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Microcelebrity and the Branded Self

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Introduction: Identity Crisis

Kobena Mercer writes: ''Identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt or uncertainty'' (1990: 43). In this chapter, I'd like to consider a relatively new form of identity linked almost exclusively with the Internet and increasingly spoken about through the language of crisis: the notion of self as ''microcelebrity.'' I coined that term in 2001 while researching a book on camgirls: young women who were broadcasting their lives over the Internet (Senft 2008). Back then I was trying to describe how camgirls utilized still images, video, blogging, and crosslinking strategies to present themselves as a coherent, branded packages to their online fans.

Since that time, the discourse of ''brand me'' has exploded into the public sphere: check the business section of any bookstore, and you will see at least half a dozen titles exhorting the importance of self-branding. In a similar vein, the practice of microcelebrity (which I define as the commitment to deploying and maintaining one's online identity as if it were a branded good, with the expectation that others do the same) has moved from the Internet's margins to its mainstream. When people request examples of microcelebrity practice, I respond by asking them to consider what they themselves do online. Have they ever agonized over whether something belongs on a work or home website? Deleted or untagged unflattering photos posted by others online? Worried about privacy settings on a social networking service? Read a website devoted to ''praying for'' or ''in memory of'' someone? All of these are part and parcel of microcelebrity.

Even for those who consider themselves off the grid with regard to social media use, some basic facts seem increasingly clear. First, there seems to be growing consensus that surveillance is the order of the day, especially when speaking about the time one spends on the Internet. Of course, employees have long understood how employers discipline their online behavior through instruments such as firewalls.

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What's different today is that now they are also being subjected to surveillance from companies they use "for fun" where, increasingly, privacy is treated as something users opt into (rather than out of). What this means for users is that, unless they expressly state otherwise, their updates, interests, and "likes" are instantly publicized to others by way of architectural features such as tickers and feeds. Social media architecture also encourages users to monitor the activities of others, all in the name of social connection. As one media writer put it, these features "make it so you know your friends better than you ever thought you could" (Parr 2011). To act responsibly under these conditions, the logic goes, one must always behave on the Internet as one would if placed on a public stage, because, in a very real sense, one is.

Related to the belief that the Internet has become a stage is an argument that a successful person doesn't just maintain a place on that stage; she manages her online self with the sort of care and consistency normally exhibited by those who have historically believed themselves to be their own product: artists and entrepreneurs. Yet, at the same time that people are beginning to perceive a coherent online presence as a good and useful thing, they are also learning that negative publicity can be quite dangerous to one's employment, relationships, and self-image. This is the source of a growing cultural anxiety regarding "over-sharing" online, which takes many forms: stories of people fired from jobs for something they posted on Twitter; parents visited by authorities after a child posts a home video to YouTube; families angered when they learn about a daughter's pregnancy via her best friend's blog; lovers who learn their relationship is now "complicated" through Facebook – the list goes on.

Online Identity: Media, Naming, Doing

If microcelebrity is so fraught, why engage in it? When attempting to understand the "crisis" of microcelebrity, it can be helpful to recall that, online, identity functions in at least three ways. First, there is the identity of the Internet itself. As the recent rise of the prefix "social" makes clear, this identity has shifted over time: once originally conceived as a space for housing research and a tool for collaborating for scholarship, the Internet has morphed into a place fostering everyday congregation, communication, and "hanging out."

The second (and most common) notion of online identity has to do with the identities of the human beings who use Internet. Just as they do offline, users identify themselves, and are identified by others, through a range of overlapping categories such as gender, sexuality, race, age, religion, language, ability, nationality, and diaspora. This "naming" language is not accidental but rather inherited: most academics who write about online identity are trained in fields such as anthropology, sociology, race and gender studies, media studies, and cultural studies, where such language is common. Most began their careers doing identity-oriented work off the Internet and transferred that knowledge gained offline to online venues as the Internet grew in popularity.

With the rise of the "digital native" has come a third way of thinking about online identity: as framed by what people do while on the Internet. When identity is conceptualized in this way, language about performing, writing, reading, interacting, gaming, participating, lurking, and so forth comes up. Obviously, the second and third identity categories supplied above overlap: one can be a Farsi blogger who participates on one site and lurks on another; a deaf gay male Jewish gamer; a disabled camgirl; and so forth. This overlap between theories of "naming" and "doing" has been extremely valuable to the field of Internet research. Theories of "doing" – generally coming from scholars of Internet ethnography, games studies, and user experience – have provided observations about online identity that are full of thick description and longitudinal commitment. Conversely, "theories of naming" have been invaluable in staunching naïve (and often industry-driven) optimism that one can be "anything" online, regardless of psychological, sociological, and political realities offline.

The Internet as Marketplace; Users as Sellers, Buyers, Goods

Of all the identity changes the Internet has undergone over the past 40 years, perhaps the most contentious one has been its recent shift into a means for creating, buying, and selling goods, driven by online advertising and e-commerce. According to J.P. Morgan, over one-third of all shoppers now buy something online more than once per month. Globally, e-commerce figures were US$680 billion in 2011 and are expected to grow by another 20 percent by 2013 (Lao 2011). Ten years ago, it was possible to almost entirely avoid the increasingly commercialized aspects of the Internet. Today, ideologies of buying and selling are too deeply rooted online for that.

With changes in the Internet's identity as a medium have come changes in users' conceptions of themselves. It is not that older categories such as race, gender, or nationality have disappeared; rather, they have now been complicated by the fact that users are now also asked to think of themselves in categories such as smart shoppers, reputable vendors, trusted citizen journalists, popular fans, reliable information mavens, essential humor portals, and so forth. To complicate matters further, on the Internet, production, distribution, and consumption tend to be interlocking affairs. The very linguistic awkwardness of portmanteaus such as "prosumer" (Jenkins 2006) and "produser" (Bruns 2008) hint at the difficulty of describing Internet users' identities vis-à-vis what they create, pass on, consume, and remix online.

In addition to serving as a marketplace, the Internet contributes to a dynamic by which users frame *themselves* simultaneously as seller, buyer, and commodity. Each of us engage the notion of buying and selling the self online differently: some use their smart shopper skills to search for attractive online dating site prospects. Others worry over how the old adage of "looking good on paper" applies in a time of Google background checks. Some ask friends to critique their on-camera presence for an upcoming interview over Skype. Others attempt to delete cruel or unflattering comments (or worse – spam advertisements) from their blogs. Still others are busy

calculating their popularity based on status update comments from high-school friends (this last example could apply both to those actually in high school and to those long graduated).

The Branded Self Online: The Paradox of Late Capitalism

To some extent, what appears as a relatively recent fixation with the branded self is actually the result of a long-blossoming growing paradox within late capitalism. On the one hand, many educated young people, prepared to enter an economy that cannot afford to hire them, are beginning to feel that the cultural promise of "making it" based solely upon capitalist principles (i.e., working within an economy based solely on supply and demand, largely free of interventions from the state) is suspicious at best and impossible at worst. Their suspicions are bolstered by market crashes around the world and increasing talk among experts that capitalism may have reached what some call a "zero growth" moment.

On the other hand, these same young people have noted that, whatever condition capitalism itself is in, opportunities to make and distribute media within capitalist markets exist as never before. Even more interesting, at the very same time that job markets appear to be shrinking and exclusionary, cultural notions about notoriety, celebrity, and fame appear to be expanding and inclusive, thanks in part to the rise in relatively recent media formats such as reality television, talent-search shows, and personalized broadcast "channels" on sites such as YouTube and MySpace.

The slowing down of certain segments of capitalism (labor, consumer spending power) and the speeding up of others (media creation and distribution) has not gone unnoticed by the world's largest corporations. Desperate to figure out new ways of profiting from the few products consumers will or can buy with their increasingly limited funds, companies are bankrolling media products they anticipate will be hits (e.g., films predicted as box office successes, heavily anticipated musical tours or videogame releases), routinely coordinating their efforts with experts in the publishing, fast food, and clothing markets to maximize profits. These exercises in crossplatform convergence are usually executed at the same time the original media material is scripted and shot, so as to minimize labor payouts to performers, writers, editors, costume directors, and so forth. On the Internet, it is common to see young people likewise curating, rearranging, and recirculating what they consider to be their best pictures, videos, and status updates in multiple venues online while dropping off their worst, carefully cultivating what in a professional venue would be a concerted audience-segmentation strategy.

From Subculture Stars to Microcelebrity Practices

To some readers, everything said above will appear to be trafficking in the logic of celebrity. In truth, Internet celebrity is not a new phenomenon: the net has long

had its share of subculture "stars": Usenet's Doctress Neutopia; home page creator Justin Hall; pornographers such as Danni Ashe; webcam girls such as Jennifer Ringely; to name but a few. Similarly, the Internet has long been a place where people have gathered to discuss "real celebrities" (i.e., recognized film, television, and recording stars), beginning with fan newsgroups, moving to special sections of dialup bulletin boards and then on to tribute home pages, and winding up in locales such as MySpace. And not all those discussions have been entirely of an amateur nature: when the web arrived in the mid-1990s, entertainment companies such as Sony, Universal, and Barnes & Noble were not far behind, searching for ways to promote the newest album, film, or summer read. What marks today's Internet as different from yesterday's is not the presence of celebrity or corporations but their current pervasiveness and ubiquity.

Andy Warhol once argued that "In the future, everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes," which he later changed to "In the future, everyone will be famous *in* fifteen minutes." The concept of microcelebrity corrects to Warhol's notion of instant fame by adding musician-cum-blogger Momus' (1991) observation: "In the future, we will all be famous to fifteen *people*." As a social practice, microcelebrity changes the game of celebrity. Essentially, "fame to fifteen people" blends audiences and communities, two groups traditionally requiring different modes of address. Audiences desire someone to speak *at* them; communities desire someone to speak *with* them. Audiences and communities also require different social codes of participants. If an audience member draws attention to herself, she often draws censure (who is she to take focus off the star?). Not so in communities, where focus necessarily shifts between members.

Immaterial Labor and the "Attention" Economy

The act of code-switching between fans and friends, audiences and communities requires a fair amount of what Marx called "immaterial labor." Today, immaterial labor is often disguised with words such as participation, discussion, flirting, goofing off. When theorized through the so-called "attention economy," it is almost always cast in narratives of empowerment. For instance, Michael Goldhaber (2009) argues that, before the arrival of the Internet, media users were almost always passive consumers, purely on the receiving end of media markets. In new media, he argues, things are different: as we watch, link, click, and forward, we switch from being consumers to being producers of the most valuable resource of all: attention.

Although proponents of attention economy continue to (understandably) flourish in the business sectors of the web, there are many critics of the notion that we have entered a new sphere of economic production and consumption. In a recent debate with Goldhaber, Jonathan Beller argued that, rather than generating new forms of "attention property," users of commercially owned social network sites toil as largely unpaid laborers in what Trebor Schultz dubs "the Internet as playground/factory" (Goldhaber 2009).[1] In response to his critics, Goldhaber concedes that we haven't

transcended a capitalist model – yet. Still, he points out, even in our transitional state, the "old kind of wealth flows easily to holders of the new." For instance, he argues, "We all know that these days stars generally have little trouble obtaining money in large amounts" (Goldhaber 1997).

Here, it seems important to stop and point out something Goldhaber misses: stars don't accumulate capital because they get attention; they accumulate capital because they have managed to *turn themselves from citizens to corporations*, vis-à-vis the proprietary organization of the attention of others.[2] This morphing from citizen to corporation is crucial when we consider the lure of celebrity for teens who feel themselves to be limited in their sense of agency. Even a cursory examination of the news displays that the only kids who count as people, rather than property, are those who have managed to somehow establish themselves as corporate entities: child celebrities, athletes, and so on. Why wouldn't a teen want to cast themselves online in an identity position that seems (on the surface at least) to generate not just capital but self-determination?

In truth, the lure of recreating the self as star/corporation isn't just for teens. As Alice Marwick notes in her recent work on Web 2.0 developers, these days, to frame one's labor in terms of self-development is to be seen by others in the workforce as a positive, entrepreneurial, and creative person. By contrast, to speak of work as labor is to be seen as boring, perhaps greedy, and, at base, a loser (Marwick 2010).

The Super-public and the Rise of Strange Familiarity

In addition to reframing labor issues, microcelebrity almost necessarily leads people to question distinctions between privacy and publicity. Sometimes, microcelebrity stories look like what we've seen before: the recent "discovery" of teen singer Justin Bieber on YouTube by recording executives doesn't differ much from the 1950s "discovery" of actress Lana Turner in a drugstore by Hollywood agents. Both tales feature a private individual who willfully "goes public" into stardom. But what are we to make of public figures who decide to "go publically private," as in the recent trend of already-famous performers who feel compelled to use social networking sites to speak "as themselves" to fans and friends (Marwick and boyd 2011a, 2011b)? How should we theorize "speaking as oneself" in light of the Twitter user who proposed marriage to his live-in girlfriend by having "Old Spice Guy" actor Isaiah Mustapha record a video on his behalf, which was then uploaded to YouTube for the world to watch? (By the way, she said "yes." Via Twitter.)

This erosion between private and public has spread beyond those who are famous and those who wish to be famous. Each day, "regular" people post their words and images to websites. Those websites may or may not be in existence in five, ten, fifty years. When we speak across time and space to audiences we cannot even conceptualize yet, we find ourselves faced with a self that danah boyd has dubbed "super-public" (2006). The super-public presents a necessarily challenging state of affairs, particularly as more young people find themselves recording and

disseminating behaviors they may well "outgrow" later but that will surely outlive them on the Internet.

The rise of microcelebrity practice and super-public presence has led to a social condition that I have in the past dubbed "strange familiarity" (Senft 2008). The expression is a response to sociologist Stanley Milgram (1992), who uses the term "familiar strangers" to refer to people who know each other by sight but not by name (such as people from the same neighborhood who ride the train together at the same time each morning). According to Milgram, social convention dictates that familiar strangers acknowledge each other but, on the whole, keep a tacit agreement not to engage with one another beyond a quick nod and a smile. But does the same commitment *not to engage* exist when we find ourselves sitting on the train next to someone we watched for five hours last night via YouTube? What if, after reading the blog of a girl who talks about being sexually abused by her father, we suddenly and without warning find ourselves in a public space with the two of them? These scenarios move us from being familiar strangers to individuals bound in strange familiarity: the familiarity that arises from exchanging private information with people from whom we are otherwise remote.

It is hard to deny the disturbing quality of strange familiarity when participants are consenting adults. It is harder still when it happens without consent. There are growing numbers of videos on YouTube and elsewhere featuring individuals who never agreed to be filmed. There are still more cases where someone agreed to be filmed but did not agree to the film being distributed (this is a common scenario in "sexting" cases; see Lenhart 2009). And the practice spreads far beyond online video. These days, most newspapers with an online presence include a "guest book" in their obituaries section where readers are invited to leave notes for the family of the deceased. The guest book is part of the newspaper's standard online layout template, which means that any family who desires an obituary must also agree to an online space where veritable strangers are free to write anything about the deceased they wish. Even when they spring from the good intentions of others, exercises in strange familiarity can be unsettling and even traumatizing to those who did not ask for them. This is especially true in the case of online "tribute" sites devoted to the ill, mourning, or deceased.

In one of the most disturbing examples of well-intentioned Internet outreach gone wrong, an Iranian woman named Neda Soltani was mistakenly identified as someone else on Facebook. It was a mistake that eventually forced her to flee her country of birth. Here is what happened: in 2009, Iranian militia members killed a woman named Neda Agha Soltan on her way to a demonstration. The murder was captured on camera phone and uploaded to YouTube, where millions watched. The day the murder was first shown on YouTube, there was confusion over the name of the woman dying on camera, and a rush to locate information about her online. People searching Facebook turned up a page for Neda Soltani, an Iranian graduate student whose face bore an uncanny resemblance to the woman in the YouTube video. It was a case of mistaken identity, but the next morning Soltani's email account was full of letters from strangers saying she had not died in vain. Soon, the

Iranian police appeared at Soltani's door, asking her to appear on television and call the murder video a hoax. Fearing for her own safety, Soltani fled to Germany, where she now lives. She is no longer a graduate student, does not know how speak German, and barely makes enough money to live. All because people were so moved by the strange familiarity of watching a woman murdered on camera that they felt compelled to reach out to some one – anyone – via Facebook.[3]

It is not hard to hear the story just related as a case of undesired microcelebrity gone horribly wrong. Personally, I don't think that is a misreading. Yet, while Neda Soltani's story might inspire fear and pity – what happened to her could happen to anyone – it should also be taken as a call to a new sort of ethics. The reason microcelebrity is perceived in terms of crisis is because it reworks the old question "Who am I?" to read "Who do you think I am?" Identity, once believed to be the property of the bearer, now belongs to the perceiver. This flip, in some ways as old as the work of Immanuel Kant, is for many a new and challenging way to think about identity, but it is a way that most of the world has had to live with their entire lives. And, while it is admittedly disturbing that "perceivers" seem continually recast as "consumers" in the Western cultural imaginary, it is equally true that, on the Internet, those who perceive have historically unprecedented opportunities to establish whose identities, communities, and stories will matter to the rest of the world.

Microcelebrity means new threats and opportunities. It also means new responsibilities. In a time when we can intervene in the lives of others in so many ways remotely, we must explain why we've chosen to watch certain events transpire in front of our eyes, as if there were nothing to be done about them. We must also explain why we've chosen to take action, whether that action takes the form of sending money via PayPal, forwarding a video from an area of the world under police lockdown, or visiting an "in solidarity" site. Certainly, in a time of crowd-sourced information, we are responsible for getting facts straight about the people with whom we feel the need to build strange familiarity, particularly when those people live across the globe. Finally, we must begin to find ways to take responsibility for compensating what is sure to be a growing number of individuals harmed by our increasing need for instant and intimate news coverage. Because when everyone is truly famous to 15 people, nobody will be able to dismiss anyone else as obscure enough to be expendable.

Notes

1. "The Internet as Playground/Factory" was the title of a very successful conference devoted to the notion of "immaterial labor" on the web, held in November 2009 at the New School for Social Research, New York. For a link-filled wrap-up of the proceedings, see Sholz (2009).
2. For the phrase "vis-à-vis the proprietary organization of the attention of others" I am indebted to Jonathan Beller. His book *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle* (2006) is an extremely useful resource in debates on "attention economies."

3. I discuss the ethics of this case at length in my essay "Sex, Spectatorship, and the 'Neda' Video: A Biopsy" in the forthcoming anthology *New Visualities, New Technologies: The New Ecstasy of Communication* (Senft 2013).

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