

Linda Levitt

Stephen F. Austin State University

Levitt.linda@gmail.com

### **New Formations of Stardom in Contemporary Media Culture**

Celebrity gossip blogs, voyeuristic glimpses into stars' lives, and stardom associated with reality programs such as *American Idol* and *The Hills* have become commonplace. How are notions of stardom, celebrity publicity, and the utility of stardom shifting in contemporary media culture and in the popular imagination?

#### *Stardom and Deadliest Catch*

Blending the genres of documentary and reality television, Discovery Channel's *Deadliest Catch* charts the successes and failures of crab fishermen on Alaska's Bering Sea. By virtue of their appearance on a popular television series, fueled by extensive promotion on television and online, ordinary working men are transformed into stars. The episodic presentation of *Deadliest Catch*, the way in which everyday lives are storied, and the insight into the personal lives of crew members enable their stardom in a media landscape in which celebrities' quotidian activities are deemed newsworthy.

The collapse of the star system, coupled with the more recent proliferation of celebrity tabloid journalism in print, on television, and online, altered the cultural production of celebrity. Where stars were once admired foremost for their talents or beauty, today stardom is situated in a different set of attributes because of unprecedented access to still images and video of celebrities often intended to diminish and demean them as individuals. Thus the rough, hardworking men of *Deadliest Catch* can achieve stardom for their dedication to their jobs, for the dangers they face, and perhaps most significantly, for their ability to entertain their audiences. A new style of post-9/11 heroism is part of the appeal of *Deadliest Catch*, which profiles men (and a few women) who make their living in the industry with the highest death rate in the U.S.; their risk-taking is deemed heroic. As crab fishing is also a lucrative endeavor—crew members often earn as much as \$30-40,000 for a few weeks of extremely grueling work at sea—captains and crew earn the admiration of the audience for their work ethic and manifestation of the American Dream.

The dangerous work lives portrayed in *Deadliest Catch*, along with the injuries, personal crises, and interpersonal conflicts played out before the cameras, serve two purposes for viewers: while creating an engaging spectacle for television, insight into the “real” lives of crew members also

provides viewers with a sense that they “know” the men and women featured on *Deadliest Catch*. Unlike many reality series in which participants are placed in a temporary, artificial setting (i.e., *Real World*, *Survivor*), there are real-life consequences to the action that unfolds in each episode of *Deadliest Catch*. For example, when *Cornelia Marie* Captain Phil Harris suffered a pulmonary embolism during season four of the series, an outpouring of posts on discussion boards and on the series’ website indicated viewers’ concern for Harris’ wellbeing.

In the popular imagination, *Deadliest Catch* creates celebrities who are simultaneously larger-than-life and down-to earth.

Following sociologist Joshua Gamson’s argument that postmodern celebrity is “a fictional realm” in which “all information is assumed to be inauthentic” (155), I would argue that the celebrity status of those featured in reality-based television programs stems in part from viewers’ sense that the portrayal of “real” life enables more authentic access than is available for stars whose public lives are produced and packaged for eager fans. Yet the access to captains and crew is carefully crafted by Discovery Channel, executive producer Thom Beers’ Original Productions, and the captains themselves. Each boat in the series has its own website with crew biographies, insider information, and paraphernalia such as t-shirts and coffee mugs which are purchased as markers of fandom. After each week’s new episode, Discovery Channel’s website hosts a live chat with one of the captains or crewmen, fostering publicity for the series and the crews. The rhetoric of these chats emulates the discourse of stardom, as fans write about the degree to which they “love the show” and ask personal questions, fostering an increased sense of intimacy for fans.

Like their counterparts in Hollywood, *Deadliest Catch* crew members contribute to the production of their celebrity through personal public appearances, guest appearances on programs like *The Tonight Show* and *The Martha Stewart Show*, or the popular series *After the Catch*, featuring *Deadliest Catch* narrator Mike Rowe hosting a roundtable discussion with the captains and crew. These appearances encourage audiences to see this group of Alaskan crab fishermen as stars as they reproduce the patterns of celebrity presence.

#### Works Cited

Gamson, Joshua. *Claims to Fame: Celebrity Culture in Contemporary America*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1994.