

TwitterTube Joseph Faina

Twitter's New Celebrity: The Mediated Need for Recognition

With the recent addition of Kanye West to its ranks, the social media site Twitter seems to have found its poster child. Garnering more than 400,000 followers in his first week, West's incessant posts about every absurdly mundane aspect of his rather extravagant public lifestyle seems indicative of the narcissistic potential of social networking. West's Twitter followers, of which I am admittedly among, are privy to an excess of publicity on a scale previously unimagined.

Neal Gabler reminds us that "celebrity" in the United States developed as technological innovations in media created an insatiable cultural desire for public recognition. Which means that like it or not, we all aspire to be Kanye West. As Twitter continues to grow at an exponential rate this drive to reach wider and more diverse audiences becomes more alluring. Predicated on the idea of instant publicity, Twitter enables a constant search for recognition by one's "followers," likening them to the fanbase enjoyed by traditional celebrities. Much like with Reality television and YouTube, Twitter may be fundamentally changing the ways in which we configure celebrity status. In other words "celebrity" is the guiding ideology of Twitter, with the desire to address and be addressed by one's "followers" serving to create a hyper-public media environment that blurs the public and private lives of celebrities as well as the distinction between celebrity and non-celebrity. With Twitter everyone strives for recognition.

To better frame this discussion I am interested in investigating an interrelated series of questions. How can we better account for and engage with the rhetorical impacts of socially mediated forms of communication on current notions of publicity? In what ways has the Internet, specifically social media, blurred the lines between public and private lives? The link between this blurring and the oft-blurred public/private lives of celebrities is more than coincidental. In the remainder of my time I will clarify the notion of celebrity as the guiding ideology of Twitter.

My statement is anchored in what communication scholar Jodi Dean, in her 2002 book *Publicity's Secret* terms "technoculture," the cultural formations of our increasingly digital society. Essentially publicity and technoculture go together like liberalism and capitalism. This is significant because it implies that our actions not only confine publicity to the online world, but that the online world is synonymous with all others. That is, publicity, in being a product of the late capitalist factors that created the modern conception of the Internet functions with a similar ideological permutation. Just like our systems of currency increasingly organize our economic systems around elements whose intrinsic worth is self-perpetuating so our notion of publicity similarly functions in contemporary technoculture. The ideologies of global capital enable the creation of similar ideologies.

What this means is that publicity is similarly self-serving. In the realm of technoculture, by which now I specifically refer to Twitter, publicity constitutes our subjectivity, forming our identities and carving out spaces in the online abyss. This mode of publicity enables twitter users to experience "themselves as subjects" who are "configured in terms of accessibility, visibility, being known". Thus since the primary realization of one's subjectivity is through their being

known to others Dean concludes that “the technocultural mode of subjectivization, in other words, is celebrity”.

With Twitter celebrity and publicity go hand in hand. The primary path to participation in the technocultural sphere is through recognition. Tweeting in the hopes of gaining a cult of “followers” we align ourselves with publicity as the underlying ideological construct of the Internet. The desire to be known is more than one of vanity however. It has also become a simulacrum of political participation. Dean explains, “for the victim to matter politically, it has to become public, to be made visible, accessible. It has to be known. Those who aren’t known are not victims.” So while Wyclef Jean’s campaign for President of Haiti may be nothing more than a publicity stunt, in late capitalist society this visibility is key and nowhere is this more tantamount than online. As the Internet potentially permeates more and more of our lives, as globalization of capital is sure to continue, this will serve to become the *reality* in every sense of the word. In this regard Jean’s political stunt may also indicate legitimate political action.

If visibility through the modicum of celebrity is what counts as political participation then those who are unable to achieve such visibility will be literally unknown. In a mediated world failure to achieve publicity and recognition is a failure to participate politically. As Twitter continues the complication of online and offline, the drive for recognition in one becomes a necessity for relevance in another. In other words Twitter indicates that being a celebrity really is most important.