

TwitterTube
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Stars—They Tweet Like Us!: Celebrity Twitter Feeds and the Illusion of Intimacy

The media product known as the celebrity emerges from a “circuit of celebrity production” in which various cultural intermediaries—the celebrity, her industry producers, the “legitimate” and the gossip-oriented celebrity media—feed off of each other in a constant struggle to control how that individual is represented to audiences. In modern celebrity culture, the extratextual media coverage of stars has played an increasingly important role in promoting the “illusion of intimacy” between a star and her fans/audiences by elevating the private side of the image as the privileged site of meaning. Tabloids and other entertainment-oriented media forms encourage the audience to pursue the “real” person behind the star persona with the hope that, beneath the controlled surface, the star “really” is who she seems to be. Tabloids, in particular, seek to disrupt the carefully constructed public image forwarded by the celebrity-industry producers (studios, publicists, managers, etc) through the revelation of the “unguarded” private self as the “real” or “authentic” star, often challenging the dominant meaning of the celebrity’s image. But the contradictory and ambivalent nature of celebrity means the circuit of production is a highly unstable process and no one player ever fully controls the meaning of the celebrity image for audiences. In other words, the meaning of the celebrity is constantly contested terrain.

Social networking platforms, particularly Twitter, offer new insight into this fraught process of production by highlighting the ways in which the illusion of intimacy can be manipulated by various players in the circuit. On Twitter, unlike traditional celebrity media outlets, audiences are offered immediate and interactive engagements with the celebrity that (purportedly) originate outside of industry control and even specifically challenge other representations of the “real” celebrity. Though celebrity media outlets have also taken to Twitter, I suggest that Twitter offers the celebrity-industry intermediaries a way to recuperate control over the image using the same appeals to the unguarded and private self central to gossip media constructions of celebrity. That is, celebrity Twitter feeds recuperate celebrity-industry control over the image by explicitly engaging the same media discourses and platforms that typically disrupt that control.

The most successful celebrity Twitter users offer a glimpse of the everyday and even mundane details of their private lives, thus stressing the ordinary self behind the extraordinary public image. Twitter’s appeal is based in its interactive nature, offering audiences a more direct sense of engagement with the celebrity than, say, reading a publicist-sanctioned interview in *Vanity Fair*. Though there is typically no way for a fan to *know* whether a Twitter feed is actually written by the celebrity (or to what degree other intermediaries influence the tweets), the very nature of Twitter as a social network gives at least the illusion of the celebrity herself as the sole author of her tweets. This is not to suggest that celebrity tweets are not “real,” and indeed many are genuinely authored by the celebrity. Yet as a site of image production, celebrity Twitter feeds offer glimpses of the star’s private life that *appear* uncontrolled and authentic, even as these glimpses are limited and, often, deliberately staged. In this way, Twitter provides the celebrity and her intermediaries greater control over her image by engaging the same appeal to the unmediated and authentic self more typical of the tabloids.

The illusion of intimacy promoted by Twitter's interactive access is also a site of struggle in which the star can challenge the tabloids' construction of her as the "truth." For example, in the days leading up to Lindsay Lohan's court appearance and jail time, she used her Twitter account to challenge the negative way she was represented in the gossip media. Such a move uses the illusion of intimacy promoted by Twitter as a means to control the representation of her image to her most important audience, existing fans. In fact, she explicitly encouraged fans to "get the news straight from me" via her Twitter feed rather than turn to other media outlets, thus rejecting their representations of her as false and untrustworthy. Of course, using Twitter cannot guarantee her version of her image will be the dominant one, and many of Lohan's tweets have been used by the gossip media as further evidence of her instability. Nevertheless the ability to speak directly to her fans about the "truth" of her situation exploits the illusion of intimacy and offers Lohan and her producers a controlled platform from which to "fight back" against tabloid gossip in the midst of scandal. Such image control is crucial if she wants to rebuild her public career post-incarceration. Within the contested terrain of celebrity culture, Twitter enables the celebrity to (at least appear to) bypass other players in the circuit of celebrity production, recuperate (if temporarily) control over her image and, most crucially, increase the illusion of intimacy with her audience/followers.