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From Photoplay to Twitter: Celebrity in the First Person

Even the most half-hearted follower of celebrity gossip shouldn't have been surprised when on March 3, Charlie Sheen set the Guinness World Record for reaching one million Twitter followers the fastest—within 25 hours of creating an account. The actor joined microblogging site Twitter in the midst of what could kindly be called a public meltdown. Following a strange incident with a prostitute in a NYC hotel room and a trip to rehab in January, Sheen declared that he'd "healed himself" within a week. In the meantime, he publicly feuded with *Two and a Half Men* creator Chuck Lorre and was banned from the Warner Brothers Lot, and a series of heavily watched UStream internet broadcasts and radio and TV interviews featured Sheen's less-than-coherent rants about "tiger blood" and "goddesses." Joining Twitter in the midst of this series of disasters seemed par for the course: Sheen's publicist quit in the midst of his transmedia breakdown, and the actor's modus operandi appeared to be speaking freely on every available platform that would allow him.

That so many Twitter users immediately "followed" Sheen is equally unsurprising. By that point, Charlie Sheen was a bona fide media event, and with the click of a single button, a user could have instant, unfettered, first-person access to the actor's every bout of insanity.

None of this may be surprising—but it is, I would argue, striking: emblematic of how social media has begun to rewrite certain core ideas about celebrity and stardom. Once upon a time, stars were envisioned as elevated beings, separate from the rest of us "mere mortals." The idea has long been held that there is a distinct separation between the public, the "star text"—the entity the public "reads"—and the actual star. We endow stars with what is

ultimately an irrational kind of devotion because we read them as “superior;” however we read them as superior because the points of access we have to them—promotion, publicity, acting roles—paint them as such. Note that, traditionally, these points of access are extrinsic to the stars themselves and highly regulated, whether by the studio system in the first half of the twentieth century, or by publicists and agents today. They are external tools that paint a particular “star image,” a multi-media persona that extends beyond any singular text. But the star image, because of the sheer number of ways it filters down to the public, has historically been distinct from the star’s actual voice and his actual real life.

I would argue, however, that social media—notably Twitter, but also Facebook, YouTube, and the blogosphere—have fundamentally begun to rewrite what we understand as a star text. Because of their ability to let stars speak in the first person, unfiltered, instantaneously, with no outside intervention, social media has allowed stars to use their own voices to communicate directly with the public.

Stars have spoken “in their own words” since the 1920s, through Hollywood fan magazines, tell-all books and exclusives, and on radio and television shows. And the use of the first-person can be especially poignant. Take, for example, a 1931 *Photoplay* article about Fatty Arbuckle (published less than a year before he died) was called “Just Let Me Work!” While the bulk of the article was written in the third-person, about Arbuckle’s difficulties in returning to Hollywood after his scandal, the plea in the headline accentuates his pain and desperation, much more than one that may have read “Fatty Arbuckle can’t get work.”¹

However, the first-person has traditionally been filtered by “official” publicity channels, all of which involve an intermediary between the star and his or her voice. Classical Hollywood

¹ Tom Ellis, “Just Let Me Work,” *Photoplay*, March 1931.

fan magazines, for example, relied heavily on the first person as a form of address, but it was a heavily mediated address. Take, for example, a story from *Modern Screen* in 1938, where a 10-year-old Shirley Temple “wrote” what her mother explained was probably her “last letter to Santa,” since she was “on the edge of belief.” Temple (or, more likely, a studio publicist) apologized in maudlin, “Gee whillikers” language for putting a bell in the toe of her stocking last year, and asked for a doll to replace hers that melted in the car, a tea set to replace the ones her dog Rowdy broke, and a pair of blue dungarees, a cowboy shirt, and a six-shooter to wear when riding her pony. The text of the article includes sentiments like, “Did you see our wreath? A lumber Jack man up north made it for me with my name on it. It must have been hard because holly pricks. People are awful good.”² In short, it sounds less like it was penned by a ten-year-old Shirley Temple (despite her childish cursive signature on the bottom) and more like it was penned by an amalgam of all of the characters she played in the 1930s, or more likely, a Twentieth Century Fox publicist. But it offers, in theory, a portrait of the “real” Shirley Temple—and it does nothing but cement her “star image,” reinforcing the persona readers already attributed to her.

According to Richard Dyer, authenticity—a star actually being who she seems to be—is a necessary component of star charisma, for it also “guarantees the authenticity of the other particular values a star embodies.”³ Media celebrities exist simultaneously on multiple discursive planes. Actors, for example, generally appear in the public eye in two ways: through the roles they play and through official publicity about them. The most elusive plane, though, is the actors’ authentic, private selves, which the public gets glimpses of from time to time but

² Martin Levin, *Hollywood and the Great Fan Magazines* (New York: Random House, 1991), 45.

³ Richard Dyer, “A Star Is Born and the Construction of Authenticity,” in *Stardom Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill, (London: Routledge, 1991), 133.

rarely sees clearly. A *Photoplay* or *People Magazine* “first person essay” (usually framed as being “as told to” the author) speaks to our desire for this type of authenticity—but it’s rarely actually authentic. In 1934, *Screen Book* published a letter Clara Bow “wrote” to her unborn child about her hopes and dreams for him—or, more accurately, they published a sentimental essay Bow “told” to staff writer Jewel Adams.⁴ The words are attributed to Bow, creating a connection between reader and movie star/new mother, but it would be difficult to argue that this is her “authentic” voice. It claims access to authenticity without actually being authentic.

One could make similar arguments about more recent forms of public self-disclosure: the tell-all book is usually ghostwritten and has to travel through the publishing and editing, and often legal, worlds before we actually read it. Celeb reality shows, on both broadcast and cable, show stars in their private lives—but reality TV is carefully planned and edited to tell good stories, not necessarily offer true authenticity.

But the desire for authenticity in celebrity personae is an essential one for fans: it represents a search for a larger truth, proof that the star texts the public reads and sees are not fictional. Often, all the proof necessary is a hint of that which publicity cannot show—at least, as long as the private correlates with the other, more public layers.

In *Picture Personalities*, Richard deCordova historicizes this desire, explaining the development of the Hollywood star system in terms of a gradual evolution of performers’ identities, from character to actor, to picture personality, to star. Initially, faces on movie screens were only identifiable as the specific characters they played. With the audience’s desire to have them identified, they became “actors,” revealing not only their names but also the fact that a reality existed beyond the filmmaking process. The next evolution was the “picture

⁴ Levin, 63.

personality,” when the actors’ own personalities extended beyond the film text, albeit still within terms of their profession. Finally, there was the star, whose personal life trumped his professional life and became the focus of discourse about him. Each successive movement was fueled by audiences’ desire to gain access to the various layers of performers’ real selves, a search for a concealed truth behind the image.⁵

Star scandal, according to deCordova, becomes the ultimate evolution and the ultimate layer of truth, for it reveals what other discourses conceal. The Fatty Arbuckle scandal, for example, belied the contemporaneous fan magazine portraits of stars’ stable home lives. At the time, showing stars with their families in relatively normal, conventional situations seemed to showcase Hollywood’s moral fortitude. Stars’ fame and money made them different from most Americans, but their domestic lives were nonetheless natural and healthy, at least according to studio publicity.⁶ Arbuckle’s infamous party, however, showed another side of the Hollywood lifestyle that discourses of stability had hidden—namely, excessive wealth that led to immorality and debauchery. In turn, it also showed that in many cases, stories of stars’ normalcy were also likely fiction.⁷ Each evolution in the development of the star system was the result of a desire to see the next “hidden” layer of those onscreen. The Fatty Arbuckle scandal, then, revealed some of the mechanisms behind the star system itself, specifically what official publicity can conceal, confirming that there was another layer of reality beneath it.

Scandal is the ultimate unveiling of truth, for it underscores the inauthenticity of much star discourse while simultaneously indicating that many things normally remain hidden.

⁵ Richard deCordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 98-101, 140-141.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 104-7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 128-31.

Despite myriad media stories about stars' daily lives, the public does not usually have unmitigated access to what is truly private, and what is not seen is always potentially shocking.

What's so fascinating about social media is that it serves the exact same function as a good old fashioned celebrity scandal, without a celebrity necessarily having to do anything scandalous. If we take Cordova's argument that scandal unveils the mechanisms behind the star factory, and allows us to see the person behind the star image, then Twitter—with its potential for complete, instantaneous candidness—serves the exact same function.

Twitter is only five years old, and it has many potential uses (public and private conversations with friends, organizing protests, networking, getting breaking news), but it's clear that one of its main purposes is cyberstalking celebrities. Of the 100 Twitter accounts with the most followers, 81 are celebrities (the top three, in descending order, are Lady Gaga, Justin Bieber, and Barack Obama), and the other 19 are corporate accounts (including the official Twitter account, CNN Breaking News, and the New York Times).⁸ Most of those with Twitter accounts use the site for multiple purposes, but instant access to a favorite stars' thoughts is undoubtedly a key one. While many famous people outsource Tweeting (Obama and Oprah Winfrey being two of them), and many only use the site for "official" announcements—tour dates, promotions, or news updates—it's not necessarily a hard and fast majority. Just as many celebrities tweet themselves, which offers the potential for genuine candidness and dialogue with fans, but also for shocking PR disasters. Either way, the traditional barrier between stars and the general public begins to break down when access has the potential to be this open.

⁸ Twittercounter.com, "The Top 100 Most Followed on Twitter," <http://twittercounter.com/pages/100> (accessed May 4, 2011)

While every single thing Charlie Sheen has ever tweeted would be a great case study for this paper, I will instead use a different celebrity to illustrate the strange relationship between fame and social media: *Happy Days* and *Charles in Charge* star Scott Baio. I first became aware of his Twitter persona through feminist blog Jezebel, which started a daily feature called “Tweet Beat” in 2009—featuring some of the most interesting, funny, or disturbing celebrity tweets of the previous 24 hours. Baio’s first Tweet Beat appearance was in October 2009, when he wrote, “People that are pro-choice should ‘thank’ their mother for being pro-life.”⁹ Jezebel noted his stance without comment, although several of the blog’s readers mocked him in the comment section—but the tweets kept coming. Over time, he tweeted an unflattering, possibly racist picture of Michele Obama (for which he received death threats), compared US border control unfavorably with that of North Korea and Iran, and yelled at the “haters” making fun of him on Twitter.

The moment that incited an official “blog war,” though, was on April 12, 2010, when Baio had just filed his taxes. He tweeted, “Taxes are DONE...That should feed, house & provide medical for a few lazy non working people at my expense. Have a great Monday!” Jezebel posted the tweet, again with no comment, but he was taken to task by a number of blog commentators, some of whom also responded to him on Twitter. This set him off. In a series of subsequent tweets, he called Jezebel staffers and readers hypocrites, racists, and prostitutes, among other things, and posted a picture of a woman in a bikini riding a broom to exemplify the “typical Jezebel reader.” Readers’ response was to add that Baio was “the antichrist” to his Wikipedia page, to “redefine” him on Urban Dictionary as something abject and obscene, and

⁹ Most of Baio’s tweets are offline as of May 2011, but the Baio/Jezebel incident has been archived on Jezebel. See Jessica Coen, “Scott Baio’s Online Meltdown: A Complete Timeline,” <http://jezebel.com/5520775/scott-baios-online-meltdown-a-complete-timeline> (accessed May 4, 2011)

to start a hashtag meme (a running joke using specifically tagged posts) called #ScottBaioRuinsEverything—for example, “Scott Baio left a cake out in the rain. #ScottBaioRuinsEverything”

Then his wife stepped in, ratcheting up the level of vitriol—calling Jezebelers “Lesbian Shitasses,” and saying that Scott Baio had more class in his urine than anyone who read the blog. Of course, the next day, she noted that she had many “lesbian friends,” all of whom were wonderful people...unlike Jezebel readers. Eventually the vitriol trailed off (and Baio’s Wikipedia page was fixed), but the story was picked up by a number of outside news organizations, including CNN, Fox News, and the Huffington Post. In the end, Scott Baio’s 128-character rant about where his tax dollars go spiraled into a minor media event, entirely because of the kind of instantaneous dialogue social media inspires.

Scott Baio may not be on the same “level” of stardom as someone like Johnny Depp or Angelina Jolie; the peak of his popularity was over 25 years ago. Apart from a running guest stint on *Arrested Development* as lawyer Bob Loblaw (who ran Bob Loblaw’s Law Blog), his most recent work was in a pair of VHI reality shows (*Scott Baio is 45 and Single*; *Scott Baio is 46 and Pregnant*), and he’s always had something of an unseemly reputation for girlfriend-hopping, at least until his reality series, when he proposed to his now-wife. But, to a fan—and clearly, he has many—his Twitter persona promises unmitigated access to his everyday, often quotidian thoughts, emotions, and actions. To be fair to Mr. Baio, most of his tweets are not as incendiary as the ones picked up by Jezebel (last week, he went to an ice cream social at his daughter’s preschool; also, his wife puts too many pillows on the bed¹⁰). For a fan of any star, these kinds of everyday observations not only grant access but can potentially shore up the

¹⁰ <http://twitter.com/#!/scottbaio> (accessed May 4, 2011)

authenticity of a star text. However, Baio's more provocative texts likely do the opposite. As a sitcom star, not a political figure, known mostly for dating every woman in Hollywood and making lowest-common-denominator television, his political rants are jarring. When coupled with his (and his wife's) aggressive reaction to those on the other end of the political spectrum, Twitter has offered the public a view of Baio that would likely have remained hidden in a pre-Twitter world. In a way, this has become his "unveiling" to the public: evidence of who he really is and how he acts, which does not mesh with any other outside discourses about him over the 30 years he's been in the public eye. Scott Baio may not necessarily "ruin everything," but he's not quite the affable womanizer we'd been led to believe. Because it's instantaneous, unfiltered, lacks any kind of intermediary, Twitter (and other forms of social media) offers the potential to add new layers to star texts, that come directly from the stars themselves. They break down the divide between stars and fans, create public dialogue, and by revealing stars' "backstage" selves, they confirm that the "star image" is just that: an image.