"Reality" Culture and the Social Web
Derek Lackaff (Department of Communication, SUNY-Buffalo)
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New Formations of Stardom in Contemporary Media Culture

What is a celebrity? Or more specifically, what is a celebrity in contemporary American media culture? Traditionally, celebrities possessed a spark of the extraordinary – exceptional athletic prowess, stunning beauty, an artistic talent – that somehow enchanted others. Since the development of mass media, audiences have come to celebrate other types of exceptional individuals, such as the ultra-wealthy, the outrageous, or, in the case of reality television, the almost ordinary. Audiences seem to love following the on-screen and off-screen exploits of their various Idols and Stars, especially as these individuals are framed as fallible and imperfect. It is no longer sufficient to watch celebrities in front of the studio cameras – audiences want to see celebrities off-camera, backstage, and even at home. A television viewer might note how the conventions of reality television – ever-present surveillance of characters, video confessionals and disclosive monologues, an attempted focus on extemporaneous emotional expression – have seeped into other programming genres. It is this shift in the celebrity construct – the acclamation of the ordinary but erstwhile private, rather than the exceptional – that I find interesting.

A second important cultural shift involves the individual's relationship to the mass media environment. The concept of "mass" is certainly under siege, as radio, television, and print networks have given way to highly personal and personalizable media such as iPods, digital television and PVRs, and RSS feedreaders. While concerns about "choice" and the actual plurality of available messages remain, it seems clear that individuals are more closely integrated and active in the processes of media consumption than in previous decades. Further, the contemporary, digital media environment provides individuals with the ability to produce their own media. Textual and audiovisual content creation and mass distribution requires only a laptop or a cellphone, rather than a studio or newsroom filled with

expensive equipment. One's photos and videos on a blog or social network site profile can reach millions of people in a matter of minutes, at least in theory. For the majority of people, this capability has only emerged in recent years with the confluence of socio-technical factors that Tim O'Reilly has christened Web 2.0 and Trebor Scholz and other theorists refer to as the Social Web.

When new media platforms become available, audiences generally look to more-established media cultures to help make meaning from the new platform. Television was initially understood in terms of radio and film, for example, just as audiences are currently trying to interpret streaming video rentals and mobile video according to their conception of television. So when a new media platform emerges which enables individuals to present their casual musings, innermost thoughts, personal photos and videos, and minute-by-minute status updates – to what existing component of media culture might they look? In my work with research colleagues, I argue that "celebrity" and "reality" cultures may be an apparent and accessible behavioral model for the development and maintenance of electronically-mediated identities.

Reality television programming purports to present non-professional actors (ordinary people) who are temporarily thrust into the mass media spotlight. This genre tends to present certain types of attitudes and behavior as normative and desirable. These attitudes and beliefs might include an emphasis on self-disclosure (so the audience can tell what a character is really thinking), the notion that personal privacy is of less social importance than public visibility, and that instrumental gains follow from broad personal exposure. Expressing intimate thoughts on a blog or sharing personal media content such as photos and videos are behaviors consistent with this understanding of publicity and celebrity. Certainly, there are many other factors and motivations for the social behavior that is observed online, but it seems worthwhile to consider the possible influences of old media and broader media cultures.