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**FAMOUS (ON THE INTERNET)**

**By: Hilary Leachman**

The rise of social media and the ubiquity of digital technologies has transformed how media is both consumed, and created. In 2005, YouTube was founded, taking advantage of these new technologies and enabling the easy sharing of grassroots entertainment separate from the traditional media machine. Today YouTube is a phenomenon: it is a place for the traditional media to ensure their product remains relevant in an era where cord-cutting means traditional entertainment outlets are increasingly becoming obsolete. Beyond this, YouTube has *also* spawned its own industry – a roster of YouTube celebrities who have become famous for sharing their lives on the platform. These individuals talk directly to the camera, vlogging (video blogging) their lives, performing hauls and challenges, cracking jokes, and essentially becoming famous for being themselves for an audience; for showing us a glossier, more produced version of a silly home movie. These celebrities – YouTubers – often refer to themselves under the banner name of “Team Internet”. They actively seek to present themselves as something radically new and different – a break from traditional celebrity.

Those active on the YouTube platform refer to themselves broadly as part of “Team Internet.” It is a term that designates these individuals (and their fans) as a part of a movement – something new, a competitive alternative collective to the traditional media machine. However, drawing on the work of media scholar P. David Marshall, examination reveals numerous similarities between traditional and YouTube celebrity; this supposedly ‘new’ form of celebrity is in fact simply an intensified extension of the traditional celebrity, bearing marked similarities to the traditional television star, in particular.

Like the television celebrity, the essential job of a YouTuber is to build an audience who will return time and time again, allowing a platform for sponsorship and advertisements (advertising is, in fact, sometimes the sole income of a YouTube celebrity). Further, their content is predicated and structured in such a way as to create a bond with the audience – their work is to ensure that the audience feels they are more than fans – that they are in some sense *friends* with the person they watch. Thus YouTubers create an inoffensive, advertiser-friendly and accessible persona in order to draw viewers repeatedly in via this persistently maintained persona. Another way in which Marshall notes the aura of the television star is diminished is through its occupation of a “privileged location” in North American households. In a digital age, however, this connection is further intensified: We are no longer spatially or temporally bound to the living room, or a particular air time and can indulge in these personalities any time, in any place. If you’ve five minutes to kill, you can open YouTube on your cell phone and spend some time with your favorite personality. There is an intimacy to the ways in which we view these people; they are not simply in your homes – they are in your hands on you cell phone, in your bed on your laptop.

This is one explanatory reason for the popularity of YouTube, not only do we feel a connection with those we view, but we become *directly involved.* YouTubers utilize this connection, creating what Marshall has termed a “micropublic” around their online persona, allowing for the dissolution of their celebrity ‘aura’ (something Edgar Morin describes as the ‘godlike’ quality of the star.)

Of course, aura is also an intrinsic part of the formation of celebrity – the drive to curiosity to know more – and the aura cannot be completely dissolved, and makes itself known in instances where the YouTubers character is broken, revealing that YouTube celebrities are *playing* themselves, rather than *being* themselves. Regardless, the YouTube celebrity is clearly not an entirely new phenomena; it is an adaptation of traditional forms of celebrity to the digital age. What then, is the reason for this adamant declaration of difference?

The answer to this question has much to do with the generation most active on the platform – Millennials. By and large decried as a hegemonic agglomeration of narcissistic personalities obsessed with social media, YouTube celebrity seems an obvious result. This is however, too simplistic, and ignores all but the most surface of elements affecting Millennials.

The outlook of Millennials is far bleaker than that of preceding generations. They are perhaps the most educated generation in history. However, their financial situation is dire, with higher levels of debt and fewer opportunities for employment. The American Dream remains alive and well, but constantly reminded of their hardships, Millennials have fantasized traditional forms of success as something new. It is here, that YouTube celebrity emerges.

First, YouTube celebrity is represented as a dichotomous other to traditional media because the millennial generation feels the need to take a subcultural stand against a traditional system that no longer benefits them. Insisting that the YouTube celebrity is new is thus a rejection of the traditional capitalist system that created them.

Second, and perhaps ironically, YouTube celebrity exists as a reaction to the very systems that allow it to exist: digital culture. In a society where every representation of the self is carefully curated to depict an Instagram-perfect life, it becomes difficult to assert a unique personality. There is a culture of similarity in which everyone is a perfect selfie with a Valencia filter. In a culture that places great value on a very particular form of self-curation, YouTubers exist as a re-assertion of the importance and validity of the individual.

This is however, a dangerous ideological illusion. Problematically, the American Dream is not, and has never been available to everyone. Social systems put into place by the government largely benefitted white, cisgender males, leading to incredible racial and gender wealth gaps. Certainly the American Dream was attainable – but not for all. Sociologist Mary Keegan Eamon has noted a similar divide in access to digital technology; this “digital divide” reflects existing patterns of social stratification. The YouTube community erases this divide. It claims a utopic egalitarian inclusivity, and yet a majority of those who achieve success are those traditionally able to achieve the American Dream. The Hierarchical structures ordering the world, are not so easily disabled. Certainly they may take on the guise of the radically new, but ultimately, despite *appearing* to be new, the similarities of YouTube celebrity to traditional celebrity reflects the continuing power of the status quo. It is an ideological illusion, a subcultural, generational fantasy.