

Celebrity and Mediated Social Connections

Neil M. Alperstein

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Fans, Friends and Followers in the Digital Age

palgrave
macmillan

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ISBN 978-3-030-17901-4 ISBN 978-3-030-17902-1 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-17902-1>

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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

For Spencer and Gabriel

PREFACE

For over 20 years I have been studying the imagination, in particular the ways in which celebrities—modern-day goddesses and gods—enter into our nocturnal dreams, daydreams, fantasies, stream of consciousness and related self-talk. I had the good fortune to study with John Caughey, an anthropologist who after spending time in India and Micronesia returned to the United States to focus on contemporary American culture. His 1984 book *Imaginary Social Worlds* has been a major influence on my scholarly work, and I learned from him ethnographic methods that provide a gateway into my informants' inner worlds. Much of my scholarship has in the past focused on advertising, as it is the one form of modern communication that has clear intent to sell or at the very least influence the consumer. If those years of research taught me one thing, it was not to take what we see before us—what's on the surface—for granted. The real work is below the surface, and getting there is no easy chore. There is great resistance, as there should be, to allow one to enter into what has been a very private sphere. I am indebted to more than 500 people who over the years have recounted their dreams to me, reported the thoughts they arrested during media consumption and told me stories of how what they gleaned from media consumption entered into their private thoughts and fantasies as well as their everyday discourse. I was never interested in decision-making or influence, the site of much advertising research, as I was in mapping the relationship between media consumption and our private world.

Along the way, something happened, which I might describe as a watershed moment that changed the way people consume media and the related

ways in which we process its content, sloughing off most of it as a result of overload, but internalizing some of it as a way of making sense of our everyday lives. That change, of course, is digital media: social media, apps, games and related technologies like the smartphone and more recently digital assistants and virtual toys. The major questions raised in this book, and additional ones to which I attempt to provide some answers, are what happens when media is with us pretty much all of the time, and even monitors our sleep (Fitbit); what happens when communication that used to be one way becomes interactive and perhaps many to many; and what happens to the imagination when what used to be our private world spills out without filters in the form of tweets, messaging, comments, likes and dislikes? Most importantly, I think, with regard to the latter, is there still room for the imagination when the world we live in is becoming more virtual, driven by digital assistants, augmented and virtual reality, and the like that call on us to extend our inner world into the outer public world, as we are called upon to respond quickly, viscerally? I think there is good news and bad news to be had, but I won't give away the conclusions here—you'll have to read the book. I can hear your internal musings now; your reactions to my unwillingness to give you the punch line. You might keep it to yourself, or you might want to take to twitter. Everything is possible in this new world of mediated social connections in which our insides are turned outward, as what used to be our stream of consciousness now streams our consciousness in public.

When I first began researching the imagination, my orientation was based on the theoretical model regarding imaginary social relationships we form with unmet media figures. There is nothing particularly new about the influence of celebrities, as the idea of emulation was the basis during the early part of the twentieth century for the use of theatrical performers and then movie stars in advertising. The repeated exposure through traditional media like radio and television, as well as gossip magazines, allowed actors and other entertainers, sports figures and political figures to become a part of individuals' everyday lives. However, with the emergence in the 1990s of a Web 2.0 24-hour participatory culture, the nature of our social connection to media has arguably intensified between the individual and the celebrity, in terms of how celebrities may model behavior and how individuals manage their own identities and learn how to operate in their own social world. New mobile technologies and content delivery systems, such as Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, Pinterest and Twitter, have brought about changes in the ways we relate to

celebrities, as individuals redefine what it means to be a fan, friend or follower, including the possibility of achieving an actual connection to a celebrity, as we move from the “illusion of intimacy” to what may be referred to as the “possibility of interaction.” Additionally, social media require a higher level of disclosure on the part of the celebrity. As a result, issues around both intimacy and authenticity arise. Both the idea of imaginary relationships and the changing nature of digital media have implications for the ways individuals communicate in the second decade of the twenty-first century, digital media being just one component in a broader referent system through which we make, unmake and remake meaning in our everyday lives. Accompanying the new rules for the ways in which celebrities operate in the new media system is the phenomenon of self-branding and in that the advent of micro-celebrities. Now pretty much anyone can play at the game of participatory media, perhaps with the end goal of becoming a star. But let’s just say, for now, that it is complicated, as fans, friends and followers communicate along with celebrities and micro-celebrities within the celebrity-industrial complex.

Establishing and conducting a mediated connection with a celebrity is an idea that grew out of television research in the 1950s based on observations by British researchers Horton and Wohl regarding what they termed parasocial interactions between viewers and media personalities who looked out of the TV set at the viewer, giving the impression that the viewer was being spoken to directly. The parasocial nature of the interaction was media centric, as Horton and Wohl did not track how that parasocial interaction traversed the point of media consumption to enter into other aspects of everyday life. In the early 1990s I first wrote about the ways in which advertising served as a mediating force in imaginary social relationships that held the potential to both stabilize and destabilize the relationship. Such imaginary relationships continued off the screen, extending Horton and Wohl’s original idea. I explored this phenomenon in my book *Advertising in Everyday Life*. My theoretical orientation conceives of individuals as active participants in making sense of their everyday lives through, among other things, the use of celebrities. This position is consistent with a cultural studies approach rooted in conceptualizing audiences as active rather than passive dupes of the media industry. I credit individuals with a sense of intelligence as well as a sense of humor and skepticism as they find pleasure and meaning in the dynamic process of creating, maintaining and perhaps dissolving imaginary relationships with celebrities.

It has become evident with the emergence of digital media that the nature of imaginary relationships changed. First, the media through which we consume and more recently produce content has changed. Second, many people feel compelled to always be connected to media, another indicator of a shift in consumptive habits. Third, the interactive nature of digital media also signals a cultural shift in which participation is not an option. And fourth, what used to remain inside our heads has now been extended into our technologically based world. Contemporary life is mediated by technology in ways that have altered the nature of what it means to be social. As played out on social media, in particular, changes in technology are accompanied by a shift in cultural expectations regarding what is appropriate and what is not appropriate. By way of example, I recall one of my informants recounting a story where she chastised a friend for actually calling her on her mobile phone when, as she said, the friend should have merely texted her back. In other words, texting is appropriate; talking, not so much. As a result of cultural shifts, the nature of social connection on and through digital media has changed in unprecedented ways. In the world of digital media, we may be more influenced by weak social connections than by those people with whom we have a strong relationship. Connection becomes more ephemeral in this era of digital media. I therefore have titled this book *Mediated Social Connections* as a way of advancing the ideas of parasocial interaction and imaginary social relationships in the age of digital media.

In *Celebrity and Mediated Social Connections: Fans, Friends and Followers in the Digital Age*, I map onto the path that fans take as they go about their daily lives sometimes engaging with celebrities, micro-celebrities, and other friends and followers. The book begins with the idea of what Horton and Wohl described in 1956 as a parasocial relationship in which a TV talk show host figuratively reached out to the audience member and in a pseudosocial manner spoke directly to her or him and extends that idea into the world of social media, which has turned the notion of a one-way relationship with a celebrity on its proverbial head. The possibility of direct interaction and the illusion of intimacy between fan and celebrity and fan opens up the possibility to play out a fantasy within a mediated environment that may feel real or authentic, but may ultimately be illusory. Beyond the possibility of literally engaging with a celebrity, fans may become voyeurs as they witness a celebrity's interactions with others and perhaps other celebrities. There is also the opportunity for the fan to circulate the meanings they find in celebrity postings on

the web, modify those meanings through memes, for example, or alter those meanings in significant ways through their own participation in the world of digital media. We take Siri and Alexa for granted, but they along with augmented and virtual reality as well as robotics represent the next tectonic shift that has implications for our outer, as well as our inner, worlds. All of this is placed within the context of a shift in our understanding of reality itself, as the concept is fractured in light of not only augmented or virtual reality, but also the perceptions that digital media fosters a mediated reality that extends from the really real to the almost real to the unreal. In other words, “real” has taken on multiple meanings and such meaning can be applied to relationships we create and maintain through digital media and beyond.

This book breaks new ground with regard to the parasocial nature of relationships with people we don’t actually know as a function of our engagement with technologies that allow us to jack in, blurring the lines between fantasy and reality. This critical examination of our mediated everyday lives presents a paradox in which our digital lives are benefited by mediated connections while detracting from our analog relationships, as a result of which we engage in illusory connections that may impinge on our imagination. Digital media have altered our imagination to the extent that our perceptions of what is real and not real have been altered. Digital media and related technologies have changed the way we are learning to deal with the ever-shifting lines between fantasy and reality. We still utilize celebrities and we use micro-celebrities and other participants engaged in digital media, but the ways in which we connect with and to those media have been extended. Yes, we still fantasize about celebrities and other media figures and include them in our imaginary inner worlds, but we also seek to engage with and about them in a more interactive manner. I hope the chapters that follow help to illuminate the changes that are taking place and provide some guidance regarding those changes and their implications for our society and culture.

The topics covered in the following chapters are intimately related, but admittedly they are wide in scope. While the broad theme revolves around the role that digital media plays in our everyday lives, the central thesis, however, focuses on the changing nature of relationships. I think of this book as a watercolor painting. Unlike oil paintings where dark colors are applied first and lighter ones follow, watercolor works just the opposite. So, it is with a broad brush stroke that I begin to layer this book; each chapter, however, adds greater background and detail. It is only when you

step back from the book that you see the ways in which the translucent quality of each chapter forms a coherent story of mediated social connections in the digital age. Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to the paradox of our digital existence, setting forth the thesis of the book, which, simply put, is that social media is not very social, at least not very social based on our historic understanding of what it means to be social. Social networks, as demonstrated throughout this book, are based on loose connections and tend toward weak ties. Social media platforms ushered in as new communication media have us staring in the mirror of narcissism, sending ephemeral messages that whiz by like shooting arrows into the air and not caring where they land or if they land at all. There are times when we do care, like when a celebrity responds to an Instagram post or tweet. For a time a fan's social status is elevated. And, because celebrities and micro-celebrities are so engrained in our mediated popular culture or rather our popular culture is so engrained in our social media, we get to be voyeurs as celebrities use digital media to reach out to one another, as fans become privy to inside information. This makes us feel good. As well, we gain a sense of closeness when intimate details are shared or exclusive content about a celebrity's life emerges. Over time we feel like we really know them. Chapter 2 extends the theory of imaginary social relationships to consider the impact that digital media have on our imagination—daydreams, reverie, mind wandering, fantasies and nocturnal dreams. Anthropologist John Caughey coined the term imaginary social relationships, which he described as one-sided relationships in which the individual knows a great deal about the celebrity, but the relationship is not mutual. Caughey's theoretical model suggests individuals utilize imaginary social relationships with celebrities as a way to shape their own identities and their feelings about themselves. Chapter 3 takes a step back in time to consider how children are inculcated into a world of digital technologies, whether it be apps, games or websites. When very young children receive their first teddy bear or other projected object, they psychologically begin to engage with a mediated world. Teddy bears notwithstanding, today children engage with what is being referred to as the Internet of Toys (as opposed to the Internet of Things), in which case an electronic object like Furby, in its latest iteration, learns to respond to a child. Robotic toys are becoming more commonplace, especially those based on artificial intelligence. We know that imaginary relationships are ways for children and perhaps adults to elaborate upon, that is act out, real experiences. The question addressed in this chapter has to do with what

happens when the “real” relationship is with a robotic toy. Chapter 4 considers the role of celebrities in selling their own branded products and products they endorse through the use of social media, as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat as well as dedicated websites become forums through which celebrities can communicate with their fans in order to promote the purchase of products and services. The chapter focuses on celebrities like Kim Kardashian, Lady Gaga and Justin Bieber as exemplars of the use of social media as an advertising and promotional vehicle. Such buying opportunities presented by celebrities allow the fan to “label” themselves as a fan and craft an identity based on attitudes and values put forth by the celebrity. Chapter 5 takes a critical look at the phenomenon of micro-celebrities that has been fostered by a Web 2.0 culture that encourages user-generated content (UGC). In order to exemplify how micro-celebrities operate, the chapter follows travel vloggers who have acquired a significant fan base that helps to support their adventures. Along the way these travel vloggers sometimes get caught between the authenticity and sincerity required of them and the world of commerce that allows them to continue their adventures. Chapter 6 moves from the world of micro-celebrity to the role that bona fide celebrities play in the world of direct-to-consumer prescription drug advertising (DTCA). Direct-to-consumer prescription drug advertising is the fastest-growing form of advertising, topping \$6 billion in expenditures in 2016. Celebrities play a key role in promoting prescription medications, including entertainers, actresses and actors, sports figures and political figures. This chapter provides an overview of the ways in which direct-to-consumer prescription drug advertising (DTCA) has moved from its beginning in print and television to include forays into social media platforms, what is referred to as eDTCA. The chapter investigates the role of celebrity spokesperson and ePatients in the context of promoting prescription drugs. Chapter 7 looks at contemporary social and political movements that have been fueled by digital media. The chapter investigates how celebrities participate in the Me Too movement, and it looks at the ways in which ordinary individuals, like the Parkland High School teens, who were by unfortunate circumstance drawn into the limelight and quickly learned to navigate the tempestuous waters of social media. Chapter 8 offers an ethnographic interview of an informant who is engaged in a mediated social connection with an Olympic ice-dancing couple. The interview illustrates how what may begin in legacy media leads to information seeking on the Internet and onward to establishing mediated

connections with celebrities and like-minded individuals. Sometimes those mediated connections lead to actual social relationships. This book paints in layers of increasing detail how dependence on digital media and related technologies impacts relationships with people we don't actually know, but with whom we may feel a sense of closeness. The closeness we feel is a function of the mediated social connections that fans, friends and followers develop with celebrities in contexts as varied as commerce, social issues and culture on a global scale.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to many people who have helped me arrive at this point in my academic career of observing culture and learning from those around me who have generously contributed to this project. I would like to thank especially John Caughey, PhD, with whom I studied as a graduate student, and it was through John that I was first introduced to the concept of imaginary social relationships. His model has become the bedrock of much of my research, and I am eternally grateful to him for leading me down this intellectual pathway. I am indebted to my colleagues at Loyola University of Maryland's Department of Communication and the graduate program in Emerging Media of which I am the founding academic director. I am grateful for the support, in particular, of Elliot King, PhD, a colleague and partner for the past 25 years. We have forged a friendship and intellectual bond that has nurtured our academic interests in digital media and online education. I have said many times in the past that I would not be here if it were not for my wife Nancy whose life-sustaining efforts brought me back from near oblivion, and it was through her gallantry that I have survived the ravages of cancer; indeed I have thrived to live another day. I want to give special acknowledgment to Elaine Bourne Heath, PhD, who many years ago mentored me and nurtured me as a teacher and scholar. I will always be indebted to you and cherish the role you played in my early career. I would also like to thank my parents who allowed me to wallow in my own boredom to the extent that it stimulated my imagination and opened up my imaginary social worlds. Several of the ideas in this book were germinated in my musings on the blogsite Medium.com. There I have written on myriad topics that, like this book, reflect my

eclectic tastes in popular culture. I thank all who have engaged with those blog posts, several of which are based on my scholarly research. The conversation doesn't have to stop at these pages, as you can find me on various social media platforms including my website www.mediatedsocialconnections.com. At Palgrave Macmillan, I am indebted to Shaun Vigil, Senior Editor, Cultural, Media, and Communication Studies, who commissioned this book, and to Glenn Ramirez for managing the production of this book. I thank the anonymous reviewers for their critical feedback and to others who have offered their critical commentary. I would also like to thank Camille Davies, Editor, Cultural, Media, and Communication Studies. And I would like to thank the production team at SPi Content Solutions, SPi Global, in particular I want to thank Project Manager Sarulatha Krishnamurthy.

CONTENTS

1	Introduction: Mediated Social Connections: Place, Imagination and Togetherness	1
2	A Model of Mediated Social Connections	31
3	Jacking in to an Extended Reality	67
4	The New New Sensibility: Selling Celebrity/Celebrities Selling on Digital Media	95
5	Micro-celebrity and the Management of Self-Presentation on Digital Media	129
6	Skin Wars: Building Mediated Social Connections to Promote Prescription Drugs	161
7	Social Movements: Our Virtual Collective Consciousness	195
8	Conclusion: What About Us?	223
	Index	237

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1.1	Direct message between a celebrity and fan	15
Fig. 2.1	Three processes of turning inward	40
Fig. 2.2	Caughey’s three types of attraction	42
Fig. 2.3	Three reasons why people turn inward	44
Fig. 2.4	Be like Mike Meme. (Be Like Mike Meme. (n.d.). Memegenerator.net)	49
Fig. 3.1	Jibo. (https://www.jibo.com/)	71
Fig. 3.2	The Internet of Toys have the ability to collect data. (Justin. (February 28, 2017). Plixer.com . Protecting our privacy in the Internet of Toys. Retrieved from: https://www.plixer.com/blog/iot/protecting-privacy-internet-toys/)	77
Fig. 4.1	Three ways of building a celebrity brand	98
Fig. 4.2	Marshall’s three levels of self-presentation	101
Fig. 4.3	Kim Kardashian’s social media followers/subscribers (March 2018)	112
Fig. 4.4	Most popular YouTube stars in the world	114
Fig. 4.5	Top YouTube earners 2018. (Robehmed, N. & Berg, M. (December 3, 2018). Highest-Paid YouTube Stars 2018: Markiplier, Jake Paul, PewDiePie And More. Forbes.com . Retrieved from: https://www.forbes.com/sites/natalierobehmed/2018/12/03/highest-paid-youtube-stars-2018-markiplier-jake-paul-pewdiepie-and-more/#19d410c1909a)	115
Fig. 4.6	Fan response to Logan Paul’s video post. (Fan response to Logan Paul video post. Retrieved from: https://twitter.com/aaronpaul_8/status/948032944408444928)	116

Fig. 4.7	Logan Paul’s apology. (Logan Paul apology. Retrieved from: https://twitter.com/LoganPaul/status/948026294066864128)	117
Fig. 5.1	Types of comments	146
Fig. 5.2	Network of networks	147
Fig. 5.3	Sentiment analysis of Gone with the Wynns’ 23andme video comments	152
Fig. 6.1	Five qualities of mediated social connections	177
Fig. 6.2	Kim Kardashian’s psoriasis tweet. (Kim Kardashian Psoriasis Tweet. https://twitter.com/KimKardashian/status/102490867327176704?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.healthline.com%2Fhealth%2Fpsoriasis%2Fcelebrities-with-psoriasis)	180
Fig. 6.3	Cosentyx Twitter launch	182
Fig. 6.4	Direct messaging Cosentyx	184
Fig. 7.1	Actress Alyssa Milano, October 15, 2017, “Me Too” tweet. (Alyssa Milano “Me Too” Tweet. (October 15, 2017). Retrieved from: https://twitter.com/Alyssa_Milano/status/919659438700670976/photo/1?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.independent.co.uk%2Fnews%2Fworld%2Famericas%2Fme-too-facebook-hashtag-why-when-meaning-sexual-harassment-rape-stories-explained-a8005936.html)	203
Fig. 8.1	From parasocial to imaginary to mediated connections	233

LIST OF TABLES

Table 5.1	Social media followers/subscribers	142
Table 5.2	Video uploads and income generated (Socialblade.com as of November 2017)	144
Table 6.1	A partial list of celebrities promoting prescription drugs	178