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## Introduction

While fame has existed for centuries, *celebrity* is inextricably linked to media. The peculiar mixture of larger-than-life personas and the feelings of connection and intimacy they inspire are formed and spread through mass media (Rojek 2001). Thus, as media changes, so does celebrity. In the last two decades, we have seen dramatic changes in the concept of celebrity from one related solely to mass and broadcast media to one that reflects a more diverse media landscape; for instance, reality television has both revealed the mundane day-to-day lives of pop stars and sitcom actors as it simultaneously transforms ordinary people into celebrities (Kavka 2012). More recently, media technologies like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Vine, and Instagram have enabled both famous and non-famous people to generate vast quantities of personal media, manipulate and distribute this content widely, and reach out to (real or imagined) audiences.

The contemporary shift from broadcast to participatory media, and the popularity of social media technologies among young people, have contributed to two major changes in celebrity culture. First, “traditional” celebrities have embraced social media to create direct, unmediated relationships with fans, or at least the illusion of such. Seeming to bypass the traditional brokers of celebrity attention like agents and managers, young stars like Lady Gaga and Kim Kardashian provide snapshots of their lives and interactions with followers that give the impression of candid, unfettered access. Social media transforms interactions with celebrities that feel interpersonal, such as watching a concert, into interpersonal mediated interaction, such as receiving a Twitter @reply from a pop star (Marwick and boyd 2011a). Such interactions can be very powerful for devoted fans, further increasing the emotional ties between a celebrity and his or her audience.

Second, social media enables *micro-celebrity*, a self-presentation technique in which people view themselves as a public persona to be consumed by others, use strategic intimacy to

appeal to followers, and regard their audience as fans (Marwick and boyd 2011b; Senft 2008; Senft 2013). The micro-celebrity practitioner may have a very small number of followers, but is able to inhabit the celebrity subject position through the use of the same social technologies used by musicians, athletes, and actors. Such micro-celebrities might include fashion or food bloggers; activists; Vine comedians with millions of views; or simply Twitter users who treat their followers like valued fans. Notably, micro-celebrity practice differs depending on the social context in which the practitioner is located and the technological affordances of the application. Technical affordances are the material functionalities of a technology which allow users to perform certain actions (Norman 2002). In Instagram, for instance, which affords users the ability to upload mobile photos and comment on them, micro-celebrities are often conventionally good-looking or people who display status symbols like luxury goods, due to the app's focus on visuals (Marwick 2013c). At the same time, subcultural or niche celebrities like Miranda Sings, a YouTube star with hundreds of thousands of followers, are able to use social media to amass enough fans to support themselves through their online creative activities while remaining unknown to most and ignored by mainstream media.

In this chapter, I use examples from a range of popular social media technologies to analyze how the particular technical features of social media applications, combined with the prevalence of celebrity-focused mass culture, enable individuals to inhabit a popular subjectivity that resembles, even if vaguely, that of the “conventionally” famous. These shifts have created a new definition of celebrity as a set of practices and self-presentation techniques that spread across social networks as they are learned from other individuals. In these contexts, celebrity becomes something a person does, rather than something a person is, and exists as a continuum rather than a binary quality. “Celebrity” in the social media age is a range of techniques and strategies that can be performed by anyone with a mobile device, tablet, or laptop.

### Celebrification, Celebritization, and Media

The desire for attention is entirely human, and the use of various attention-getting techniques has a long lineage. While Richard Schickel famously argued that “there was no such thing as celebrity until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (2000), historians and media scholars have shown that celebrity and fame have co-existed for centuries (Barry 2008). Many historically

significant people used what might be considered early mass media, such as literature, monuments, or portraiture, to strategically solidify their elevated social status. Alexander the Great, for instance, famously cultivated an image of himself as a god and heir to an immortal throne, and hired historians, bards, and poets to spread this myth throughout his empire (Braudy 1986, 4). The advent of mass media gave rise to new forms of celebrity. The burgeoning print culture of the early nineteenth century produced arguably the first print star, Lord Byron, whose romantic exploits, passionate poetry, and handsome face were widely disseminated via newspaper, creating a “brand” consumed by an international female audience and fuelling what Byron’s wife called “byromania” (McDayter 2009). The popularity of film and radio in the early twentieth century demanded constantly updated content, which increased in turn the “names, faces and voices” featured in the media, increasing the number of well-known people (Boorstin 1961, xxxiv). These famous people fueled the popular appetite for theater, radio, and motion pictures, and served as common reference points for a large, diverse, and increasingly urban immigrant population (Henderson 2005). As broadcasting fragmented and multiplied, so did the images and voices of radio, film, television, music, and sports stars.

In the contemporary United States and Britain, celebrity has become a broader phenomenon in which image, spectacle, and drama are expected in social spheres beyond entertainment, such as business and politics (Guthey, Clark, and Jackson 2009; Street 2004). In part, this is due to the *mediatization* of culture; as Frederich Krotz explains, mediatization is the process by which “media in the long run increasingly become relevant for the social construction of everyday life, society, and culture as a whole” (2009). This is distinct from *mediation*, which refers more generally to communication through media technology (Lundby 2009). Mediatization suggests that even the most intimate dimensions of life, such as individual subjectivity and interpersonal relations, are being actively reshaped and infiltrated by the media (Livingstone 2009).

In examining the increasingly prominent place of celebrities in mass culture, scholars have used the terms “celebritization” and “celebrification” often, and confusingly, interchangeably. Following the distinction between mediatization and mediation, Olivier Driessens proposes that *celebritization* be used to refer to the “societal and cultural changes implied by celebrity” whereas *celebrification* is the process by which individuals are transformed

into celebrities (2013, 642). However, much as “mediatization” is criticized for postulating a linear timeline from pre-media to mediatized society, and for presuming a singular media logic which doggedly infiltrates every sphere of life (Couldry 2008), this distinction may be a bit simplistic. To Driessens, celebrityization describes not only the ways in which social and cultural life is transformed by celebrity, but also contemporary changes in celebrity, primarily diversification, democratization, and migration. Diversification is the increased importance of celebrity status outside of entertainment and sports, while migration refers to the ability of celebrities famous in one realm to migrate to another: the wrestler Jesse Ventura, for example, becoming governor of Minnesota, or former child star Soleil Moon Frye finding success as a mommy blogger and new media entrepreneur. Democratization, however, incorporates elements of celebrification, and is crucial to understanding micro-celebrity.

What Evans calls the “populist democracy” position (2005, 14), and what Graeme Turner refers to as the “demotic turn” (2004, 82; 2006), maintains that reality television and the internet have created new types of celebrities who are average Joes rather than remarkable stars. As Joshua Gamson explains, “Celebrity culture is increasingly populated by unexceptional people who have become famous and by stars who have been made ordinary” (2011, 1062). Misha Kavka argues that reality television has both elevated individuals to celebrity status and revealed the “regular people” behind celebrity personas, the former through programs like *Big Brother* and *American Idol*, and the latter through “celebrality” shows like *The Osbournes* and *Dancing with the Stars* (2012, 146–147). Turner deliberately distinguishes between “democratic” and “demotic” to argue against the notion that the media apparatus has opened to ordinary citizens. Instead, the demotic turn is an increased *appearance* of participation—which may include more spaces for people of color, queer people, and so forth—tightly circumscribed within a hierarchical media system. Television networks find it increasingly worthwhile to “grow their own” celebrities to leverage across properties, such as the *Real Housewives* and their attendant spinoffs, but only to serve the best interests of the corporation (Turner 2006).

In part, this is due to the fragmentation of network television into many channels of narrowcast niche media, bringing to light people formerly known only to particular subcultures, and creating “stars” of chefs, drag queens, hairstylists, long-haul truckers, and pawn-shop owners.<sup>1</sup> However artificial the “reality” in reality television, it has indubitably expanded the

field of the famous, with many reality stars becoming permanent fixtures on tabloid covers and others achieving widespread recognition even if they fall outside of mainstream celebrity aesthetics. The stars of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *Duck Dynasty*, for instance, are working-class American Southerners. While their class status is exploited on these shows as a matter of exotic difference, their media access provides them with the ability to command enormous attention. When *Duck Dynasty* star Phil Robertson gave an interview to GQ condemning gays and lesbians as sinful and compared their activities to bestiality, a media furor broke out (Magary 2014). While Robertson's comments were initially condemned by A&E, the network that airs *Duck Dynasty*, religious groups and prominent conservatives like Sarah Palin and Bobby Jindal spoke out in support and the show remained on the air (Carter 2013). While conservative religious beliefs like Robertson's are rarely shown on reality television, they are shared by millions of Americans—so in one sense, *Duck Dynasty* gave Robertson a platform for his political beliefs that he would otherwise not have had.

Another aspect of democratization is the incorporation of elements of celebrity into individual subjectivity and self-presentation, which some scholars of celebrity mark as part of *celebrification*. The impact of celebrity culture, and marketing/advertising culture more widely, on individual self-presentation has been theorized in various disciplines as promotional culture (Wernick 1991), presentational culture (Marshall 2010), the specularization of the self (Hearn 2006), and personification (Sternberg 1998). Andrew Wernick argues that “promotional culture,” which includes publicizing people, ideas, and organizations through marketing, public relations, branding, and lobbying, has become the predominant modern paradigm (1991). Although Wernick focuses on these processes within the media industries, his larger point is the expansion of commodification into aspects of social life, including subjectivity. Ernest Sternberg focuses on one such expansion, how modern laborers draw from celebrities to model “personas” in the work place which performatively convey human virtue (1998). This model, which he refers to as “phantasmagoric labor,” is used by Allison Hearn to describe the “specularization of the self,” or how prospective reality television contestants consciously present themselves as personae, or “personal brands,” to fit into pre-existing media tropes (2006). These theories present a clear overlap between self-commodification and celebrity, as the celebrity is the personification of person-as-brand. David Marshall proposes that the celebrity remains a model for self-conscious

online performance, and suggests that many of these processes be grouped under the label “persona studies” (2010; 2014). I suggest that the model of *micro-celebrity* in internet studies might help us further understand these shifts and changes in the relationship between celebrity and society outside the landscape of television and film.

### Micro-Celebrity

Terri Senft, in her book *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks*, coined the term micro-celebrity, which she defined as “a new style of online performance in which people employ webcams, video, audio, blogs, and social networking sites to ‘amp up’ their popularity among readers, viewers, and those to whom they are linked online” (2008, 25). Micro-celebrity can be further understood as a mindset and set of practices in which the audience is constructed as a fan base, popularity is maintained through ongoing fan management, and self-presentation is carefully assembled to be consumed by others (Marwick and boyd 2011b; Marwick 2013a; Senft 2013). Micro-celebrity, in other words, is something one *does*, rather than something one *is*. It typically involves self-conscious, carefully constructed personas, which may be primarily textual, visual, or video, leveraged through a personal blog, set of Instagram selfies, or collection of YouTube videos, for instance. Micro-celebrity practitioners see their audience as fans rather than friends or family, and share information strategically with this audience to boost their popularity and attention within a network. Internet studies scholars have used this conceptualization of micro-celebrity as a practice to understand Twitter users (Page 2012), online activists (Tufekci 2013), “porn stars,” (Attwood 2007), and citizen-government relations (Pearce 2014).

Related, but distinct, from micro-celebrity is the idea of the subcultural or local celebrity (Hills 2004; Chin and Hills 2008; Ferris 2010). Matt Hills defines subcultural celebrities as “mediated figures who are famous only by and for their fan audiences” (2004, 60), rather than the ubiquitous recognition usually presumed by the term “celebrity.” Hills and his collaborators have examined subcultural celebrities including actors on cult television shows (Hills and Williams 2005) and television producers like Joss Whedon (Chin and Hills 2008), finding that subcultural celebrities may engage in direct audience interaction, such as blogging or making personal appearances at conventions. In other words, rather than viewing the celebrity from afar

through a mediated lens, fans may encounter subcultural celebrities through “subcultural, social knowledge and repeated personal contact as well as or rather than emerging through common cultural currency and mediated distance” (Hills 2004, 60). Kerry O. Ferris suggests that this concept could also be applied to local celebrities like “newscasters, politicians, and professors, as well as the lifeguard at the pool, the cashier at the market, and the waitress at the diner—people who are seen, recognized and followed by more people than they can keep track of, and who hence experience relational dynamics similar to those of global, mass cultural celebrities” (2010, 393).

While research suggests that subcultural celebrities, like micro-celebrity practitioners, may have personal contact with their fans, use social media, and command relatively small audiences, micro-celebrity and subcultural celebrity are distinct. First, micro-celebrity is a set of practices and a way of thinking about the self, influenced by the infiltration of celebrity and branding rhetoric into day-to-day life, rather than a personal quality (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*’s James Marsters may be a subcultural celebrity, but he may not practice micro-celebrity). Second, the process of using social media for audience development and outreach distinguishes micro-celebrity practitioners from their subcultural counterparts. Much contemporary social media encourages users to compete for attention and status, encouraging self-promotion in a variety of ways including micro-celebrity (Marwick 2013a). While the subcultural celebrities discussed by Hills have their origin in broadcast media, micro-celebrity practitioners have fame that is native to social media, such as the YouTube star or highly-followed Twitter user, and exist within many interest groups and subcultures besides cult and genre fandom. Despite this, there are overlaps. Micro-celebrity practitioners surely do experience the relational dynamics described by Ferris in her essay on local celebrity. Like subcultural celebrities, they often have smaller audiences (although it is important to note that one can inhabit the mindset of micro-celebrity regardless of the number of people paying attention). But micro-celebrity is not simply a smaller, scaled-down version of celebrity: it is a set of practices drawn from celebrity culture that “regular people” use in daily life to boost their online attention and popularity.

In fact, micro-celebrity is the latest development in a lengthy process of understanding how people make meaning out of media. People who enjoy consuming celebrity culture have often been pathologized, portrayed as miserable or lonely, or viewed as cultural dupes (Jenson

1992). The “active audience” paradigm of media studies attempted to counter this view through studies of how people interpret media products differently and make meaning and use of them in their own lives (Radway 1984). Extending this active interpretation into the productive activities of organized fandom, scholars began to investigate how fannish activity could build community and enable creative activity (Baym 2000), accelerated by the internet. This shift from *consumption to participation* has been widely discussed. Henry Jenkins coined the term “participatory culture” in his ethnographic study *Textual Poachers* to describe how people draw from media texts to create and produce their own cultural products (1992). While fans use cultural raw materials to create content about media properties like Dr. Who or Star Trek, micro-celebrity practitioners turn the fannish discourse on its head to create content about themselves. As Kim Allen states in her ethnography of aspiring singers and actors, “No longer ‘private consumers’, ‘teenyboppers’ or ‘groupies,’ idealizing (male) singers and musicians, the young women in this study were quite literally taking center stage as performers themselves” (2011). The often-criticized fan subject is replaced by people creating and producing blogs, selfies, web videos, photographs, short films, music, fiction, and so forth, shifting the relationship from media consumption to production. The new media technologies that enable participatory culture—mobile apps, video editing software, blogs, digital cameras, Garageband—similarly facilitate personal content creation and dissemination.

Through the following case studies, I examine micro-celebrity as a self-presentation technique. Mollysoda is a home-grown Tumblr celebrity, whose predilection for shock and sensationalism is boosted by her post-feminist ethos. Miranda Sings is a character popular on YouTube who responds to “haters” while knowingly winking at her over-the-top satire. Each woman engages in performative acts of self-construction and self-promotion with the goal of maintaining and increasing her audience, but the technological affordances of her chosen platform and the social context in which her performance exists affects how she practices celebrity. Specifically, these case studies illuminate some of the core components of micro-celebrity practice outlined in this essay, namely the relationship between attention and micro-celebrity, and the differences between micro-celebrity practitioners and both mass and subcultural celebrity.

[Tumblr: Mollysoda](#)

Tumblr is a quick blogging platform used most frequently for posting images, memes, and macros. It is very popular with teens and young adults and boasts 110 million users (Kafka 2013). Mollysoda (<http://mollysoda.tumblr.com/>), a 20-something digital artist sporting thick eyebrows, winged eyeliner, candy-colored hair and an eyebrow ring, is one of the stars of the platform; she has 30,000 followers and recently sold one of her webcam videos at an art auction for \$1500 (Osberg 2013). She epitomizes a certain kind of pixelated aesthetic which mixes punk rock, pornography, feminism, 1990s internet culture, and lolcats in equal measure. (Her website, replete with gifs of dancing Second Life avatars, crashed my web browser.) In an essay for art magazine *Hyperallergic*, Alicia Eler and Kate Durbin coined the term “teen-girl Tumblr aesthetic” to describe the endless scrolling stream of animated glittery gifs, photos of naked girls annotated with slang terms, selfies, and pictures of childhood icons that appear on many popular Tumblrs, including Mollysoda. They write:

In the case of these teen girls, their own bodies are canvases upon which they interface with the world, an audience with a gaze that is constantly watching and appraising... There is still plenty of nostalgia present in the teen-girl Tumblr aesthetic — for example, references to Japanese kawaii culture and ‘90s nostalgia — but there is a darker edge, an undermining of the heterosexual male gaze, as well as an ever-present extreme vulnerability (Eler and Durbin 2013).

Tumblr enables users to “re-blog” images or posts they find interesting; the teen-girl Tumblr aesthetic consists of carefully curated streams of images that, taken together, project an image of the curator as simultaneously empowered and objectified.

Most research on self-presentation and blogging has assumed that blogs are primarily textual or that the images are produced by the blogger, such as fashion bloggers, who photograph themselves (Trammell and Keshelashvili 2005; Schmidt 2007; Mazur and Kozarian 2010). (This shift is at least partially due to the changing functions of blogging software like Blogger and WordPress, which originally focused on text but now allow for many other forms of digital content.) On Tumblr, the vast majority of images are unattributed and found elsewhere, whether they be scanned magazine ads from the 1990s or animated gifs. Mollysoda, however, posts endless numbers of her own videos, selfies, and animated gifs. She considers herself a blogger

and artist; in addition to selling her famous “Inbox Full” video in which she read out loud, for ten consecutive hours, all the messages she had received via Tumblr, she writes zines and created a set of animated gifs for the 2012 MTV Video Music Awards (O. Horton 2013).

As an exemplar of the teen girl Tumblr aesthetic, Mollysoda is often viewed with curiosity; if she’s just posting videos on YouTube and gifs on Tumblr, why is she so popular? Digital strategist Luna Vega wrote in a blog post:

She personifies the modern model of Internet fame and what’s so interesting about her is that exactly what she does or what she’s famous for isn’t always easy to discern. She’s an artist, a filmmaker, and a lot of what she does online (and basically what a lot of Internet famous people do online) is kind of just hanging out while posting media on her Tumblr and videos to her YouTube and Vimeo. For a lot people and especially those who are unfamiliar with Internet culture the distinction of what makes Molly Soda interesting vs. her thousands of similar counterparts is exactly what makes Internet fame so intangible and simultaneously sought after (Vega 2011).

Mollysoda spoke about this during an interview:

Q. How do you feel about the idea of how easy and common it is for people to become so known online for not really "doing anything"? Do you see this as any different from how mainstream culture idolizes people like Kim Kardashian and Paris Hilton for no reason? Do you think there's validity to this fame?

A. I hate that. I hate it when someone asks me what I "do," like your job is supposed to define you or something. I'm doing me, you're doing you, some people are better at getting attention for it than others. There's no shame in that. (Abascal 2013)

Molly explains that her talent lies in getting attention for “doing me,” or in performing a version of herself that can easily be consumed by an audience. Perhaps the attention she gets can be linked to her instantly recognizable appearance, which has made her into a style icon for younger

girls; her penchant for revealing personal details about her insecurities and romantic entanglements; or her creation of original content that can be appropriated and used by others. She steadfastly refuses to pin down either her popularity or her purpose. When asked by a reader “What’s does your art stand for? What are you trying to say with your art? What is your art form?” she responds “hahaha calm down.” Asked in an interview what she thought of the art world, she retorted “I’m pretty sure you don’t have to answer this question after you’ve graduated from art school, right?” Perhaps Mollysoda’s appeal is simply ineffable. Therein lies one of the contradictions of micro-celebrity which makes it difficult for many to understand: while thousands of people practice the components of micro-celebrity—creating an easily consumable persona, responding directly to readers, and sharing personal information to enhance emotional ties with fans—these alone do not guarantee an audience.

The way Mollysoda interacts with her readers is dependent on the technical affordances of Tumblr, namely that Tumblr posts do not have comments in the same way that blogs do. A user can reblog someone else’s post and annotate the reblog, but conversations are often strewn across multiple Tumblrs and difficult to follow. Tumblr does allow readers to ask questions—Mollysoda both asks and answers questions, posting the answer on Tumblr and thus creating a legible dialogue with her readers. Her “Inbox Full” video showed that she gets as much hate mail and negative comments as she does support from her readers (*INBOX FULL* 2012). But publicly, audience interaction is measured in numbers, specifically how many reblogs or “likes” a post gets. These visual metrics are available to all, and become stand-ins for social status, signaling to the Tumblr owner (and the public at large) that the site is worthwhile (Marwick 2013a). (Interestingly, Tumblr does not display how many followers a blog has.)

Mollysoda fully admits that her involvement in Tumblr stemmed from her desire for attention. She said in an interview, “Tumblr existed as a security blanket for me, somewhere where I could project all of my crazy displaced emotions and needy feelings in exchange for some sort of validation in the form of ‘likes’ and ‘reblogs’” (Abascal 2013). The thousands of comments that Mollysoda gets on each post may provide instant feedback and gratification, especially when she posts selfies crying late at night or gloomily speculating on a failed relationship.

Mollysoda's micro-celebrity practice must be situated not only within Tumblr, but specifically within the transgressive teen-girl visual aesthetic identified by Eler and Durbin. Her animated gifs of naked people would be shocking on fashion blogs, for instance, which value a much more traditional performance of femininity. A YouTube video of Mollysoda covering 1980s teen idols Wham!'s hit "Last Christmas" in an 8-bit candy wonderland might be considered bizarre if posted on Facebook. Mollysoda's visual sensibility and art is deeply contextualized within a particular technological platform and subculture. Inside the slice of Tumblr populated by teenage girls coming to terms with sexuality, femininity, feminism, and publicity, Mollysoda's actions make sense. And while her content may look different from that of many micro-celebrities, her practices—having an easily consumable public persona, posting information to create personal ties with the audience, and directly corresponding with followers—are the same.

#### YouTube: Miranda Sings

Miranda Sings was first brought to my attention by one of my students, a huge fan of her YouTube videos who had seen her perform several times in New York.<sup>2</sup> (The other students stared at him blankly whenever he mentioned her in class.) Miranda Sings is a character played by Colleen Ballinger in a series of YouTube videos, a talentless musical theater aficionada who nonetheless takes her career as a dancer, model, actress, and singer—a "four threat"—very seriously (Eggar 2010). Miranda began as a satire of Ballinger's college classmates, "self-unaware performers who post overly-dramatic and musically-deficient videos online" (M. Allen 2013). Ballinger deftly satirizes wannabe celebrities who post home-made videos to YouTube, hoping to follow in Justin Bieber's footsteps as the latest star to be discovered online. In Miranda's videos, she warbles popular songs off-key, gives questionable singing and dancing advice, and responds to positive and negative comments from fans. Her videos have collectively garnered more than 50 million views, and she has adapted her Miranda persona to a touring cabaret act, performed to overwhelmingly positive reviews across the United States, the UK, and Australia (M. Allen 2013). Miranda is a cult favorite in musical theater circles, but exemplifies the niche micro-celebrity who has garnered great online popularity but avoided the attention of mainstream media (with the exception of her recent *MTV True Life* episode, which I discuss below.)

While Miranda has a variety of social media accounts, her fame is “native” to YouTube; it is where she first became popular, and most of her other accounts simply serve as promotion for her YouTube channel. Unlike people like Mollysoda who are “playing themselves,” her success relies on her ability to consistently embody and physically perform the same character throughout her online presence. As such, Miranda’s public persona is immediately recognizable, well-defined, and remarkably constant across platforms. The character wears baggy, unflattering clothes and thickly-applied red lipstick that resembles clown makeup. Her videos are shot in messy rooms or her poorly-lit suburban kitchen. Miranda’s blithe lack of self-awareness and immense confidence in her own beauty, talent and fame never waver (Pascucci 2013). While Miranda’s fans, called “Mirfandas,” are in on the joke, part of Miranda’s appeal is that she is inevitably taken seriously by annoyed viewers, who post angry comments on her YouTube videos and Instagram pictures to the delight of her fans (“You got most of the song WRONG even I know it and I have only listen to it twice learn the songs before you sing them 😊!”). Miranda is not immediately legible as a parody, as her delusional self-presentation is both comprehensive and uniform across her personal website, Instagram, Twitter account, and YouTube channel. Regardless of site, Miranda misspells words, posts awkward selfies, articulates words strangely, uses inappropriate hashtags, and doles out doubtful moral guidance. (For instance, in her “Twerking Tutorial” video, in which she demonstrates “her own version of twerking, because I think it’s fun to be a sexy lady, but only if you’re respectable,” she instructs viewers to leave videos of their own Miranda-style twerking tagged “Hashtag no porn, get rid of porn style twerking! For Miranda!”) (*HOW TO TWERK! (Miranda Sings)* 2013). Unlike many micro-celebrities who are performing a version of themselves, however idealized, Ballinger is self-consciously performing a comprehensively formed and realized theatrical character.

Miranda furthers her ties with her audience by interacting with fans, primarily through her videos, but also at in-person meet and greets at her shows and by individually replying to fan mail. She regularly posts two videos a week, on Mondays and Thursdays, and takes requests from commenters, who urge her to cover the latest popular song or musical theatre success. In each video, Miranda calls out particularly nice or mean comments, inspiring some Mirfandas to post negative comments in hope that they might be featured. While her real identity is hardly a secret, as Ballinger posts bloopers of Miranda videos on her personal YouTube channel and

gives interviews out of character, fans delight in their shared knowledge of Miranda's performance and the talentless hopefuls she is skewing. Mirandas can take pleasure in their communal understanding that they are 'insiders.' Colleen's personal YouTube channel, which includes footage of her family, friends, and daily life in addition to singing and comedy, recently reached over 400,000 subscribers. By producing videos of her "real life," she can strengthen the emotional bonds with her audience.

In late 2013, Colleen appeared on *MTV True Life*, a long-running documentary-style show which explores various aspects of modern teenage life like family conflicts, jobs, and addiction. The episode, titled "I'm Famous Online," revolved around Colleen's boyfriend Josh and his jealousy of the time Miranda requires. Colleen is shown answering enormous binders of fan mail, being approached constantly by fans, and meeting with her manager—she describes Miranda as a "24/7 job." By the end of the episode, Colleen has helped Josh set up a live show, and says she has found balance between love and career. After the episode aired, Colleen posted a tearful video with Josh on her personal YouTube channel saying that choosing to do the video was "one of the worst decisions I've ever made. I feel like an idiot for agreeing to it and thinking they would portray my life how it actually is." She said that MTV filmed her for six months, but selectively edited the footage to create dramatic conflict and focused on the negative aspects of her relationship with her boyfriend. She told her fans, "The truth is, we're YouTubers, and we show you guys what we want to show you on the internet, so we're gonna show happiness and positivity. But we're people, and we have fights, and we have bad moments, because we're humans" (*My Experience on MTV* 2013). Even when stepping outside of the Miranda Sings character, Colleen selectively portrays her life. Giving editing power to MTV made it impossible to maintain the level of control she has with her YouTube channels, and threatened the authenticity key to maintaining micro-celebrity.

### Discussion: Social Media and the Attention Economy

With the increase in broadband and mobile access, the "always-on" nature of social media encourages celebrities and those aspiring to be famous to share constant details of their day-to-day life. At the same time, the visible, comparable metrics of social media success—the number of followers or "likes" on a piece of content—encourages the active inculcation of an

audience. As a result, celebrities and micro-celebrities alike use social media to create persistent streams of content, competing for the largest number of listeners. These techniques are part and parcel of an online attention economy in which pageviews and clicks are synonymous with success. In 1997, Michael Goldhaber argued that while the internet has provided people with an abundance of information, this has simultaneously created a scarcity of attention, making attention an extremely valuable resource. He admitted finding personal satisfaction in reaching a wide audience, and clarified:

... it is possible to enthrall any number of people if you can reach them and if you are good enough at it. So having attention is very, very desirable, in some ways infinitely so, since the larger the audience, the better. And, yet, attention is also difficult to achieve owing to its intrinsic scarcity. That combination makes it the potential driving force of a very intense economy (Goldhaber 1997).

The “attention economy” is now a widespread marketing strategy which implies that in a media-saturated world full of information, what is valuable is that which can attract “eyeballs” (Fairchild 2007). As a result, not only brands, but individuals now compete for limited attention. Brands make viral videos and post funny gifs so they can sell products; individuals take selfies and write blog posts for personal satisfaction, ego boosts, or the increase in personal status that can result from online popularity (Marwick 2013a). While Mollysoda’s brand is edgy, provocative, and countercultural, she is using attention-getting techniques pioneered by both celebrities and consumer brands in order to get comments, likes, reblogs, and followers. Micro-celebrities, however, may not be able to convert this attention to financial capital; Miranda Sings may be supporting herself from her videos, but she is hardly living the *Cribs* lifestyle. The desire for fame, which is often a desire for economic security, is replaced with a desire for *attention*, which is quite different, and requires constant, ongoing labor.

The world of micro-celebrity exists as a parallel to the world of traditional celebrity, with similar dynamics in some ways but quite different ones in others. Miranda Sings’s fans are just as ardent as those of mainstream pop stars, but she is far more accessible to them than even a “subcultural” celebrity might be. Mollysoda’s visual aesthetic does not resemble that of any conventional celebrity, but she has great status within the subcultural world of Tumblr. Neither

woman's fame comes from broadcast media. Instead, they use the affordances of their technologies of choice—Tumblr and YouTube—for both creative production and display of emotional vulnerability. While Mollysoda argues that she is just being herself online, she is presenting a persona complete with stage name, immediately recognizable visual aesthetics, and appealing messiness. Colleen Ballinger's character of Miranda Sings is simply a stage persona, much like RuPaul's over-the-top drag self or Bette Midler's raunchy Soph character. Colleen, though, also produces videos under her own name about her "real life," including her boyfriend, her family, and her emotional reactions to problems and issues.

Both Mollysoda and Miranda demonstrate that while we expect a certain degree of artifice from celebrities, one of the key attributes of micro-celebrity practitioners is that they are *authentic*. Fans of fashion bloggers, for instance, consistently name "authenticity" as a value that differentiates bloggers from fashion magazines, which traffic in luxury goods that are unaffordable to many, displayed on models who scarcely resemble average women (Marwick 2013b). Micro-celebrity practitioners know their fans, respond to them, and often feel an obligation to continue this interaction to boost their popularity, breaking down the traditional audience/performer spectator/spectacle dichotomy. The micro-celebrity has direct interaction with fans, while traditional celebrities only give the illusion of interaction and access. (While social media has also changed the way that broadcast celebrities interact with fans, they often use social media to perform the insider authenticity expected online while maintaining a public face ((Muntean and Petersen 2009; Marshall 2010; Marwick and boyd 2011a).) Regularly viewing the cast of a television show in one's living room every week creates a feeling of intimacy and familiarity that communication scholars Horton and Wohl called "para-social interaction" (1956); these para-social relationships can be emotionally gratifying, to the point where people tune in to particular programs to check in with their friends. Micro-celebrity extends this to networked webs of actual interaction, such as instant messenger, @replies, comments, and face-to-face meetings. This interaction is crucial to maintaining the micro-celebrity practitioner's popularity and becomes part of their personal brand. For instance, in an article about young YouTube stars, a 12-year old girl said "YouTube gives you the opportunity to interact with [micro-celebrities] directly, and in the comments with other people who like them" (West 2014). This ideal is common to social media which follows a many-to-many model of content

transmission rather than the one-to-many model of broadcast media, but it also suggests accountability and responsiveness to the audience far beyond what mainstream celebrities usually provide to their fans.

This authenticity is often set up in contrast to mainstream celebrities who, as gossip aficionados can explain in detail, often have public personas that are directly at odds with the realities of their lives; Rock Hudson's public romantic relationships were with women, whereas in his private life he preferred the company of men. While in the 1950s, some fans might have believed that Lana Turner was discovered at a soda fountain, in the modern age one of the pleasures of celebrity is exposing the realities of the celebrity publicity machine. Daniel Boorstin's pioneering work on "pseudo-events," for instance, argued that the press conference and the ribbon-cutting ceremony were events that existed only to be televised (1961). Their meaning was otherwise non-existent; they were fabricated, inauthentic, and theatrical. Today, events choreographed entirely for the benefit of the media are well-understood. Savvy celebrity-watchers can tell the difference between a truly candid snapshot and a "pap walk," a pre-arranged paparazzi photograph of a celebrity walking down the street or leaving a restaurant. Joshua Gamson used the term "game players" to refer to such audiences, who adopt a playful attitude towards the world of celebrities, gossiping, sharing tidbits, and engaging in collective detective work to discover who the celebrity "really" is (1994). The popularity of gossip blogs, which dissect everything from celebrity breakdowns to PR-generated relationships, has widened the scope of this game playing. The desire to discover the "truth" behind celebrities like Tom Cruise or Angelina Jolie is one of the major distinctions between celebrity and micro-celebrity: the presumption is that there is little difference between perceived and actual micro-celebrity personas.

Micro-celebrity's emphasis on attention and authenticity does not always yield positive results. Magibon is a "YouTube idol" who gained rapid worldwide fame for her webcam videos posted to YouTube. A sample video, which got more than six million hits, consists of 36 seconds of her staring at the camera with big eyes, blinking, and occasionally saying a few Japanese phrases (MRirian 2008). Magibon exemplified "burikko," a Japanese word that means acting in an exaggeratedly girlish manner, usually to attract young men. Magibon, however, was not Japanese, but an American teenager from rural Pennsylvania who, like many other American

teenagers, had a passion for Japanese culture, films, anime, and language. In 2008, the Japanese internet television company GyaO sponsored a trip for her to Japan, with the proviso that she would appear on the show (“Magibon” 2014). Rather than the adorable, big-eyed kawaii pin-up she appeared to be on YouTube, she came off an awkward, nervous teenager, uncomfortable in a situation where she could not control her image. Many people delighted in the discrepancy between her public profile and this somewhat disastrous public appearance—the schadenfreude of a faux-Japanese Keane doll being exposed as a regular young American girl. Magibon was called a victim of “internet disease,” slang for the phenomenon where internet dating profiles and selfies are tweaked to make the creator seem thinner, sexier, and younger than they appear in real life (“MRirian” 2013).

Magibon’s unfortunate exposé reveals that the backlash against microcelebrity practitioners can be very damning when an “inauthentic” person is revealed. The venom with which online sources like Encyclopedia Dramatica systematically set out to destroy her vlogging career is similar to the impulse which fuels “celebrity cellulite” stories on the cover of *US Weekly*. Perhaps as the artificial nature of traditional celebrity is revealed through blind-item blogs and comments on gossip sites, internet celebrity provides a quirkier, cooler, weirder alternative. Micro-celebrity interactions with their audiences often reveal the intimate details of their thoughts, dreams, food consumption, and sex lives, and they present personas that appear to be less controlled than those of highly-regulated, highly-consumer brand oriented film and television celebrities. When internet celebrities turn out to be regular, fallible people, without the coterie of managers and agents available to traditional celebrities, their fans may experience intense disappointment.

### Conclusion

While there are significant differences between young women like Magibon, Mollysoda, Miranda Sings and their mainstream media counterparts, they each have the ability to attract an enormous amount of attention—in the thousands, tens of thousands, or even millions of viewers. Social media has ushered in a new era in which average people are able to command audiences as large as those made possible by broadcast media. But because the dynamics of social and mass media are quite different, each lends itself to particular types of celebrity. Social media’s

micro-celebrities are often niche personalities with very specific audiences that broadcast media could not support; those who are willing to reveal intimate or emotional material to appeal to viewers; people willing to be accountable and respond directly to audiences; and those prepared to take on unrelenting, often financially unrewarding labor. Analyzing micro-celebrity calls into question the impact of one aspect of fame, attention, on those without the financial and logistical support that celebrity usually brings. Colleen Ballinger agreed to be filmed by MTV thinking it would support her online career, but had a difficult time losing control of her online persona to the machinations of the reality program's plot lines, which demanded drama.

Recently, E! Online aired a reality show called “#RichKids of Beverly Hills” directly inspired by a popular hashtag on Instagram; the teaser trailer is full of Instagram references, and one of the show's stars says, “I think I'm somewhat Instafamous in the Instagram world.” Micro-celebrity as practiced by Mollysoda or Miranda Sings may be considered somewhat of a niche practice, but its dynamics are increasingly a part of everyday life. The ability to view oneself as a celebrity, attract attention, and manage an audience, regardless of the potential downsides, may become a necessary skill. While viewers crave the authentic, the messiness that comes with it can be off-putting. Selectively editing oneself into a palatable product, remaining consistent, and dealing with potentially belligerent audience members are difficult tasks that prioritize performativity over any true sense of self.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In *Top Chef*, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, *Shear Genius*, *Ice Road Truckers* and *Pawn Stars*, respectively.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to James Pascucci for introducing me to Miranda Sings and writing a brilliant analysis of her “theatrical trolling” performances.

### Bio

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Key Words

Micro-celebrity, internet celebrity, social media, internet fame, Tumblr, YouTube

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