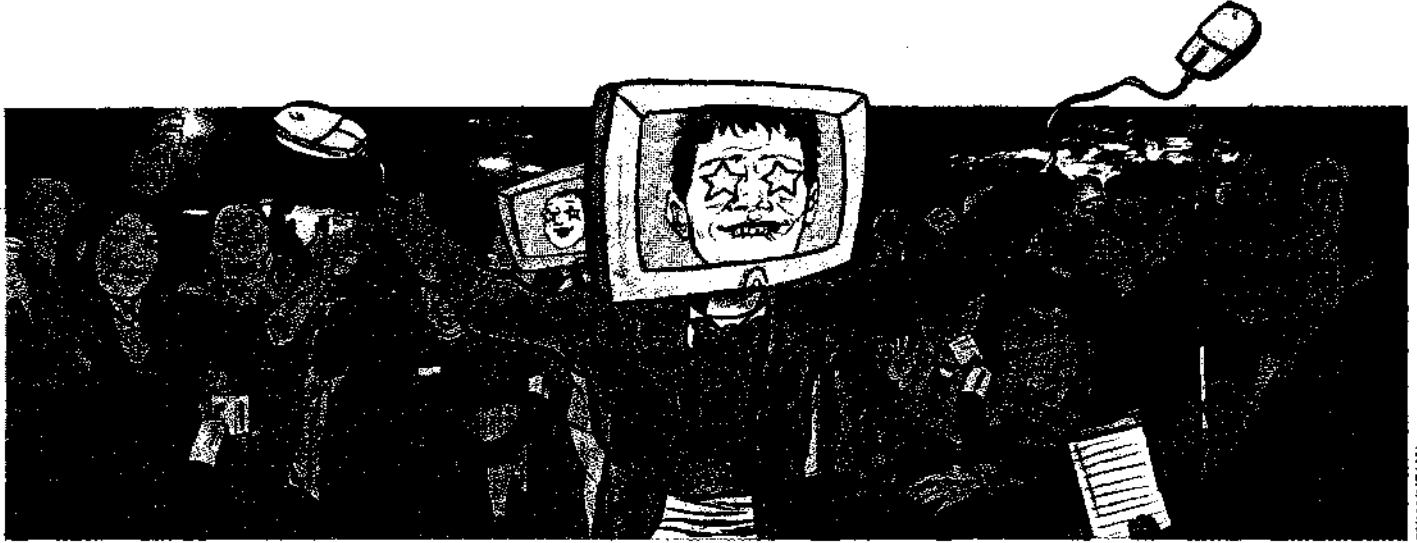


Chaudry, Lakshmi, "Mirror, Mirror On The Web." The Nation, January 29, 2007, pp. 19-22.

THANKS TO THE DIGITAL DEMOCRATIZATION OF FAME, WE ARE EVEN MORE IN THE THRALL OF CELEBRITY—EXCEPT NOW WE HAVE A SHOT AT IT OURSELVES.



RYAN INZANA

Mirror, Mirror On the Web

“Everyone, in the back of his mind, wants to be a star,” says YouTube co-founder Chad Hurley, explaining the dizzying success of the online mecca of amateur video in *Wired* magazine. And thanks to MySpace, YouTube, Facebook, LiveJournal and other bastions of the retooled Web 2.0, every Jane, Joe or Jamila can indeed be a star, be it as wannabe comics, citizen journalists, lip-synching geeks, military bloggers, aspiring porn stars or even rodent-eating freaks.

We now live in the era of micro-celebrity, which offers endless opportunities to celebrate that most special person in your life, i.e., you—who not coincidentally is also *Time* magazine’s widely derided Person of the Year for 2006. An honor once reserved for world leaders, pop icons and high-profile CEOs now belongs to “you,” the ordinary netizen with the time, energy and passion to “make a movie starring my pet iguana... mash up 50 Cent’s vocals with Queen’s instrumentals... blog about my state of mind or the state of the nation or the *steak-frites* at the new bistro down the street.”

The editors at *Time* tout this “revolution” in the headiest prose: “It’s a story about community and collaboration on a scale never seen before. It’s about the cosmic compendium of knowledge Wikipedia and the million-channel people’s network YouTube and the online metropolis MySpace. It’s about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes.”

This is the stuff of progressive fantasy: change, community,

collaboration. And it echoes our cherished hope that a medium by, of and for the people will create a more democratic world. So it’s easy to miss the editorial sleight of hand that slips from the “I” to the “we,” substitutes individual self-expression for collective action and conflates popular attention with social consciousness.

For all the talk about coming together, Web 2.0’s greatest successes have capitalized on our need to feel significant and admired and, above all, to be seen. The latest iteration of digital democracy has indeed brought with it a new democracy of fame, but in doing so it has left us ever more in the thrall of celebrity, except now we have a better shot at being worshiped ourselves. As MySpace luminary Christine Dolce told the *New York Post*, “My favorite comment is when people say that I’m their idol. That girls look up to me.”

So we upload our wackiest videos to YouTube, blog every sordid detail of our personal lives so as to insure at least fifty inbound links, add 200 new “friends” a day to our MySpace page with the help of friendflood.com, all the time hoping that one day all our efforts at self-promotion will merit—at the very least—our very own Wikipedia entry.

In *The Frenzy of Renown*, written in 1986, Leo Brady documented the long and intimate relationship between mass media and fame. The more plentiful, accessible and immediate the ways of gathering and distributing information have become, he wrote, the more ways there are to be known: “In the past that medium was usually literature, theater, or public monuments. With the Renaissance came painting and engraved portraits, and the modern age has added photography, radio, movies, and television. As each new medium of fame appears, the human image it conveys is intensified and the number of

Lakshmi Chaudhry, a senior editor at *In These Times*, is a contributing writer to *The Nation*. Her work has appeared in the *Village Voice*, *Wired News*, *AlterNet*, *Ms.* and *Bitch*.

individuals celebrated expands." It's no surprise then that the Internet, which offers vastly greater immediacy and accessibility than its top-down predecessors, should further flatten the landscape of celebrity.

The democratization of fame, however, comes at a significant price. "Through the technology of image reproduction and information reproduction, our relation to the increasing number of faces we see every day becomes more and more transitory, and 'famous' seems as devalued a term as 'tragic,'" Brandy wrote. And the easier it is to become known, the less we have to do to earn that honor. In ancient Greece, when fame was inextricably linked to posterity, an Alexander had to make his mark on history to insure that his praises would be sung by generations to come. The invention of the camera in the nineteenth century introduced the modern notion of fame linked inextricably to a new type of professional: the journalist. Aspiring celebrities turned increasingly to achievements that would bring them immediate acclaim, preferably in the next day's newspaper, and with the rise of television, on the evening news.

The broadcast media's voracious appetite for spectacle insured that notoriety and fame soon became subsumed by an all-encompassing notion of celebrity, where simply being on TV became the ultimate stamp of recognition. At the same time, advertisers sought to redefine fame in terms of buying rather than doing, fusing the American Dream of material success with the public's hunger for stars in programs such as *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*.

But the advent of cyber-fame is remarkable in that it is divorced from any significant achievement—farting to the tune of "Jingle Bells," for example, can get you on VH1. While a number of online celebrities are rightly known for doing something (a blogger like Markos Moulitsas, say), and still others have leveraged their virtual success to build lucrative careers (as with the punk-rock group Fall Out Boy), it is no longer necessary to do either in order to be "famous."

Fame is now reduced to its most basic ingredient: public attention. And the attention doesn't have to be positive either, as in the case of the man in Belfast who bit the head off a mouse for a YouTube video. "In our own time merely being looked at carries all the necessary ennoblement," Brandy wrote twenty years ago, words that ring truer than ever today.

Celebrity has become a commodity in itself, detached from and more valuable than wealth or achievement. Even rich New York socialites feel the need for their own blog, socialiterank.com, to get in on the action. The advice for aspiring celebantes may be tongue-in-cheek—"To become a relevant socialite, you are virtually required to have your name in the press"—but no less true in this age of Paris Hilton wannabes.

Fame is no longer a perk of success but a necessary ingredient, whether as a socialite, chef, scholar or skateboarder. "For a great many people it is no longer enough to be very good at what you do. One also has to be a public figure, noticed and celebrated, and preferably televised," writes Hal Niedzviecki in his

book *Hello, I'm Special*. When it is more important to be seen than to be talented, it is hardly surprising that the less gifted among us are willing to fart our way into the spotlight.

The fantasy of fame is not new, but what is unprecedented is the primacy of the desire, especially among young people. "I wanna be famous because I would love it more than anything.... Sometimes I'll cry at night wishing and praying for a better life to be famous... To be like the others someday too! Because i know that I can do it!" declares Britney Jo, writing on iWannaBeFamous.com.

She is hardly unusual. A 2000 Interprise poll revealed that 50 percent of kids under 12 believe that becoming famous is part of the American Dream. It's a dream increasingly shared by the rest of the world, as revealed in a recent survey of British children between 5 and 10, who most frequently picked being famous as the "very best thing in the world." The views of these young children are no different from American college freshmen, who, according to a 2004 survey, most want to be an "actor or entertainer."

Our preoccupation with fame is at least partly explained by our immersion in a media-saturated world that constantly tells us, as Brandy described it, "we should [be famous] if we possibly can, because it is the best, perhaps the only, way to be." Less obvious, however, is how our celebrity culture has fueled, and been fueled by, a significant generational shift in levels of narcissism in the United States.

In the 1950s, only 12 percent of teenagers between 12 and 14 agreed with the statement, "I am an important person." By the late 1980s, the number had reached an astounding 80 percent, an upward trajectory that shows no sign of reversing. Preliminary findings from a joint study conducted by Jean Twenge, Keith Campbell and three other researchers, revealed that an average college student in 2006 scored higher than 65 percent of the students in 1987 on the standard Narcissism Personality Inventory test, which includes statements such as "I am a special person," "I find it easy to manipulate people" and "If I were on the *Titanic*, I would deserve to be on the *first* lifeboat." In her recent book *Generation Me*, Twenge applies that overarching label to everyone born between 1970 and 2000.

According to Twenge and her colleagues, the spike in narcissism is linked to an overall increase in individualism, which has been fostered by a number of factors, including greater geographical mobility, breakdown of traditional communities and, more important, "the self-focus that blossomed in the 1970s [and became mundane and commonplace over the next two decades]." In schools, at home and in popular culture, children over the past thirty-odd years have been inculcated with the same set of messages: You're special; love yourself; follow your dreams; you can be anything you want to be.

These mantras, in turn, have been woven into an all-pervasive commercial narrative used to hawk everything from movie tickets to sneakers. Just do it, baby, but make sure you buy that pair of Nikes first. The idea that every self is important has been redefined to suit the needs of a cultural marketplace that devalue:

Celebrity has become a commodity in itself, detached from and more valuable than wealth or achievement.

genuine community and selfhood in favor of "success." In this context, "feeling good about myself" becomes the best possible reason to staple one's stomach, buy that shiny new car, or strip for a Girls Gone Wild video. The corollary of individualism becomes narcissism, an inflated evaluation of self-worth devoid of any real sense of "self" or "worth."

Since a key component of narcissism is the need to be admired and to be the center of attention, Generation Me's attraction to fame is inevitable. "You teach kids they're special. And then they watch TV, the impression they get is that everyone should be rich and famous. Then they hear, 'You can be anything you want.' So they're like, 'Well, I want to be rich and famous,'" says Twenge. Or if not rich and famous, at least to be "seen"—something the rest of us plebeians can now aspire to in the brave new media world. "To be noticed, to be wanted, to be loved, to walk into a place and have others care about what you're doing, even what you had for lunch that day: that's what people want, in my opinion," *Big Brother* contestant Kaysar Ridha told the *New York Times*, thus affirming a recent finding by Drew Pinsky and Mark Young that reality TV stars are far more narcissistic than actors, comedians or musicians—perhaps because they reflect more closely the reason the rest of us are obsessed more than ever with "making it."

Not only do Americans increasingly want to be famous, they believe they will be famous, more so than any previous generation.

Not only do Americans increasingly want to be famous, but they also believe they *will* be famous, more so than any previous generation. A Harris poll conducted in 2000 found that 44 percent of those between the ages of 18 and 24 believed it was at least somewhat likely that they would be famous for a short period. Those in their late twenties were even more optimistic: Six in ten expected that they would be well-known, if only briefly, sometime in their lives. The rosy predictions of our destiny, however, contain within them the darker conviction that a life led outside the spotlight would be without value. "People want the kind of attention that celebrities receive more than anything else," says Niedzwiecki. "People want the recognition, the validation, the sense of having a place in the culture [because] we no longer know where we belong, what we're about or what we should be about."

Without any meaningful standard by which to measure our worth, we turn to the public eye for affirmation. "It's really the sense that Hey, I exist in this world, and that is important. That I matter," Niedzwiecki says. Our "normal" lives therefore seem impoverished and less significant compared with the media world, which increasingly represents all that is grand and worthwhile, and therefore more "real."

No wonder then that 16-year-old Rachel, Britney Jo's fellow aspirant to fame on iWannaBeFamous.com, rambles in desperation, "I figured out that I am tired of just dreaming about doing something, I am sick of looking for a "regular" job... I feel life slipping by, and that 'something is missing' feeling begins to dominate me all day and night, I can't even watch the Academy Awards ceremony without crying...that is how I know...that is me... I have to be...in the movies!!!"

The evolution of the Internet has both mirrored and shaped

the intense focus on self that is the hallmark of the post-boomer generation. "If you aren't posting, you don't exist. People say, 'I post, therefore I am,'" Rishad Tobaccowala, CEO of Denuo, a new media consultancy, told *Wired*, inadvertently capturing the essence of Web 2.0, which is driven by our hunger for self-expression. Blogs, amateur videos, personal profiles, even interactive features such as Amazon.com's reviews offer ways to satisfy our need to be in the public eye.

But the virtual persona we project online is a carefully edited version of ourselves, as "authentic" as a character on reality TV. People on reality TV "are ultra-self-aware versions of the ordinary, über-facsimiles of themselves in the same way that online personals are *recreations* of self constantly tweaked for maximum response and effect," writes Niedzwiecki in his book.

Self-expression glides effortlessly into self-promotion as we shape our online selves—be it on a MySpace profile, LiveJournal blog or a YouTube video—to insure the greatest attention. Nothing beats good old-fashioned publicity even in the brave new world of digital media. So it should come

as no shock that the oh-so-authentic LonelyGirl15 should turn out to be a PR stunt or that the most popular person on MySpace is the mostly naked Tila Tequila, the proud purveyor of "skank-pop" who can boast of 1,626,097 friends, a clothing line, a record deal and making the cover of *Maxim UK* and *Stuff* magazines. YouTube has become the virtual equivalent of Los Angeles, the destination de rigueur for millions of celebrity aspirants, all hoping they will be the next Amanda Congdon, the videoblogger now with a gig on ABCNews.com, or the Spiridellis brothers, who landed venture capital funding because of their wildly popular video "This Land."

Beginning with the dot-com boom in the 1990s through to its present iteration as Web 2.0, the cultural power of the Internet has been fueled by the modern-day Cinderella fantasy of "making it." With their obsessive focus on A-list bloggers, upstart twentysomething CEOs and an assortment of weirdos and creeps, the media continually reframe the Internet as yet another shot at the glittering prize of celebrity. "We see the same slow channeling of the idea that your main goal in life is to reach as many people as possible all over the world with your product. And your product is you," says Niedzwiecki. "As long as that's true, it's very hard to see how the Internet is going to change that." As long as more democratic media merely signify a greater democracy of fame—e.g., look how that indie musician landed a contract with that major label—we will remain enslaved by the same narrative of success that sustains corporate America.

In our eagerness to embrace the web as a panacea for various political ills, progressives often forget that the Internet is merely a medium like any other, and the social impact of its various features—interactivity, real-time publishing, easy access, cheap mass distribution—will be determined by the people who use them. There is no doubt that these technologies have facilitated greater activism, and new forms of it, both on- and offline. But

we confuse the web's promise of increased visibility with real change. Political actions often enter the ether of the media world only to be incorporated into narratives of individual achievement. And the more successful among us end up as bold-faced names, leached dry of the ideas and values they represent—yet another face in the cluttered landscape of celebrity, with fortunes that follow the usual trajectory of media attention: First you're hot, and then you're not.

It's all about you. Me. And all the various forms of the First Person Singular," writes cranky media veteran Brian Williams in his contribution to *Time's* year-end package. "Americans have decided the most important person in their lives is...them, and our culture is now built upon that idea." So, have we turned into a nation of egoists, uninterested in anything that falls outside our narrow frame of self-reference?

As Jean Twenge points out, individualism doesn't necessarily preclude a social conscience or desire to do good. "But [Generation Me] articulates it as 'I want to make a difference,'" she says. "The outcome is still good, but it does put the self in the center." Stephen Duncombe, on the other hand, author of the new book *Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*, argues that rather than dismiss our yearning for individual recognition, progressives need to create real-world alternatives that offer such validation. For example, in place of vast anonymous rallies that aim to declare strength in numbers, he suggests that liberal activism should be built around small groups. "The size of these groups is critical. They are intimate affairs, small enough for each participant to have an active role in shaping

the group's direction and voice," he writes. "In these 'affinity groups,' as they are called, every person is recognized: in short, they exist."

Such efforts, however, would have to contend with GenMe's aversion to collective action. "The baby boomers were self-focused in a different way. Whether it was self-examination like EST or social protest, they did everything in groups. This new generation is allergic to groups," Twenge says. And as Duncombe admits, activism is a tough sell for a nation weaned on the I-driven fantasy of celebrity that serves as "an escape from democracy with its attendant demands for responsibility and participation."

There is a happier alternative. If these corporate technologies of self-promotion work as well as promised, they may finally render fame meaningless. If everyone is onstage, there will be no one left in the audience. And maybe then we rock stars can finally turn our attention to life down here on earth. Or it may be life on earth that finally jolts us out of our admiring reverie in the mirrored hall of fame. We forget that this growing self-involvement is a luxury afforded to a generation that has not experienced a wide-scale war or economic depression. If and when the good times come to an end, so may our obsession with fame. "There are a lot of things on the horizon that could shake us out of the way we are now. And some of them are pretty ugly," Niedzwiecki says. "You won't be able to say that my MySpace page is more important than my real life.... When you're a corpse, it doesn't matter how many virtual friends you have." Think global war, widespread unemployment, climate change. But then again, how cool would it be to vlog your life in the new Ice Age—kind of like starring in your very own *Day After Tomorrow*. LOL. ■

LETTERS

C O N T I N U E D

(Continued From Page 2)

previous attempts at peace have failed (news to no one) and the colonization of the West Bank is irreversible: Settlements are "an irreversible reality." As he states in his book: "Palestinians do not have the political or material strengths to stop the settlements and walls that have rendered a two-state solution unworkable"; and: "there seems to be no constellation of internal or external forces that will push Israel out of the West Bank against its will." So Abunimah concludes from this that Palestinians should abandon their struggle for national self-determination and construct a "moral" struggle for "individual rights" and democracy within a binational state. For "diaspora Palestinians" like himself, he revealingly states, who are "long accustomed to transience and movement," nationalism "has lost its luster." If only the Palestinians can now be as inclusive as the ANC, Abunimah wishes: "build a consensus around a clear, simple, and inclusive alternative like the Freedom Charter" and "Israel's arguments are powerless in a struggle that is not about winning territory but securing democratic rights for all."

Such naïve moralizing misses the point I emphasized in my review: What was possible

in South Africa has proven to be far less possible in Israel-Palestine. The reason is not Palestinian nationalism, as Abunimah charges, but the nature of Zionism itself. Unlike South African apartheid, Zionism is an exclusionary settler colonialism and has sought to dispense with rather than exploit the indigenous population. As Mona Younis argues: "While the majority of both whites and Jews were committed to exclusionary states in South Africa and Israel...the economic inclusion of Africans in South Africa permitted an inclusionary vision that had the potential of gaining support from significant sections of whites...Palestinian exclusion obviated this possibility in Israel." How can Abunimah expect bantustanized Palestinians to produce the same outcome of a one-state democracy in a situation where they are banished and cut off from their oppressors' structures? Where are Palestine's townships and labor movements, and where is Israel's Joe Slovo and his ANC-allied Communist Party, which had the support of a sizable and influential minority of whites?

This is why I felt it would have been worthwhile for Abunimah to consider the history of binationalism in Israel-Palestine more closely. It may have helped determine why binationalism

has been such a weak and marginal option and explain why it has had such little support among Palestinians and none among Israelis.

But Abunimah cares little about popular opinion. He is unrealistic in proposing a solution that has zero support among Israelis rather than advocating a solution that has their majority support (negotiated peace) or at least their 34 percent support (withdrawal to 1967 lines) and is backed by an international consensus. If Abunimah has spent a lot of time objecting to the feasibility of the two-state solution, he spends far too little time appreciating why after forty years of Israeli colonization, rejectionism and demonization of Palestinians there still remains such solid support in Israel for ending the occupation. Any real advocacy would choose to work with a realistic political program as an initial step in resolving the conflict rather than with wishful thinking. ■ BASHIR ABU-MANNEH

JUST ONE QUESTION

Champaign, Ill.

■ Regarding John Leonard's 3,360-word review of Thomas Pynchon's 1,085-page book ["Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind," Dec. 11]: Yeah, but is it any good? STEVE MCGAUGHEY