TOWARDS A THEORY OF CROSS-MEDIA NETWORKED MICROCELEBRITY: OF BEDROOMS, BLOGSITES, BROADCASTS, AND BOARDROOMS

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Cross-media networked microcelebrity

It has been almost ten years since the concept of microcelebrity was coined by Theresa Senft (2008) to describe a communicative practice and self-branding labour wherein internet users fashion themselves as prolific personalities with commodifiable value. As the industry has matured, elite microcelebrities have honed themselves to become Influencers (Abidin, 2015), a cross-platform, highly commercial, extensively self-narrativized form of branding that bridges across physical and digital spaces.

Influencers are impacting traditional media industries, including television (Hamedy, 2016), cinema (Hamedy, 2015), and publishing (Naughton, 2016). They are among the world's most influential teenagers (Kembrey, 2014), being fastest-selling debut novelists (Collison, 2014), and recognized by traditional awards (Collins, 2016) and internet-native ones (Influence Asia, 2017). They have even stimulated updates in tax laws (The Nordic Page, 2011) and advertising guidelines (Drake, 2016). Yet, most of these recent developments have been limited to popular press coverage rather than scholarly inquiry.

As the Influencer phenomenon is evolving quicker than scholarship can keep up, a major gap in the field of microcelebrity studies is the connection between microcelebrities and legacy media. More specifically, what begs theorizing are the networked relationships between the three ecologies of internet personalities (i.e. transient virality, people who become memes, microcelebrities, and Influencers), digital estates of the media (i.e. internet-native publishing outlets and the internet presence of legacy media), and traditional old media (i.e. television, cinema, and radio). While some scholars are beginning to investigate the dispersal of celebrity value across platforms

and populations (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2015), this paper explicitly maps out the structural, cultural, and social institutions that connect these three ecologies in relation to spatiality and temporality, through a theory of cross-media networked microcelebrity.

Methodology and typology

To understand the networked flows among virality, celebrity, and commerce across the attention economy (Goldhaber, 1997) of internet personalities, digital estates of the media, and traditional old media, I draw on six brief case studies from the last six years to illustrate the key (micro)celebrity pathways that have emerged globally. As an anthropologist, I draw on traditional ethnography with personal experience from fieldwork with Influencers, and digital ethnography wherein I trace the historical and discursive journey of the case studies on various media (Postill & Pink, 2012). Through grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I build a theory of cross-media networked microcelebrity. Regrettably, these case studies are overtly White and Anglo-centric; although this is not a function of the researcher's intentional choice, it does serve as a commentary on the types of bodies and forms of microcelebrity that are accorded higher visibility in the media, and the forms of value (such as shame as spectacle or borrowed celebrity) ascribed to them. The six types are:

1) Eyewitness virality: television news interviewees, many of whom are victims of the incidents being covered, who attain overnight fame through the news networks who curate and disseminate their sensational and memorable eyewitness accounts on social media as humour and clickbait. Case study: Michelle Dobyne of "ain't nobody got time for that" fame (2016).

2) Face of memes: ordinary people, many of whom are accidentally captured with compromising expressions or gestures, who become iconic memes that while in high circulation, do not attach to their (attempted) self-branding nor translate into more permanent microcelebrity. Case study: Kyle Craven of "Bad Luck Brian" fame (2012).

3) Spotted and groomed: everyday users, many of whom are children or teenagers, whose unexpectedly viral videos on social media are rebroadcast and amplified on television talk shows, and are invited as guests on talk shows before being groomed to run their own recurring segments on the talk show. Case study: Sophia Grace and Rosie of the "Ellen DeGeneres show" fame (2011).

4) Politicized posterchild: young children, many of whom share politicized content on social media, who have become branded by the media as the "face" of a movement, but who maintain their high visibility on social media without celebritizing themselves or being subsumed by legacy media. Case study: Bana Alabed of "Tweeting from Aleppo" fame (2016).

5) Borrowed Influence: Influencers, many of whom are the elite of their subgenres, who are invited to participate in or helm sections of traditional media outlets in order for legacy media to capitalize on Influencers' internet-native audiences to amplify their (fading) presence and relevance. Case study: MunahHirzi of "YouTube to Suria" fame (2012).

6) Weaponized microcelebrity: microcelebrities, many of whom produce ambivalent content with the prowess to polarize public opinion, whose content is made viral and spectacular through traditional media's disproportionate coverage, such that their fame and content can be weaponized and borrowed as a placeholder for various causes. Case study: PewDiePie of the "Wall Street Journal Anti-Semitic accusations" fame (2017).

Contribution

This paper extends current scholarship on microcelebrities by shifting away from culturally-specific empirical case studies and platform-specific silos to theorize the production, consumption, circulation, and cooptation of microcelebrity across old and new media. By attending to how internet personalities, digital estates of the media, and traditional old media borrow from, capitalize on, and collaborate and compete for viewership and attention, we can understand the lifecycle, use value, discardability, and respectability politics involved in the field of microcelebrity studies.

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