

In the Future, No One will be Famous or The Downsizing of Celebrity and its Possible Effects on the Future of the New York Times Online Edition

In the future, no one will be famous.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/28/business/media/28askthetimes.html?pagewanted=all>

Marc Frons, chief technology officer, digital operations at the New York Times, answers reader questions about the technological direction of the Times. It's an interesting read. Throughout the column, Frons and the readers seem to be trying to reconcile technological innovation with print convention while attempting to avoid lapsing into clichés of “progress” vs. “tradition.” One passage in particular caught my attention. Frons writes:

“We will be offering a way to personalize a small part of the home page within the next few months so that you can see headlines from sections that would not ordinarily appear there while leaving the rest of the page intact. But a completely personalized version of the home page isn't something we have seriously contemplated, at least not yet. There are a couple of reasons for this. First, such a page would probably be daunting for most readers to set up and maintain. Second, and more important, I think most readers who visit the NYTimes.com home page go there because they are interested in what the editors of the New York Times think is newsworthy. There's great value in that.”

This got me thinking – about the parallel evolutions of the web and celebrity, and how it might affect the relative importance of the editors of the New York Times. Back in 1996, when the web was in black-and-white (OK, in static images and text), I made an online project called The Multi-Cultural Recycler¹. The Recycler predicted, half tongue-in-cheek, that the then-nascent webcam culture would ultimately produce web celebrities - who would then be subject to cultural recycling. (Keep in mind, the most popular web-celeb at the time was a coffeepot². So this idea was actually a bit of a reach.) Anyway, I wrote at the time that webcams would be the realization of Warhol's infamous fifteen minutes of fame.³ And with the onslaught of YouTube, they arguably have been. So now my next half tongue-in-cheek prediction: in the future, no one will be famous.

Predicting is a perilous endeavor. Often it's trendy to be among the first to predict the “death” of a cultural phenomenon. I can assure you, I do not aspire to be a cutting edge cynic. So let's not think of this as the Death of Celebrity. Maybe the Downsizing of Celebrity would be a gentler, and more realistic, way to put it.

Let's start with the current web-celeb landscape. YouTube has produced a number of celebrities. Some – like Chris Crocker and Obama Girl – stay in our consciousness for awhile. Others are quickly forgotten. So, my first hypothesis:

* Internet fame doesn't scale well.

Unlike film, television, and print media, the Internet effectively has unlimited spectrum space – so it's easy for celebrities to proliferate. But with so many web celebrities dividing up the public attention span, their level of celebrity must at some point drop below the threshold of "fame." We have, incidentally, already experienced this phenomenon in the parallel universe of television reality programs. Reality show stars have become so plentiful, their fame has devolved to the point where it most resembles that of quiz show champions of the 1970's and 80's. (A several time returning champion on a popular quiz show could command a lukewarm degree of celebrity in the US for a couple of weeks. After their run was over, retired champions quietly departed to the backstage of our collective psyche.) Today's YouTube stars, while often displaying more interesting talents than either reality show contestants or quiz show champs, seem destined to slip into a similar non-stardom. Fame has just become too fragmented.

But is that necessarily a downer? Let's examine my second hypothesis:

* Fame is becoming a dubious distinction.

Celebrities whose fame turned to infamy – usually owing to some moral indiscretion - have been with us since time immemorial. But it's not just a matter of personal behavior. John McCain's tragicomic "Celeb" campaign ad, which juxtaposes Barack Obama with Paris Hilton and Britney Spears,⁴ begs for pop psychological analysis. It's surely no coincidence that the McCain campaign chose to feature two celebrities known for imprudent behavior. But the commercial's message – at least its overt one - is that celebrity itself is necessarily anathema to substance. The implication is that the public by and large already understands that to be true - and that if you don't believe it, you're naïve. Sure it's campaign hogwash – but like most campaign hogwash, its ridiculous assumptions feed on actual public fears. Who then, would risk their career by becoming a bona fide celebrity?

But – back to web celebs. Let's look at bloggers. What makes a blogger famous? As Nick Douglas points out, it's a complicated question. Is it readership? Is it links from other blogs? Is it being featured in the mainstream media? Douglas's position on the latter:

“So is it worth schmoozing reporters to get in Forbes? Please. These lists drive traffic to themselves, not back to the subjects. Some magazines don't even link to blogs from their online pages. What a waste of attention. But hey, if you'd rather feel famous than *be* famous, go ahead and suck up.”⁵

Douglas hits upon an important point here: old school vs. new school notions of fame. Traditional ideas of celebrity and importance tell us that famous, important people are anointed by famous, important publications. That's why Marc Frons assigns “great value” to a homepage assembled by New York Times editors. But to a blogger commanding a million sets of eyeballs, that kind of fame is akin to hereditary succession. But – eyeballs or no eyeballs, the famous blogger is not really accepted as a celebrity by

the old guard. While he may have a million readers, he's vying for an increasingly small share of the public attention span. And, maybe he doesn't even *want* to be famous. He's a new breed of celebrity – the lay-celeb.

But, as Douglas's comments remind us, the lay-celeb has all the validation she needs – and she and her counterparts are becoming increasingly influential. As the balance of power continually shifts from the mainstream media to bloggers, will online publications like the New York Times cease to exist – or at least diminish in importance - *as units*? Will they instead become primarily producers of individual articles, to be assembled like components into a myriad of online publications? Will we all assemble our own New York Times home pages - or perhaps home pages comprised of articles from a number of sources? Or, more likely, will we select customized home pages assembled by our favorite lay-celeb editors – much like we read blogs by our favorite bloggers today? In other words, will today's decentralization of content production become tomorrow's decentralization of editing? TimesPeople,⁶ the New York Times's own social networking application, is moving toward that scenario already. Other sites, such as Newsvine, allow the user community to vote their favorite story onto the front page, further decentralizing the editing process.

Although my discussion of the decentralization of editing will likely be recognized by many readers as a manifestation of remix culture, it's also about the downsizing of celebrity. The New York Times and The Drudge Report are celebrity publications – in other words, the publications are celebrities. Despite old school/new school divides, to be featured in the Times is still seen by many as an anointment of “importance.” Will that same level of importance be perceived if a New York Times story resembles a cross between an Associated Press wire story and an RSS feed – freestanding content that will appear in some publications but not others?⁷ By the same token, what value will awarded to the appearance of an article on the front page of a site like Newsvine,⁸ where the placement decision is made by an anonymous group of readers with unknown qualifications? The public may not be ready to give up on editors completely. The shift, then, could be away from the most famous content and toward the most famous compilations – those compiled by the most famous compilers, for lack of a better term.⁹ Famous compilers may not command the celebrity of Matt Drudge – but we're looking at a downsized fame anyway.

The New York Times's move toward customizable home pages brings to mind concerns that have been around for several years that mainstream online media could send us individualized content based on publications' surveillance of what we read online. Could we miss the opportunity to read news outside our personal blindersphere - thus being dangerously deprived of a breadth of information? Given the proliferation of media skewed to specific viewpoints, Big Brother technology isn't necessary. People seek out customized media themselves. Americans, at least, seem to be gearing their blog reading toward those blogs with whose political viewpoints they already agree.¹⁰ No surprise there.

So, soon, instead of favorite bloggers we may have favorite compilers – who agree with our points of view - for both mainstream and independent content. The two may grow increasingly difficult to distinguish from one another. But if this all comes to pass, mainstream online media will likely need to produce more content to meet the demands of increasingly narrowcast compilations – making each piece of content less important. Independent compilers and compilations, on the other hand, will become more important.

And celebrities? They'll be as rare as Elvis in Las Vegas.

-Amy Alexander
08/08

¹ <http://recycler.plagiarist.org> While The Multi-Cultural Recycler is still online, it is currently in disrepair. Since it relies on external webcams, it was necessary for me to weed out dead webcams from its database and replace them with new ones periodically. I kept that up for several years, but stopped doing so by about 2002. Among other things, it had become difficult by then to find continuously updating webcams that displayed static images. Recently, I found the Recycler, with its mid-90's formatting and stated optimization for Netscape 2.0, included on a website devoted to abandoned websites.

² <http://www.cl.cam.ac.uk/coffee/coffee.html>

³ <http://recycler.plagiarist.org/r1/recyclerenglish.html>

⁴ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHXYsw_ZDXg

⁵ <http://valleywag.com/tech/internet-famous/whos-really-the-most-famous-blogger-246134.php>

⁶ <http://timespeople.nytimes.com/packages/addons/timespeople/>

⁷ Some readers may wonder why I don't mention personalized web portals. The reason is that they involve editorial control only at the macro level, not the micro. In other words, portal builders can choose content from particular sources, but not the content itself.

⁸ <http://www.newsvine.com/>

⁹ One could also refer to them as "editors." I just didn't want to create confusion with those editors who edit articles.

¹⁰ <http://www.themonkeycage.org/blogpaper.pdf>