"Bytes, Web Camera, Democratisation!"
A Critical Examination of the Internet's Impact upon Celebrity Studies

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ABSTRACT

The Internet has both developed and challenged the predominant paradigms via which the phenomenon of celebrity is examined. This paper explores a variety of celebrity studies theories and tests their merits within the postmodern age of the Internet and its distinctive brand of celebrity. The relevance of several postmodern theories are analysed with respect to the Internet and celebrity, including the integral roles the simulacra and disembodiment central to the online realm play in rethinking conventional understandings of the relationships between audience and celebrity. Thus, this paper reveals the unique impact the Internet is having upon the notion of celebrity and its theorisations.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of the Internet has enhanced existing and instigated new media activities, thereby challenging and at times subverting predominant theoretical frameworks through which the media are examined, significantly so in the case of the 'celebrity' phenomenon. This paper examines a series of key celebrity-studies theories, which are largely founded upon predominant philosophical movements, and exemplifies the ways the Internet supports or challenges said theories, with practical Internet-celebrity related exemplars.

Within this paper I consider how the Internet's intertextual and democratic qualities, coupled with its valorisation of the mundane, have developed and challenged traditional theories of celebrity. Furthermore, I explore the relationships operating between the Internet and a variety of postmodern theories, analysing the significant ramifications they bear upon our conceptions of celebrity. These theories include the social construction of identity, and the Baudrillardian 'hyperreal' with its notion of all encompassing simulacra.

WHAT IS CELEBRITY?

Celebrity can be understood at its simplest, via Chris Rojek's (2001:10) equation: 'celebrity= impact on public consciousness'. Contemporary celebrities fill the roles occupied in previous eras by royalty and the gods, and likewise inherently involve a degree of *social distance* (Rojek, 2001: 12) operating between themselves and the 'ordinary' public. A product of the decline of monarchy and religion coupled with the rise of modernism, democracy and consumer culture, celebrities today are, to use P. David Marshall's (2006: 13) terms, 'hyper-versions of possible transformations that anyone in consumer culture could achieve'. Therefore, contemporary celebrity requires its audience to recognise/celebrate the primacy of the individual and the malleability of identity, and functions to express temporary moments of transformation, transcendence, and individuality (Marshall, 2006: 20). Celebrities are hence vessels for the creation of social meanings, and either directly or indirectly serve to convey (typically dominant) social values as well as definitions of sexual/gendered identity; thus they play a significant role in organising our perceptions of the world (Evans, 2005: 2).

Rojek identifies three types of celebrity (2001: 17): 1) 'Ascribed', whereby celebrity is obtained via one's lineage/bloodline (for instance royalty), 2) 'Achieved', which is acquired through the perceived accomplishments an individual achieves in open competition (such as actors and sportspeople), and 3) 'Attributed', which is akin to achieved celebrity, except it is not only reliant upon possession of talent/skill, but is largely the consequence of one's concentrated representation as exceptional/noteworthy by 'cultural intermediaries' like agents and publicists. Daniel Boorstin (1961: 57) argues that the modern mass media since the twentieth century have made celebrity a desirable end in itself, rendering the contemporary celebrity a person purely 'known for his well-knowness' (i.e. entirely 'attributed'). However, Jessica Evans (2005: 20-23) notes that celebrity has *always* been inextricably linked with staging and mediation by the media of the day (for example King Louis XIV staged 'pseudo-events' which appeared spontaneous to the public, including public rejoicings regarding French victories). It is armed with these notions of celebrity that I shall proceed to consider some major theoretical frameworks through which celebrity has been examined.

SOME TRADITIONAL PARADIGMS OF CELEBRITY

Media studies concerned with celebrity and celebrity culture have continuously shifted and modified themselves to pertain to various prevalent philosophical

movements. There are therefore several major perspectives through which to understand the notion of media celebrity. One of these is a 'Subjectivist' view, which justifies a celebrity's status by means of their personal, innate characteristics. A celebrity is supposedly imbued with said prestige due to their possession of an innate talent of sorts, talent here perceived as an inexplicable, intangible phenomenon (Rojek, 2001: 29). Celebrity status is hence rendered mysterious and valorised, rather than analysed and questioned. Chris Rojek (2001) distinguishes such Subjectivist accounts with 'Structuralist' accounts of celebrity, which are largely founded upon the 'Culture Industry Thesis'. The latter is affiliated with the Frankfurt School of social criticism, and perceives celebrity as created by and through organised media entertainment (for instance 'the Hollywood machine') as a means of social control. As Rojek (2001: 29) asserts,

> Celebrities are conceptualized as one of the means through which capitalism achieves its ends of subduing and exploiting the masses. They express an ideology of heroic individualism, upward mobility and choice in social conditions wherein standardization, monotony and routine prevail.

As P. David Marshall (1997: 61) notes, 'the celebrity sign...contains the audiences through positioning the type of identification in terms of individuality'. Celebrity presupposes the audience for means of distinction, definition and appreciation. The Culture Industry Thesis involves a consumer capitalist-oriented view of audiences, seeing the latter as constructed by the mass media, their consumer needs marketed as a commodity to exploit for and by advertisers (Turner, 2000). As such, the masses' identification with a celebrity is a manifestation of false consciousness, with celebrities mere fabrications designed to further the aims of capitalism. Therefore, the Culture Industry Thesis supports the 'Propaganda Model' raised by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky. Under the Propaganda Model, Herman and Chomsky view that media content is organised purely around the interests of mass media facilities, the government and other dominant private interests (Herman and Chomsky, 1994). They identify five filters through which media content must pass that determine which content is worthy of printing, which will marginalise dissent, and which will allow for the communication of dominant interests by the aforementioned elite bodies. Of particular relevance here is the Propaganda Model's second such filter, which concerns *advertising* as shaping media content due to its position as the primary income source of the mass media. If one is to support the Propaganda Model, the Culture Industry Thesis of the media's exploitation of celebrity for the sake of capitalistic advancement is a complimentary paradigm.

However, such notions of top-down media content and false consciousness are somewhat shortsighted and overly simplistic. Alternatively consider Chris Rojek's

argument that the audience may too be perceived as socially constructing the celebrity simultaneously with the mass media. As Rojek (2001: 37-38) points out, '...audiences must be regarded as sophisticated, creative agents in the construction and development of the celebrity system.' An example of this is Judy Garland's acquired status as 'gay icon', which evidences a reappropriation of Garland's celebrity image by homosexual audiences. Herein lays a central notion underpinning 'Post-Structuralist' perspectives towards celebrity culture. Post-structuralism transcends the monolithic, grand narratives of structuralism, which value concepts of individualisation and prioritise celebrity-meaning as obtained via talents, character and/or embodiment of a particular subject position. Instead, post-structuralism recognises 'the omnipresent celebrity image and the codes of representation through which this image is reproduced, developed and consumed' (Rojek, 2001: 43-44). This perspective, as Richard Dyer (2001: 17) argues, acknowledges an interaction between narrative accounts of celebrity, and recognises socio-cultural, political, historical and economic contexts as influencing the construction of celebrity. The celebrity hence comes to be viewed as an intertextual phenomenon.

THE INTERNET'S CHALLENGE: MUNDANE CELEBRITY, INTERTEXTUALITY AND DEMOCRACY IN THE POSTMODERN MEDIUM

When dealing with the Internet, celebrity can be seen as an intertextual creation in an additional way. Specifically, due to the Internet's erasure of boundaries between the producers/celebrities and consumers/audiences of Internet content, the Internet-generated celebrity reveals themself an intertextual entity, given context is constantly invoked in the online realm (Agger, 2004: 154). Furthermore, the notion of intertextual Internet celebrity may extend to traditional celebrities, for instance Hollywood celebrities, when they are discussed within online media content. Consider the proliferation of fan sites and 'hate' sites offered on the Internet regarding celebrities made famous via other media (whether these be television, radio, film, music etc). The celebrity is re-contextualised and hence reconstructed online due to the intertextuality evoked by the various websites concerning the celebrity in question. Whilst such intertextuality in the latter sense existed prior to the Internet (through material production of fandom and so forth, for example fanzines) the lack of censorship and far greater access to publish material offered by the Internet increases this intertextuality in manifold ways (Owen, 1999:9).

Given such intrinsic qualities as its intertextuality, media studies have oft touted the Internet as a 'postmodern medium.' Another reason for this status is that the Internet appears to adopt a postmodernist opposition to the notion of the avant-garde. Postmodernism posits that nowadays there is nothing original or novel-everything has been done before (Bauman, 1997:95). Through its shirking of the

avant–garde, postmodernism similarly involves rejection of the notion that one requires an elite, for instance highly educated, position (as was the case in modernism) to possess a viable perspective/opinion. Under this view, the concept of celebrity becomes subject to reappropriation. If all people and their views/opinions are, to at least some extent, equally validated beneath postmodernism, then potentially the 'everyday person' can obtain an equal position in the public sphere as that of a celebrity figure. The 'ordinary' civilian's voice is hence equally worthy of being heard, their life equally worthy of analysis in the media, as hierarchical-status signifiers are rendered somewhat defunct. The high/low cultural divide is herein spurned.

Chris Atton exemplifies contemporary media studies' propensity towards postmodernist paradigms, for instance by his illustrating the ways the Internet involves postmodern revalorisations of the routine and everyday. However, Atton suggests that media studies which attempt to valorise popular (productive) consumption are erroneously looking for the extraordinary in the mundane as well as a rebellion against dominant cultural forces (Atton, 2001). Instead, Atton calls for a model such as that proposed by Andrew J. Weigert (1981), which views the mundane as a taken for granted and largely unexamined 'background of meaning' for one's life. Hence it

> ...is not a background against which extraordinary
> actions are played out; it is the background that is
> itself of interest. We must not render this background
> as foreground since that would once again find the
> extraordinary in the mundane. (Atton, 2001)

The everyday is neutral, subject to examination, and free from imbuement with any particular value. Atton adopts this paradigm in studying contemporary proliferations of the mundane in the public sphere as instigated by the Internet. He exemplifies the online personal webpage which deals with its editor's/author's everyday life (whether this includes their experiences, interests, tastes etc). Herein, someone's life comes to be produced as a work, subject for popular online consumption. Atton therefore identifies that:

> Production and sociation are together wrought from
> everyday experience through...the 'bottom-up
> production of difference', created by the popular
> producer from the available technological resources of
> the dominant order...thus [a personal webpage or a
> 'perzine' is] able to liberate its producer(s) from the
> controls and limits set by the dominant order by
> redeploying its resources in infractory ways. In de
> Certeau's...terms, the place that is the political
> economy and the site of production of the mass media
> becomes inhabited by those people normally outside it.

(Atton, 2001)

THE CONUNDRUMS OF CEL-WEB-RITY

However, one might identify somewhat incongruous and converse consequences of the Internet's permitting recognition of the personal and mundane. Namely, since audiences have received such shifts in media content extremely well, the mundane texts in question are becoming popular and successful, thus ironically elevating their status. They are drawing mass audiences, and consequently, new media events tailored specifically for them, for example 'The Weblog Awards' (http://weblogawards.org/) and the 'Bloggies' (http://2008.bloggies.com/), the latter held at the prominent 'South by Southwest Interactive Festival' in Texas. These events have been created to acknowledge the popularity of such mundane online media content. They are popular awards ceremonies for the best weblogs as determined under numerous sets of categories (in the 'Bloggies' they range from 'Best Entertainment Weblog' to 'Best Programming of a Weblog Site'). Such events mirror awards nights of earlier media such as the U.S. 'Academy Awards' for film and 'Emmy Awards' for television. Ordinary civilians creating personal weblogs are now thus being granted a form of celebrity status (and with this, often recognition in the mainstream mass media as well). The mundane and prestigious hence become inextricably linked and interdependent, as ordinary people and tropes permeate the public sphere, sometimes acquiring unique public recognition in the process (Graham, 1999: 69). Whilst the celebrity status which weblog-award events offer bloggers may often be somewhat limited, fleeting and simplistic in itself (bearing in mind Rojek's notion of celebrity as at its most basic simply involving an impact upon public consciousness), certain winners have achieved ongoing and more complex celebrity status through their continued efforts online.

Consider Internet celebrity blogger Perez Hilton (a pseudonym for Mario Armando Lavandeira, Jr.). Hilton has won the Bloggies' 'Best g/l/b/t [gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered] weblog' category in 2007 and 2008 (and has received numerous other 'Bloggie' nominations). Hilton's weblog (www.perezhilton.com , previously 'PageSixSixSix.com'), in operation since 2004, deals with gossip and personally-captioned tabloid photographs concerning celebrities, actors and musicians, among others. The controversial site has additionally garnered attention for 'outing' supposedly homosexual celebrities. In 2005, television show *The Insider* bestowed Hilton's 'PageSixSixSix' weblog with the status of 'Hollywood's Most-Hated Website', which increased its popularity exponentially. At one point in 2007, Hilton's blog even reportedly attracted 8.82 million page views within twenty-four hours. This year, the *Terra* website (part of the *Terra Networks* global Internet group: www.terra.com) bestowed the title of 'Hispanic of the Year' to Hilton, and Hilton

topped the *Forbes* 'The Web Celeb 25' list for 2007. In 2008, Hilton's blog additionally earned a number six spot in the *Observer* newspaper's '50 Most Powerful Blogs' list, amongst other accolades.

Hilton's fame has earned him his own television series since 2007 on U.S. cable television network *VH1* entitled *What Perez Sez*. Hilton has also made regular appearances discussing gossip on the television series *TRL* and *Extra* as well as television station *MuchMusic,* and had a co-hosting spot at the 2008 *MTV Europe Music Awards*. Additionally, Hilton was a contestant on *MTV's* 'Celebrity Rap Superstar' and hosted a *Best of MADtv* episode in 2007. He has appeared in a Simple Plan music video, and as himself in many reality and scripted television series, including *Victoria Beckham: Coming to America*, *MTV Cribs, Paris Hilton's My New BFF*, *Privileged* and *Family Guy*, among numerous others. Hilton also has his own radio show which relates to the material on his blog, has released a song entitled 'The Clap', and has been referenced in the songs 'Addicted to Perez' by SoftSwap and 'Pedestal' by Fergie. Hilton's weblog even advises to watch out for his book and record label in 2008. Hilton exemplifies the potential of the everyday, weblog-award winning Internet celebrity to achieve ongoing celebrity both online and through other media like television, as opposed to acquiring a mere 'fifteen minutes' of fame.

A further example of such 'everyday' Internet celebrity' is 'Faceless' (http://www.podcastdirectory.com/podcasts/10130) , the young English university student, who reveals intimate details regarding her everyday life, including her sex life, via leaving messages on the answering machine of a London radio station disc jockey. This DJ ('Bam Bam') then gets this tape recording transcribed and employs a computer to read the text back in a monotonic, electronic female voice. Thus the subject's (Faceless') identity is concealed. The content Faceless produces is subsequently made into a podcast, and her podcast has become extremely popular, at one point the *most* downloaded podcast in the U.K. and the second most downloaded in the U.S. Faceless has permeated the mass media, obtaining recognition internationally. Faceless has become a celebrity, yet somewhat seemingly contradictorily, her true identity remains a mystery to her adoring public. Herein we find an intriguing example of the ways the Internet might not only breed an everyday celebrity founded upon the production of mundane content surrounding their everyday life. Now as well, the Internet-generated-celebrity may even involve *no* distinct, tangible identity whatsoever.

Clearly (Herman and Chomsky themselves admit this) new media technologies like the Internet are challenging the Propaganda Model's preconceived 'top-down' model of media operation (for instance with 'bottom-up' produced media content including the aforementioned 'personal webpage' example). A more appropriate paradigm through which to study our contemporary media climate therefore, is Brian McNair's 'Cultural Chaos' theory. McNair suggests that we are currently experiencing

>...a global political environment of unprecedented turbulence and volatility, fuelled by new communication technologies like satellite TV and the internet, in which information flows faster and with fewer possibilities for top-down control than ever before...The accelerated, relatively uncensored information flows unleashed by cultural chaos are pushing the process of democratisation... (McNair, 2006)

Under this theory, vectors of information are produced from a vast number of diverse sources and directed towards equally various audiences. Such structured and simplistic assumptions of media operation as the Propaganda Model are hence antiquated and excessively simplistic. As new media technologies acquire increasing status in the public sphere and converge with pre-existing media technologies (for example the Internet with television) this schizophrenic array of different information flows will only become more pronounced.

This very trend is reflected in the current Internet-celebrity climate. Consider the ways video-making online has flourished, converging technologies and instigating notable cases of celebrity, such as Michael Buckley. Buckley, a U.S. thirty-something Internet celebrity/comedian, has posted a regular video-log ('vlog') entitled 'What the Buck' since 2007 on popular video sharing website *YouTube* (www.youtube.com/WHATTHEBUCKSHOW). Buckley's videos deal with American popular culture, namely the satirising of celebrities (for instance Lindsay Lohan and Beyoncé Knowles). Buckley boasts one of YouTube's most popular video channels, attracting over six million viewers and in excess of 300 000 YouTube subscribers, earning him consistently high ranks in the 'Most Viewed' and 'Most Subscribed' channel categories on YouTube. Buckley broke YouTube records when four of his videos entered YouTube's weekly ten top-rated videos list within the same week. Additionally, Buckley's video 'LonelyGirl15 is Dead!' secured the 'Best Commentary' prize in the 2007 YouTube Awards. Buckley's online popularity has led to his being interviewed in such prominent U.S. publications as *The New York Times* and *The Advocate*, and gained him a regular guest segment on weekly gossip program 'Lips and Ears' on the *Fox News Channel*. Buckley has made appearances on *DirecTV* and Leeza Gibbons' U.S. radio talk show, and contributes to the *Chicago Tribune's* newspaper *RedEye*. Additionally, Buckley broadcasts popular bi-weekly live shows on *BlogTV* (a social broadcasting/viewing website). This suggests Internet celebrity's potential for ongoing success and reveals how Internet celebrities may branch out into additional media via finding that initial break online, reinforcing McNair's Cultural Chaos Theory.

A similar instance of Internet celebrity is twenty-something Chris Crocker, who also creates regular videos for YouTube. Although Crocker had reportedly previously provided video for *MTV's* website and television show owing to his

online exposure, it was Crocker's now-infamous 'LEAVE BRITNEY ALONE!' viral video (http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=kHmvkRoEowc&feature=channel_page) which skyrocketed Crocker to fame in 2007. The video received international media coverage and numerous parodies, arguably the most prominent of which features in the 2008 film *Meet the Spartans*. Consequently, Crocker's YouTube video channel (http://uk.youtube.com/user/itschriscrocker?ob=1) achieved immense notoriety, obtaining nearly 200 000 subscribers and over fifteen million viewers. However, many viewers appear *not* to be fans of Crocker, instead criticising his video efforts, a curious inversion of the oft positively-connoted and admiring regular audiences of more orthodox celebrities. Nevertheless, Crocker's fame reportedly led to his signing a contract in 2007 with *44 Blue Productions* to star in a reality television series entitled *Chris Crocker's 15 Minutes More*. Crocker has also reportedly agreed to collaborate with producer Glenn Meehan to develop ideas for another television show, and has been in talks with staff at *LOGO*, *MTV's* gay-themed channel. Like Buckley, Crocker is experiencing ongoing celebrity and moving into other prominent media avenues.

Rather than being predominantly 'Internet celebrities', some celebrities alternatively find initial popularity and exposure online in limited degrees which leads to their acquiring celebrity status in other media. A prime exemplar is Diablo Cody (real name Brook Busey), whose weblog *Pussy Ranch* (which dealt with her year spent as a stripper) caught the attention of talent manager and producer Mason Novick. Impressed with Cody's writing talents, Novick helped her acquire a publishing deal with *Gotham Books,* which led to the publishing of her memoir *Candy Girl: A Year in the Life of an Unlikely Stripper*. Cody's collaboration with Novick also amounted in her writing her debut fictional feature film screenplay for what would become the immensely popular 2007 film *Juno*, directed by prominent U.S. director Jason Reitman. Shooting Cody to fame, the screenplay won an Academy Award for 'Best Original Screenplay' and earned three additional Oscar nominations in 2008. The screenplay also won a 2008 BAFTA for 'Best Original Screenplay', amongst a myriad of other noteworthy film award wins and nominations. Consequently, Cody has obtained significant celebrity status, and has subsequently written/co-written screenplays for and executive produced the feature film *Jennifer's Body* as well as television pilot *The United States of Tara*, evidencing her durable celebrity and ongoing success/work in the entertainment industry. Cody has also appeared on the popular U.S. talk/interview shows *Late Show with David Letterman* and *"Sunday Morning Shootout"*.

Cody's unique road to success and celebrity reveals the overly simplified nature of 'top-down' hierarchical models of media operation, instead reaffirming Cultural Chaos Theory. Overall, the Internet clearly offers a variety of distinctive ways for one to acquire celebrity status, either predominantly on the Internet itself (as with Buckley and Crocker), or via other media subsequent to some initial online exposure (as in Cody's case).

CELEBRITY THROUGH THE E-MAGNIFYING GLASS

Indeed the Internet's 'everyday' celebrity is a far cry from the traditional, filmic celebrity. After all, the latter's status is founded upon prestige, and 'special', almost ethereal characteristics, which function to distance them as they 'perform' their elevated lives for their admiring public audiences (Barbas, 2001: 43). With the film star, there is an emphatic shift from their talent and work to their personal life, which in Maureen Oath's terms, becomes their 'greatest performance' (Oath, 2004: 19). This proves an interesting contrast to the everyday celebrity as produced/operating via the Internet. The latter's life is their work; they are *living* their special talent. The online celebrity embodies a mergence between traditionally diametrically opposed facets of the celebrity's reality (i.e. personal/private life and public/working life), rendering the definition of celebrity problematic and ambiguous.

However, such contrasts in celebrity instigated by the democratic proliferation of everyday ideas and people throughout the Internet, frequently instigates a *presumption* that the Internet is a revolutionary and entirely democratic medium (Seiter, 2000: 227). Chris Atton will be the first to remind us that the Internet often extends and enhances/magnifies existing tendencies within the media, rather than revolutionising the media and generating entirely novel ones. The contemporary 'everyday celebrity' of the Internet is a perfect case in point, for recognition of the mundane *has* been exploited via previous media and their respective celebrities. P. David Marshall asks us to consider the television celebrity, whom he argues is constructed very differently from the filmic celebrity. As Marshall asserts, 'Whereas the film celebrity plays with aura through the construction of distance, the television celebrity is configured around conceptions of familiarity.' (Marshall, 1997: 119). As such, the television celebrity has been constructed to embody attributes of the familiar which are designed to be acceptable by mass audiences. (This echoes the ways celebrity radio personalities were framed pre and during World War II.) Consider, for example, the television talk show host, who deals with programming that tackles everyday issues/events, and whose direct address to the audience (down the barrel of a camera) serves as a method of inclusion.

Marshall identifies three key impetuses behind this tendency with the television/radio celebrity (Marshall, 1997: 121). Namely, 1) A greater affiliation operates between television/radio celebrity and consumer capitalism. Marshall attributes this to the 'domestication' of the television and radio entertainment technologies which occurred between the 1920s and the 1950s. Herein, television 'personalities' (rather than stars) came to endorse the various consumer products of their show's sponsors and said products often were

integrated into the content of the program rather explicitly. (This impetus supports the Culture Industry Thesis.) 2) Television viewing occurs in a domestic environment (as opposed to viewing a film in a cinema, for instance). 3) Continuity of content/character integrity is supplanted due to the intermittent presentation of commercials throughout a television program.

Modes of the everyday, familiar and routine have permeated previous media and hence have fashioned the 'everyday celebrity' prior to the Internet (dating back to the 1920s). A major difference does however lie in the *motivations* behind the familiarity of the online celebrity. Namely, publishing details about one's personal life online tends to provide a means of public catharsis/recreation for the Internet celebrity (often it is not an 'audience-entertainment' driven pursuit at all). The individual in question is not necessarily (through their production of mass media content) overtly seeking or even desiring celebrity status, but often acquires it unintentionally. Additionally, it is generally not as common (although not non-existent) for personal web pages and the like to operate via a primary means of consumer capitalist endeavours.

A notable case of unintentional Internet celebrity is that of Turkish man Mahir Çagrı, whose personal webpage aimed at acquiring social contacts shot him to sudden fame in 1999. Amongst the numerous pictures of Çagrı, the site (currently located at http://www.ikissyou.org/) features such comments as 'I like to take foto-camera (amimals , towns , nice nude models and peoples)', 'I live alone!!!!!!!!!' and the now famous 'I Kiss You!!!!!'. (Çagrı has claimed the more suggestive comments on his website were the doings of hackers, who embellished Çagrı's personality, exploiting his broken English and cultural background.) The webpage brought Çagrı fame when it became a regular on the viral email-comedy circuit, leading to Çagrı's 1999 U.S. media tour sponsored by *eTour* (a member-based Internet service), whereby the latter commemorated Çagrı at a San Francisco ceremony. Çagrı's webpage has since ranked at number two on *CNET's* 'Top 10 Web fads' and featured in *PC World's* list of 'The 25 Worst Web Sites'. Çagrı has been parodied in such prominent U.S. television shows as *MADtv* and the *Late Show with David Letterman*, the Çagrı phenomenon even reportedly inspiring a bout of Turkish tourism. Çagrı had made international news, featuring in stories on/in *CNN*, *Time* and *USA Today*, as well as making talk-show appearances. Çagrı additionally made headlines when he expressed interest in pursuing legal action against English comedian Sacha Baron Cohen, after claiming Cohen stole his character of 'Borat' from Çagrı's personality and webpage's content (for example 'Borat's' saying 'I like sex' and interest in ping pong were a saying and interest of Çagrı's, displayed on the latter's webpage).

Overall, Çagrı's celebrity, albeit prominent and international, has significantly waned over the years. This suggests that if Internet celebrity is acquired purely via 'gimmick-founded' hype, overexposure and novelty value as in Çagrı's case (as opposed to requiring some degree of work and skill/talent, such as that

underpinning Perez Hilton's comical weblog and Michael Buckley's carefully prepared videos) it tends to be relatively fleeting. Enduring Internet celebrity (as is typically the case with celebrity in other media) seemingly requires consistent work and talent/skills of some persuasion and extent. To use Chris Rojek's aforementioned terms, 'achieved' Internet celebrity typically outlasts purely 'attributed' Internet celebrity.

CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY AND PROBLEMATISING THE ROLE MODEL IN CYBERSPACE

Some more extreme media studies perspectives are forming as inevitable by-products of our postmodern zeitgeist, for instance conceptualisations of identity (including celebrity/audience identity) as altogether socially constructed. Such perspectives posit there is no continuous, integrated self. Rather, facets of the social, including language and action, contribute to the construction of the self in a network of relationality (Gudorf, 2004: 3). If an identity is but a construct, it follows that this identity is subject to *reconstruction*. And this can occur in the hands of the individual in question. John B. Thompson targets such postmodern perspectives towards the media when he states,

> Self is a symbolic project that the individual actively
> constructs....out of the symbolic materials [such as
> those offered by the media] which are available to him
> or her, materials the individual weaves into a coherent
> account of who he or she is, a narrative of self-identity.
> (Thompson, 1995: 210)

Beneath Thompson's theory, celebrities are therefore one among many such symbolic materials through which public audiences come to construct their own identities. The celebrity hence often potentially fulfils an important, personal role with respect to their audience's sense of identity (Ndalianis, 2002: xii). This involves a form of unidirectional relationship, directed from the audience to a celebrity, which Thompson refers to as a 'non-reciprocal intimacy at a distance' (Thompson, 1995: 210). David Gauntlett agrees, asserting that the celebrity consequently often achieves 'role model' status for their audiences, interpreting a role model as someone for audiences to admire, '...to base [their]...character, values or aspirations upon' (Gauntlett, 2002: 211). Subject positions may hence be tested by audiences vicariously through their celebrity role models of choice. Subsequently, audiences may construct/reconstruct their own identities accordingly.

However, the Internet problematises such positioning of celebrity as role model. For if Internet-produced celebrities like 'Faceless' can be ordinary civilians, fashioning media content out of their everyday lives online and not necessarily possessing an innately elevated/prestigious status, what of the role model concept for Internet audiences? Will the latter have to turn to online discussions of 'traditional' (for instance filmic and television) celebrities for the continuation of the role model paradigm? Bear in mind the latter is rendered ambiguous online thanks to the proliferation of hate sites surrounding even the most popular of celebrities, which raises another point: Owing to the Internet's decentralisation, lack of general censorship and ease of access/media content production, celebrities can no longer obtain elevated status as role models quite so easily. Granted, negative views of celebrities have been abundant in previous media such as tabloid magazines, yet not to the Internet's extent. In the Internet's case, where any civilian (not just a professional, largely 'objective' journalist) is permitted a say online, society's role models are inevitably going to become subject to a far more diverse and subjective array of views, hence a significant bout of cynicism. How will our conceptions of the role model stand up against such a heterogeneous, subjective audience? For if a net user scratches the online surface, and discovers negative views towards their role model, the online environment could perhaps alter the perspective of the user in question. The celebrity as role model, may well have fallen from grace. Welcome to the democratic Internet.

SIMULACRA, ROLE PLAY AND DISEMBODIMENT: POSTMODERN HYPER-CELEBRITY IN THE INTERNET AGE

Further postmodernist perspectives, for instance those of Jean Baudrillard, have permeated media studies and its conceptions of contemporary celebrity culture. Baudrillard recognised that modernity was an era concerned with production over which the industrial bourgeoisie held control, unlike postmodernity. Rather, postmodernity is a 'new era of simulation in which computerization, information processing, media, cybernetic control systems, and the organization of society according to simulation codes and models replace production as the organizing principle of society.' (Best and Kellner, 1998: 294) Baudrillard adopts a form of technological determinism, viewing such models and codes as constructing social experience entirely, thereby destroying the distinction between the simulation and the real. In such cases, the simulation hence produces its own reality, becoming 'more real than the real'. Baudrillard refers to this as

'hyperrealism'. This reality can only be represented by further simulation, resulting in a 'simulacrum of a simulacrum'.

It follows that identities are merely subsets of these endless chains of signifiers, not only represented by simulacra, but *constructed by simulacra* in the first place. The human, and therefore the celebrity, is hence a breeding ground of signifiers, their identity permitted no foothold in any firm, traditional sense of reality. Under Baudrillard's theory, the social construction of celebrity identity might be understood as a necessary, audience-conducted process, as the audience attempts to fashion meaning from a multi-directional flow of endless, disorienting signifiers. In such times of confusion, it may additionally be posited that people, as Richard Schikel (1985: 31) states, 'need familiar figures they [can]...carry about in their minds...a sort of portable community, containing representations of good values, interesting traits, a certain amount of within-bounds attractiveness, glamour, even deviltry.' Such solid, secure identifications as often granted to celebrities hence serve to create a sense of security, rigidity and familiarity in our utterly fluid, heterogeneous and ever-fluxing milieu.

However, such rigid identities of celebrity as posited by Richard Schikel are misunderstandings in a Baudrillardian reality. This becomes especially obvious when considering a person's experience as they engage with the Internet. Jeffrey Fisher views Internet use as involving a virtual transcendence of the body and history, the body originally discarded yet subsequently synthesised into a terminal body operating as an extension of Cyberspace. (This is interesting when considering Internet celebrities like Faceless given *freedom from* body and history are not facets one would ordinarily associate with the concept of celebrity). Fisher (1997: 114) goes on to posit, 'Cyberspace is the postmodern paradise, where we forget the ills of our past lives in... the relentless virtualization of reality'. Adopting a Baudrillardian understanding, Internet-users come to exist as terminal online *simulacra of themselves*, their identities entirely built upon this virtual reality transcendent of body and history.

Indeed the virtual self undergoes a serious transformation, and its status as tied to the corporeal self is altogether questioned, when the Internet user engages in virtual reality role play games on the Internet. Consider such Celebrity Role Play games as the 'Must Be Pop RPG' (http://www.mustbepop.net/), wherein ordinary Internet users may pretend to be pre-existing celebrities. Users are free to reconstruct familiar celebrity signifiers amongst one another and play out hypothetical celebrity-related scenarios online. Whilst in cyber form, they hence ostensibly *become* the celebrity, given they are no longer tied to a self grounded in body and history. In a virtual world, nothing but data representation (read: simulacra) abound in egalitarian mayhem, freed from the hierarchical connotations of corporeally-founded reality. When a simulacrum of a person undergoes celebrity role play and the like in online virtual reality, they become inextricably intertwined with celebrity-connoted simulacra (understood here as data including verbal descriptions/characteristics etc of the celebrity in question).

Traditional celebrity identities are hence subject to reappropriation, reconstruction and *mergence* with the ordinary person/Internet user. Within the Internet's simulacra-founded reality, celebrity cannot theoretically survive. Celebrity simulacra are fair game, subject to subsumption into the virtual selves of everyday Internet users.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the Internet is producing a significant impact upon theorisations of celebrity. This paper has analysed and tested the relative merits of various celebrity theories against the relatively new media technology of the Internet and its particular forms of celebrity. The Internet's valorisation of the mundane, as well as its intertextual and democratic qualities, have both built upon and subverted traditional conceptions of what constitutes a celebrity, imbued the concept of celebrity with distinctive paradoxes, and problematised notions of celebrity as role model. Furthermore, the simulacra-founded hyperreality of the postmodern Internet and its affiliated disembodiment, have revealed novel possibilities for the relationships between celebrity and audience. As technology continues to progress with frightening pace, only time will tell whether the celebrity theorisations which have adapted to support the new media technologies of today will bear veracity in a future media and technological milieu.

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