**Video Script**

**Lecture 37 – Understanding Contemporary Celebrity**

**Fall 2020**

**Welcome**

We’ve talked about stars a few times this semester. Stars: Part One began in the early 20th century, when Carl Laemmle staged a trolley accident to announce the Biograph Girl’s jump to his independent motion picture company where she would be billed under her real name: Florence Lawrence. From then on, the major media industries in the United States were enmeshed in this system of making stars with different characteristics as the era and medium demanded. Why? Because *stars make money.*

I wanted to revisit the concept of stardom one more time in our last week because I think that looking at contemporary celebrity will help us tie the recent concepts we’ve learned to our earlier content. What kinds of stardom exist now, in 2020? And how did we get here—technologically, industrially, and culturally?

**Key Concepts**

Here are your key concepts for this lecture…

**Sources**

…and here are the sources, besides your reading, that I’ll be drawing from. There’s a lot of awesome, really thoughtful scholarship out there on celebrities, influencers, social media stars, and the many factors that make these kinds of notoriety possible. Just know that this is something you *can study* if you’re so inclined, and it’s an amazing body of work.

**Timeline**

Now, let’s use the critical historical mindset we’ve cultivated all semester to think about how we got from **[ANIMATION]** stars to **[ANIMATION]** influencers. Judging by how brilliantly you’ve all done with our coursework, I bet you could already give me a rough explanation of where movie stars come from, and where influencers come from.

Here’s what I sketched out. **[ANIMATION]** Stars were (and are!) produced by powerful legacy industries like film and television. They’re often performers whose work is produced by Hollywood and distributed to a relatively circumscribed set of endpoints: theaters, television networks, streaming services, digital and physical copies with copyright protection, etc.

**[ANIMATION**] The rise of the famous influencer (a catchall term I’m using to refer to people whose stardom is reliant on social media) is connected to a lot of what we’ve discussed in the last few weeks, as I’m sure you could guess. Without a digital technological infrastructure comprised of the internet, home computers, and smartphones, we certainly couldn’t have the influencer. Nor could we have influencers without participatory culture—how this technological infrastructure invites us to consume *and* produce media, and interact with the contributions of other users, usually through a social networking platform.

So—some pretty different factors influence the stars emerging now, from networked digital spaces, and the stars that emerge from legacy industries, right? This is all stuff we know.

And of course, we also know that one didn’t totally give way to the other. Just because we have famous makeup YouTubers doesn’t mean we don’t have stars in the traditional model, too. Angelina Jolie doesn’t have an Instagram, you know?

**Celebrity**

What I want to do in this lecture is trace a few, more subtle ways the concept of celebrity—an umbrella category of which film stars and influencers are different expressions—has changed across the 20th and 21st centuries. New technology alone doesn’t explain the jump from Florence Lawrence to niche social media stars.

The first way I want to chart this change is through **[ANIMATION]** value. **[ANIMATION]** Two of the scholars whose work I’m drawing on for this lecture describe celebrity as “a constructed subjectivity comprised of distinct sets of self-referential, attention-seeking, market-aware practices.” Celebrity is an “an economic condition,” not an exceptional individual. So, can I decode that for you? Of course. This is saying that you can view celebrity as a set of behaviors and strategies that have an actual financial value. And how we valuate celebrity has changed across the span of our course…

**Timeline**

…producing a timeline that’s not just star to influencer, but instead that looks something like this. From the introduction of stars to the movie business in the 1910s, we’ve converted celebrity into profit in different ways. Let’s take a look at each one.

**Product**

In the 1910s and 1920s, the Hollywood star system produced stars in order to sell movies. As Hearn and Schoenhoff point out, star personalities were constructed by studios and their film roles were made to align with those personalities, in order to create a seamless, bankable product. Stars, in these early days, were *goods* produced in movie factories.

**Bara & Pickford**

Thinking back, we saw this **[ANIMATION]** with snake-eating, devil-worshipping Theda Bara, whose gothic vamp persona was created by the studio by assigning her to femme fatale roles onscreen and circulating those wild stories about her to the industry press. **[ANIMATION]** The same technique was applied to Mary Pickford, but it produced a different flavor—the sweet, girl-next-door ingenue. These (and other) early stars produced value by drawing attention to their films. As their celebrity increased, so too did their box office receipts.

**Industry**

As the studio system declined, however, they lost strict control over their stars. In that vacuum arose a whole industry of celebrity construction and promotion, a “highly developed” set of professions that included public relations, celebrity journalism and photography, makeup, styling, and so on. In this era, we see the beginning of an industry that produces value from the celebrity’s whole life on and off the screen, and this value (crucially) is *independent from their work in Hollywood productions.*

**Confidential**

In this era, for example, we see the rise of *Confidential* magazine. *Confidential* was a famous celebrity gossip magazine that began publishing in 1952. It notoriously thrived on *scandal,* not on cooperation with the studios—in fact, it mined value from celebrity by purchasing *unflattering* stories that might harm a studio’s ability to make money from a star’s image. This is what’s meant by a celebrity industry. Cashing in on celebrity happened independently from the success or failure of the films and programs in which those celebrities appeared.

**Property**

In 1953, a legal decision defined the *right to publicity*. Thus, the law gave a celebrity the right to damages and other relief for the unauthorized appropriation of that celebrity’s identity—which, legally, turned celebrity into a kind of *property*. It was a thing that could be owned, alienated, contracted to others, willed to your heirs, and so forth.

**Johnny Carson**

In the wake of this decision, you get lots of cases of celebrities suing people, companies, and other institutions that are infringing upon their right to publicity by using their name or likeness inappropriately. In other words, if celebrity was property, could use the law to stop people from stealing their property.

There was a great case of *Tonight Show* host Johnny Carson suing to stop…

**Portable Toilets**

…a company from calling itself “Here’s Johnny” portable toilets, and thereby devaluing his property, his celebrity, by associating his name and catchphrase with the heavenly aroma of human excrement festering in a plastic box in the sun.

**Gallagher & Gallagher 2**

My personal favorite, though, is the ongoing dispute between “comedian” Gallagher—famous for looking like this and smashing watermelons with a sledgehammer—and his brother, **[ANIMATION]** who toured under the name Gallagher 2. Gallagher 1 did originally grant Gallagher 2 permission to play small venues with some of his old, retired material. But eventually, Gallagher 2 started advertising in ways so subtle that many people who went to his shows didn’t realize that they weren’t seeing Gallagher 1. And then Gallagher 2 started doing the watermelon-smashing bit, too. And that was when Gallagher 1 brought down the sledgehammer of *the law* and sued to protect his property—his celebrity.

**Endorser**

From the 1970s through the 1990s, celebrities increasingly cashed in through the process of endorsement.

**Wheaties**

There is, of course, a long history of celebrities plugging products for money. Wheaties cereal, the breakfast of champions, began featuring athletes on their boxes way back in 1934, for example. But in this case, and in many of these early examples, Wheaties simply chose a category of person—here, virile, strong athletes—to communicate something about their product, and then chose individuals representative of that category across time.

**People Meter**

The era of converting celebrity to money through endorsements relied on 1) the expansion of television advertising in the 1970s due to the rise of cable and 2) new ways to measure audiences. What you see here is the People Meter, a device introduced by the Nielsen ratings corporation in 1987 that helped track what individual people were watching, not just whole households. Coupled with the Q-score, or a formula for measuring how popular a celebrity is with a specific demographic, the value of a celebrity’s endorsement could be measured, quantified, and analyzed rather than just guessed at.

**Jennifer Garner**

…which is how you get ongoing endorsements like Jennifer Garner’s endless, interchangeable commercials for CapitalOne credit cards. I could have picked a million examples here. The point is just that from the 1970s onward, the increasing calculability of a celebrity’s value to a target audience allowed a company like CapitalOne to select a celebrity whose endorsement would sway exactly the demographic they were trying to grab—here, likely white, middle-class, young-ish moms, I would guess?

**Brand**

And finally, in the age of the internet, from roughly the 1990s onward, the value of celebrity is in building a cohesive *brand*. By that, we mean that—as Hearn and Schoenhoff say—celebrities invest in themselves; taking full control of their public image, they build their fame or celebrity value as a form of market equity. They’re able to present a cohesive and seemingly authentic version of themselves through social media directly to the public, and then manufacture and sell an array of fitting products directly to those fans. Why endorse someone else’s product when you can sell your own goods?

**Fenty Beauty**

A great example among myriad others is Rihanna’s Fenty Beauty line. Rihanna has built a glamorous, beautiful, sexy, laid back, and inclusive brand; Fenty Beauty converts this image into money through the sale of branded makeup products.

**Celebrity**

Okay, so that’s one way to look at how we get from stars to influencers—through the changing value and practice of celebrity as an economic strategy.

Another way we might look at the shift from stars to influencers is by looking at **[ANIMATION]** celebrity criteria. By that, I mean interrogating *who is allowed to be a celebrity* at different points in media history.

**[ANIMATION]** As Alice Marwick explains it: “As media changes, so does celebrity…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.”

Let’s dissect this.

**Stars/Influencers continuum**

If I asked you to describe the qualities of a Hollywood star vs. the qualities of an influencer, my guess is you might come up with some of the following criteria.

**[ANIMATION]** The model of stardom produced by Hollywood generally creates celebrities from glamorous, exceptional, larger-than-life performers. They’re widely known household names.

**[ANIMATION]** If we think about the qualities of an influencer, we might reflect on the need for their brand to feel authentic, because they appeal directly to their audience through social media content that they produce (or at least appear to produce). They appeal to smaller audiences than Hollywood stars, but the seeming democracy of online platforms—the idea that everyone has access to a similar set of production tools through TikTok or Instagram—makes their stardom seem less engineered.

**Celebritization**

In fact, the move from stars to influencers can be attributed to a process called *celebritization*, or **[ANIMATION]** the multiplying ways in which social and cultural life is transformed by celebrity, but also contemporary changes in celebrity, primarily diversification, migration and (most importantly) democratization.

By diversification, we’re talking about celebrity status moving outside of entertainment—the idea that there are celebrity hair stylists, celebrity championship eaters, celebrity astrologers, and so forth. By migration, we’re talking about the ability of famous people to move from one kind of fame to another—John Cena moving from wrestler to actor, for example.

And by democratization, we’re talking about the increasing inclusion of so-called average Joes, everyday people, within the celebrity ranks. This is the key criteria that changes from legacy forms of stardom to social media stardom. Who can be a movie star? Virtually *no one*. Who can be a social media celebrity? Anyone with a phone. Or that’s what the discourse around influencers seems to want us to believe, at least.

**Continuum**

If we focus on the appearing democratization of celebrity, you might look at media history like this. **[ANIMATION]** First, there were film stars. In our lecture on TV stardom, we talked about Ida Lupino, femme fatale of mid-century noir on the big screen…**[ANIMATION]** who became relatable, authentic and intimate on television, where she played a housewife in a lightly fictionalized sit-com version of her life.

**[ANIMATION]** The proliferation of reality television shows beginning in the 1990s was a turning point in the seeming democratization of stardom. Reality television both elevated everyday people to fame (on shows like *The Real World*) and made famous people real (on celebreality shows like *Dancing with the Stars* or *The Osbournes*. Without this crucial step, we couldn’t get to **[ANIMATION]** internet and social media stardom, which amplifies the seeming accessibility of fame by cutting out the television network as an intermediary. Your reading for this lecture, by Crystal Abidin, talks more about the specific qualities of internet stardom.

**Celebrity**

The third (and final!) way we might explain the shift from stars to influencers is by looking at media history through the lens of labor. What kind of work is celebrity? Who does that work, and how are they compensated for it? **[ANIMATION]** Scholar Alice Marwick points out that the dynamics of social and mass media are quite different and lend themselves to particular types of celebrity; social media micro-celebrities must often take on unrelenting, and often financially unrewarding labor compared to legacy forms of stardom.

Let’s dig into that a bit.

**Star Hierarchy**

Remember way back when we talked about stars in the studio system? We learned about how precarious many workers in that system were. While precious few stars made lots of money, most everyone else in this pyramid was hustling and struggling. There was that anecdote about the extra on the D.W. Griffith set taking half his sandwich to the studio fence to pass to his hungry wife, who was standing on the other side.

So, income has always been distributed unequally among media workers despite their labor. That’s not new.

**Attention Economy**

The difference between the stars of the studio system and the influencers of today is that influencers labor in a **[ANIMATION]** constant, always-on, ruthlessattention economy. As the internet has exponentially multiplied the amount of content available to the average consumer, attention becomes scarce. This creates fierce competition for that attention, and value is connected to what can draw eyeballs.

The work of an influencer in some ways resembles an early movie star, to the extent that the influencer performs through photos and tiny motion pictures. But the influencer’s labor doesn’t end there—their real labor is the constant research, interaction, and promotion required to capture that scarce, and highly valuable, attention. That’s work that studios do on behalf of stars. Again, Angelina Jolie doesn’t have an Instagram.

**Micro-celebrity**

The real kicker is that nearly *all* of us labor in the attention economy. To the extent that we must live our personal, and especially our *professional* lives online, we can’t help it! **[ANIMATION]** To thrive in the attention economy, we regular people often borrow strategies from celebrities in order to boost our online attention and popularity. This is known as *micro-celebrity*.

**Pause and think**

I’m throwing a lot at you here, so I’d like you to pause for a moment and reflect. One of the most common ways micro-celebrity shows up as labor we must perform in our everyday lives is in the push to establish a personal brand. So, write or reflect for a minute or two: have you branded yourself? Why? In what ways? If you have not actively done so, how might others perceive your brand based on your social media presence(s)?

One of the ways branding shows up in my life, as a graduate student who one day hopes to be a professor, is in the pressure I feel to have a Twitter account with a significant following of other scholars in my field and the broader public. Having a bunch of followers wouldn’t make me a better teacher, writer, or thinker, but the celebritization of academia means there are famous online professors like Tressie McMillan-Cottom. To compete in the attention economy, even as a professional nerd, I am compelled to use strategies like public relations, cultivating an audience, targeted interaction with high-profile users, and personal branding—strategies that were once only necessary for real, honest-to-goodness celebrities. That’s micro-celebrity. Even though I’m not a famous person, I’m now compelled to do the labor of a celebrity in order to compete for attention. And in an attention economy, having eyeballs on my content is seen as an asset by potential employers—even though it has almost *nothing* to do with the job of being a professor.

**Attention**

So, put another way, the transition from stars to influencers is evidence of a media culture that appears to offer more people the opportunity to become celebrities, but in reality offers more people the opportunity to do the *labor of celebrities* without the perks. As Alice Marwick puts it, we’re all doing a lot of work to gain attention without any of the financial and logistical support celebrity usually brings; again, Angelina Jolie doesn’t have an Instagram. She pays a team of people to manage her image, and reaps the benefits of that image work. We do that work on our own.

In summary, then, if we want to understand the world of contemporary celebrity, we need to understand how older forms of celebrity, like the untouchable movie star, exist alongside newer forms of celebrity, like the influencer. Technology alone isn’t enough to explain how we get those newer forms of celebrity. Gradual shifts in the media industries and American society have changed the economic value of celebrity, democratized who can *be* a celebrity, encouraged the creep of celebrity labor into our everyday lives. Influencers aren’t just online stars; they’re an expression of this hugely complicated media history.