Celebrity Culture and the Rise of the Ordinary: An Interview with Joshua Gamson

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Commodifying my Culture

frozen and crystallized in time. Within this discourse the networks and flows that would have allowed Morgan to be aware of Japanese Animation were hidden. I was continuing the work of so many interventionists in the region before me of preserving particular aspects of a culture which could easily be accommodated into the craft industry of the region, but what was I doing for/to Morgan? This of course led me to ask myself, why was I not celebrating crafters who make new and original artwork along with crafters who use traditional methods and patterns? Rather than perpetuating ideas of traditionalism and perhaps even fatalism in my work, I realized that I must strive to recognize this diversity of Appalachian culture which I had until this point excluded.

I find myself once again in Lexington, once again a student at the University of Kentucky, this time adding a Doctoral degree in Geography to my toolkit. I have been drawn to the field of Economic Geography, because I am interested in addressing questions of consumption and production practices within Kentucky’s craft industry, and looking more broadly at questions of economic development in rural regions. I am now committed to deconstructing the discourse of Appalachia, examining the ways in which the region’s economy has always been connected to the broader economy, thus breaking down the notion of isolationism that has plagued this region. I no longer romanticize “traditional” or “authentic” forms of small-scale craft production; rather I examine small-scale and large-scale forms of production with an equal amount of vigor. Nor do I engage in preservation projects which may benefit only local elites. I am now fully aware and cognizant of the forms of creative destruction that preservation projects may create.

I suppose the lesson to be learned from this cautionary tale, for me anyway, is that I must always be committed to reflecting on each theory I employ, each article I write, and each interview I conduct... I will always be reflecting on how I might be commodifying my own culture for consumption and the role I play in sustaining the discourse on Appalachia.

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Celebrity Culture and the Rise of the Ordinary:
Interview with Dr. Joshua Gamson

Conducted by David Hoopes and Drew Heverin
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JG: When I hear that term, I think of cultures in which consuming is central to social experience, where shopping, buying and getting commodities is central to social existence, where consumption is part of how people make their identities, part of how people connect with one another. It’s where people mark their individual identities and collective identities with products.

dC: Do you think that this is characteristic of all contemporary cultures?

JG: Well, I focus on American culture, so that is certainly my frame of reference. I suppose that’s also my shortcoming. But I think of market-based cultures, capitalist societies where advertising and marketing are dominant and become the model for a lot of other parts of one’s experience.

Joshua Gamson is Professor of Sociology at the University of San Francisco, and author of the books Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America, Freaks Talk Back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Nonconformity, the Stonewall Book, the Award-winning The Fabulous Sylvester and numerous scholarly and non-scholarly articles. In 2009, he received a Guggenheim Fellowship. He lives in Oakland with his husband and their two daughters.
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In American culture, where branding becomes an important part of non-business enterprises—for political movements and so on—they're operating according to the logic of branding. They brand themselves and sell their products to consumers. And to some degree, people who come into contact with these enterprises encounter them as though they were a product to be consumed.

People do that with themselves, too, with their own individual identities. I think that this phenomenon has to do with living in a society where a market logic dominates. Not all societies are like that.

dC: We'd like to turn to some of the issues raised in your talk yesterday. If you would allow me to paraphrase your thesis: "In celebrity culture today, there's been a triumph of the ordinary." Could you expand on that?

JG: Yes. Since the beginning of modern celebrity culture, there has been a part of this culture that emphasizes the ordinariness of the celebrity through showing their private lives or their private selves in some way. For example, celebrities have been shown in circumstances that are not necessarily glamorous—in a tabloid without make-up or sloppy after a night out, or often in a softer kind of "at the beach with their kids" moment, just doing something regular, being human instead of fancy stars. This has been around for a long time. However, in the last 15-20 years, that kind of emphasis on the ordinariness of celebrities—not to mention the phenomenon of ordinary people becoming celebrities—has become really dominant.

dC: I suppose the ordinary is attractive sometimes.

JG: It comes and goes, and it's really here now. There have always been stories of ordinary people becoming famous accidentally, for a kidnapping or something similar, like the Lindbergh Baby. However, this phenomenon where the credential for becoming famous is that one is ordinary, that's pretty pronounced now, especially in reality TV.

dC: Do you think that this has resulted from the obsession we had with seeing celebrities as ordinary?

JG: It builds from that, for sure, but I think it's more directly related to developments in the media production system. Television producers, who were under financial pressure in the late 1980s, came up with a cheap alternative to scripted programming: Make drama out of ordinary lives. Fortunately, there were already some genres that lent themselves to this model like game shows and similar programs. That's how TV production works: You take something that's already working and you tweak it a little bit and see if the new tweaked version will work also. There was already a model of ordinary people appearing on TV (on talk shows) and giving them a more sustained format where they have the cameras on them for a while is a low-risk, low-cost production. It has the advantage of being both manageable and unpredictable. You set people up and try to get some real emotions to display.

dC: That accounts for the impetuses behind the production of that form of entertainment. But how do you account for its extreme popularity and consumption by the public?

JG: I think people tend to enjoy, first of all, imagining that it could be them or their friends. There's less social distance between them and the people who everybody is watching. With really big stars, you know clearly that they have something you don't; some talent, or internal quality or just some powerful machine behind them that you can't have. Even if you don't think they're talented, they are supported by a machinery that you are not going to get access to.

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dC: We talked yesterday about pleasure and its link to the real and unmasking the non-real. However, now I forget which one was pleasing. Was it pleasing to see the real or was it pleasing to unmask the non-real? I’ve been turned around...

JG: I actually think it is some combination of those. I think there is something satisfying about discovering something that has broken through that layer of management so typical of consumer cultures. Remember that one thing about a consumer culture is that everything is commodified, manipulated or filtered through advertising. When you are conscious that all that is going on around you, breaking through and unmasking the real is very satisfying. It’s about that unmasking moment. There’s something reassuring in knowing that ultimately, underneath it all, there is something real. Rather than feeling like underneath there is just another image, another performance, another fake thing, another mass-produced person, there’s something reassuring in knowing that there is real life left and that you know how to detect it.

dC: Speaking of the rise of the real, how is Hollywood responding to the triumph of the ordinary?

JG: Honestly, the Hollywood system and TV production has created most of it.

dC: But at the same time, it is true that a lot of these reality shows grow out of that initial expression online, like for example the show with Tila Tequila.

JG: Yes, and for some of them Internet fame is all they want or can get. Certainly, in other cases, mining online celebrity is one of the newer ways that the established TV system is finding and using reality stars. Typically, YouTube and online celebrities don’t initially have any connection to any existing celebrity or to the entertainment industry in Hollywood. What seems to be happening now is that Hollywood is absorbing Internet celebrities who have shown that they are established and can attract attention. Entertainment industry companies know that it is a pretty good deal to simply find figures that already have people who are following them. For example, Julia Alison in New York has managed to market herself by being a pain in the ass on Gawker and by having herself photographed while going out partying and then writing about it. She has managed to attract a following not necessarily because she is liked but because she annoys. But it doesn’t make much of a difference: she attracts attention and then she sells the fact that she can attract attention to whatever company wants to buy it. And it makes more sense for a company to give that a try than to try to discover someone like Julia Alison and put her on TV and hope that people might be interested in her exploits; it’s less risky since an audience has already been demonstrated—just as Paris Hilton and Nicole Ritchie were already known commodities before they had a reality TV show.

dC: At the beginning of your response you said that these online celebrities, figures like Julia Alison, achieve their celebrity, at least initially, outside of the Hollywood market. Do you think that this sort of notoriety constitutes any sort of resistance to the Hollywood logic or has it been completely absorbed and commodified?

JG: I think we’d have to figure out how we are using the term resistance. I don’t think there is necessarily any ideological resistance. However, I do think there are a lot of people who want to bypass gatekeepers, and that is a form of resistance. It is resistance when people outside the Hollywood and New York celebrity industries are trying to do the selecting themselves, and trying to control access to an audience, doing it their own way. There’s a form of resistance there, in the self-made celebrities and the viral celebrities you find online.

dC: But at the end of the day, they still just want to enter into the same system?

JG: I think a lot of people just want to go where the center of the action is, and where the obvious cash is. But I think it won’t be possible to totally colonize these online celebrity-making processes. It’s not new to have people on the fringes attracting audiences, cult celebrities who are known in a particular subcultural community—like drag performers for instance. These are not all people who want a reality show. Often, they’re more invested in subcultural expression. I think a lot of the mini-celebrities you find online are more like cult figures, who aren’t attempting to “cross over.” Their whole thing is to embody some form of critique, sometimes even a direct critique of Hollywood control of celebrity, or of the worship of celebrity. They try to undercut that in some way, to play with and against it, and that’s their form of entertainment and expression; that’s the basis of their little bit of fame. There is a lot of that kind of energy among the people who become online celebrities.

It doesn’t all get commodified. It’s not possible at this point to do that. As YouTube and other similar sites continue down the path of trying to control things, with restrictions and licensing—which is starting to happen—the energy will move somewhere else, the way it does and has. I’m not someone who argues that cultural resistance always gets commodified; it takes different shapes and often just moves somewhere else, literally.

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JG: You know, I think, basically, I work it. I have a good reason for tuning into the part of me that enjoys it. I believe that the pleasures that people get from culture, including consumer culture, are crucial to understanding it, and we need that understanding in order to be able to make any meaningful critique. If you are really making a critique because you want to see things change, you need to be inside the logic of it, the meaning of it, the pleasure of it. I think my enjoyment is crucial to my critiques.

dC: Finally, what's your favorite show?

JG: That's a good question. My tastes are pretty varied. I was in love with The Wire and Six Feet Under in their day, and am still in love with True Blood and Dexter. Going on my current TiVo list, I'd have to say 24, Project Runway, Entourage, Modern Family, American Idol, and Curb Your Enthusiasm.

dC: Thank you very much.

JG: My pleasure.