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Celebrity, Past and Present

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In the 1920s, gossip columnist Walter Winchell catered to a formidable public appetite for celebrity news, reaching about 50 million Americans via his weekly radio show and daily newspaper column. Winchell relished the power his column gave him: “Democracy is where everybody can kick everybody else’s ass. . . . But you can’t kick Winchell’s” (Gabler 1994: xiii). Precisely because public opinion had become such a formidable political force, the autocratic few who shaped it were cushioned from its blows.

Today Winchell would be posting online and getting kicked by commenters within seconds. In the Internet era, no single tastemaker has the monopoly Winchell once enjoyed, and the lines between producers and consumers of public opinion have blurred. When pop music celebrities like Bono practice international politics and politicians like Brazil’s Lula become international stars, when Lady Gaga can exhort her millions of Facebook fans to protest government policies such as “don’t ask, don’t tell,” when in the week following Michael Jackson’s death millions of people the world over watch a YouTube video of Filipino prisoners dancing to his music, it is time to ask whether we are witnessing structural changes to celebrity or whether the Internet has merely accelerated and extended dynamics that have fundamentally changed little over the past two centuries.

The essays that follow turn our attention to sites ranging from Syria to Silicon Valley, the Museum of Modern Art to karaoke bars, reality television to Instagram to ask how new digital media platforms have changed celebrity—and how they haven’t. Celebrity and fandom have existed since at least the eighteenth century as ways of apportioning status, rendering markets more predictable, disseminating and debating social values, and creating public intimacy among strangers. The rise of the periodical press, the commercialization of photography, the emergence of film and sound recording, and the popularization of radio and television broadcasting all shaped the first waves of modern celebrity. Then and now, celebrity



1 and fandom, as opposed to fame, have been about simultaneity and contempora-
2 neity, about connecting with others through what matters *right now*. Have Tumblr,
3 Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, GIFs and MP3s, search engines, selfies, and
4 reality TV, with their capacities for filtering and ranking levels of fame, distribut-
5 ing images, and exposing private life in public, qualitatively changed what celeb-
6 rity is and how fans interact with celebrities and with one another? Or do these
7 media simply enable celebrity and fandom to move at a much faster pace and on
8 a more global scale? Can we develop a theory of celebrity that identifies its core
9 structural features while also accounting for historical change?

10 The contributors to this special issue explore celebrity and fandom at a moment
11 when new media have redefined what it means to be a person, both in private and
12 in public. Each of the essays explores how celebrity intersects with some of the
13 key social, political, and economic changes of the past several decades, including
14 globalization, feminism, neoliberalism, increasing income inequality, and polit-
15 ical revolution. Each also acknowledges continuities between celebrity and fandom
16 past and present to home in on the truly innovative effects of digital media.

17 In “Profiling ‘Money,’” Carlo Rotella describes the jousting match he experi-
18 enced as a print journalist writing about celebrity boxer Floyd Mayweather Jr.,
19 whose ability to promote himself compensates both for the public’s waning inter-
20 est in boxing and for his own limitations as an athlete. My essay on performance
21 artist Marina Abramović proposes four theses about celebrity old and new and
22 identifies one key innovation of digital media: fans can now interact *individually*
23 with celebrities and with one another in full view of an attentive public. Fred
24 Turner and Christine Larson challenge the traditional opposition between word-
25 based public intellectuals and image-based celebrities by providing a geneal-
26 ogy of network-based intellectuals—Norbert Weiner, Stewart Brand, and Tim
27 O’Reilly—who created the very networks that manufactured their renown.

28 Through a study of karaoke as a technology, a vocal performance style, and
29 a global leisure activity, Karen Tongson shows how celebrity, far from depend-
30 ing on the perceived uniqueness, authenticity, and remoteness of stars, instead
31 thrives on fans who get close to their idols by imitating them. Laura Grindstaff
32 and Susan Murray show how reality TV trains ordinary, nonprofessional actors
33 to produce the emotional outbursts that, once packaged as GIFs, readily circulate
34 online. Alice E. Marwick analyzes the forms of celebrity that proliferate on the
35 mobile app Instagram, and Marwan M. Kraidy turns our attention away from the
36 democratic and neoliberal frameworks that structure most scholarly discussions
37 of celebrity to ask what happens when a pop star joins a revolution and pits her
38 spectacular power against an autocrat’s, as recently happened in Syria.

1 What general claims about celebrities and publics in the Internet era emerge
2 from these essays, and what directions do they set for future research? The con-
3 tributors ratify a by now common observation, that the speed and reach of the
4 Internet have created a more globally connected world; as a result, celebrities
5 and their publics have become more transnational (Tongson, Kraidy, Marwick).
6 The essays also complicate this claim in at least two ways. First, they show that
7 the Internet is itself a multimedia phenomenon: YouTube audiences emerge from
8 those built by pan-Arab satellite TV (Kraidy); the GIFs posted on Tumblr are
9 often drawn from other media, such as reality TV shows (Grindstaff and Murray);
10 and Flickr, Facebook, and Twitter derive their content from live events such as a
11 museum performance (Marcus). Second, several authors sound a cautionary note
12 about the Internet's massive reach, reminding us that more global does not neces-
13 sarily mean more diverse. Highly networked stars and massively large publics
14 can be surprisingly homogeneous: almost exclusively white and male, in the case
15 of Turner and Larson's entrepreneurial intellectuals and their adherents; united
16 by consumerism, as are Marwick's Instafamous and their followers; or linked
17 by very basic emotions and very bad behaviors, as with Grindstaff and Murray's
18 reality stars and their fans.

19 These essays also reveal how much celebrity depends on activities of reproduc-
20 tion and circulation being carried out by a vast public. The pace of celebrity crea-
21 tion accelerates when rates of image production and circulation increase. During
22 the last four decades of the nineteenth century, for example, the rise of photogra-
23 phy and telegraphy yielded a corresponding expansion of celebrity culture. Until
24 very recently, however, if you wanted to share a photo of a celebrity, you had to
25 find a photocopier and stand in line at the post office and were then limited to
26 mailing individual copies one by one. The Internet has sped up and extended
27 celebrity's reach by combining a rapid, decentralized copying machine with a
28 cheap postal system that extends the power of broadcasting to those who used to
29 be only on the receiving ends of TV networks and radio stations. Celebrity has
30 always required the reproduction and circulation of the celebrity's image, words,
31 or voice; the Internet era makes it easier to see that creating celebrity and dissemi-
32 nating it are one and the same.

33 In the past, stars themselves, along with a relatively small number of profes-
34 sional gatekeepers—journalists, studio executives, media moguls—controlled the
35 means and assumed the costs of reproduction and circulation. Now fans enthusi-
36 astically do the work of replicating and circulating celebrity discourse, as entering
37 the search term “Taylor Swift” on Tumblr will quickly demonstrate. In the past,
38 celebrity discourse often moved from public to private; one clipped an image or

1 interview from a magazine read by thousands and inserted it into a scrapbook
2 that was either jealously guarded or shared with at most hundreds of others. Now
3 fans no longer take images out of circulation but instead recirculate them across
4 platforms that are almost all public, in some cases numbering millions of users,
5 in almost all cases potentially viewable by anyone in the world who can access a
6 computer or mobile phone.

7 The increasing prominence of fans who help create celebrity by disseminating
8 it as well as consuming it points to another theme that traverses many of these
9 essays: the increasing proximity between celebrities and fans. Social media and
10 mobile apps such as Instagram now make it easier for fairly ordinary people to
11 emulate the glamorous attitudes and poses of the rich and famous and to garner
12 significant attention for doing so (Marwick), although contemporary media also
13 often elevate ordinariness itself into a basis for celebrity (Grindstaff and Murray).
14 Traditionally, the boundaries separating celebrity and fan, professional and ama-
15 teur, original and imitation were fairly clear, but as the Internet makes manifest
16 how much celebrity depends on processes of copying, those lines start to blur
17 (Tongson). The Internet has also brought celebrities and fans closer to one another
18 by giving both groups more or less equal access to the media that produce celeb-
19 rity and by individualizing fans in public to an unprecedented degree (Marcus).

20 Scholars have been interested in fan behavior for decades but often lacked
21 evidence of what fans felt and thought. In the Internet era, fan commentary far
22 outweighs the material that celebrities and their handlers produce, and the scale of
23 evidence calls for big-data methodology along with more qualitative analyses of
24 case studies. Media platforms that spur fans to express what they think and feel,
25 along with our increased access to that expression, have brought affect to the fore
26 of celebrity studies, as these essays attest, with their attention to recognition and
27 aloofness (Marcus, Marwick); feelings of sympathy (Rotella) and commonality
28 (Tongson); and the central role that emotional displays play in creating and sus-
29 taining celebrity (Grindstaff and Murray).

30 The distinction between fans and celebrities has also become fuzzier because
31 the Internet era has blurred the boundaries between persons and media. We no
32 longer have celebrity-producers on one side and fan-consumers on the other but
33 instead have media users meeting on the same platforms to engage in very simi-
34 lar activities, which for both celebrities and fans include seeking and conferring
35 recognition. Figures like O'Reilly and Abramović become celebrities not simply
36 by inserting themselves into preexisting networks but also by working in tan-
37 dem with publics to build the networks that increase their fame, just as television
38 decreasingly relies on professional celebrity actors but instead cooperates with its

1 viewers and their Internet activity to make stars. Increasingly, celebrities and fans
2 alike are shrewd users of media who also let themselves be used by it, allowing
3 digital media in particular to shape and sustain them to the full extent that the new
4 platforms' ubiquity and rapidity enable.

5 Finally, where there are publics, there are politics, and these essays suggest
6 that new media and new forms of celebrity and fandom emerge from, promote,
7 and oppose new political frameworks. In the decades following World War II,
8 scholars and pundits took democracy and Marxism as their reference points when
9 evaluating the pros and cons of celebrity. Many of the essays gathered here turn
10 instead to other political forms: dictatorship, autocracy, monarchy, and revolu-
11 tion, with their competing cults of personality (Kraidy); postcolonialism, with its
12 challenges to authenticity and originality (Tongson); and neoliberalism (Marwick,
13 Grindstaff and Murray), with its emphasis on markets, branding, and individual-
14 ism. In the past, critics of celebrity relied on what now seems like an optimistic
15 contrast between democracy and totalitarianism, warning that mass media stars
16 whose appeal seemed populist in fact fostered the kind of uncritical mindless-
17 ness and homogeneity typical of fascist propaganda machines. Now neoliberalism
18 threatens to neutralize democratic promises of equality by blending totalitarian-
19 ism's insistence on complete access to the self with capitalism's production of
20 increasing precarity. Celebrity may not be driving these political changes, but as
21 these essays demonstrate, celebrities and their publics occupy increasingly impor-
22 tant positions on the information highway along which those political transfor-
23 mations travel. The essays that follow pay as much attention to that highway as
24 to the vehicles and drivers plying it, reminding us that it's the journey, not the
25 destination. To recall a meme popularized by Marshall McLuhan, a networked
26 celebrity intellectual commenting on the changes wrought by electronic media:
27 the medium is the message.

28 Reference

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