION 5.0, was used to evaluate documents in terms of word counts, content types and language tones. For example, DICTION can count any reference to “I”, “I’m”, “me”, or “my”, and create a self-referencing rating. Their research findings disprove earlier work that males use less emoticons and that females tend to use passive, accommodating and cooperative language; rather, Huffaker and Calvert found that online communications were becoming more androgynous and the distinctions between male and female communications were slight. Content analysis proved to be a useful method through which a broad statistical analysis of computer-mediated communications could be attained. The method of content analysis used in this study was highly structured and complex, as the researchers were able to make use of a computer program. While there are some gaps in category explanation (for example, what is meant by “passive language”), this study points to the importance of language on the Internet as “a new type of discourse shaped by the creativity and innovation of its communities of users.” (2005)



A more anthropological approach to the study of blogs is presented in Denise Bortree's "Presentation of Self on the Web: An Ethnographic Study of Teenage Girls' Weblogs." (2005) Bortree finds that young female bloggers are forced to address the dual nature of weblogs as a "tool for interpersonal communication and mass communication." (25) His methodological approach is that of ethnography, in-depth analysis and interviews. This approach to blogs, from those that have so far been considered, is most closely linked to my approach in its methodology. Bortree establishes that young females make up the majority of bloggers (56%) and attempts to uncover how they present themselves to their peers and to the general masses that may be reading their blog. In general, Bortree found that his sample group tended to write in very personal ways, for themselves and their close friends, but also, at times, addressed a more general audience, with warnings such as "this part may not be interesting if you don't know who I am talking about..." (34). Bortree concludes that it is essential for author web-theorists to not exclude these teenage blogs from their analysis of online culture, as these blogs provide a permanent record of thoughts in a dynamic, interactive and frequently changing way. Bortree's analysis of teenage female bloggers provides a useful example of an anthropological approach to the study of online phenomenon and points to the interesting dichotomy of writing for self and writing for others online.

Mark Brady's working paper "Blogging: Personal Participation in Public Knowledge Building on the Web" (2005) for the Chimera Institute of Technological Innovation and Research points to the three technological innovations that have

enabled a blog community to emerge. These additions, permalinks, comments and trackbacks, which allow readers to read individual posts, comment on various posts and track who is citing a blog on their website, have broad social and collaborative effects. Specifically, these new features have facilitated the linking between blogs, allowing for ideas and knowledge to be shared with many diverse people. Brady points to specific examples to demonstrate how blogs have been used to provide an alternative news source and suggests that blogs can quickly form communities and achieve goals when necessary (such as disproving George W. Bush's military service record). The speed and effectiveness of blogging in terms of affecting change in the mainstream media (or at least bringing a topic to the mainstream media to focus on) based on knowledge sharing is at the forefront of Brady's analysis and points to the change in software/technology which have allowed for this to occur. While his research is more preliminary, Brady points to the potential of blogs to provide a new research arena by sharing resources and knowledge on a specific topic.

John Quiggin's article "Blogs, Wikis and Creative Innovation" (2006) emerges from a cultural studies approach to online research. Quiggin's draws on the work of Williams (1958) in "its attempt to place innovation in a historical context and to relate cultural innovation to technological and economic developments." (482) Quiggin's points out that the relationship between technology and culture is not one-way and the ways in which they influence each other must be explored in terms of blogs and wikis. Basing his analysis on McLuhan's aphorism "the medium is the message", Quiggin seeks to explore ways in which these interactive new

communication mediums are creating new possibilities and types of messages. This article also provides a lot of insight into copyright issues and the role of blogs and wikis in terms of developing a creative sphere in which ideas are not bound to copyright law (creative commons). Quiggin sees the Creative Commons Licensing System and Wikipedia as examples of the possible institutional developments that are associated with “new modes of innovation” (493) and claims that the boom of open-source software challenges standard assumptions about the market and competitive innovation. Quiggin’s exploration of blogs and wikis serves to highlight the ways in which software/technology can influence and is simultaneously influenced by new forms of communication. This approach, in terms of understanding the interrelations between technological innovation and content is particularly relevant to my research, as it points to a method of exploration which acknowledges the two-way relationship between technology and culture.

Michael Keren’s book *Blogosphere: The New Political Arena* (2006) provides a classification and description of the various types of blogs and bloggers. Keren takes the approach that blogs, like autobiography (Smith 1993) provide a form of emancipation for the individual blogger, in that they allow each individual to express an opinion. This text is an attempt to explore the political implications of the newly acquired emancipation experienced by bloggers. Keren establishes that the new political arena created by bloggers is characterized by melancholy, in that the blogger is the reversal of the rational, enlightened citizen (13). The blogger, to Keren, is a vision of Dostoevsky’s Underground Man, but with a public voice (13). This text is

more interested in the political potential, rather than personal potential, of blogs and Keren concludes that blogs have not done what they have been touted to do: emancipate the politically disenfranchised. This inherently pessimistic outlook, suggesting that the “blogosphere involves journalism without journalists, affection without substance, community without social base, politics without commitment...[and] replaces action by talk, truth by chatter, obligation by gesture, and reality by illusion,” (14) provides a critical counterpoint to more optimistic (idealistic) representations of the blogs and their capacity for social change and community building. This oppositional viewpoint is necessary in terms of creating a critical, well-rounded examination of celebrity-focused blogs.

### **Bringing It All Together**

The previous discussion examined themes of online research and specifically explored methodological and theoretical approaches to the study of blogs. I now wish to explore two authors who have considered new media and its impact on celebrity culture. Graeme Turner’s *Understanding Celebrity* (2004), mentioned earlier, covers a broad spectrum of topics relating to celebrity culture. While he does not pay extensive attention to the role of the Internet in terms of framing and structuring celebrity, Turner does explore the phenomenon of “D.I.Y. Celebrity” in the form of “cam-girls”. Cam-girls are women who have made use of new web technologies, such as streaming video and web-cams, to turn themselves into cyber-celebrities. Turner suggests “the construction of symbolic capital within this alternative medium

employs similar tools to those used within the mainstream media.” (65) Turner also makes the claim that fame and notoriety is increasingly becoming a form of capital, generally, and specifically within this subculture. Much of Turner’s analysis focuses on the economic aspects of celebrity, including the ways in which an individual is commodified and traded and Turner feels he is caught up in what he describes as a “classic cultural studies bind of balancing determination and agency” (66) when analyzing web-cam celebrity:

The bypassing of one determining structure-the celebrity industry- certainly enhances the cam-girls’ agency over the content of their sites, but the consequences of their subsequent choices have their own dangers and limitations, as well as their own commercial, and thus determining, contingencies. (66)

So, while cam-girls may exist outside the traditional celebrity structure, they still find themselves part of a determining economic system. Turner’s work explores the role of new online technologies in terms of providing an alternative discourse surrounding celebrity, but remains critical of how much actual agency is achieved by the actions of D.I.Y. webcam-girls.

P. David Marshall’s “New Media-New Self: The Changing Power of Celebrity” (2006) provides a much more optimistic view of the potential of new media in terms of challenging traditional notions of celebrity. Marshall suggests that “the discrete and carefully controlled and distributed structure of the culture industries...have been elasticized by the different flows of information that have developed via the Internet and the Web...” (634). These new media have challenged the traditional “audience-subjectivities” generated and maintained by older media,

such as magazines and television. New media subjectivities are generated via the capacity of the Internet to both give and receive information and the digitalization process, which allows for the manipulation of online information. What then emerges is a reformulation of the category of passive audience resulting in a democratization of cultural production and a direct challenge to the classic relationship between celebrity and audience. Marshall also acknowledges the role of blogs and fan-sites in this reformulation of the celebrity structure, particularly evident in the ways in which bloggers write about celebrities and the ways in which celebrities sometimes respond (640). User-generated media (such as mash-ups of Blair and Bush declaring their love for each other) is also noted by Marshall as a unique Internet-specific phenomenon that is contributing to a restructuring of celebrity via “the breakdown in control of mediated culture by the major players in the entertainment industry” (641). This lessening of industry control suggests that a new era of celebrity and celebrity coverage is emerging, due to new media technologies.

Both Turner and Marshall have made early attempts to explore the role of the Internet and new media in terms of the ways in which it is re-structuring the traditional celebrity structure. My own research will continue in this vein and will aid in creating a broader understanding of the role of celebrity-focused blogs in terms of their ability to challenge traditional notions of audience and celebrity, as well as the ways in which the Internet has facilitated the production of D.I.Y celebrity.

## CHAPTER 2: ONLINE TABLOIDS

Amidst news of the Democratic debates and the war in Iraq, Britney Spears' tattooing and head shaving incident was at the forefront of CNN's news coverage. The man who tattooed her several hours after she shaved her own head was interviewed, as was the owner of the hair salon where Mrs. Spears gave herself the haircut. One of America's most watched news channels was dedicating a significant amount of time to the coverage of a falling pop star, to the point where "real news" was consistently being pushed back for more Britney news coverage. A similar frenzy surrounded the death of Anna Nicole Smith and the subsequent paternity battle for her newborn daughter. And while CNN and other news channels, as well as entertainment focused television shows, magazines and newspapers, dedicated significant coverage to these two events, nowhere was there more reporting about Smith and Spears than on the online tabloid sphere. These online tabloids, or celebblogs, can be viewed as the newest development within the spectrum of celebrity coverage and have changed the ways in which celebrities are talked about, commented on and presented to the public.<sup>17</sup>

Specifically, this chapter will explore the growth and development of online tabloids and suggest how they present a new style of celebrity news coverage. While online tabloids are part of a historical tabloid continuum, they are, at the same time, a

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<sup>17</sup> It should be noted here, and considered throughout, that not everyone has access to the Internet. In my discussion of access to technology and Internet democracy it must be acknowledged that there is still a significant digital divide based on socioeconomic, ethnic/racial and geographical factors throughout North America (and, of course, world-wide).

distinct phenomenon in terms of the ways in which they actively challenge traditional notions of fame, celebrity, tabloid and gossip. The first section of this chapter will provide a brief history and typology of celebblogs. From there, I will explore how celebblogs fit into the tabloid continuum based on their similarity to earlier forms of celebrity-focused news coverage. Finally, I will establish the ways in which celebblogs challenge the celebrity structure and traditional tabloid media through the speed of news delivery, style of discourse, and the role audience interaction.

### **Celeblogs: A Typology**

Compiling a history of online tabloids is challenging, as there are no definitive sources that lay out a concise and complete timeline of their emergence. However, based on press coverage of the “blog phenomenon” in the early 2000s, Gawker.com emerges as one of the early celebrity focused websites. Developed in 2002, this website is billed as “the source for daily Manhattan media news and gossip.” In November of 2003, the *New York Times Online* described Gawker.com as “a standout among Web logs, or blogs, which emerged several years ago as idiosyncratic online journals by individuals posting their musings and links to other sites.”<sup>18</sup> Nick Denton, owner of Gawker Media at the time, was in the process of trying to make blogging an ad-driven venture and was using Gawker.com as his main vehicle for pursuing this goal. Currently, it comes as no surprise that a popular blog would use advertisements to make a profit and conform to a standard economic model in terms of selling ad

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<sup>18</sup><http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?sec=technology&res=9F04E1D91138F934A25752C1A9659C8B63>



space to fund their product and produce profit; however, in the late 1990s, blogs were mostly known as diary-type websites, and the idea that they could be used as profit-makers was somewhat unexpected. Gawker.com and other more politically-focused blogs such as Instapundit.com and LittleGreenFootballs.com proved that as long as the topic was of interest and people could relate, enjoy or even loath the writer, a blog would achieve a high enough readership to make a profit or, at the very least, allow for some sort of viable living for its creator/writer.

Jeff Jarvis, president of Advance.net, the online arm of Advance Publications, points to the significance of blogging clearly, suggesting in 2003 that “tying history’s easiest, cheapest publishing tool to history’s best distribution network, the Internet, would have a tremendous impact on media.<sup>19</sup>” While many, such as Jarvis, recognized the possible implications and impact that blogging could have, Denton of Gawker.com is responsible for understanding the effect of blogging in terms of celebrity and popular culture news coverage, and in turn, created a website that not only brought celebrity coverage online in a significant way (moving beyond official and fan-driven sites), but also created a now-standard “voice” for celebrity blogs. This style of discourse surrounding celebrity culture, a departure from the mainstream news coverage found in print and television tabloid, was (and still is) often a sarcastic and cynical take on celebrity lifestyles. While mocking critics of celebrity life may have originated online at Gawker.com, there are currently countless celebblogs that have taken the “Gawker format” and produced their own scathing coverage of famous

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<sup>19</sup><http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?sec=technology&res=9F04E1D91138F934A25752C1A9659C8B63>

people in each aspect of their lives. A more detailed analysis of this style of discourse surrounding celebrity life will follow in the third section of this chapter (*Celeblogs as a New Phenomenon*).

A key feature of blogs today, which I explored in more specific detail in Chapter 1, is their relation to other blogs in terms of hyperlinks to other related sites. With one significant exception that I will later explore, most of the popular celebblogs provide links to each other, resulting in a community of like-minded blogs. These websites include:

- Asocialiteslife.com
- Cityrag.com
- Derekhail.com
- Dlisted.com
- Egotastic.com
- Gawker.com
- Hollywoodrag.com
- Hollywoodtuna.com
- Idontlikeyouinthatway.com
- Imnotobsessed.com
- Justjared.com
- MollyGood.com
- Pinkisthenewblog.com
- Popsugar.com
- Thebastardly.com
- TheGrumpiest.com
- TheSuperficial.com

This is by no means an exhaustive list of celebblogs; however, it does point out a core group of sites that frequently link to each other to provide complete and comprehensive celebrity coverage. Some of these sites overlap with Alexa.com's<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Alexa is an online source for website ranking, based on several variables and ranks sites broadly, as well as categorically, based on their popularity in terms of unique hits per day.

list of top 10 entertainment-focused websites. This list includes, in order from top to bottom: PerezHilton.com, The Superficial.com, Egotastic.com, TMZ.com, Popsugar.com, Gawker.com, Hollywoodrag.com, Blogcritics.com, GoFugYourself.com and CelebrityGossip.com. While each of these sites is very similar and may contain the same photographs, the commentary and perspective of the writer(s) varies, allowing each site to remain unique, while covering very similar or even identical topics.

The notable difference between the list taken from Alexa.com based on official statistics and my list based on a core group of sites that link to each other is the absence of PerezHilton.com, the most visited entertainment-focused weblog according to Alexa.com. This site is not included in my longer list of inter-linked websites due to the reluctance of PerezHilton.com to post links to other celebblogs, as well as the reluctance of other sites to link to the site. In the realm of the blogosphere, the practice of linking to other sites is a central feature and places the website within an online community of like-minded bloggers. (Keren 2006:8) The lack of links to PerezHilton.com suggests that this site is excluded from this celebrity-focused community of bloggers. Perez Hilton's high profile within mainstream media and his perceived lack of credibility based on his friendships with many of the celebrities he once mocked could be part of the reason he is excluded from the celebblog sphere.

## **Celeblogs as Traditional Tabloid**

The history of tabloid news has been considered by some to be as old as the history of journalism itself (Ornebring and Jonsson 2004). As I suggested in Chapter 2, there is quite an extensive history of celebrity news coverage in the media and celebblogs can be viewed as the newest manifestation of an old category of news. In order to understand the role of celebblogs in terms of establishing celebrity, in a traditional sense, I wish to outline the theories of fame and celebrity, and in particular, the apparatuses of the star system, which create and maintain a star's status, and into which the role of publicity and tabloid come to the forefront. Both P. David Marshall (1997, 2006) and Graeme Turner (1999, 2004) have done extensive work in this area and it is their shared approach to the construction of celebrity, which I shall be exploring here. In specific, I will outline Marshall and Turner's organization of the celebrity structure with a focus on the role of the media and consumer culture in terms of constructing celebrity, thus establishing celebblogs as part of this structure; however, my next section will illustrate the ways in which celebblogs actually and paradoxically challenge the standard celebrity structure.

Central to understanding the role of the media in constructing celebrity are the historical conceptualizations of the mass audience. Based on the foundational work of Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), Marshall (1997) outlines the ways in which the mass can be understood as various audience groups that are attracted to different forms of "consumption of messages for different reasons." (1997:42) The reason that an individual may be drawn to a certain media (form of satisfaction) is due to

fundamental emotional and psychological desires (42), rather than “group think”.

This framework for understanding how and why an audience may chose to consume a specific media message emerged from the uses and gratification model and established a distinct understanding of the mass as fractured opinion holders rather than a threatening entity (a viewpoint earlier held by crowd theorists and sociologists (Marhsall 1997: 36-40)).

This nuanced understanding of the mass is particularly important in terms of understanding celebrity, as Marshall points out that:

The growth in the celebrity’s power is contemporaneous with the rationalization of the crowd and the social sphere through social psychology and other behaviorist disciplines. In the rationalization of the social, the celebrity performs the same function as social psychology: it celebrates the potential of the individual and the mass’s support of the individual in mass society. (1997:43)

Simply put, the concept of mass audience as individuals rather than simply a mass audience allows for an individual to be championed by the masses, as each member of the audience can in some way see themselves as an individual also. Furthermore, as the mass came to be viewed as individuals they also came to be viewed as consumers and the celebrity emerged from the crowd as “an ideological support for consumer capitalism.” (43) While this conceptualization of the celebrity as puppet for capitalist culture ignores some of the counter-culture and subversive aspects of celebrity, it highlights the role of celebrity as a public image, constructed and disseminated by the studio, the agent, the publicist and the media (Turner 2004: 32).

As this brief theorization of the collective audience suggests, understanding the shift of the mass audience to individual consumers is central to understanding the role of celebrity as commodity and points to the importance of uncovering the structures which aid in this construction of celebrity. Marshall (1997:56-59) claims, as does Dyer (1986), that the celebrity must be viewed, to some degree, as a sign and is a “complex configuration of visual, verbal, aural signs...it is manifest not only in films but in all kinds of media texts.” (Dyer 1979: 38) As such, the celebrity is a fundamentally intertextual sign (Marshall 1997:58), whose image is “informed by the circulation of significant information about the celebrity in newspapers, magazines, interview programs, fanzines, rumours and so on.” (58) These secondary sources (the primary source being the celebrity) are key to enriching the meaning of the celebrity sign and “thereby providing the connecting fibers to the culture.” (58) Celeblogs have emerged recently as a powerful secondary source that contribute to the cultural meaning of celebrity via the images and video they post, along with the accompanying text-based commentary.

From this perspective, celeblogs perform the same task as many other secondary sources in terms of contributing to the cultural meaning of celebrity specifically through providing insight into the daily and “real” life of the celebrity: that is, their life off-screen and off-stage. Nightly television shows, such as *Entertainment Tonight*, *Extra* and *Access Hollywood* (as well as entire networks, such as *E!*), weekly magazines such as *People*, *InTouch*, and *USWeekly* and blogs such as *PerezHilton.com*, *Popsugar.com*, and *HollywoodRag.com* all perform the same task

of exposing the lives of celebrities by documenting their love lives, their real-estate dealings, their up-coming movie, television show or album, and mundane realities such as trips to the grocery store, manicurists and doctor. Each television show, magazine and blog ranges in their focus, from more detailed and well-reported new stories, to briefer, less-documented news and gossip snippets. But common to all is the desire to present behind-the-scenes information about the celebrity and further expose their real-life to the general public.

Celebrity-focused magazines and blogs are the most similar in their format, in terms of presenting an image, with accompanying text, to explore a particular news issue. While entertainment television shows often play a major role in publicizing the celebrity in an official manner, by documenting movie premiers and the making of films with accompanying interviews, tabloid magazines and blogs tend to publicize celebrities via exposing their real, non-professional lives. Many tabloid magazines have entire sections devoted to exposing celebrities as “real people”, with the headline “Stars! They’re just like US!”<sup>21</sup> This section will show celebrities doing very average, daily activities, such as grocery shopping or going to the airport, with accompanying text describing their activities and whereabouts. Rather than portraying the celebrity as a star, in fancy clothing and on the red carpet, this section of the magazine is explicit in constructing the celebrity as a real person, just like the reader. Celeblogs also participate in this type of celebrity-as-real-person construction. Candid shots of famous people are a main feature on these sites and

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<sup>21</sup> This is the headline for *USWeekly*. Other magazines have similar headlines.

function in a very similar way in terms of trying to portray celebrities as real and down-to-earth. Here is a fairly typical post from Popsugar.com, showing a celebrity drinking coffee and talking on the phone:

### ★ Michelle Is A Lady In Red

2 hours 45 min ago by PopSugar

Michelle Williams charted away on her cell phone in Brooklyn the other day wearing Ray Bans like her hubby Heath. We're liking her little red dress, but it would look a lot better if she wore a bra. Also, we're starting to wish she would grow out those long locks again; the pixie cut makes her seem grumpy all the time.



Figure 1-Michelle is a Lady In Red<sup>22</sup>

However, as I will discuss later, the accompanying text found on celebblogs is not always as good-natured and “edited” as magazine copy.

This ordinary/extraordinary paradox (Holmes 2005) that constructs the celebrity as both a star and a regular person is emblematic of celebrity in general and the construction of celebrity in tabloids and celebblogs in particular. In any given tabloid magazine or celebblogs, there will be features, photographs and posts of

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<sup>22</sup> <http://popsugar.com/352010>



celebrities at glamorous events, which will often be followed by some photographs illustrating a physical flaw of the celebrity such as unwanted hair or poor makeup application. Furthermore, right next to the “Stars! They’re Just Like Us” feature, there will often be a detailed look into which celebrity is buying which multi-million dollar property (clearly, something the “average” person is unable to relate to). This ordinary/extraordinary paradox has been used to explain the relationship of the on-screen/off-screen lives and the ways in which a connection is made between two seemingly oppositional aspects of an individual, that is, a glamorous lifestyle and a ordinary domestic life (Geraghty 2000:184). Holmes suggests the continued presentation of the ordinary and extraordinary aspects of a celebrity in tabloids (her focus is on British magazines) leaves a fundamental question unanswered: is there something naturally special about celebrities or are they simply products of wealth and grooming (2005:31)? While television and print tabloids continue to fuel the ordinary/extraordinary paradox serving to perpetuate the myths surrounding celebrity, I would suggest that blogs have decidedly answered the question “are celebrities fundamentally special?” with a resounding no and have un-earthed the myths of celebrity production and construction to such a degree that the extraordinary aura no longer surrounds the star.

What this focus on the “real” and authentic in magazines and blogs points to is what Su Holmes aptly describes as the “ever more tenuous line that magazines [and blogs] walk in balancing both the construction and deconstruction of contemporary celebrity.” (2005:24) Celeblogs, as a site of meaning making, more so than print

tabloids, have exposed the nature of celebrity by deconstructing the very construction of celebrity in an explicit and challenging way. As they are outside the traditional economic structure, celebblogs are allowed an editorial freedom not bestowed upon print and television tabloid.

### **Celeblogs as a New Phenomenon**

While I have already established that celebblogs can be viewed as the newest manifestation of tabloid news, I now wish to consider the ways in which these sites of celebrity news coverage are quite separate from their historical predecessors. There are three specific aspects of celebblogs I wish to focus on: the speed at which news is disseminated, the style of discourse surrounding celebrity, and the role of audience response. The second and third unique aspects of celebblogs, in particular, actively deconstructs celebrity and challenges the distinction between the “real life” celebrity and the glamorous star by uncovering the economic and visual (image) construction of celebrity. Finally, I will suggest that rather than contributing to a vapid consumerist culture, celebblogs are active in their renegotiation of social and political norms.

As Perez Hilton, a celeblogger, stated in an online interview with *ABC News*:

I think that the blogosphere has changed the way that people consume celebrity media. I think that people no longer want to wait a week to see something in *USWeekly* or *People*. They want it now, as soon as it happens.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> <http://abcnews.go.com/Video/playerIndex?id=3246365>.

Hilton has pointed to one of the key features of online tabloids that sets them apart from their print and television counterparts: speed of information. Due to advances in digital technologies and mobile computing and photography, celebblogs have far surpassed weekly magazines and nightly television shows for their ability to provide up-to-date and detailed coverage of specific celebrity events. Press coverage of the Paris Hilton prison saga provides a telling example of the ability of online tabloids to provide information to their readers faster than a nightly entertainment show, such as *Access Hollywood* or a weekly magazine tabloid, such as *In Touch*. When Mrs. Hilton was allowed to leave prison on Thursday, June 7, 2007, and then was ordered back in the next day, Perezhilton.com posted 28 updates of the situation, starting at 2:05 AM on June 7<sup>th</sup> and ending at 5:47 PM June 8<sup>th</sup>. Each post provided some detail about her case, her issues, and her possible medical problems that allowed her to be released from prison in the first place. *Entertainment Tonight*, an entertainment and celebrity-focused news show could only provide coverage of her release by their air time, 7pm Eastern Standard, leaving them over 14 hours behind Perez Hilton's first post. Although *Entertainment Tonight* does have a website, they only posted one news story on the 7<sup>th</sup> of June, in contrast with Perez Hilton's 12 posts for that day. Weekly tabloids were further left behind, depending on their press time, and were in no way able to provide information in a timely and relevant fashion.<sup>24</sup>

While the speed of online tabloids is remarkable and allows readers *access* to information, it is the style of discourse and commentary of celebblogs that stands in

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<sup>24</sup> Various all-news networks, such as CNN, provided significant coverage of the Paris Hilton jail situation. Other than the celebblogs, they were the only media source to provide up-to-date coverage.

direct contrast with other avenues of celebrity news coverage. The lack of censorship and regulations over blogs (and the Internet in general) allows for their content to escape traditional norms of magazine publishing and television production, resulting in very different approach. This approach can be described superficially as sarcastic, satirical, ironic and mean; it is this approach, however, that reconstructs celebrity discourse in a meaningful and potentially subversive way. The subversive aspect of celeblogging comes from their ability to expose the celebrity structure and the role of the media in creating/constructing a celebrity sign.

As previously mentioned, celebrities are best understood as a sign or text, with the material reality of the celebrity sign (that is, the actual person who is at the core of the representation) disappearing into “a cultural formation of meaning” (Marshall 1994: 57). It is the secondary sources, the magazines, newspapers, television interviews, and the celeblogs, which actively construct the meaning of the celebrity sign. As Marshall suggests, these secondary sources tend to conventionalize or stereotype the celebrity sign, based on the stability (or staying power) of the celebrity:

A nearly completely conventionalized celebrity sign enters into the very lexicon of a culture, its personality instantiated and immortalized into caricature in the tradition of celebrity icons such as Marilyn Monroe and James Dean. (Marshall 1994: 58)

Examining the “connotative chains of signification” (58) found in the secondary sources of the celebrity sign allow the ways in which celebrities are constructed by various texts to be understood. These secondary texts act each have a specific agenda and format which informs the ways that the celebrity is constructed as an intertextual

sign; however, celebblogs tend to be free from many of the constraints placed on other secondary texts and, as such, have the outsider perspective in terms of analyzing and deconstructing the celebrity sign. To further explore the ways in which celebblogs challenge the traditional celebrity structure, I will first examine why this sarcastic approach to celebrity news is not as easily achieved in other mediums, due to commercial and corporate restraints.

As Marshall (1997), Turner (2004) and Moran (200) clearly outline, celebrity is not created “organically” or instantaneously as the popular expression “a star is born” would suggest; rather, celebrity is the result of various apparatuses working together to produce a successful (economically) product. This “system of celebrity” (Marshall 1997), which includes agents, publicists, and managers, is bound by economic interdependence between the celebrity, his or her “team” and the entertainment industries and entertainment news media (Turner 2004:45), as well as an audience of consumers to support the celebrity and the celebrity-making machine. These relationships are explicitly corporate, as evidenced by celebrity news features appearing in magazines owned by the same company producing the film in which said celebrity is appearing in and is contractually obligated to promote (47). While celebrities can still be seen as cultural workers and are paid for their labour (34), they are also “property” (Dyer 1986:5), in the sense that they are financial assets for those who stand to gain from their commercial success. As smaller media outlets are swallowed up by the major giants and we are left with “three or four dozen large transnational corporations, with fewer than ten mostly US-based media

conglomerates towering over the global market,” (Herman and McChesney 1997:1) it becomes increasingly difficult, within mainstream media, to avoid censorship of content to some degree based on corporate relationships and restrictions.

That is not to say that celebrities aren’t mocked, ridiculed and generally made fun of by mainstream media. Late night talk show hosts, for example, such as David Letterman, will often make fun of the celebrity *de jour*, but it is rarely taken to such an extreme that the mocked celebrity won’t show up the next week to promote their new film or book (Oprah Winfrey being, until recently, a notable exception to this rule). The partnership between media and celebrity is necessary as the celebrity needs the media to promote their projects and the media needs the celebrity to sell their product, be it a magazine or television show. Print and television tabloids often focus on the very same bits of gossip as celebblogs, but the pressure from advertisers and libel laws generally hold print and television more accountable for “fact” and “truth”. Websites are occasionally the target for lawsuits, but not nearly to the same degree as print tabloids and, as such, are able to post salacious, possibly untrue, slanderous and defamatory stories without much legal consequence. By being allowed to exist outside of the economic system of celebrity production, while having been able to attain a high level of cultural visibility by way of both the Internet and mainstream media, the celeblogger is granted a unique position of celebrity commentator without censorship.

Traditional media systems, such as print and television, have generally encouraged a certain kind of mediated discourse surrounding celebrity. These

structures are governed by rules and standards, which allow for a specific kind of publicity and framing of a celebrity. In comparing two similar stories, in print format and online, two distinct styles of discourse surrounding the celebrity can be distinguished:

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## Nicole Richie Will Be a Great Mom



Nicole Richie is a spoiled, self-centered cokewhore, so it's no wonder why she's so super excited about being pregnant:

Nicole is kind of hoping her pregnancy will keep her out of jail. "...But friends are concerned and "wondering if she can carry the baby to term because of her weight issues."

Nice. Millions of women around the world are unable to have kids, but Nicole is going to throw hers in the dumpster if it can't keep her out of jail. She shouldn't be allowed to babysit a Barbie. On the bright side, she's only 85 pounds. Hopefully by the second trimester the baby will just punch out of her like that thing in Alien. Well, hello there little fella!

Figure 2-Nicole Richie Will Be A Great Mom<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.idontlikeyouinthatway.com/labels/nicole%20richie.html>

This post, taken from [Idontlikeyouinthatway.com](http://Idontlikeyouinthatway.com), is clearly very critical of Ritchie's possible pregnancy and calls into question her motivation for becoming pregnant; that is, to possibly avoid the same type of jail sentencing her friend, Paris Hilton, experienced. The language used is offensive at times, such as the word "cokewhore" and the blogger assumes that Ritchie, based on her history of drug-use and speculated eating disorders, will not be fit to parent a child. The text in the center of the post, in quotations, is taken from the *New York Post* gossip column, "Page Six"<sup>26</sup>, which also appears in an online format. "Page Six" is the original source of the gossip and its coverage of the pregnancy did not focus on Ritchie's possible unethical motivations for being pregnant, but rather reported the facts in an un-editorial manner. In the celeb blogging world, however, it is the role of the blogger to put forth their opinions and critique the ways in which celebrities chose to live their lives. Bloggers, as I have already suggested, are excluded from the rules governing traditional media, and, as such, are in the position to openly criticize and question the lives and decisions of celebrities, as Todd, one of the two bloggers for [IDontLikeYouInThatWay.com](http://IDontLikeYouInThatWay.com), did in a openly derogatory and unsympathetic way.

In comparing the coverage of Nicole Ritchie's possible pregnancy both online and in print, a stark contrast is evident. Some of the same photographs are used as part of the story and some of the same issues are raised in print and online: specifically, Ritchie's readiness to be a mother and the possibility of the pregnancy keeping Ritchie out of jail. However, in *InTouch* magazine, rather than sourcing "a

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<sup>26</sup> [http://www.nypost.com/seven/06152007/gossip/pagesix/eating\\_for\\_two\\_\\_pagesix\\_.htm](http://www.nypost.com/seven/06152007/gossip/pagesix/eating_for_two__pagesix_.htm)



friend” who claims that Ritchie is having the baby to keep herself out of jail, the magazine asks a lawyer about the legal implications of pregnancy in a DUI case. It is not speculated that Ritchie intentionally got pregnant to avoid jail time, but rather, the situation is framed as a more serious legal and social issue, with the lawyer quoted as saying “there are pregnant women who go to jail...and are placed in special needs areas of the jails in which they have access to medical treatment.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the magazine asks “are they ready for a baby?” but quickly establishes, based on interviews with “close friends”, that Ritchie and her boyfriend will both be good, loving parents, rather than an individual who “shouldn’t be allowed to babysit a Barbie”<sup>28</sup> as speculated on the celebblog version of the story. That is not to say that tabloid magazines aren’t critical of celebrity lifestyles; however, the freedom of online publishing clearly allows for a different kind of discourse surrounding celebrity to emerge.

Beyond being rude and offensive just because they can, in what ways are celebblogs actually deconstructing the celebrity system? From one perspective, it is clear that some celebbloggers are simply fans of various stars and enjoy posting images, text and video all about how they live their lives; however, from another viewpoint, celebbloggers can be seen as critical observers of the celebrity structure illustrated throughout their uncensored critique of the Hollywood machinery. Celebloggers tend to do this in two distinct ways: firstly, blog authors are explicit in pointing out the economic workings of the entire system of celebrity, from the

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<sup>27</sup> *InTouch Weekly*. July 2, 2007. Pp 43.

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.idontlikeyouinthatway.com/labels/nicole%20richie.html>

paparazzi to the traditional tabloid and news outlets; secondly, celebbloggers actively expose the manipulation of image that many stars experience via surgery or Photoshop-ing. These two aspects of exposé exemplified in many popular celebblogs are the features which most distinguish them from traditional tabloid media and deserve a closer degree of analysis.

Celeblogs, and blogs in general (Keren 2006:8), are keenly attuned to the world they blog about and are at an advantage by positioning themselves outside the economic structure and thus being easily able to expose it. There is much to critique in terms of the blatant commercialism and lack of artistry in Hollywood, as well as the growing trend of increased numbers of “unwarranted” celebrities (i.e. socialites and reality television stars). Celeblogs tend to focus their critiques on the “celebrity” aspect of the industry, while generally ignoring the actual product produced by celebrities, such as their films or television shows. Celeblogs are almost exclusively concerned with exposing the “real life” of celebrity and, with it, the media structure that works to promote and present the celebrity commodity to the public. A post featuring a reality television show star is a typical example of the type of economic exposé found often on celebblogs. Heidi Montag was one of the individuals featured on an MTV reality television show about living in Los Angeles, entitled *The Hills*. Due to the fact that she is not actually very famous outside of the realm of MTV viewers, the celebbloggers questions the “candidness” of the paparazzi shots:

## Heidi Montag's Bikini Shows Off Her New Breasts

12:05 AM, Filed under: [Home](#) \ [Celebrities](#) \ [Heidi Montag](#)



Now, I don't want to say that these pictures of *The Hills* "star" Heidi Montag in her bikini, showing off her brand **new breasts**, are in any way staged, but that's exactly what I'm saying.

Anyone who thinks that a reality show cast member doing push-ups, play fighting and making out with her **douchebag boyfriend**, (yeah, you Spencer, you're a douchebag) while simultaneously showing off her new body from every possible angle is not a desperate attempt to steal the spotlight from her cast mate / former "best friend" (who happens to have a sex tape coming out), is living in their own scripted "reality" world.

No, these Heidi Montag bikini pictures, while they may appear candid, are anything but. That girl wants people looking at her more than **Lindsay Lohan** wants coke. Well, maybe not that much, but she's obviously desperate for attention. And while I'm not really into fake breasts, I have to say, hers are pretty damned effective at getting attention.

Seriously, though, they're just standing there smiling for the damn camera. They probably paid the photographer to show up.

(For the record, other fake activities featured in this totally staged "candid moment" include: Water pistol fights, Racquetball, Playful chasing, Splashing, Cuddling, Kissing, Lounging, Holding hands, Piggy-back riding, Applying lotion, Posing, Kissing, and Posing.)

There's a huge load of Heidi Montag bikini pictures right here, and even more after the jump.

Figure 3- Heidi Montag's Bikini Shows Off Her New Breasts<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> <http://egotastic.com/entertainment/celebrities/heidi-montag/heidi-montags-bikini-shows-off-her-new-breasts-002428>

It is clear from this post that the blogger views the paparazzi shots as staged and part of a campaign to become a more public figure, planned and executed by Heidi Montag and her soon-to-be fiancé Spencer Pratt (another reality TV show star). When compared to print coverage, in which the photos of Montag and Pratt are treated as genuine real-life moments between two in-love individuals rather than pre-planned publicity stunts, it is clear that celebblogs are actively deconstructing the economic aspects of celebrity while the tabloid magazines are continuing to promote the celebrity and their “product”. In one weekly tabloid, Pratt is quoted as saying when asked about his engagement to Montag, “if you want to know what happened, watch *The Hills!*”<sup>30</sup>. This is reported on without a hint of irony or critique in print tabloids, while the celeblogger at Egotastic.com reported, after several different staged shots of Pratt and Montag appeared, “unless there’s a Heidi Montag sex tape, I don’t care anymore”<sup>31</sup>. While the print tabloid medium is literally buying the act and helping promote Montag and working to establish her as an “extraordinary individual”, the sphere of online tabloid is calling into question Montag’s celebrity credentials and “misuse” of paparazzi (staging and posing, rather than appearing candidly).

Celeblogs are not only successful at debasing the economic aspects of the celebrity system, but are also active in examining the ways in which the media and the celebrities’ themselves manipulate their own image. In this case, image refers not only to their actual bodies, but also the intertextual representations of themselves, as

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<sup>30</sup> *InTouch Weekly*. June 11, 2007. Pp29.

<sup>31</sup> <http://egotastic.com/entertainment/celebrities/heidi-montag/>

Dyer describes, “a complex configuration of visual, verbal, and aural signs...it is manifest not only in films but in all kinds of media texts” (1979: 38). In this era of new media, it often becomes difficult or even impossible to tell which image/representation is “real” and which has been manipulated. Digital technology, Photoshop and plastic surgery have distorted the celebrity image, resulting in a continual questioning of the signs of star production. Celebloggers are active in exposing acts of celebrity image manipulation and, in doing so, are uncovering the often-disguised aspects of physical alteration in the celebrity sphere.

Manovich (2001) describes this post-modern era of new media as allowing for perpetual re-selection of the image:

Rather than assembling more media recordings of reality, culture is now busy reworking, recombining, and analyzing already accumulated media material.  
(Manovich 2001:131)

As described by Manovich, the star becomes the “author” of their own image, “the object”, and in doing so, “the creative energy of the author goes into the selection and sequencing of elements rather than design.” (130) This new development in celebrity production, that is, a selective process of image assembly, results in a simulacrum of classic, less-mediated movie star iconography (i.e. Marilyn Monroe and Greta Garbo). Celebloggers take it upon themselves to point out this state of simulacra and expose the process of production at all levels. Bloggers address these issues of manipulation through various techniques such as calling attention to surgery based on image comparisons (before and after), pointing out heavily airbrushed photo-shoots

and even digitally drawing on the image of a celebrity in an attempt to re-author the image.

In this recent post on PerezHilton.com<sup>32</sup>, Hilton comments on the high degree of Photoshop-ing used on a magazine cover of Micha Barton (whom Hilton refers to as Mushy Fartone) by asking “is that a painting” and saying “we ‘think’ that’s her”, insinuating that the Photoshop-ing has gone so far as to make it difficult to tell if the celebrity is even themselves:

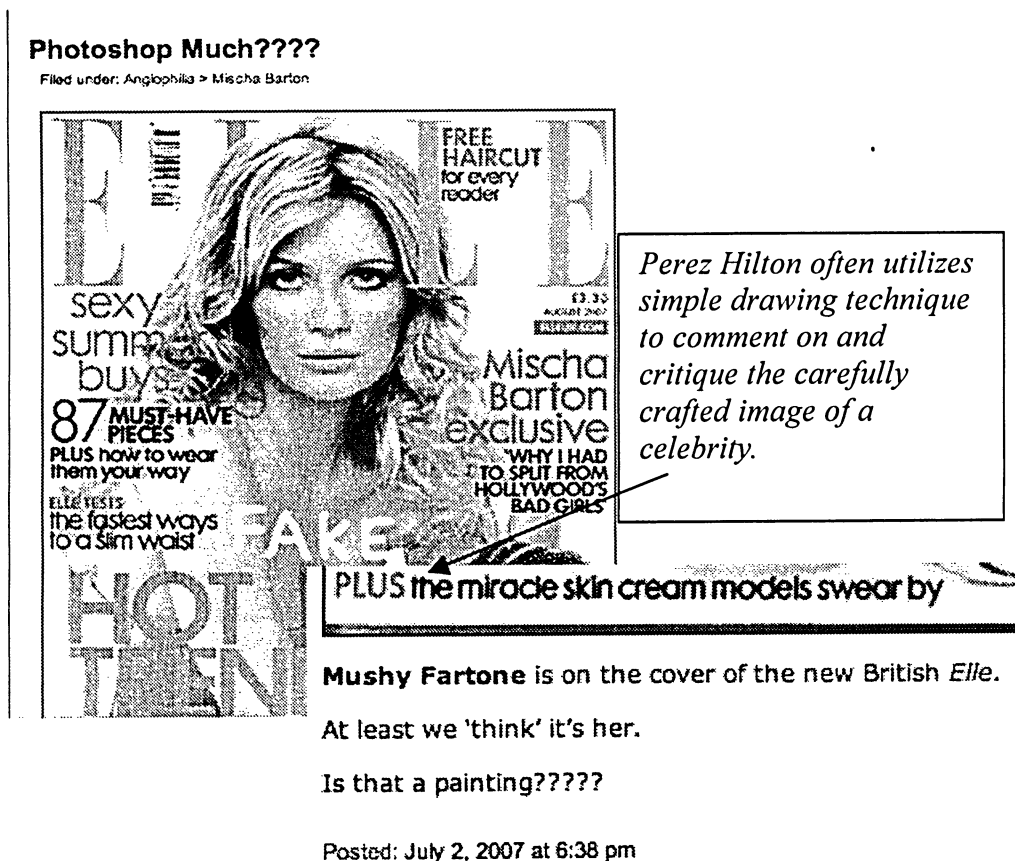


Figure 4-Photoshop Much????<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> <http://perezhilton.com/?p=722>

<sup>33</sup> *ibid*

While bloggers no doubt take part in the re-proliferation of mediated images, they intentionally make an effort to point out the flaws in the celebrity's carefully created image and by doing so, force their readers to question the very nature and construction of celebrity.

The role of the audience in the blogosphere is perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the development of online tabloids. P. David Marshall acknowledges this key feature and suggests "the discrete and carefully controlled and distributed structure of the culture industries...have been elasticized by the different flows of information that have developed via the Internet and the Web..." (2006: 634). These new media have challenged the traditional "audience-subjectivities" generated and maintained by older media, such as magazines and television. New media subjectivities are generated via the capacity of the Internet to both give and receive information and the digitalization process, which allows for the manipulation of online information. What then emerges is a reformulation of the category of passive audience resulting in a democratization of cultural production and a direct challenge to the classic relationship between celebrity and audience.

As with almost all blogs, celebblogs provide an area where readers can post their response, generally labeled a "comment", to any particular post. In this instance, readers are put in the position to critique and question the celebrity structure and often point out details and controversies that the blogger may have missed. Comments are posted almost immediately after a new post is put up, resulting in a discourse between the readers and the blogger. Furthermore, celebbloggers often

explicitly ask the audience to participate in various ways: for example, on the popular fashion-focused website Gofugyourself.com, readers are polled on their opinions about a particular fashion moment. Perez Hilton also asks his readers to help vote on new celebrity couple names, as when Jessica Simpson and her boyfriend of the time, Jonathan Mayer, were voted to be called “Fugs’n’Jugs”. The choice of names was reader suggested and the readers also made the final decision on the moniker. This parody of the tabloid act of couple naming, which grew in popularity after Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck were dubbed “Bennifer” by the traditional tabloid media, is performed and executed not by the celeblogger, but by the audience, thus allowing them to critique the ridiculousness of celebrity naming. While earlier manifestations of celebrity production placed the audience member strictly as a consumer, new online tabloid media are allowing the audience member to produce and construct celebrity as an active participant serving to expose the system.

Allowing the consumer to also be a producer, to have an active role creating the intertextual celebrity sign, is emblematic of a “postmodern media culture” (Bignell 2000:193), and serves to challenge criticisms against the popular culture industry. Horkheimer and Adorno’s stern critique of the culture industries suggested that that the individual is reassured through the actions of the celebrity/star (1972). Horkheimer and Adorno both emphasized the notion that the masses’ consciousness was easily malleable, the system of celebrity an explicit example of this concept. Furthermore, they suggested that the star is meant to epitomize the potential of everyone in American society, when, in reality, the star is part of a system of false



promise within the system of capital, which offers the reward of stardom to a random few in order to perpetuate the myth of the potential universal success. This critique of the culture industries placed the audience as consumer, with a limited role in society:

There is nothing left for the consumer to classify. Producers have done it for him...Not only are the hit songs, stars, and soap operas cyclically recurrent and rigidly invariable types, but the specific content of the entertainment itself is derived from them and only appears to change. The details are interchangeable. The short interval sequence which was effective in a hit song, the hero's momentary fall from grace (which he accepts as good sport), the rough treatment which the beloved gets from the male star, the latter's rugged defiance of the spoilt heiress, are, like all the other details, ready-made clichés to be slotted in anywhere; they never do anything more than fulfill the purpose allotted them in the overall plan. (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972:125)

Horkheimer and Adorno lament that the consumer has no role in classification and the details become irrelevant. However, analysis of celebblogs and the blog movement in general, proves that bloggers and readers are questioning the content produced by the culture industries and are holding producers accountable. A celebrity's "fall from grace" is not accepted and forgotten, but questioned and investigated as the heavy celebblog coverage of Isaiah Washington's homophobic comments and subsequent firing from *Grey's Anatomy* demonstrate. User-generated media (such as mash-ups of Blair and Bush declaring their love for each other) is noted by Marshall (2006) as a unique Internet-specific phenomenon that is contributing to a restructuring of celebrity via "the breakdown in control of mediated culture by the major players in the entertainment industry," (641) thus re-enforcing the role of new media to

emancipate the audience from the role of consumer to role of producer. Contrary to Horkheimer and Adorno's assessment of the culture industries as placating the masses, the blogosphere has allowed consumers to produce and cliché's to be questioned.

## Conclusions

While it can be argued that making fun of celebrities online is in no way influencing the larger structure, such a critique ignores the ways in which readers and bloggers challenge the norms and re-produce celebrity on their own terms. Perez Hilton has been personally responsible for "outing" several closeted homosexual celebrities, and while the ethical implications of his actions may be questioned, he is motivated by his desire to create social change:

I know there is some controversy about outing people, but I also believe the only way we're gonna have change is with visibility. And if I have to drag some people screaming out of the closet, then I will. I think that lots of celebrities have an archaic fear that being gay will hurt their career.<sup>34</sup>

Hilton has in fact out-ed several celebrities and does so not to invade their privacy (although it can be argued that he does), but to challenge societal prejudices and renegotiate the meaning of being gay in Hollywood.

Celeblogs, on the surface, appear to be basic extensions of the classic tabloid format and can be understood simply to be the next stage in the tabloid

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<sup>34</sup> <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14065223/from/ET/>

continuum. However, upon closer analysis, celebblogs can be seen to deconstruct the celebrity sign, and in doing so, challenge the entire celebrity structure, including not only the celebrity, but also the institutions and texts that, together, create the celebrity. But as Perez Hilton's site is starting to receive over 8 million hits in twenty-four hours, on a day when "no one was arrested or going to rehab,"<sup>35</sup> celebblogs are starting to become very important and well-read secondary texts surrounding the celebrity. As sites that circumvent traditional structures, such as the corporate news media and Hollywood figures, such as agents and publicists, celebblogs are providing new grounds for constructing an age-old archetype by aggressively deconstructing the previous structures of celebrity construction and consumption. And it is the democratic and easily accessible nature of the internet that not only allows bloggers and readers to deconstruct the very notion of celebrity, but to participate in the actual act of becoming a celebrity, as the career of Perez Hilton and other Internet-made celebrities demonstrates.

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<sup>35</sup> <http://perezhilton.com/?p=2601>

## CHAPTER 3: ONLINE CELEBRITY

Cory Kennedy has just turned 17 years old. If you type her name into Wikipedia.org, you will find a surprisingly long entry for a girl who has, in fact, done very little. There are fan sites dedicated to her, websites that tell you how to dress like her, an incredibly popular video of her eating Indian food is available on Youtube.com and *The New York Times*, *LA Weekly* and *the Los Angeles Times* have all done features on Kennedy. Perhaps best portrayed by Gawker.com, a site described as “the source for daily Manhattan media news and gossip”<sup>36</sup> as an “Internet It Girl,” Kennedy became famous at the age of 15 for being herself: an awkward, stylish and charismatic young lady. Her rise to fame consists of being photographed countless times by a party photographer, who then posted his pictures of hip and stylish LA party kids online. The images of Kennedy proved to be so popular that she grew into a celebrity at such a quick pace that her parents didn’t even notice and by 16 she was hanging out with Lindsay Lohan and Paris Hilton. Cory Kennedy is the *new celebrity*, emblematic of a marked shift in the ways in which celebrity status is achieved and maintained.

Peter Oakley is also emblematic of the growth of online celebrity. Better known online as geriatric1927 (for the year of his birth), Oakley is one of the more unlikely online celebrities to emerge from the website Youtube.com, a site which allows users to post their own videos for anyone to watch. For a period of time he

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<sup>36</sup> [www.gawker.com](http://www.gawker.com)

was at the top of the most-subscribed list, displacing users that had been on the site since its inception in 2005 (Kumi 2006). A British pensioner, Oakley had become somewhat addicted to watching clips on YouTube and decided that he would post his own clip:

It's a fascinating place to go to see all the wonderful videos that you young people have produced so I thought I would have a go at doing one myself. What I hope I will be able to do is just bitch and grumble about life in general from the perspective of an old person...and hopefully you will respond in some way by your comments. (Oakley in Kumi 2006)<sup>37</sup>

Oakley did considerably more than just “bitch and grumble”; his videos would often tell viewers about his life, such as his experiences growing up during World War II, life in the British Army, and his passion for motorcycling, among other things. The videos, of which there are now about 82<sup>38</sup>, are very simple, featuring Oakley sitting on a chair, almost always in the same room, with headphones on talking to the computer (focusing on his image onscreen, rather than focusing towards the web cam). Oakley simply desired to reach out to the younger generations of Internet users; however, his videos proved to be so popular that he began an online celebrity and a YouTube phenomenon.

My aim in this chapter is to explore how new media, specifically the Internet, have changed the ways in which celebrity is produced as an intertextual sign. In particular, I will discuss how online celebrity is emblematic of a truly democratic

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<sup>37</sup> <http://technology.guardian.co.uk/news/story/0,,1844073.00.html>

<sup>38</sup> For a list of all of geriatric1927's videos, go to [http://www.youtube.com/profile\\_videos?user=geriatric1927&p=r&page=1](http://www.youtube.com/profile_videos?user=geriatric1927&p=r&page=1)

media system. The construction of online celebrity (distinct from, but often leading to, mainstream celebrity) will be analyzed in an effort to determine the degree to which it illustrates the democratic principles of entertainment laid out in John Hartley's *Uses of Television* (1999). In order to establish online celebrity as a distinct shift within the conception and creation of celebrity, a brief history of fame, as laid out by Leo Braudy (1997), will be surveyed. The Internet, as a relatively new technology, has drastically altered some traditional aspects of fame, as described by Braudy; as such, with the use of several case studies to examine the new and possibly democratic aspects of online celebrity, while also taking into account some of the possible criticism of D.I.Y. celebrity and democratainment (Turner 2004, 2006a, 2006b), I will explore the results of new media in terms of the changing nature of celebrity.

### **A (very) Brief History of Fame**

Leo Braudy's extensive history of fame *The Frenzy of the Renown: Fame and its History* (1987) is perhaps the most thorough account of the rise of Western "celebrity" to date. While Braudy's essential claim lies in challenging the assumption that fame is a relatively new phenomenon, through the use of vast and expansive historical examples of fame, my research focuses primarily on "modern" celebrity as measured by its relation to the development of mass media in its various forms. Still, it is important to understand that, while celebrity as we now recognize it appears to be a recent phenomena, it has a rich history tracing back to the act of "self-naming,"

(1987:29) that is giving oneself a new name and in doing so, proclaiming a sort of public identity. The process of self-naming developed in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. in Greece, with the transcription of the oral epics the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* when “the scattered images of the heroic drew together into a prolonged cultural mediation of the meaning of heroism” (30). Fame, in its earliest instances, was not self-made, but grew out of the works of Homer, whose stories embodied a sense of the Greek pursuit for honour. These stories spoke of heroes who came to be known throughout Greece and lead to a type of fame based on achievement rather than a predetermined place in society (37). This type of "achieved fame" is similar to contemporary celebrity in terms of the basic self-driven desire to achieve notoriety city, country and worldwide. However, this earlier understanding of “achieved fame” was often based on some type of talent, skill or intelligence, which is not always the case in the current celebrity structure.

There have, of course, been oscillations and shifts in the ways in which fame is achieved, attained and prescribed. Certainly, the types of fame Braudy describes as the "fame of the spirit," (1987: 150) which included the type of fame achieved/ascribed by/to Jesus and many of the saints, is a different construction of celebrity than we are experiencing today. However, the idea that an individual can become known to a mass, for whatever reason, sets the groundwork for the current discussion and analysis of celebrity and challenges the assumption that mainstream contemporary celebrity is a new phenomenon. Braudy's work even challenges notions of the recent democratization of fame, suggesting that this occurred roughly

at the time of William Shakespeare and Ben Jonson (the late 1500s and early 1600s) (320). The shift from a hierarchical structure based on ascribed, rather than achieved celebrity was not a new shift, as Braudy's earlier analysis of Alexander the Great's rise to fame demonstrates (30-51); however, the late 1500s was the beginning of a significant shift in how one became famous. In particular, this era gave rise to theater, which Braudy describes as "a double-edged sword in the establishment of monarchical status," (331) in which the persona of a specific monarch rose due to more public exposure via theater, but was being played out by an actor rather than the actual monarch, thus de-stabilizing the structure of the monarchy. Good-looking actors portraying "dumpy, somewhat unattractive" real kings (331) became a threat to the royalty who could not measure up to the actor's physical presence or charismatic charm. The actor/monarch duality represented the significant shift in achieved rather than ascribed fame, as the actor had a skill and talent, which lead to notoriety, while the monarch was famed due to an ascribed and established position in society.

With the rise of the theater and its cast of actors (as well as other self-made stars), came the fan:

We now live well along in an age when curiosity about the celebrated is considered reason enough to press for their privacy...But the eighteenth century is only the dawn of such an era. Fame and the famous are just beginning to be discovered as a species of sympathetic magic by which the monogamous can negotiate the world. (Braudy 1987:380)

The rise of the individual, both as idol/celebrity, but more importantly as a fan, can be viewed as emblematic of this early democratization of fame. This usage of the term



democracy suggests both that those who could become famous had been opened up beyond hierarchical structures to some, but also that fans (consumers) had a role in choosing who would become a mainstream celebrity. Thus, the most "unprecedented element in the crucial changes the eighteenth century makes in the concept of fame" (381) is the role of the audience as active in terms of defining celebrity as opposed to passively "responding to is idols." (381) The importance of this shift from a passive mass to active audience of individuals has already been commented on in Chapter 3 and in summary, allows the audience a certain degree of agency in terms of constructing celebrity and actively participating in the celebrity structure.

While the role of the fan is crucial in terms of understanding celebrity, I wish to delve a little deeper into the notion of fame itself, and in particular, earlier conceptions of self-made fame. Many in the popular press (Holmes 2005) claim that fame today is devoid of meaning and that celebrities are "only well-known for their well-knownness" (Boorstin 1962:57); however, there is a significant history of self-made celebrity beginning in America (Braudy 1987:510) in which American popular entertainment was an extension of oneself, rather than a show of the monarchy, "whose point was to watch someone who is clearly inimitable and different." (510) The often-retold rags-to-riches, self-made man story of the mid-to-late nineteenth century established an ideology in which any individual, if they tried hard enough and had a good enough character, could succeed socially and financially (512). Autobiographies and biographies of successful men (women rarely became "self-made" it seems) such as Lincoln and Rockefeller only served to further establish the

self-made man narrative and inadvertently suggest that no special talent was required to succeed, but rather perseverance and determination.

While this narrative eroded during the Great Depression of the 1930s when even the most determined could not succeed, the myth that "inner merit is validated by the spiritual benediction of fame" continued to grow (571). For those with the right charismatic aura, fame was a meaningful possibility. Fame was, and still is, a viable route to attaining the All-American dream. Surely Anna-Nicole Smith and Paris Hilton are typical examples of the rags-to-riches and self-made<sup>39</sup> via fame narratives, respectively. This type of fame, while critiqued by many (Boorstin 1962; Alberoni 1972; Lowenthal 1944), has been suggested to be, by Braudy, the truest from of fame:

The frequent lack of actual accomplishment, which fame moralists find easy to mock is therefore totally functional. The less you actually had to do or create in order to be famous, the more truly famous you are for yourself, your spirit, your soul, your inner nature.  
(Braudy 1987:555)

With reference to Braudy, we can view the online celebrity today as perhaps a more authentic form of fame, as it often lacks "accomplishment" or even extensive effort to create. Furthermore, online celebrity continues the shift towards a democratic celebrity structure, often sidestepping traditional media and publicity apparatuses, resulting in a truly self-made fame. Clearly, according to Braudy's thorough historical framework, fame is not a new phenomenon and being famous without a

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<sup>39</sup> My suggestion that Paris Hilton's fame is self-made does not ignore her family name and legacy. Instead, I am proposing that her fame was personally orchestrated and created based on her desire for notoriety, rather than any skills or talents that resulted in an achievement-based celebrity.

particular special talent or skill is also not a new phenomenon. The debate in various branches of cultural studies (Turner 2004) over the authenticity of “real” celebrity, based on talent/skill and the inauthentic nature of useless celebrity, based solely on persona, is rather pointless, as it does little in terms of exploring the actual construction of contemporary celebrity. As such, I will avoid assessing the relative skill/talent of those who gain online notoriety and will focus explicitly on the ways in which celebrity online is constructed. In the next section, I will explore several instances of online celebrity and consider the ways in which they exemplify a continuation of the self-made narrative and the democratization of the media.

### **Self-Made Million Views: YouTube Celebrity (The Democratic Turn?)**

John Hartley’s *Uses of Television* (1999) describes the ways in which television is used by its viewers and considers how television studies has developed and changed the way we research and understand the phenomenon of the televisual medium. Hartley is particularly convinced that television is a “transmodern” (41) pedagogical tool that teaches viewers about various cultural positions and identities within society. Hartley labels this “democrataintment,” (1999:154) and suggests furthermore that this democratic media sphere allows for the possibility of D.I.Y citizenship, that is, the construction of cultural identity based on the chosen consumption of media choices available. As television broadens its scope of performers, such as more international news coverage and a growing diversity of reality television show contestants, viewers are able to broaden their own sense of

cultural identity based on the various and varied options available: Hartley refers to this process as “semiotic self-determination.” (1999: 47) Hartley’s understanding of D.I.Y citizenship has little to do with production in terms of the audience creating their own content; however, he does thoroughly explore how viewers may and can be using television to become cultural citizens of a global world (163).

I would like to suggest that this conception of D.I.Y citizenship can be applied to an analysis of the Internet and can be further extended to the actual production of content. While reality television shows and talk shows, such as Jerry Springer, are driven by “regular people” appearing and creating content, suggesting that television is more democratic than it has ever been, these individuals are not responsible for putting themselves on television and have less control/agency than the producers/host/editors of the show. The Internet, however, is user-driven with content created by the audience in many instances, as Youtube.com exemplifies. As such, the type of celebrity that is created online is D.I.Y. citizenship in the realm of both production and consumption and is the realization of Hartley’s optimistic conceptualization of semiotic self-determination:

Now is the era of what I call DIY citizenship. In a period of consumer choice, computer-aided interactivity and post-identity politics, semiotic self-determination is emerging as a right, not just a market segment overpopulated with early adopters, nerds and geeks and other denizens of Californicated computer culture. What does semiotic self-determination look like? (1999:181)

Hartley goes on to make use of a popular children’s television show as an example of semiotic self-determination, suggesting that the main character allows the viewers to

learn about basic things such as plot, character, genre, as well as complex cultural concepts such as feminism, choice, and what it means to be a young adult. The show in question is *Clarissa Explains It All*, a sitcom in which the main character, Clarissa, speaks directly to the camera to describe what is going on in her life (basic teenager issues and events). As Hartley suggest, “we’re [the audience] her diary.” (1999: 183)

I must admit, though I had heard of this show, I never had the Nickelodeon channel growing up and I had never watched an episode. But in an attempt to further understand Hartley’s use of this particular show as an example of D.I.Y citizenship, I decided to try and watch a little of the show online. With the use of Youtube.com, an exceptionally popular site for posting and viewing videos, I found a short clip of the show and the opening sequence. Not very helpful. However, there were endless clips of regular people talking about the show, reenactments of the show and montaged clips of the show set to more recent music (the show originally aired 1991 to 1994). While it was difficult to find much of the actual show, probably due to copyright concerns and inability to upload the content, it was very easy to find videos of ordinary individuals creating their own Clarissa-based content. One of these videos, a montage of clips of the show set to a song invented by the creator, has garnered over 16,000 views. While this is a substantial amount, it comes nowhere close to the numbers of views that the most popular videos receiver, which are in the millions. These videos, viewed by millions, are at the center of the new fame machine, separate from the mainstream and fueled by user-producers. And some of the individuals that gain notoriety via YouTube and other D.I.Y. sites do not fit into the traditional realm

of Hollywood stars.

Peter Oakley, a 90-year-old pensioner is a recent example of the atypical nature of online fame. He became very well known in England and garnered much attention from the mainstream media and advertisers after posting videos, but was very reluctant to participate in types of media not related to YouTube<sup>40</sup>. In his seventh video blog, *Telling it All 7*, he did not tell a story about his life as he usually would, but focused instead on the mainstream media response to his videos and his displeasure with the attention he was receiving from advertising, telephone and newspaper companies<sup>41</sup>. As I will later demonstrate, this shunning of mainstream media coverage is not the standard outcome of online celebrity. Oakley did, in the end, do a few interviews and participated in several media events, including singing as one of The Zimmers, a group of pensioners who were brought together by a documentary film maker to highlight some of the issues facing the older generation in Britain<sup>42</sup>. Since the earlier days of his YouTube fame, Oakley has created a website to deal with the high levels of fan and media response ([www.askgeriatric.com](http://www.askgeriatric.com)).

Oakley, while an anomaly due to his age, is emblematic of the process of democratisation and D.I.Y citizenship, which Hartley (1999) attributed as a possible use of television. In this case, as with many cases of online celebrity, the individual who has become famous is directly responsible for the production of the material (i.e. blog, video blog, or creative work) that resulted in their growing notoriety online.

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<sup>40</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9in-eYkvU\\_4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9in-eYkvU_4)

<sup>41</sup> *ibid*

<sup>42</sup> [http://www.thisisderbyshire.co.uk/displayNode.jsp?nodeId=124378&command=displayContent&sourceNode=231734&home=yes&more\\_nodeId=124522&contentPK=17145982](http://www.thisisderbyshire.co.uk/displayNode.jsp?nodeId=124378&command=displayContent&sourceNode=231734&home=yes&more_nodeId=124522&contentPK=17145982)

Oakley owned his own computer and webcam and taught himself how to upload video to YouTube. He was the producer, director and star of his own online show. While Hartley describes D.I.Y. citizenship as essentially having the ability to choose between various cultural identities presented on television as relatable identities, online D.I.Y completes the process of “choice”, allowing the consumer to also be the producer. Much like celebblogs, which are able to ignore the economic constraints placed on other factions of tabloid media and side-step the traditional fame-making machines, online producers are able to be in charge of all aspects of content production and, in doing so, have complete control over their presentation of self to the public. When the mainstream media got word of the success of Oakley’s posts, he became increasingly uncomfortable with the notion that the media would be attempting to tell his story and gain access to private information he did not wish to share. Oakley says in his response to this media focus:

It may sound glamorous to go onto television or be recorded in newspapers, but it’s something that I do not want and would never do. *I mean I’d have no way of editing what they might...*and I think that might be an infringement of my privacy. (Oakley *Telling It All* 7, 2:30)<sup>43</sup>  
(Italics added for emphasis by R. Rosenberg)

The fear that mainstream media might take his statements out of context caused Oakley to shun attention from mainstream media for a significant period of time. He only granted his first television interview to the BBC in February of 2007 (Craven

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<sup>43</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9in-eYkvU\\_4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9in-eYkvU_4)

and Hull 2007)<sup>44</sup>, 6 months after he started posting his videos on YouTube. Instead of venturing into the mainstream, as many online celebrities later do, Oakley preferred to stay within the community where he first became a celebrity and maintain control over the production of his image and celebrity status.

Hartley does acknowledge that new technologies only continue to further the concept of semiotic self-determination, stating, “the new media technologies make ‘DIY citizenship’ not only easier because of extended choice, but also mutual, because of enhanced interactivity and connectivity.” (1999:187) Cory Kennedy, mentioned at the outset of this chapter, is another example of “organically” produced online celebrity with end results very different from that of geriatric1927. I use the term “organic” to suggest that her fame occurred because of accidental circumstance and response, rather than a pre-produced type of celebrity orchestrated and executed by the film, television or music industries. Rather, Kennedy was photographed by Mark Hunter, also known as The Cobra Snake, for his website dedicated to documenting various parties and happenings in Los Angeles. Hunter noticed that every time he posted a photograph of Kennedy, traffic from fashion-focused websites would increase (Hubler 2007)<sup>45</sup>. On a trip to New York, Hunter introduced the then-fifteen year old Kennedy to the editor in chief of Nylon, and she was soon featured in their magazine and is now a fixture on their website. During that same trip to New York, Kennedy’s mother, who was there also, was somewhat surprised that her

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<sup>44</sup>[http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/news.html?in\\_article\\_id=400383&in\\_page\\_id=1770](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/news.html?in_article_id=400383&in_page_id=1770)

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.latimes.com/features/magazine/west/la-tm-corykennedy08feb25,0,591340.story?coll=la-home-magazine>



daughter seemed to “know” so many people in the city: in fact, these people were not her friends, but her fans who recognized her from her online photographs (Hubler 2007). Her online popularity had translated into magazine photo spreads and some degree of “real-world celebrity”. But this fame started simply with people seeing her image online and becoming captivated by her style. According to Braudy, this is in fact the truest type of celebrity in a way, based not on talent or skill, but some innate charisma that attracts and interests people (1987:555).

Cory Kennedy now has her own blog and often posts her own photographs from her parties, daily life and travels. Most recently, she documented her trip to Paris to be photographed by Jean Baptiste for a French fashion magazine (while also being filmed for a documentary). Her surprising rise to fame is a phenomenon that is unique to the Internet in its growth. Journalist Shawn Hubler writes:

If it's [Kennedy's rise to fame] hard to characterize, it may be because hers is a dispatch from uncharted cultural waters. Never before have media, technology and celebrity collided with adolescence at such warp speed. Never before has it been so easy for, say, a middle-class kid with a curfew and no driver's license to rise to international fame almost without her parents' knowledge.<sup>46</sup>

This new terrain of online celebrity is difficult to predict and categorize as it appears in so many forms. Both Peter Oakley and Cory Kennedy became famous online without initially planning to do so: rather, they each presented themselves to the public and audience response dictated their success. While Kennedy had less control

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<sup>46</sup> <http://www.latimes.com/features/magazine/west/la-tm-corykennedy08feb25,0,591340.story?coll=la-home-magazine>

early on in terms of producing her own image, she soon created her own blog and MySpace page, allowing her control and agency over her online presentation. But while Oakley and Kennedy each remain in control over certain aspects of their online image, Kennedy has openly embraced “mainstream media” and is happy to be interviewed, photographed and filmed. She has let go of a certain degree of agency in order to develop a more mainstream, multi-media celebrity status.

### **Democratic or Demotic?: Is Online Celebrity Truly D.I.Y. Citizenship?**

There has been some criticism of John Hartley’s notions of democratisation and D.I.Y. citizenship. Graeme Turner, in particular, has been highly critical of his conceptualization of “democracy” within the televisual sphere. While Hartley views television as a tool of democracy in terms of opening up the media sphere to various types of cultural identities, Turner suggests that there are hierarchies within these structures (2004: 80). Furthermore, Turner suggests that many of the genres in which previously ignored groups have been featured on television tend to reinforce certain stereotypes (80). Most importantly, Turner challenges Hartley’s (and others, such as Rojek 2001; Lumby 1997; Masciarotte 1991) claim that television is a democratizing force and suggests instead that the diversity seen now on television represents a “demotic turn” rather than a profound political change (Turner 2004, 2006). By using the term “demotic”, Turner acknowledges that the media is representing more “ordinary” and diverse people than it ever had previously, but questions the political impact and constructed nature of this emerging “ordinariness” seen on game shows, talk shows and reality television. Turner, writing a few years later than Hartley,

carries over the notion of the demotic turn to the Internet, also acknowledging that there is a growing realm of D.I.Y celebrity emerging online, but is critical of its political potential and “real-world” consequence.

Unfortunately, Turner limits his analysis of D.I.Y celebrity to web-cam girls, that is, women who use web-cams to create pseudo-pornographic websites for profit. While Turner acknowledges that this type of self-made celebrity can be viewed as an “emancipatory medium,” (Cheung 2000 in Turner 2004: 64) Turner is very skeptical and critical of the type of fame achieved by these women:

It is the classical cultural studies bind, of balancing determination and agency. The bypassing of one determining structure-the celebrity industry- certainly enhances the cam-girls’ agency over the content of their sites, but the consequences of their subsequent choices have their own dangers and limitations, as well as their own commercial, and thus determining, contingencies. (2004: 66)

Turner’s focus on web-cam girls and later in his text, on nude celebrity websites, is a short sighted and unfair assessment of online fame. While YouTube was not yet a website at the time of his research, there had already been several instances of online fame. In fact, the very first incidence of international online celebrity occurred in 1999 and had little to do with the web-cam girl industry and pornography sphere of online fame.

According to *Wired Magazine*, Turkish Mahir Cagri is the “world’s first global cyber-superstar” (Arent 1999)<sup>47</sup>, gaining international fame due to his humourous homepage ([www.ikissyou.org](http://www.ikissyou.org)), showcasing pictures of himself with

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<sup>47</sup> <http://www.wired.com/culture/lifestyle/news/1999/12/33122>

accompanying text detailing his hobbies and passions in endearing broken English.

In 1999, when his personal homepage became a sort of global inside joke, Cagri found himself to be an online-born celebrity. While it turns out his webpage had been designed by a friend as a joke (Brown 1999)<sup>48</sup>, Cagri managed to turn his online popularity into “real-world” celebrity by briefly touring in America and becoming a poster-man for the fairytale of fame. “He’s seen as an Everyman who has made good,” stated Darian Patchin, director of Cagri’s publicity tour (Arent 1999).

Surprisingly, Cagri’s cyber-celebrity lasted longer than anyone could have predicted as it has been suggested that he is the inspiration for comedian Sacha Baron Cohen’s widely popular character “Borat”, a clueless Kazakhtani man with a fondness for America. In fact, Cagri attempted to sue Baron Cohen in 2006 for stealing his character and “giving bad message to USA people.” (Cagri in Leckhar 2006)<sup>49</sup>

Cagri’s rise to Internet celebrity in the late 1990s, with a brief re-emergence in 2006 with the release of *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, suggests that online fame is not a brand new phenomenon and is not always linked to pseudo-pornographic sites as Turner (2004) seems to suggest. While Cagri’s is a sad story of possible stolen identity and lost profit, other online celebrities have become successful and well known in both the alternative sphere of online celebrity and the traditional realms of celebrity production.

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<sup>48</sup> [http://www.salon.com/tech/log/1999/11/08/more\\_mahir/](http://www.salon.com/tech/log/1999/11/08/more_mahir/)

<sup>49</sup> <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.11/play.html?pg=4>

## **The *Mainstream/Alternative* Dichotomy for the Internet and Online Fame**

While online fame is certainly constructed in new ways (D.I.Y.) and undoubtedly allows its new crop of celebrities a higher degree of agency over their image and imagining of self, the online realm of celebrity raises some questions in terms of the alternative (or subculture) nature of online fame. The case studies I have already explored are examples of significant instances of online celebrity, but within the mainstream media realm these “celebrities” remain unknown. While the Internet is a ubiquitous technology within North America, certain online phenomenon, such as celebrity, continue to be dispersed, un-centralized events and occur in a much different fashion than the traditional construction of celebrity via mainstream media such as television, film and print. It is the online technologies and software, such as Facebook or MySpace that gain notoriety and “well-knownness” in the mainstream rather than the individuals who populate these sites. While having over 2 million individual views of a self-made video is significant, does it mean the star is a “celebrity” in the traditional sense? Does YouTube fame translate into “real fame”? Can a distinction be made between “real” (traditional) and “online” (modern) celebrity?

Regardless of the ubiquitous nature of the Internet, celebrity achieved online functions in a very different way than mainstream manifestations of fame. The academic discussion surrounding the coverage of political issues online suggest that the Internet is an alternative media sphere, thus providing one possible framework for understanding how and why online celebrity functions differently from celebrity

achieved via more traditional routes, such as film or television fame by establishing the Internet as alternative. As a second mode of exploring online celebrity, I wish to consider the intertextual nature of the celebrity sign; specifically, when a celebrity is not “covered” over a variety of different media, the achieved fame remains related to a specific medium, rather than an omnipresent type of fame that is not bound by any particular medium. Understanding the facets of the intertextual celebrity and the alternative nature of the Internet will provide a clearer understanding of the characteristics of online celebrity.

How is it that a technology as ever-present as the Internet can be described as “alternative”? In this case, it is most relevant to consider specific sites of information and content, such as weblogs (rather than the Internet as a whole), as potentially alternative to mainstream media sources. Political and journalistic weblogs have been considered alternative news media sources since their inception (Johnson and Kaye 2004) and even more so after September 11, 2001, when blogs were used to report on facts which were not necessarily being covered in the mainstream (Johnson and Kaye 2004). As I have already mentioned with reference to celebblogs, weblogs are generally outside the corporate realm (this does not refer to blogs attached to specific major news outlets and networks) and therefore have little to no censorship over their content. Bloggers are free to report on whatever they wish and do not have to adhere to the journalistic standards of mainstream media. In fact, many blogs have pointed out critical oversights of the mainstream media, actually calling into question their supposed “journalistic standards”. For example, weblogs have been credited for

bringing Senator Trent Lott's racist comments, made at an event attended by many journalists, to the forefront when mainstream media was ignoring the story (Hass 2005: 388). Because of the many blogs that covered the story, Trent Lott was forced to resign.

It is significant that blogs were responsible for bringing to light errors and oversights made by mainstream journalists. Bloggers have been able to steer mainstream news coverage and practice a type of journalism that can be described as taking a "decentralized, bottom-up approach...by turning traditionally passive news consumers into active news producers." (Hass 2005: 388, with reference to Gillmor, 2004; Rothenburg, 2003; Rutigliano 2004) D.I.Y. citizenship is explicitly found in blogs, as they allow for any type of individual to have an impact on journalistic issues, which had previously been relegated to an exclusive, mainstream, and corporate realm<sup>50</sup>. Salam Pax, an anonymous Iraqi citizen, is perhaps one of the best examples of a blogger participating in independent, alternative news reporting. His blog, *Where is Raed?*, focused on the political and social situation in Iraq before and after the 2003 American invasion, and was responsible for reporting on issues often ignored by the mainstream Western and Arab news media (Reynolds 2004).

Tanni Haas suggests in her article "From 'Public Journalism' to the 'Public's Journalism'? Rhetoric and Reality in the Discourse on Weblogs" (2005) that a close analysis of citizen-produced weblogs challenges the "familiar, if not predictable,

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<sup>50</sup> The issue of whether or not blogs are reporting the "truth" in the same way other mainstream news sources are is an important concern, but will not be addressed here. It is far too difficult to judge the accuracy of blogs, as well as other news sources. As such, I will consider blogs to be as accurate as other news sources, regardless of their existence outside of the traditional journalistic norms and standards.

utopian and dystopian speculations that tend to accompany the emergence of each new medium of communication.” (2005: 394) While weblogs may be alternative to the mainstream, Haas cautions against assuming that these blogs are somehow more ethical or truthful than mainstream news which is often dictated by overarching corporate structures. Haas proposes, instead, that weblogs, in many ways, are very similar to the mainstream media system as a whole: specifically, the hierarchical nature of mainstream news media is recreated in the small number of highly influential blogs that have emerged as “agenda-setters for the rest of the blogosphere.” (394) Haas thus cautions uncritically assuming that new media, such as blogs, “represent a radical departure from and challenge to more established communication media” (394) and instead suggests that scholars carefully assess the relation and similarities between mainstream and alternative news media. While Haas remains critical of over-romanticizing the outsider-nature of the blog, he nevertheless acknowledges that blogs remain “alternative” in relation to mainstream structure,

Establishing blogs, in general, as alternative media in relation to mainstream media structures provides some explanation for the otherness of online celebrity and, in particular, establishes the “alternative nature” of online fame. It must be noted that the term alternative, in this case, does not insinuate counterculture or oppositional in nature; rather it suggests that the Internet is an alternative media sphere with relation to mainstream media, such as television and magazines. This distinction is important in terms of situating the Internet not as oppositional, but as separate in many ways,



from other kinds of medias. And while the alternative/mainstream dichotomy is useful as a partial explanation of online celebrity, as reason for its alienation from the mainstream, sticking to this somewhat over-used distinction between mainstream and alternative as a justification of the uniqueness of online celebrity fails to explore the intertextual nature of the celebrity sign, and instead simplifies the complex concept of online celebrity to a simple mainstream/alternative dichotomy. In fact, it is the very nature of the intertextual celebrity that limits the online celebrity from “true” fame. How much is known of Peter Oakley, whose videos have been viewed millions of times? Similarly, how much is known of a soap opera star that has not received any type of media coverage outside of their television show? If, by nature, the star is made up of multiple texts, then one is not a “real” celebrity until they have appeared in various forms in various texts.

As was already discussed in Chapter 2, the celebrity can best be analyzed theoretically as an intertextual sign (Dyer 1979; Marshall 1994; Turner 2004), composed of the celebrity themselves as the primary sign, with magazine profiles, television appearances, tabloid coverage and the actual media product itself (i.e. the movie a star is appearing in) as secondary texts which form the intertextual celebrity sign. For a celebrity to truly be well known, they must appear in various media forms. A celebrity who only exists on one media plane is, in fact, not a celebrity: consider again the soap actress, who may appear everyday on television, but is not known to the general public (excluding those who pay close attention to soap operas and actively consume the soap actress in other media formats, such as fan magazines

and websites). To exist only within one media sphere inhibits the degree to which an individual (or group) can be known to the general (or mainstream) public. As such, most online celebrities are not known to the general public and remain celebrities only within their own online media sphere.

For many online celebrities, Oakley included, the choice to remain an online celebrity, rather than exploiting opportunities to become known to the mainstream public, allows for more control over their fame. Much like celebblogs, which manage to exist outside the constraints placed on traditional realms of production by staying online and still maintaining a very large readership, online celebrities can become known to a large number of people, while still maintaining a high degree of agency over their image online. Oakley remained skeptical of offers to appear on television and in magazines because he feared losing control of his image<sup>51</sup>. Existing only within the online media sphere allows individuals to exploit the democratic potential of the Internet and the opportunities that D.I.Y programs and self-publishing allow. And it is not to say that online fame cannot result in commercial success. The Arctic Monkeys, a rock group, are described as “a success born of a "DIY marketing campaign" and an "internet phenomenon" that has allowed the Sheffield four-piece to flourish "despite not receiving much airplay." (Barton 2005)<sup>52</sup> As journalist Barton describes, “the simple fact that the Internet allows a fledgling band's music to be

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[http://www.thisisderbyshire.co.uk/displayNode.jsp?nodeId=124378&command=displayContent&sourceNode=231734&home=yes&more\\_nodeId=124522&contentPK=17145982](http://www.thisisderbyshire.co.uk/displayNode.jsp?nodeId=124378&command=displayContent&sourceNode=231734&home=yes&more_nodeId=124522&contentPK=17145982)

<sup>52</sup> <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/features/story/0,11710,1599974,00.html>

heard without label assistance has heralded a joyous new musical socialism.” (2005)<sup>53</sup>

The Arctic Monkeys are currently signed with an independent record label, as well as the larger EMI for international rights to their music. But while they may now have ties to major record labels world-wide, the D.I.Y. ethic, “musical socialism” and self-made rise to fame exemplifies the growth of online celebrity and the possibilities in terms of moving beyond one media sphere to another.

## Conclusions

Cory Kennedy has chosen not to limit her fame and is appearing in magazines as a bonfire model, posing in staged shots. She also has a monthly feature in *Nylon* (a print magazine), in which she is challenged to take something very un-fashionable, such as “mom-jeans” and make them fashion forward, in true Kennedy fashion. She is also starring in a new music video for The Cribs, which will air on television music networks. As her image is constructed not only online, but in magazines and television, Kennedy’s move into other media spheres will no doubt boost her profile and make her more known to the general public. In allowing herself to become an intertextual sign, she loses some control over her image but will possibly gain in notoriety. As such, it remains a trade-off: to exist online only allows for a very high degree of agency, but can limit the reaches of fame, as the online celebrity cannot be a truly intertextual celebrity sign.

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<sup>53</sup> *ibid*

## CONCLUSION

The *New York Times* recently did a small piece on celebrity blogger, Perez Hilton. Journalist Mireya Navarro wrote:

In barely three years, Mr. Lavandeira [Perez Hilton], 29, has risen from the blogosphere to reap some of the same fame and notoriety as the entertainers he celebrates and humiliates daily on his Web site. With his shameless self-promotion... Mr. Lavandeira has become a hard-to-ignore Hollywood player. (Navarro 2007)<sup>54</sup>

Perez Hilton, born Mario Lavandeira, has come to exemplify the very nature of online tabloid and celebrity. His blog is now referenced in print and television tabloids. He has guest hosted on *The View*, has a book in the works and will soon have his own VH1 reality show. Recently, in a surreal cycle of celebrity coverage, Perez Hilton posted a photograph of himself tapping his reality show, which had appeared in an *US Weekly* magazine<sup>55</sup>. As Hilton traverses the media spheres, his celebrity status will undoubtedly rise, shifting from the alternative realm of the Internet to the mainstream media realm and he will come to be part of the system he explicitly critiques on his celebblog.

The Internet and its do-it-yourself ethic has made it possible for the average citizen and media consumer to participate in the system of celebrity which has

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[http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/29/fashion/29perez.html?\\_r=2&ref=fashion&oref=slogin&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/29/fashion/29perez.html?_r=2&ref=fashion&oref=slogin&oref=slogin)

<sup>55</sup> <http://perezhilton.com/?p=2742>

traditionally been controlled by various institutions and individuals, rather than the media consumer. Guy Debord, in his text *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), describes the celebrity as

A spectacular representation of a living being...The agent of the spectacle placed on stage as a star is the opposite of the individual, the enemy of the individual in himself as well as in others. (Debord 29)

The celebrity, for Debord, exemplifies the false promise of a consumer society, embodying “the inaccessible result of social labour by dramatizing its by-products magically projected above as its goal.” (29) But in an era where 90-year old pensioners, celebrity gossips, and average teenagers can become almost instant online celebrities (often with the option to translate their online fame into mainstream fame), the celebrity no longer represents an “inaccessible result.” Fame is, in fact, entirely accessible to the average person; furthermore, the very notion of fame is being deconstructed and questioned online by media consumers and the governing structures of celebrity (the makers of the spectacle) are being challenged and exposed.

The power of the individual to gain control over a previously elitist and controlled component of society has been achieved via the democratic nature of the Internet and the accessibility of D.I.Y. software and websites. “Broadcast Yourself” the tagline from popular video posting site YouTube.com, has allowed for a very real state of “democrataintment” (Hartley 1999), heralded originally with the development of reality television shows. Reality television shows, however, under network and producer control, do not allow for the same type of freedom granted to online content producers. And while the online realm remains alternative to a certain degree, its

relation to the mainstream has allowed for many online celebrities, such as Perez Hilton, to crossover media mediums. For several years, *InTouch Weekly*, a print tabloid, has featured Perez Hilton as celebrity style commentator and other magazines and television shows have given Perez Hilton some type of coverage. Hilton, in turn, references magazine articles, television shows, newspaper articles, fan-captured videos and other websites on his blog. These sites (both mainstream and online) of celebrity discussion and (de)construction have themselves become increasingly more intertextual in nature, much like the celebrities they feature, with the alternative celebrity-focused discourse found online and the mainstream media commentary frequently referencing each other.

While there have been significant changes to the conceptualization of celebrity, brought on by the Internet, we must be careful not to overlook our continual and growing obsession of celebrity and fame. As ordinary individuals have gained access to the tools of the industry, celebrity has only heightened in its importance. Furthermore, the motives of bloggers and those who seek online fame must be considered not only as democratic and deconstructive, but as neo-liberal and individualistic. For example, celebblogs appear, at one level, to critique and deconstruct fame and the celebrity industry, but are perhaps more focused critiquing the exclusionary nature of fame. Perez Hilton often fights for the underdog and champions gay and lesbian rights on his site, and has turned himself, a blogger lacking in movie-star looks, into a near-celebrity. Thus, while Hilton appears to critique fame, he is more actively involved in changing who can be famous, rather than challenging

the notion of fame in its entirety. While other may bloggers prefer to remain anonymous, they are incessant in attacking certain celebrities they deem undeserving of fame. Often these sites have heroes and villains, those framed as worthy and unworthy of fame, and in doing so, would seem to be more involved in critiquing who can be famous, rather than the entire process of fame and celebrity.

In terms of D.I.Y. celebrity, we are observing a loss of the collectivist ethic involved in early D.I.Y. culture. “Doing it Yourself”, in its conception, was related to working outside traditional industries and political structures to accomplish a goal that may have been over-looked by those in power. Certain aspects of celeblogging and online fame actively demonstrate this move to circumvent the traditional fame industries; however, we are also seeing a departure from the collective ethic of D.I.Y. culture and an explicit shift towards the individual. Celeblogs promote an individual author and an individual viewpoint, while online fame, at the core, is about the promotion of a single person into the stratosphere of fame. While celebbloggers and YouTube celebrities are certainly doing it by themselves, they are also doing it FOR themselves, thus missing out on a key aspect of D.I.Y. culture.

While there are certainly some issues surrounding the explicitly individualistic nature of celeblogs and online celebrity (which is at odds with collectivist ethic of D.I.Y culture and online democracy), celeblogs have given us new ways to perceive stars and have, in fact, changed the way in which the star system functions. As many celeblogs have deconstructed traditional notions of fame, regular individuals have been able to become online celebrities, due to their perceived authenticity in

comparison to the fabricated nature of mainstream fame. With the emergence of new media (the Internet, digital and portable technologies), conceptualizations of the colossal film star are collapsed, as the real and flawed nature of the individual celebrity and the structure as a whole is revealed online. It has become, in many ways, impossible to achieve the larger-than-life status of the early screen star as the many facets of the star sign have been exposed. While the images of early film stars such as Carey Grant and Clark Gable were certainly constructions, there were far fewer discourses surrounding them. The daily life of the star is now tracked, captured, discussed and dissected to the point where we are reluctant to believe earlier myths surrounding fame and celebrity (Holmes 2005). As Perez Hilton makes visible the signs of celebrity production while declaring himself “the Queen of All Media,”<sup>56</sup> he and other online celeb bloggers and celebrities are actively changing the rules of the celebrity game and becoming a part of their own, self-made spectacle of celebrity.

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<sup>56</sup> [www.perezhilton.com](http://www.perezhilton.com)



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