Gossip Talk and Online Community: Celebrity Gossip Blogs and Their Audiences

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GOSSIP TALK AND ONLINE COMMUNITY: CELEBRITY GOSSIP BLOGS AND THEIR AUDIENCES

A Dissertation Presented

by

ERIN A. MEYERS

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2010

Department of Communication
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And I offer my deepest thanks to my wonderful husband, Michael DeLuca, for his love, good humor, generosity, and, most of all, patience during this entire process. I simply could not have done it without him.
Celebrity gossip blogs have quickly established themselves as a new media phenomenon that is transforming celebrity culture. This dissertation is an examination of the impact of the technological and textual shifts engendered by new media on the use of gossip as a form of everyday cultural production. Broadly, I investigate the historical role of gossip media texts in celebrity culture and explore how celebrity gossip blogs have reconfigured audience engagements with celebrity culture.

Following Gamson’s (1994) approach to celebrity as a cultural phenomenon, I separate celebrity gossip blogs into three elements—texts, producers, and audiences—and examine the interplay between them using ethnographic methods adapted to the new media setting. I begin with an investigation of what is being said about celebrity on gossip blogs, supported by my five-week online fieldwork observation of six heavily-trafficked, commercially-supported celebrity gossip blogs. I focus on visual images and blogger commentary as the key elements of gossip blogs as media texts. I supplement these observations with oral interviews of the producers of these texts, the gossip bloggers. I argue that the blogger, as the primary author of the site, retains authority as a
cultural producer of these texts. The final component of this study focuses on the reading and cultural production practices of celebrity gossip blog audiences using data gathered online and through a qualitative survey. I examine the various ways these practices support the emergence of community within these virtual spaces.

While I claim that gossip is an active engagement with celebrity culture well suited to new media’s emphasis on immediacy and interactivity, I conclude that an active audience is necessarily a resistant one. Blogs can be seen as a space for intervention into celebrity culture that allows bloggers and readers to challenge the power of the media industry to define celebrity culture. However, gossip blogs often uphold oppressive norms, particularly around questions of gender, race, and sexuality. Gossip is an important area of inquiry because it reveals the way women, the predominant audience for and participants on gossip blogs, may be implicated in the normative ideologies forwarded by the celebrity media.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The celebrity-oriented magazines or so-called “tabloids” that line the aisles of grocery store checkouts and newsstand magazine racks have long been a major source for America’s seemingly insatiable appetite for celebrity gossip. In the early years of the 21st century, the genre was expanding, with new titles, like an American version of the British glossy OK!, joining the already crowded newsstands and titles across the board earning large profits. According to The New York Times, the average total sales of popular celebrity glossies Star, People, Us Weekly and In Touch combined were up 11.6 percent at the end of 2004, with Star and In Touch sales each rising about 80 percent (Story, 2005, p. C1). However, since 2005, the genre has been in decline, with newsstand sales of all titles falling 11% in 2007 (Magazine Publishers of America, 2008). This downturn should not be interpreted as a decrease in the public’s interest in celebrity gossip, as Us Weekly alone reportedly cleared close to $75 million in 2007. Subscription numbers and single issue sales for the top gossip magazines, including People, Us Weekly, and In Touch also remained fairly strong, with these three in the top 10 of overall single issue circulation and the top 100 of paid subscriptions (ibid; Kelly, 2008, para 5).

Nevertheless, these magazines’ overall earnings and circulation have decreased from their peak in the early 2000s. Recent economic woes have certainly had an impact on these numbers, as print gossip magazines, like other forms of print media, have been forced to downsize their pages or fold altogether in response to the depressed market.

This downturn has been hastened by the advent of online sources of celebrity gossip that allow audiences to turn to the internet instead of the newsstand for the latest
gossip. As print magazines are downsizing staff and decreasing page numbers, online sources of gossip are flourishing, with the most popular sites regularly attracting millions of page views per day. Furthermore, online sources of celebrity news and gossip are challenging the traditional ways in which celebrity-watching audiences consume and negotiate celebrity gossip, and are having an impact on the way celebrity news is produced, circulated and consumed. Certainly, some of these sites are simply online versions of print gossip magazines, a clear sign that the print magazine publishers recognize the need to adapt. But a new breed of online celebrity gossip that takes full advantage of the technological and social possibilities of new media has arisen in the form of celebrity gossip blogs. Ostensibly existing outside of the control of both the media and celebrity industries, blogs are not simply online gossip websites. They offer the latest celebrity gossip coated in a thick layer of blogger commentary and, more importantly, offer a comments sections and other interactive space for audience members to participate in the gossip talk. Celebrity gossip blogs have exploded into the media market, transforming the ways audiences get the latest celebrity dish and the ways in which they engage with celebrity culture through gossip talk.

This dissertation is a critical examination of the impact of the technological and textual shifts engendered by new media on the use of gossip as a form of everyday cultural production. Few studies have been done on celebrity and new media, and my work centers on the gossip blog as an emerging space of virtual community and cultural production anchored by gossip about celebrities. The expanding use of the internet to access and participate in celebrity gossip positions my dissertation as a study that makes a vital contribution to the field of media studies and is timely and relevant to the everyday
lives of women. Internet audience research shows that gossip blog audiences are overwhelmingly female, as are the vast majority of celebrities featured on these websites. I suggest that celebrity gossip is not just for women, but also must be investigated as media about women and the ways women, their bodies, and their sexuality are represented in contemporary culture. Celebrity gossip is an important area of inquiry because it reveals the way women, as consumers and creators of content on gossip blogs, may be implicated in the normative cultural ideologies forwarded by the mass media. Yet gossip, as an active social process, can also be a way for women to challenge these normative ideologies through their everyday talk. Women’s cultural production on gossip blogs has been little studied, but is increasingly relevant to understanding the impact of representations of women in popular culture and women’s consumption and negotiation of those images.

**Description of Data**

The genre of celebrity gossip blogs, as will be explored in this dissertation, is a wide and varied one. A Google search for “celebrity gossip blog” on October 12, 2007 yielded 5,680,000 results, clearly indicating an examination of the genre as a whole would be impossible. Defining gossip blogs as a unique celebrity media form is further complicated by the fact that the rising popularity of blogs in general have led many mainstream gossip media sources, such as tabloid magazine *Us Weekly* and entertainment cable channel *E!*, to include blogs on their web sites. These sites are outside the scope of this project, as I am here interested in the gossip blog as a text produced outside of these traditional gossip media and celebrity industry sites. At the same time, blogs rely heavily on these “legitimate” celebrity media outlets for their content, and are not completely
immune to the social ideologies that structure celebrity culture. But what makes blogs
unique forms of celebrity media is the way they divorce themselves from a sense of
journalistic objectivity and foreground gossip talk as the primary mode of engagement
with celebrity culture. Additionally, unlike print media forms, gossip blogs embrace new
media’s immediacy and interactivity to explicitly involve the audience in both the
construction and consumption of the celebrity image through gossip talk.

In order to investigate this particular form of gossip media, I will limit my sample
to six celebrity gossip blogs, Perez Hilton (www.perezhilton.com), Pink is the New Blog
(www.pinkisthenewblog.com), Pop Sugar (www.popsugar.com), Jezebel
(www.jezebel.com), What Would Tyler Durden Do? (www.wwtdd.com) and The Young,
Black and Fabulous (www.theybf.com). Each of these blogs will be discussed in more
detail throughout the dissertation, beginning with a general introduction in chapter three.

Lindlof and Taylor (2002) claim this “maximum variation sampling” will allow me to
“build a conceptual understanding of the phenomenon” of celebrity gossip blogs by
addressing the range of characteristics that help define the larger category (p. 123).

Rather than attempting the overwhelming and rationally impossible task of examining
every celebrity gossip blog available on the internet, I instead strategically chose
exemplars that demonstrate the “wide range of qualities [and] attributes” that characterize
the celebrity gossip blog genre (ibid). Each blog I have chosen offers a different
perspective on celebrity culture and highlights varied ways of reading celebrity images
through gossip. My investigation of these specific blogs will offer an illustrative, but not
prescriptive, view of the broader genre of celebrity gossip blogs and their audiences.
Statement of Research Questions

Following Gamson’s (1994) approach to celebrity as a cultural phenomenon, this dissertation separates celebrity gossip blogs into three elements—texts, producers, and audiences—and examines the interplay between these elements. In order to address these three areas of inquiry, this study addresses three major research questions. First, how are gossip blogs defined as unique gossip media texts? I am here interested in what is being said on gossip blogs and the role new media technologies play in the production of these gossip texts. Broadly, I investigate the historical role of gossip media texts in defining celebrity culture and explore how new media forms of these texts, specifically gossip blogs, have reconfigured audience engagements with celebrity culture. My intent is to understand the social and technological influences on the production and consumption of celebrity gossip media. I investigate how new media characteristics of immediacy and interactivity enhance and extend the textual form of celebrity gossip and the processes of cultural production that occur on gossip blogs.

Drawing on existing scholarly work, I approach gossip as a mode of cultural production based on the processing of others’ social behaviors and values through shared negotiation and judgment (Levin & Arluke, 1987; Bergmann, 1993; Gamson, 1994; Hermes, 1995). Gossip is not simply about possessing knowledge, but about evaluating that knowledge in order to help structure the gossippers’ social network and understanding of the cultural world. It is an informal mode of everyday communication concerned with situating, interpreting, and transforming information against the background of one’s own social position and interests. Celebrities, as will be discussed in chapter two, are ideal objects of gossip talk because their widely circulated images are easily accessible
ideological symbols (Schickel, 1986; Dyer, 1998; Turner, 2004). Thus, my second research question addresses gossip as a form of cultural production of meaning on celebrity gossip blogs. Who produces meaning on celebrity gossip blogs and what sorts of meanings are produced? How do such meanings vary across blogs? How is gossip used by bloggers and audiences to negotiate the often oppressive ideologies forwarded by celebrity culture? Though audiences are explicitly invited to participate in the gossip talk as part of their reading practices, I argue that the blogger, as the primary author of the site and its particular gossip-oriented approach to celebrity culture, retains authority as the principal cultural producer. Bloggers exist outside the official celebrity media industry, and thus provide unique insight into the construction of the celebrity image in an increasingly fragmented media age. Does this outsider status offer a space of resistance to or recuperation of hegemonic norms of gender, race, class, and sexuality?

The final component of this study foregrounds the ways in which audiences use gossip talk on celebrity gossip blogs as an active engagement with celebrity culture that highlights the celebrity image as cultural conduit. Though audience engagement is relevant throughout my dissertation, my third research question specifically addresses the role of gossip as a mode of negotiated cultural production and community-building for audiences of celebrity gossip blogs. How do audiences use gossip talk on gossip blogs to make social meaning? What sorts of reading practices and interactive engagements support this mode of cultural production on celebrity gossip blogs? Furthermore, how does online (rather than face-to-face) gossip foster a sense of community amongst gossip blog audiences? While I frame gossip as an active engagement with celebrity culture, I do not assume that all meanings made through gossip talk are necessarily transgressive.
Gossip talk can work as a mode of social control that upholds oppressive norms, particularly around questions of social identity. Instead, I explore the possibilities and limitations of gossip talk as a social practice that allows audiences more freedom to make celebrity images meaningful in their everyday lives by resisting, to various degrees, the semiotic closure of the industry-controlled meaning.

**Overview of Methods**

This study is theoretically and methodologically informed by ethnographic studies of media and media audiences. However, these methods have been reconfigured to better address the internet as a distinct space of social inquiry. Following Ward’s (1999) notion of “cyber-ethnography,” I retain qualitative and interpretive approaches of ethnographic research, but recognize the impact of technology on the collection and analysis of this data. The technological medium through which participants engage is a central part of my analysis, but such interactions are not reducible to the technology. As Hine (2000) suggests, online research explores “the internet as a way of communicating, as an object within people’s lives and as a site for community-like formations” based on “the ways in which it is used, interpreted, and reinterpreted” (ibid, p. 64). In this spirit, I offer a more focused and bounded discourse analysis of gossip blog texts, producers and audiences in the online context in which they appear with attention to the differences between the various online gossip communities.

In order to address the richness of the practices occurring on celebrity gossip blogs and my three research questions, I employed several methods of data collection to support my discourse analysis. I use discourse analysis, rather than a more simplified textual analysis, in order to draw connections between the blog texts as artifacts and as
modes of social communication. First, in order to understand what is being said on blogs, I conducted a five-week online fieldwork observation of each of the blogs in my sample from February 2008-March 2008. I visited each site at least once per day and remained on the site for as long as it took to observe and document the day’s new content. I generally returned several times throughout the day in order to monitor the frequent updates to the site content as well as the comments sections, and kept detailed field notes on my observations. Additionally, I created a selective archive of posts and comments that were particularly interesting or relevant to my research questions. Though all the blogs in my sample are archived to some degree,¹ my personal archive is intended to a) capture the site as it appeared at the time of my field work and b) provide more specific examples of the negotiation and cultural production inherent to gossip talk within the particular framework of each blog. In order to faithfully reproduce the content of the blogs in my analysis, all quotes taken from blog posts are as they appeared in the original text. Though I reformatted for readability (e.g. converting pink fonts to black) and in order to save space, I retained the textual effects (such as capitalized, bolded or italicized text) as well as all syntax, spelling and/or grammatical errors.

The field notes and general observations provided the background information on the blog’s coverage of celebrities necessary for the second part of my discourse analysis:

¹ Some sites include archives of every post ever published on the site (PITNB is a good example of this thorough archiving), others include only posts for the last two or three years (PerezHilton’s archives only go back to July 2007 even though his site has been active since 2005). Additionally, some blogs (like PINTB, PerezHilton, and YBF) archive by date, keeping all posts from a particular date together. The remaining blogs archive only by category tag, typically the name of the celebrity featured in the post. I would have to identify which celebrity to search in order to find archived posts rather than see them in the context of other daily posts. The archives are thus inconsistent across the blogs in my sample and my own personal archive ensures my access.
the analysis of the coverage of a media scandal or “big” story on the blogs. Lull and Hinerman (1997) define a media scandal as:

occurs when private acts that disgrace or offend the idealized, dominant morality of a social community are made public and narrativized by the media, producing a range of effects from ideological and cultural retrenchment to disruption and change. The transgressions assume additional impact when markers of human difference such as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation are involved (p. 3).

The nature of such scandals makes them an ideal space to investigate the ideological standpoints at work in both the blogger’s framing of a scandal and the audience’s response to it. These stories are “big” because the scandalous nature captures the audiences’ attention and the stories continue to develop over a period of time. An example of a recent media scandal is the frenzy surrounding the death of Anna Nicole Smith in February 2007. This story dominated even mainstream media for weeks, fed by details of her alleged drug abuse, the status of her relationship with lawyer Howard K. Stern, and, most notably, the paternity of her infant daughter and the ensuing custody battle between Stern and the man eventually determined to be the child’s biological father, Larry Birkhead. Though some celebrities seem to be scandal magnets, it is impossible to predict what the next “big” scandal will be or which celebrities will be involved. Prior to her own death Anna Nicole Smith’s presence had been somewhat diminished in gossip media following a brief flurry of coverage in the wake of her son’s death five months earlier. The tragic turn of events could not have been predicted for the purposes of study.

Though no particular scandal arose during my fieldwork, I continued to observe the blogs more informally until an appropriate story did surface. In April 2008, I identified a relevant scandal in the rumors surrounding Ashlee Simpson’s “baby bump
watch.” In addition to keeping field notes as the story progressed, I archived all blog posts relevant to this story as it progressed, stopping when Ashlee officially announced her pregnancy in May 2008.

This data on the textual content of celebrity gossip blogs was supplemented with oral interviews with the bloggers from five of the six blogs in my sample. The first interview with Pop Sugar blogger Molly Goodson was conducted on May 27, 2007 and served as a pilot study for future interviews. The remaining interviews were conducted in the summer of 2008 after my online fieldwork had been completed. These interviews allowed me to more specifically address the process of writing gossip blogs, the particular blogger’s approach to celebrity culture, his or her understanding of the blogger’s place in that culture, and, finally, the relationship between blogger and audience. These interviews allow the bloggers to define their role in celebrity culture in their own terms, rather than having a normative definition of producer or audience placed on them. In my analysis of these interviews, I considered not only what the bloggers said in the interview but place this insight in the context of what they say on their gossip blogs.

Finally, as I am interested in a range of audience reading practices and modes of cultural production, my audience analysis is supported by two different forms of data. My online fieldwork included observation of the reader comments section, thus I was able to analyze the publicly visible forms of reader engagement on gossip blogs. In order to address the fact that not all readers use these interactive spaces, I conducted an online qualitative survey from November 2008-February 2009. This survey was posted on two blogs, one from my sample and one associated with a blog from my sample, in order to
solicit audiences of these specific blogs. By combining these two sources of audience data, I am able to analyze how audiences participate on blogs and allow audiences to describe their various engagements in their own terms. As with the blog posts, all quotes taken from the survey and the comments sections are reproduced as they originally appeared. They are reformatted only to save space and I retained textual effects and spelling and/or grammatical errors. A more detailed overview of the methodological rationale is available in Appendix A and a full list of survey questions is available in Appendix B.

**Summary of Chapters**

This dissertation is divided into nine chapters. In chapter two, I provide an overview of scholarly approaches to celebrity culture and the role of gossip media in the production, circulation, and consumption of celebrity images. In this chapter, I define key terms related to the study of stardom and celebrity in contemporary culture in order to demonstrate the role of the celebrity as an important site “for the configuration, positioning, and proliferation” of cultural meanings and ideological norms (Marshall, 1997, p. 72). Particular attention is paid to the role of gossip, as a mode of everyday communication, in shaping these cultural meanings. Finally, the role of gossip in celebrity media is defined in order to set up my investigation of how audiences make sense of the world “as a result of social interaction based on [our] making use of cultural sources of meaning production” (Hermes, 1999, p. 71). Using Hermes (1995) and Gamson (1994), I conclude with an overview of the various reading practices of gossip audiences and how such practices relate to the community-building amongst readers.
Chapter three outlines the key terms for the study of new media and more clearly positions the celebrity gossip blog as a new media form. In particular, I draw attention to the importance of both the technological and the social to understanding new media texts and the ways in which readers engage with those texts. I offer a more specific definition of the celebrity gossip blog in terms of its textual format and its role in the promotion of online community, emphasizing the interplay between the technological and the social in these new media forms. This chapter also includes a basic introduction to each of the blogs in my sample, locating them within the broader category of celebrity gossip blogs and briefly defining the unique perspective that makes them useful for this study. Finally, I offer an overview of scholarly approaches to new media and the metaphor of community, arguing for the necessity of a flexible notion of community in studying the various online communities produced on and through celebrity gossip blogs.

In chapter four, I locate the celebrity gossip blog within a larger history of American celebrity gossip media. I compare the stylistic shifts in celebrity media across the twentieth century media by focusing on the major characteristics of two major celebrity media forms, specifically the classic Hollywood era gossip column and the tabloid magazine, and trace their influence on 21st century new media engagements with celebrity gossip. After defining the media’s role in the circuit of celebrity production, I offer a textual analysis of columns by Walter Winchell and Louella Parsons, arguably the progenitors of celebrity gossip as a media genre. I compare the style and approach to celebrity culture evident in these columns, particularly in terms of the first-person, conversational style that permeates their work, to the approach taken by contemporary gossip blogs. Secondly, I define the so-called “tabloid” as a gossip media form and
discuss the central role of the visual or photographic image in shaping the gossip within these texts. Ultimately, I argue that gossip blogs combine crucial elements of each of these historical predecessors to create a unique, but not unprecedented, form of celebrity gossip media. This chapter’s historical perspective on the changing approaches of media to celebrity culture grounds my more in-depth analysis of gossip blogs as both a part of and a challenge to the entertainment-news media.

As I am interested in what is being said on gossip blogs, chapter five addresses blogs as texts in order to understand what is said about celebrity on the six gossip blogs in my sample and how the technological features of new media shape the production and consumption of these texts. My intent is not to create a single definition of gossip talk on gossip blogs, but to recognize how the various discussions of celebrity evident across the blogs contributes to the shared social ideologies that bind members together in virtual interpretive communities. This chapter focuses on the general approach to celebrity offered by each blog and draws comparisons between blogs in terms of both technological and social features. This analysis is supported by data gathered during my five week online fieldwork observation as well as the oral interviews conducted with the gossip bloggers.

Chapter six offers a case study of the scandal or “big” story as it appeared across the blogs in my sample. I engage a close reading of the “baby bump watch” centered on Ashlee Simpson in April 2008 in order to illustrate how each blog engages its ideological standpoint in the production of gossip talk and how the audience is involved in the production of meaning within that ideological framework. Furthermore, this case study also illustrates the centrality of immediacy and interactivity/participation to the
construction, circulation, and consumption of the celebrity in on celebrity gossip blogs. I describe the baby bump watch as a “gossip game,” using Gamson’s (1994) term, that privileges the (female) body as the point of access to the real individual behind the celebrity façade. The continual surveillance of the female body that is the hallmark of the bump watch points to the ways in which contemporary approaches to celebrity culture on celebrity gossip blogs are deeply, and problematically, gendered.

Chapter seven is the first of two chapters specifically dedicated to analysis of the audiences of celebrity gossip blogs. This chapter focuses on the reading practices described by the respondents to my online survey. As many audience members choose not to participate in the interactive features on gossip blogs, I argue for a broader definition of community that includes “invisible” practices of reading gossip blogs. Using my survey data, I describe the varied and complex reading practices engaged by gossip blog audiences as well as the different forms of community that emerge as a result of those practices. Starting from a flexible notion of community, I provide an overview of the ways readers connect with others and foreground their own voices in describing their reading practices as a way of connecting (or not) with others.

Chapter eight, the second audience analysis chapter, explores the visible modes of cultural production and audience participation in the comments sections on celebrity gossip blogs. I explore the relationship between the technological and social features on each blog in order to understand the types of interpretive communities that emerge on gossip blogs. The interactive spaces on blogs make reader engagement visible, but what readers do in these spaces is more closely examined in order to understand community as a process. Through my analysis, I investigate how audiences both accept and resist
oppressive ideological norms forwarded by celebrity culture and celebrity gossip blogs through their use of gossip talk in the online setting. How readers use this space, as well as why some readers choose not to participate in the comments sections, reveals something about the social dimensions of participation and the strength and quality of the commenter community on that blog. Ultimately, I argue even though building community may not be the primary goal of celebrity gossip blog audiences, the negotiation of shared meaning central to gossip talk and the interactive space in which to do this negotiation promotes community in multiple and constantly evolving ways.

In my concluding chapter, I summarize and synthesize my analyses of the gossip blog texts, producers, and audiences in order to develop a theory of new media engagements with celebrity culture and the role of gossip in building community on celebrity gossip blogs. I return to earlier discussions of the technological and social features of new media in order to demonstrate the need for a flexible notion of community in order to understand the complex engagements evident on celebrity gossip blogs. Finally, I argue that celebrity gossip blogs offer those outside the traditional celebrity production circuit, including the bloggers and the audiences, an unprecedented ability to participate in the construction and circulation of the celebrity image and the cultural production of meaning through that image. At the same time, such engagements are not necessarily resistant and often uphold oppressive ideological norms, particularly around questions of social identity. I also explore the possible limitations of this study and will conclude with suggestions for future research.
CHAPTER 2

THE CELEBRITY IMAGE AND GOSSIP MEDIA

The history of modern celebrity has been framed by numerous scholars as the concrete manifestation of the ideological discourses of individuality and subjectivity presented to the public in a neatly packaged celebrity image. Generally, though not exclusively, emerging from the sports or entertainment industries, celebrities are highly visible throughout the media, thus making them easily accessible symbols. But these symbols are necessarily complex, embodying multiple and competing discourses on what it means to be a subject in contemporary Western culture. It is not simply their ubiquity that makes celebrities potent ideological symbols, but the range of representations available in the media and ways in which audiences consume and negotiate those representations that shapes the cultural function of these images.

Stardom and Celebrity: Understanding the Image

Turner (2004) points out that the category of celebrity is unique because unlike other public figures, “their private lives will attract greater public interest than their professional lives” and that their “fame does not necessarily depend on the position or achievements that gave them prominence in the first instance” (p. 3). The public recognition of talent or skill may bring the individual into the public eye, but the category of “celebrity” extends beyond this professional image to encompass “everything that is publicly available” about a star (Dyer, 1986, p. 2). Speaking specifically of film stars, Dyer says the image:

consists both of what we normally refer to as his or her ‘image’, made up of screen roles and obviously stage-managed public appearances, and also of images of the manufacture of that ‘image’ and of the real person who is the site or occasion of it (ibid, p. 7-8).
These representations are “complex and contradictory,” but when these various mediated representations are pieced together by the audience, they “articulate what it is to be a human being in contemporary society” (ibid, p. 8). Though celebrities are real people, our cultural interactions with them remain at the level of image and signification because, as Dyer elsewhere argues, “we never know them directly as real people, only as they are to be found in media texts” (Dyer, 1998, p. 2). The celebrity is socially grounded and contextualized within the historical conditions in which it is produced, expressing contemporary cultural concerns about the self though a widely disseminated and highly identifiable media image. Celebrity images offer insight into cultural production of meaning, and its attendant tensions and possibilities, in and through the media. In our increasingly media saturated world, the celebrity image has become a key site “for the configuration, positioning, and proliferation” of cultural meanings and ideological norms (Marshall, 1997, p. 72).

In his 1985 book *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity*, Richard Schickel suggests that the history of celebrity in Western culture is closely linked to the history of communication technology, further demonstrating the crucial role media play in the production, circulation, and consumption of cultural meaning through celebrity images. As new forms of media develop and older forms find new ways to reach larger audiences more quickly, demand for and availability of information has skyrocketed (p. 28). Ideally, easing and increasing the flow of information would achieve the democratic ideal of well-informed publics who are astutely tuned in to the world around them. However, Schickel sees the information explosion in modern society as having the opposite effect. As information is spread wider and faster, it necessarily becomes more simplified, relying
more heavily on simple symbols “that crystallize and personify an issue, an ideal, a longing” (p. 28). These symbols “help us to resolve ambivalence and ambiguity” not only about wider social issues, but also speak to “private needs and desires,” helping audiences to make sense of themselves within an increasingly fragmented modern Western capitalist system (ibid). Chris Rojek (2001) similarly argues:

to the extent that organized religion has declined in the West, celebrity culture has emerged as one of the replacement strategies that promotes new orders of meaning and solidarity. As such, notwithstanding the role that some celebrities have played in destabilizing order, celebrity culture is a significant institution in the normative achievement of social integration (p. 99).

Such accounts of the social function of the celebrity image recognize that while celebrity remains a commercial process, the image produced, circulated, and consumed within that system is “one of the key places where cultural meanings are negotiated and organized” (Turner, 2004, p. 6).

Some social critics see celebrity, as part of the larger “culture industry,” as a negative and coercive force that shapes society according to oppressive ideologies that favor the powerful elite and exists purely as a means of mass distraction from the realities of that oppression. Essentially, the celebrity image is the center of false value that works to deceive audiences into equating real life with the movies or other culture industry fabrications (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1979, p. 353). The celebrity appears to be an “authentic” and “natural” individual as a result of industry manipulation, but she is not a “real” person. She is merely a commodity, an image without substance, used to control the consciousnesses of a malleable public. For these critics, highlighting the social uses of celebrity is not an emancipatory project and fails to recognize how audiences become agents of their own oppression through consumption. These arguments usefully draw out
the political economy of celebrity culture by exposing commercial interests and power as key elements in the production, circulation, and consumption of celebrity images, a theme which will be discussed in more detail in later chapters. As Schickel (1985) points out, celebrities “can sell us anything, given the right circumstances” (p. 29).

I contend this simplistic view of the cultural role of the celebrity image and the reduction of the audience to mere passive dupes misses the complexity of the social negotiation of the celebrity image and the audience’s agency in such negotiation. Celebrities do sell us “things,” but that is not all they do, nor is this “selling” a straightforward process.

The audience’s “affective investment” with the celebrity image, the ways in which they use the image to make sense of larger questions of the self in contemporary society, is crucial to the construction and maintenance of celebrity power and is the focus of this dissertation (Marshall, 1997, p. 75). The complex and contradictory nature of the celebrity image suggests that while celebrities are “embodiments of social categories in which people are placed and through which they have to make sense of their lives” the precise meaning of the image can never be guaranteed because “the whole phenomenon is unstable, never at a point of rest or equilibrium, constantly lurching from one formulation of what being human is to another” (Dyer, 1986, p. 18). Celebrity thus remains tied to and shaped by various media industries, but the audience plays a crucial and active role in negotiating the social meanings of that image through their consumption of media. From this perspective, I examine the tensions inherent in the production, circulation and consumption of the celebrity image within mass media and how such engagements relate to the cultural power and pervasiveness of celebrity culture.
Celebrity and Media

Schickel (1985) claims that our fascination with celebrities, as well as their power as cultural symbols, is rooted in the “illusion of intimacy” constructed between the audience and the celebrity figure by a range of media forms (p. 4). He suggests a “finely spun media mesh” has ensnared audiences into thinking “we know [celebrities], or think we do. To a greater or lesser degree, we have internalized them, unconsciously made them a part of our consciousness, just as if they were, in fact, friends” (ibid). Celebrity is “a product of media representation” and the analysis of celebrity must necessarily center on the range of “representational repertoires and patterns employed in this discursive regime” (Turner, 2004, p. 8). Following Dyer’s definition of the celebrity as an intertextual and discursively constructed image, P. David Marshall (1997) further argues “although a celebrity may be positioned predominantly in one mediated form, that image is informed by the circulation of significant information about the celebrity in newspapers, magazines, interview programs, fanzines, rumors, and so on,” highlighting the crucial role of extra-textual media sources in the construction of the celebrity image (p. 58). The supposedly “true” intimate and behind-the-scenes details of a celebrity’s private life are of the utmost concern for these media sources, as they emphasize the notion of a “real” celebrity who, in her unguarded or supposedly outside the public eye moments, is just like the average person (Honey, 1972, p. 62).

While the fan may recognize that the star seen on screen or stage is a highly constructed figure, that star is brought close and revealed as a regular person through the media coverage of the details of her private life. Celebrity media is built upon this blurring of the boundaries between the constructed public persona and the “real” private
self. This is not to suggest that these private life details are no less constructed, rather that “the whole media construction of stars encourages us to think, as Dyer (1986) suggests, in terms of ‘really,’” searching the mediated image for signs of the authentic and “real” individual beneath the surface (p. 2). In this way, celebrities “bespeak our society’s investment in the private as the real,” functioning as ideological symbols that represent “typical ways of behaving feeling and thinking in society, ways that have been socially, culturally, historically constructed” (ibid, pp. 13; 17). For the audience, the pursuit of who the celebrity “really” is, Littler (2004) argues, “informs the way we connect with celebrities” but also, and I argue more importantly, it also informs the “mechanisms through which we bond with other people” (p. 12).

Schickel (1985) posits that television, in particular, has broken down the barriers between the public and private lives of celebrities by bringing these larger than life personas “into our living rooms in psychically manageable size” (pp. 9-10). He here suggests that all images of celebrities on television, whether a performance or as part of a news program that details her behind-the-scenes life, serve to create the illusion of intimacy between the viewer and the celebrity. Television, Marshall argues, “embodies the characteristics of familiarity,” that bring the celebrity image close to the audience member and allows her to enter into a more intimate relationship based on the accessibility of the star (p. 119). I argue his claim could be made about celebrity media more broadly because of its emphasis on the “private” and therefore “real” person behind the celebrity façade. Tabloid and entertainment magazines, fan-authored and official websites devoted to celebrities, and any other forum where celebrity lifestyles are the main topic of concern work to bring the celebrity close to the audience by making her life
not so far removed from the audience’s own. Celebrity media explicitly promote the illusion of intimacy by stripping away the mask of the public performance through the revelation of personal and private details about the celebrity.

Despite this sense of intimacy promoted by the media, the celebrity cannot be classified as exactly the same as the average person, and this contradiction is central to the cultural potency of the image. Dyer’s valuable work on stars is grounded in the idea that a large part of their appeal is the complex and contradictory nature of their images. “Stardom,” he says, “is an image of the way stars live…it combines the spectacular with the everyday, the special with the ordinary” (Dyer, 1998, p. 35). Celebrity media humanizes the stars, but never completely disentangles them from their extraordinary personas. The ultimate irony of celebrity, of course, is that the fan can never really know the celebrity through these any of these celebrity media texts, as they are just as constructed as a celebrity’s public performances. No one media source, not even the one most associated with the celebrity, gives us a full understanding of the complexity and tensions inherent in celebrity personas. Taken together, the star’s public performances and the celebrity media coverage of her private life “ensure that whatever intimacy is permitted between the audience and the star is purely at the discursive level” (Marshall, 1997, p. 90). The signs are so intertwined that it is nearly impossible to separate the “real” from the constructed image, which encourages audiences to continue the pursuit of the authentic individual by consuming more media about the celebrity. Thus, it is the tension between the two sides of the persona, the larger than life and the “real” person, coupled with tension between the possibility and impossibility of knowing the truth about
her life which makes celebrities so intriguing to the public and such apt ideological symbols.

This is not to say that audiences are unable to recognize that the celebrity image available in the media is any more “real” than the one on screen. Dyer (1986; 1998) argues that there is no “right” image of the celebrity because all aspects of her image are discursively produced within specific social and historical contexts. The constructed nature of the celebrity sign allows the audience to derive pleasure from the ability to construct and reconstruct the celebrity’s star image from a variety of texts in complex and often contradictory ways. This sort of audience engagement is clearly evident in deconstructive readings of celebrity, such as camp appreciation or gay readings of Hollywood icons like Judy Garland, both of which work against the meanings intended by the media industries that created these images (Dyer, 1986, p. 5). Thus, the audience is a crucial component of the construction of the social meaning of celebrity images. However, as Dyer points out, the audience’s meaning making powers are not absolute. The celebrity image does not exist in a vacuum; rather it is dependent on the context in which it is presented (e.g. a public performance or an article in a tabloid) as well as the audience’s prior knowledge of the celebrity persona. Furthermore, the very pursuit of this meaning by audiences within celebrity media and public performances encourages audiences to think in terms of truth, bolstering their own feelings of intimacy with a celebrity image which in turn supports the image’s cultural meaning.

Dyer (1991) claims most audiences are engaged in a project of discovering the truth behind the appearances, or, in other words, believing that what lies behind the
surface of the professional image of the celebrity is authentic and real. He argues that the authenticity sought by audiences:

is established or constructed in media texts by use of markers that indicate lack of control, lack of premeditation and privacy. These return us to notions of the truth being behind or beneath the surface. The surface is organized and under control, it is worked out in advance, it is public (p. 137).

The audience begins with the public persona of the celebrity, her films or pop songs, but does not have to accept this highly constructed image as the “real” celebrity. By pursuing stories and photographs in celebrity media to fill in the gaps of the celebrity’s private life, the audience is engaged in a search for the “real” person behind the celebrity façade.

The question, then, is why audiences remain unsatisfied with the public image of the star and turn to extratextual reports in order to seek the “truth,” even if they rationally are aware those images are constructed. Dyer (1986) asserts that:

part of the answer lies in the precise and differentiated relation between the values perceived to be embodied by the star and the perceived status of those values (especially if they are felt to be under threat or in crisis, or to be challenging received values, or else to be values that are a key to understanding and coping with contemporary life). But I also want to suggest that all of this depends on the degree to which stars are accepted as truly being what they appear to be (p. 132, emphasis mine).

The search for authentic celebrity in Western popular culture is, then, closely related to the illusion of intimacy described by Schickel. The audience’s intimacy with the star gives the illusion of knowing the truth about what a star is really like. More importantly, once the celebrity is positioned as “authentic,” the values and ideologies she symbolizes also become real and culturally resonant. Marshall (1997) suggests:

the celebrity is one form of resolution of the role and position of the individual and his or her potential in modern society. The power of the celebrity, then, is to represent the active construction of identity in the social world (p. xi).
Who we think the star “really” is tells us something about who we are or who we ought to be. By uncovering what is below the surface or behind the scenes of the celebrity’s public image, celebrity media purports to give the audience what is “unquestionably and virtually, by definition, the truth” (Dyer, 1991, p. 137). The never-ending quest for the “real” celebrity bestows upon her persona heightened cultural significance that is disseminated through all forms of celebrity media, but is particularly central to the pursuit of the “real” celebrity in gossip media.

**Gossip and the Celebrity Image**

Typically condemned as the catty province of malicious and mindless women, gossip has a bad reputation as a gendered form of social control that serves to rigidly categorize social behaviors and values and to ostracize those who fall short. Often lacking any real power to participate in and define the public sphere by virtue of their gender, women use private and intimate gossip talk as a way to evaluate and control the social behaviors of others within the private, personal domain (Jaworski & Coupland, 2005). Deborah Jones (1980) points out that because gossip typically occurs in women’s spaces (the home, the hairdressers, the market) and grounds knowledge in personal experience, it is often “derogated...as trivial” (p. 194-195). Though research has shown men are equal participants in gossip talk, this form of personal and private conversation nevertheless retains its gendered associations in the popular imagination because of its connection with the private (Levin & Arluke, 1985). That gossip is considered a negative form of communication not only diminishes it as a form of women’s cultural production but also fails to recognize the complexity of gossip talk as a means to build group identity and community.
Many scholars contend gossip is actually an important means of social and cultural production based on the processing of social behaviors and shared judgments of those behaviors (Levin & Arluke, 1987; Gamson, 1994; Hermes, 1995; Hermes, 1999; Turner, 2004). In his study of the practice of gossip as a mode of everyday communication, Bergmann (1993) defines gossip as an informal mode of talk between two or more individuals about an absent third person who is known, to at least some degree, to all participants. Gossip talk, he argues, “draws an essential part of its energy from the tension between what [the subject of the gossip] does publicly and what he or she seeks to keep secret as his or her private affair” (p. 53). Gossip, therefore, is not simply about possessing knowledge, but about evaluating and sharing that knowledge in order to help structure the gossipers’ social network and understanding of the cultural world. Bergmann rejects a functionalist understanding of gossip as “nothing more than an indirect form of social control,” instead arguing that gossip talk is about situating, interpreting, and transforming the information against the background of one’s own social position and interests (p. 130). He says:

> gossip is not concerned with the disdain and preservation of social norms and moral principles in their universality, but, in interpreting the situational behavior of other members of the group from their own situation and with the knowledge of the specific behavior rules of the group, conversely with specifying the kind of validity of social rules for individual concrete cases (pp. 133-4)

A primary function of gossip talk is to bind individuals together, to create a sense of intimacy and connection within the larger context of modern society.

Levin and Arluke (1987) argue that engaging in gossip talk indicates a level of trust and intimacy between the participants that delineates a sense of group membership (p. 24). Exchanging gossip as a means of sharing culture and determining what is and is
not the correct way to lead one’s life, reinforces the gossips as members of the “in-group.” This “in group” maintains its sense of unity through the judgment of those subjects of gossip who fall outside the boundaries of acceptable behaviors and values held by the group. Certainly such talk can become a negative or even vicious means of social control, as it “allows individuals to say otherwise private things without taking responsibility” (ibid, p. 22). But all gossip talk is not inherently mean-spirited or even necessarily derogatory towards the subject, despite its reputation. Rather, it “arises because some behavior or event is important enough to demand explanation” and as a way to reinforce social connections between the participants (ibid, p. 23). It thus defines the social world and the gossippers’ place within it.

Celebrity culture provides an excellent site for the investigation of the social role of gossip talk for several reasons. First celebrities are always absent, yet knowledge about their private lives is publicly accessible through the media. The illusion of intimacy necessarily brings celebrities into our social circles, but we continue to remain unknown to them even as we learn more and more about them. Thus, the social risks of gossiping about them are more limited than gossiping about an actual member of one’s kinship or friend network, allowing the meaning making and social connections engendered by gossip talk to take center stage. Secondly, our interactions with celebrity images in the media are built upon the same tension between the private and public self that is key gossip talk. Marshall (1997) declares “celebrities are the production locale for an elaborate discourse on the individual and individuality that is organized around the will to uncover a hidden truth, or…to uncover the ‘real’ person behind the public persona” (p. 4). Gossip aims to uncover this real person not only through the sharing of
knowledge about the private life of a celebrity, but more importantly through the *shared interpretation* of that knowledge, again indicating the community-building role of gossip talk. The blurring of private and public, of known and unknown, inherent in both written and spoken gossip about celebrities thus “anchor[s] processes of meaning making” by linking abstract social ideologies about the nature of personhood in modern society to a “real” person and, more importantly, offers the means to discuss and negotiate those meanings within the reader’s everyday life in a non-threatening way (Hermes, 1999, p. 83).

According to Turner (2004), gossip about celebrities can be understood “as an important social process through which relationships, identity, and social and cultural norms are debated, evaluated, modified and shared” (p. 24). The celebrity is “not just a desired object” offering the audience a para-social intimacy with a public figure, “but also an intimate doorway for connecting people” where gossipers create community based on the negotiation and judgment of celebrity culture (Holmes & Redmond, 2006c, p. 3). As celebrities are media representations, the various forms of celebrity media play a crucial role in structuring and supporting the community of gossipers and their meaning making processes. I offer a more detailed discussion of the range of celebrity media sources and their historical development from print to new media forms and their role as intermediaries between the public and celebrity in chapter four on the history of celebrity media.

My project asks how the textual address of the celebrity gossip blog shapes the ways in which readers respond to celebrity culture and, more centrally, use it to interact with other readers as a way to work out shared understandings of the world around them.
through their own gossip talk. That is, I will investigate how audiences make sense of the world “as a result of social interaction based on [our] making use of cultural sources of meaning production” available in celebrity gossip media (Hermes, 1999, p. 71).

However, as Dyer (1986) points out, “audiences cannot make media images mean anything they want to” and media industries attempt to restrict the meaning in order to maintain the profitability of the particular celebrity (p. 5). Dyer goes on to suggest, however, that audiences “can select from the complexity of the image the meanings and feelings, the variations, inflections and contradictions, that work for them” (ibid). Thus, the importance of the celebrity image is not simply the economic value of the image but also its role as an ideological symbol through which cultural meanings are made and remade. Gossip is central to this negotiation, as it suggests a crucial space of rupture within the larger ideological frame of celebrity culture because it centers on the creation of shared meaning between audience members themselves. Following similar work on audiences by scholars including Jenkins (1992), Harrington and Beilby (1995) and Baym (2000), my research on gossip blogs indicates that a range of audience interpretations can and do exist and, more importantly, that these interpretations are negotiated within the gossiper’s social networks rather than solely shaped by industry control.

Blogs are certainly not exempt from the commercial interests of celebrity culture, as they do play a role in the commodification of celebrities and of audiences. Drawing attention to celebrities in order to gossip about them, even if negatively, keeps them in the public eye and may translate into increased sales of the celebrities’ products (e.g. films, records, fashion lines, perfumes, etc). As will be discussed in more detail in chapter five, all the blogs in my sample, like most popular blogs, are clearly advertiser
supported commercial ventures that use celebrity images and gossip to bring in audiences to sell celebrities, “products about them, and products tenuously connected to them” (Littler, 2004, p. 12). However, echoing previous work on the social role of print gossip, I argue that to reduce blogs merely to their economic function ignores the important work of social and cultural production that takes place on and through the blogs. While “the celebrity’s primary function is commercial and promotional,” the relationship between audience and celebrity extends beyond the purely economic to become the locus of cultural power and identity construction (Turner, 2004, p. 9).

**Reading Celebrity in Gossip Media**

If gossip media is an important site for the cultural production of meaning, it is important to understand the various ways audiences engage with such media. Though she does not support a monolithic mode of reading celebrity images, Hermes (1995) suggests that gossip magazine readers can be broadly categorized as those “who speak more or less seriously about gossip magazines” and those who read the magazines as camp (p. 121). These categories have important implications for the ways in which celebrity images are used to build social networks through gossip regardless of the media format that informs the gossip. A range of reading practices fall under each perspective, but the overall sense that readers take the gossip seriously or not, and what it means to take gossip “seriously,” is the important distinction.

The serious readers, who were generally women in Hermes’ study, more readily identified with the celebrities or directly related the narratives to their own lives. Hermes’ camp readers, on the other hand, were mostly gay men “who never seem to speak seriously about gossip magazines” and used celebrity media to shape their social
worlds in opposition to the dominant values of mass culture (ibid, p. 135). Camp is a
distanced and humorous stance, denoting a position of disidentification with celebrities.
Muñoz (1999), following French linguist Michel Pêcheux, points out that unlike
counteridentification, in which the subject attempts to wholly reject the sites of
identification offered by dominant ideology, disidentification “neither opts to assimilate
within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that
works on and against dominant ideology” (p. 11). Grounded in Althusser’s theory of
subject formation and interpellation in which individuals are called into being or “hailed”
as subjects within ideology, Muñoz’s theory of disidentification suggests the subject is
constructed by ideological practices. However, he argues that though all subjects are
formed within ideology, they are not bound to accept the images on offer as sites of
identification or emulation. Drawing on Hall’s theory of encoding/decoding, Muñoz
frames disidentification as a negotiated mode of cultural production in which encoded
meanings are “scramble[d] and reconstruct[ed]” as a way to rupture dominant ideology
and empower subordinated identifications (p. 31). Disidentification is thus not a failure
to identify, but an active “shuffling back and forth between reception and production” in
which the subject accepts yet reworks the contradictory components of ideology (p. 25).

Camp reading of celebrity culture and gossip, I contend, is a playful performance
of disidentification. Hermes’ (1995) gay male gossip readers used camp reading of
celebrity culture as “a playful way of showing off and playing with other people’s
cultural values and judgments,” carving out a space for themselves within a social system
that marginalizes their identities (p. 133). This mode of gossip not only offers a place for
identity play but also, as Gamson (1994) suggests, a space for the active “refus[al]…[of]
the prestige and admiration offered by the text, the vertical relationship offered between celebrity and watching, opting instead for a system of collective evaluation and horizontal relationships between gossipers” (pp. 177-8). Questions of truth or accuracy are much less important to these readers than the pleasures of speculation and the engagement of “a different, supplementary set of standards” in their judgment of celebrity culture (Hermes, 1999, p. 133). Through disidentification and mocking, gossipers are aligned as an interpretive community whose consensus in adopting such a stance symbolically challenges the ideological power of the celebrities and culture they mock while simultaneously legitimizing their interest in celebrity culture.

Disidentification is a critical space of analysis, as it indicates resistant reading practices are possible and that celebrity gossip readers are not passively accepting the hegemonic ideologies at work in celebrity culture simply because they enjoy reading celebrity gossip. However, critical or mocking readings are not inherently liberatory simply because they appear to go against the grain of the preferred reading. Diana Negra (2009) points out that “media studies scholarship conventionally attribute[s]” ironic and self-reflexive readings, key components of the camp approach to media texts, “with the power to neutralize conservative ideological representations” without problematizing the ways in which such readings may actually reinforce such norms (p. 4). Disidentification can distance the reader from celebrity culture, but also use such distancing to reinforce hegemonic norms. For groups that do not typically associate with celebrity culture or gossip, such as the white male readers of What Would Tyler Durden Do?, irony is a defense mechanism allows them to reassert hegemonic ideals in the guise of pleasure and non-serious reading. I argue the performance of a mocking stance has no necessary
connection to the politically motivated disidentification described by Muñoz, and might, in practice, serve as a mode of ideological interpellation that aims to recuperate wayward subjects back to their proper social place and reinforce the status quo. Examining celebrity gossip blogs with this in mind recognizes blogs as complex spaces of cultural negotiation that offer space for resistant readings but may also work in the interests of dominant culture.

**Celebrity Gossip and Community-Building**

Hermes (1995) points out that while reading printed gossip is a characteristically solitary mode of consumption it also creates its own sense of community. She says, “written gossip tends to create closeness or familiar faces in a wider world by helping the reader to bring celebrities into her or his circle of family, friends and acquaintances by inviting readers to share in a moral universe that is at times petty, and at times rich” (p. 121). Both written and spoken gossip, she argues, work to forge communities based on “shared standards of morality (with an imagined community of other gossip readers, or with other readers who are present in the flesh) that alternate between disapproval and understanding” (ibid, p. 132). Hermes explicitly hails Benedict Anderson’s (1983) notion of the imagined community as a group tied together not through face-to-face interaction between members, but through a mental understanding of a broader connection based on shared affinity and world-view. Even when reading is done alone, gossip gives one the sense of group membership based on shared interests and judgments. It is a valuable mode of cultural production because it allows participants to link abstract social ideologies to a “real” person, offering a concrete way to discuss and negotiate social meaning about questions of identity (e.g. what it means to be a “woman” in our society)
or proper social behaviors (e.g. how to be a “good mother”) within their everyday lives. The multiple ways gossip works to construct a sense of community between readers/gossipers is an important space of analysis for this project. The debate about the viability of community in the online setting will be engaged in the next chapter, but at this point it is worth noting how gossip can bridge the gap between real and imagined communities.

While Bergmann (1993) suggests that gossipers must necessarily be acquainted with the subject of gossip, he never establishes the level of acquaintance necessary between the gossipers themselves when discussing what he calls “well-known persons” (p. 51). Most scholarly work on gossip focuses on its role within existing social networks, such as family, friends, and/or neighbors. Yerkovich (1977), for example, argues that in order to gossip, participants “must know one another. They need not be friends or intimates, but they must be familiar enough with one another to minimize intervening social distance” (p. 192). Such familiarity is necessary in her study because the participants are gossiping about others within their urban community, i.e. people who the gossipers both know, but who also know them. This, both Yerkovich and Bergmann point out, makes gossiping a “risky” behavior which could threaten the social relationship with both the subject of the gossip and the other participant. Celebrities, on the other hand, are public figures whose images are widely disseminated through various media sources, and are therefore not ever really known to us. Despite Schickel’s assertion of the “illusion of intimacy” between the celebrity image and the consumer of that image, most people are rationally aware that they are not actually acquainted with the celebrity. This makes gossip about celebrities a “safe” way to judge the values and behaviors of
others as a means to work out what those standards ought to be within the gossippers’ own everyday social experience.

For example, gossiping about your sister-in-law’s mothering skills may get you in trouble with other members of the family, but criticizing Britney Spears as a bad mother allows you to establish a standard of what it means to be a “good mother” without threatening your own social relationships. In fact, you may strengthen your relationship with your co-gossiper(s), as you come to a moral consensus about what ought to define motherhood. Furthermore, gossip about celebrities demonstrates the integration of celebrity into the cultural processes of our daily lives. Turner (2004) suggests celebrity gossip allows for a “partial substitution of a category of [gossip] content,” in which the celebrity provides the fodder for gossip instead of people we actually know through direct contact (p. 24). There “seems no intrinsic reason,” he elaborates, that such a substitution “should have negative effects, or change the nature or productivity of the social and communicative processes into which it has been inserted” (ibid). Hence, I suggest gossip about celebrities and their lives can be a way of making connections with others in our social world. Co-gossipers can be close friends or relatives or they can be strangers on a bus, and they are in a social relationship defined and/or strengthened by the knowledge of and an opinion about the celebrity and, critically, their desire to share it with others as a means to structure social norms.

This claim is central to an understanding of online celebrity gossip as a potential space of community building around a shared topic. First, it assumes the physical space in which gossip occurs is less relevant than the topic and the processes of making meaning around that topic. Just as Hermes (1995) envisions the solitary practice of
reading a gossip magazine as a space of imagined community, I suggest the text and image based gossip available on the blogs draws readers into similar sense of imagined community or “an intimate common world in which private standards of morality apply to what is and what is not acceptable behavior” (Hermes, 1995, p. 132). However, online blogs further defy the necessity of physical presence as a pre-requisite for community-building, as, unlike the solitary reading of a gossip magazine, blog audiences can read the gossip on offer and immediately respond to it through the online forums and/or comments sections available on most sites, all while sitting alone at the computer. Certainly Hermes’ readers used their gossip magazine reading to inform and foster later conversations with others, but part of the appeal of the blog is that one can do more than just read. Here, the virtual space of the blog is more like face-to-face interaction or actual shared gossip talk, but the question remains as to whether or not participants see this as a space of community and how the computer mediated nature of such a social network shapes their relationships within it, topics that will be taken up throughout my dissertation.

This project will foreground the ways in which audiences use gossip talk on celebrity gossip blogs as an active engagement with celebrity culture that highlights the celebrity image as cultural conduit. More specifically, I will investigate the importance of gossip as a mode of negotiated cultural production, nourished by dominant meanings from the mass media coverage of celebrities as well as group meanings established through shared gossip talk about these celebrities. I do not, however, mean to suggest that gossip ultimately empowers the audience to make wholly unique and necessarily resistant meanings from celebrity images. I am interested in the complex ways gossip talk allows
audiences to both identify and dis-identify with the celebrity image as a means to negotiate meaning. While I frame gossip as an active engagement with celebrity culture, I do not assume that all meanings made through gossip talk are necessarily transgressive, as such talk can, in other ways, uphold oppressive norms, particularly around questions of identity performance. Instead, I will explore the possibilities and limitations of gossip talk as a social practice that allows audiences more freedom to make celebrity images meaningful in their everyday lives by resisting, to various degrees, the semiotic closure of the industry controlled meaning.
CHAPTER 3

NEW MEDIA AND CELEBRITY GOSSIP BLOGS

Media in the twenty-first century are marked by the “breaking down of barriers between traditional media industries and the telecommunications sector…redefining the way music, film, radio, television, newspapers and books are produced, manufactured, distributed and consumed” (Burnett and Marshall, 2003, p. 1). Though the catch-all phrase “new media” is used to refer to a variety of digital media and communication forms, the rapid spread of “the internet—with all its capacities, interfaces, uses, and underlying technologies—both epitomizes and enables a seemingly constant barrage of” changes within the media landscape (Markham and Baym, 2009, p. vii). The internet has increased our access to information and shifted the ways in which we communicate that information.

While such technological changes have had a profound influence on reshaping the production, distribution and consumption of media, many scholars argue that the task for media researchers ought to be to highlight these changes without falling into a technological determinist mode of analysis. Technology may enable different forms and spaces of interaction, but how such technology is actually “appropriated for the everyday conduct of social, occupational, and civic life” should remain at the center of social research on new media (ibid, p. x). In this chapter, I examine the technological and social impact of the rise of new media on celebrity culture and gossip media and their audiences. Without losing connection with the historical predecessors to online media forms, a topic which will be explored in greater detail in chapter four, I here define celebrity gossip blogs as part of the broader category of “new media” with attention to
their technological features but, more importantly, the social implications of engagement with those features.

**Defining New Media**

Rice (1984) describes new media as “those communication technologies, typically involving computer capabilities (microprocessor or mainframe), that allow or facilitate interactivity among users or between users and information” (p. 35). In this definition, new media are inherently social, as the technologies ultimately encourage interaction between user and media and between media users. Lievrouw and Livingstone (2006) go further to introduce a framework that places the connections between media technology and social contexts at the core of research on new media. They identify three main features of new media that recognize the historical connection to previous media forms and foreground the associated social contexts, in their myriad forms, that are inherent to the practice of communication. These features are:

- the artifacts or devices that enable and extend our abilities to communicate;
- the communication activities or practices we engage in to develop and use these devices; and
- the social arrangements or organizations that form around the devices and practices (p. 23).

These features “are inextricable and mutually determining,” as the connections between the technology and the social, economic, and cultural contexts in which they are created and used are all crucial to defining new media (ibid). Their emphasis on the social aspects of new media in both form and use is an important shift away from traditional conceptions of mass media, as it “permits movement of information in both directions,” and highlights the role of audiences in the production of meaning through the creation and consumption of media texts (Marshall, 2006, p. 637).
Jill Walker Rettberg (2008) says new media technologies have “moved [us] from a culture dominated by mass media, using one-to-many communication, to one where participatory media, using many-to-many communication, is becoming the norm” (p. 31). Audience practices remain grounded in existing modes of communication, such as reading and writing, but the technologies open new spaces and modes for users to engage with others. Within new media:

the ‘audience’ member has become a producer of their content. In some instances, that action of producing is quite limited to just moving from website to website in a particularly individual and idiosyncratic way; in other cases, the user is actively transforming the content for redistribution (Marshall, 2006, p. 638).

Livingstone (2004) points out that new media puts “interpretive activities at the very centre of media design and use” and foregrounds the ways in which new media users are “increasingly active—self directed, producers as well as receivers of texts” (pp. 78-9). The interactive nature of new media, defined by the ability of the audience to produce as well as receive text and image as part of the design of the media form, is what distinguishes it from traditional print forms.

Marshall (2006) and others have pointed out the rise of new media is especially relevant to the study of contemporary celebrity culture. In particular, the fact that new media blur the distinction between production and consumption of texts suggests that audiences present a “challenge [to] the relatively structured and controlled world of celebrity culture” (Marshall, 2006, p. 639). As discussed in chapter two, celebrity-watching audiences have always been understood as active, making and remaking the celebrity image through their consumption of a variety of textual and extra-textual sources. Gossip talk in the “real” world is already understood as an interpretive activity that works to reshape celebrity images in meaningful ways, but online forms of gossip
media, with their emphasis on interactivity and participation, foreground this audience practice in unprecedented ways. A plethora of gossip-oriented sites exist, ranging from, but not limited to, online counterparts to traditional print magazines (such as usmagazine.com or people.com), entertainment pages on sites that are not specifically celebrity oriented (such as msnbc.com or yahoo.com), official celebrity websites, and countless unofficial fan sites. These sites remain grounded in the interpretive and social aims of gossip talk discussed in chapter two but engage the technological capabilities of new media as the medium through which users connect with the celebrity image and with each other.

For this project, I limit my analysis to celebrity gossip blogs. Weblogs, more commonly referred to as blogs, have received a great deal of hype as new means of online communication that foster community in both form and content through their emphasis on technological interactivity. Yet interactivity alone cannot describe what a blog is and what that form means for those who read it. As Lievrouw and Livingstone (2006) point out, interactivity is a characteristic that distinguishes new media from traditional forms of mass media, and therefore we expect to see some sort of interactivity

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2 By official celebrity websites, I mean those sites that are typically sanctioned and produced by the celebrity’s publicity team and typically highlight his or her professional life. As a facet of the industrial production of celebrity, these sites are overwhelmingly laudatory of the celebrity and typically do not have a strong connection to gossip. An example of such a site is www.britneyspears.com, the official webpage devoted to pop star Britney Spears. Unofficial fan sites may be sanctioned by the celebrity, but are produced by individual fans outside of the industry control. These sites may also focus on the professional life of the celebrity, but address all on his or her overall public image in more gossip-oriented ways. Sites like www.worldofbritney.com and www.breatheheavy.com are examples of fan sites devoted to Britney Spears, offering photos and news on all aspects of her life and, as fans, tend to be supportive of her public appearances. These may have characteristics of blogs, but their overall focus on celebrating one celebrity puts them outside the scope of this project.
across all internet sites. Indeed, many websites that are not defined as blogs explicitly construct spaces for user interactivity, including instant surveys, online forums, and/or spaces for comments. How are blogs different from these online spaces of participation and, more importantly, what makes celebrity gossip blogs unique sites to study community within the larger online environment? I begin with a more thorough definition of blogs in general and celebrity gossip blogs more specifically as a means to illuminate the technological and social features of these new media forms. This taxonomy of blogs includes a brief description of each of the blogs analyzed for this project with attention to the unique features of each blog. As I argue that gossip talk about celebrity culture on these blogs creates a sense of online community, I end with an exploration of the metaphor of community as a means to understand online engagements and connections on each of these blogs.

**The Blog as Textual Format**

Rooted in the nautical navigation term that referred to the chronological record or “log” of events during a voyage, the earliest weblogs functioned as online journals and earned their name from their similar chronological organization of content (Rettberg 2008). A blog is most basically defined by its textual format: a regularly updated web page consisting of short posts arranged in reverse chronological order with the most recent post appearing at the top of the screen. The “post” is the basic unit of a blog, dividing the overall site into individual entries. Within these entries, blogs are united as a category not by their content, as a range of topics are covered on blogs, but by the use of two textual features—the link and blogger commentary. Rettberg (2008) suggests blogs “are founded upon the link, building connections between related issues,” thus framing
the blog as a clearinghouse or filter of web content through the blogger’s particular lens (p. 1). Similarly, Rebecca Blood (2002) describes the basic format of a blog post as “links with commentary, updated frequently,” highlighting the ways in which blogs rely on both existing (online) content and, more importantly, the bloggers’ observations and interpretations of that content (p. ix).

Though both are important components of blogs, the proportion of links to commentary is not rigidly defined and varies widely across blogs, indicating the malleability of the format to fit the specific topic and blogger style. Some blogs more closely resemble a personal diary, tracking the day-to-day life of the blogger, using links sparingly to relate to what the blogger is thinking about or more general links that relate to his or her interests (e.g. links to favorite music, movies, television programs, or travel destinations). Others rely heavily on links to other web content as the focus of their commentary, combing the web for stories to use as a springboard for discussion or to simply list the stories readers may have missed in their own web surfing. Blogs are “the place for daily stories, impassioned reactions, mundane details, and miscellanea” indicating the content of blogs is as varied as the authors or “bloggers” who create them (ibid, xii).

The post is the most basic unit of the blog, and can, in principle, stand alone as a complete text with a beginning and end. However, Rettberg (2008) argues individual posts function as part of a larger story of the blog that should not be analyzed out of that context. Blogging, she argues, is:
a cumulative process, [in which] most posts presuppose some knowledge of the history of the blog, and they fit into a larger story. There’s a very different sense of rhythm and continuity when you follow a blog, or a group of blogs, over time, compared to simply reading a single post that you’ve found through a search engine or by following a link from another Web site (p. 4).

Each blog post can be read on its own, but when they are read together (though not necessarily in sequence), the posts tell a larger story about the blogger and/or the topic of the blog. Rettberg says “the overall story as gleaned from reading a blog is likely to be pieced together from fragments, perhaps supplemented by bits of stories from other places” (p. 115). Bloggers themselves often provide links back to previous posts to help orient or remind the reader of the context of the most recent post and keep them tuned into the larger blog narrative. As most blogs are written in the first person and have a personal tone in the commentary, the construction of a larger narrative through the aggregation of individual posts foregrounds the blogger’s perspective and personality as the heart of the blog. The blogger defines the topic of the blog through the choice of which links to include and, more importantly, his commentary on those links. Even when blogs are topic oriented rather than personal online diaries, it is the blogger and his or her perspective that draws readers in and keeps them coming back for more of the overall narrative.

The second aspect of blog format is the inclusion of some sort of interactive features for readers. Blogs typically include some way to interact with the blogger and/or other readers, ranging from an email address link allowing readers to email bloggers directly to, more commonly, online space where readers can write comments at the end of each new post. This, more than other structural features, is what makes new media so “new.” Unlike old media forms, like newspapers or television, that function as one-
directional modes of communication, blogs are participatory media forms, blurring the boundaries between producer and consumer of content through the inclusion of these sorts of technological features. These features foreground the audience by making their contributions a part of the overall content of the blog. In one sense, blogs can be seen as the great leveler of the internet, a democratic space where anyone can participate, every voice counts, and participation is paramount. However, such participatory possibilities must be interrogated in order to avoid technological determinism that assumes that all users will participate simply because these interactive features exist.

**Interactivity vs. Participation**

Jenkins (2006a) draws a distinction between interactivity and participation that is useful in defining blogs through a social, not just a technological, lens. He argues these two terms are related, yet distinct, elements that support audience engagements with new media. Interactivity, he says, “refers to the ways that new technologies have been designed to be more responsive to consumer feedback” (p. 133). The degree to which audiences are able to interact with media is framed by the available technological protocols. In the case of blogs, the blogger decides whether or not to include interactive features and which specific features to add. Each technological choice opens or limits interaction, controlling the ways in which the audience can engage with and through content. For example, choosing to include a comments section opens space for readers to engage in dialogue, but requiring them to register as members in order to do so is a technological choice that limits who can participate. At the same time, offering the audience a prescribed space and/or way to interact with the media content, however, does
not necessarily mean that they will use it in the way the producer intended or even use such features at all.

In a 2003 survey of 53 million American adults, the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that some 44% had contributed content to the internet (Lenhart, Horrigan, & Fallows, 2004, pp. 3-4). Yet their definition of “creating content” was quite broad and included posting photographs to websites, commenting on newsgroups, and allowing others to download music from a personal computer as well as more complex creation acts like maintaining a personal webpage or blog. When considered individually, the numbers of adults creating content in each of these categories decreases as the complexity the process of creation increases. For example, though 21% have posted photographs to a website and 17% have posted written comments to a website, only 13% maintain their own websites, 3% have uploaded videos to websites, and a mere 2% maintain blogs (ibid). Similarly, Hitwise, an internet tracking company, reports that sites typically heralded for their emphasis on user created content and interactivity actually show very small numbers of users actively creating content. Just 0.16% of YouTube visitors upload video, 0.2% of Flickr visitors upload photos and Wikipedia, gets edited or expanded by 4.59% of users (Prescott & Hanchard, 2007). Thus, it appears that most visitors to these popular sites are reading, watching or listening, not necessarily using the interactive features. In other words, they are using new media in typically old media ways.

While the presence of reader comments on celebrity gossip blogs clearly indicates some sort of engaged audience, this may represent only a small percentage of the actual reading audience and conflates interactivity with participation in ways that do not address
the range of social contexts audiences bring to their new media engagements. Jenkins (2006a) uses the term “participation” to get at the social dimensions of media engagement missed by the technologically driven notion of interactivity. Participation refers to the cultural and social protocols that shape how, why, when and where audiences engage with media content, recognizing the agency in audience practices. He says individual audience members “participate in the production and distribution of cultural goods—on their own terms” (p. 133). These terms, as I will argue, may not include the use of interactive spaces, such as posting comments or emailing bloggers. Indeed, less visible types of engagement play a role in the social participation on and meanings made through celebrity gossip blogs. However, Jenkins’ notion of participation recognizes these engagements are active and meaningful. Interactive features open space for a certain type of participation, but an analysis of the social activities of blog audiences should recognize a range of participatory modes framed by multiple social relationships, not just technological features.

**Gossip in New Media: Defining the Celebrity Gossip Blog**

Widespread availability of user-friendly weblog software, much of which is available for free, means that anyone with something to say and an internet connection can create a blog, foregrounding the interactive nature of new media technologies. But further distinction is needed, as the simple ability to create an online presence does not mean one has created a blog. Blogger Cameron Barrett, creator of one of the first blogs, CamWorld, posted an essay on his own blog that draws a useful distinction between blogs and other forms of personalized online content, such as personal home pages. He says:
home pages are places where you put pictures of your family and your cats. It’s a place to distribute information to a close circle of family and friends. Weblogs, however, are designed for an audience. They have a voice. They have a personality. Simply put, they are an interactive extension of who you are (qtd. in Barrett, 2002, pp. 29-30).

Barrett here frames the blog as a unique space that foregrounds the blogger—her interests, thoughts, ideas, and self—but always with the assumption of some sort of relationship between the blogger and the public audience. The blog is not merely informative, though it certainly is that, but it is also a space of public social interaction between blogger and reader and between readers around a shared interest. The idea of shared interest points to the importance of content as well as form to defining the multiple subgenres of blogs. Indeed, the very term “celebrity gossip blog” recognizes that this particular form of new media, the blog, is focused on a particular type of content, namely gossip talk about celebrity culture.

Hartelius (2005) offers a taxonomy of blogs that focuses on content over structural form, bringing out the social aspects of new media that Lievrouw and Livingstone (2006) argue are crucial to the study of new media audiences. Hartelius “refocuses the question of a blogging community on heuristic distinctions between different types of blogs and on blogging content,” arguing that the interactivity of blogs facilitates “the formation of a virtual community around a specific topic” (pp. 79-80). In other words, blogs are spaces to engage with others around a shared interest, and therefore studies of the blogs as spaces of community should focus on how talk around that interest facilitates such connections. While bloggers are responsible for the vast majority of content on their blogs, the audience is here conceived as active searcher for more information and discussion on topics of interest, thus using the blog as a way to
gain more social currency. Focusing on blog content as the defining feature still recognizes the importance of textual and interactive features to understanding the broader category of blogs. However, it also moves beyond those features in understanding how blogs become spaces of virtual community around shared interests.

Classifying celebrity gossip blogs under this taxonomy points to the usefulness of a continuum that acknowledges both the range of categories and the need for fluidity in categorizing blogs. Hartelius argues that all blogs exist on a continuum defined at its extremes by the content of two distinct types of blogs: the group blog and the personal blog. The group blog is a site typically published as an interactive feature of a larger organization’s website with multiple contributors writing about issues pertaining to that institution. Content remains important to defining these blogs, as the contributions of each writer on the blog are “commonly centered on a particular topic or theme, whether the theme be knitting, promoting environmentally friendly carburetors, or cheering for a college sports team” (p. 80). By extension, those who read the blog do so because they are interested in that topic. Political party or candidate blogs are examples of this sort of blog because they focus on one topic through a unified perspective.

The personal blog, in contrast, has one primary contributor who is responsible for all posts. This sort of blog is comparable to an online journal or diary, as the blogger uses the site “to post anything that he/she feel illustrates and enhances the expression of self” (p. 83). The extreme form of these sorts of blogs are what Hartelius calls are the “individualizing personal blogs,” or the virtual space for musings on the minutia of the blogger’s everyday life and interests (p. 86). These are not strictly topic-oriented, tending instead to cover a wide range of interests and musings from the blogger. But individual
blogs can also be of a “supplementary” nature, that is, focus on the “cause or identity that is representative of the blogger offline” (p. 84). These blogs are more topic-oriented, focusing on a specific interest or pursuit, such as the blogger’s artistic work as a musician or a writer, and offers a space of self promotion to an audience that shares an interest in that particular subject matter. Most celebrity gossip blogs are individually authored and are thus especially influenced by the blogger’s personality. This is a crucial element of the celebrity gossip blog, as the blogger’s commentary and often sardonic perspective on celebrity culture are responsible for drawing in an audience. That is, readers do not simply want the latest dish on Britney Spears, as they could find that on any number of sites across the internet, but also enjoy the blogger’s framing of the story and reading of Spears’ celebrity image through his or her commentary. Like Hartelius’ definition of the individualized blog, the emphasis on celebrity gossip blogs is on the blogger’s unique perspective on the celebrity gossip as evidenced in his or her commentary.

Multi-authored celebrity gossip blogs maintain this same sense of individual voice in terms of framing celebrity culture, but it is more aligned with the blog overall rather than the individual blogger. For example, posts on popsugar.com (Pop Sugar) or gofugyourself.com (Fug) are alternately written by two different bloggers. The name of the blogger who authored the post (either PopSugar or Molly on Pop Sugar and Heather or Jessica on Fug) is always listed and the posts are written from a first person

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3 I address bloggers by their first names in my writing as a way of pointing out the sense of intimacy they develop on their blogs. That is, they usually refer to themselves by their first names on their own sites, either in the credit line for a post or an in-text reference within a post. Furthermore, I refer to Perez in particular by his first name to avoid confusion with celebrity Paris Hilton, who appears frequently in the blogs in my sample. It is worth noting here that Perez took his pseudonym from Paris, as she was, and still is, a frequent topic of gossip on his blog. I will refer to his blog as PerezHilton.
perspective, echoing a more individualized type of blog in terms of textual address. Other blogs, such as asocialitelife.com (A Socialite’s Life) and jossip.com (Jossip), list editors or editorial boards separately and give each blogger credit for the posts he or she authors. Despite the multiple authors on these group blogs, the first person perspective dominates the commentary and each blogger develops his or her personality on the group blog. However, on these group blogs, there still tends to be a coherent approach to celebrity culture between the bloggers, as the content, or approach to the content, remains the defining feature. That is, whether a post is written by Molly or PopSugar, the overall tone remains basically the same, echoing the individualized perspective of the single-authored blogs. Regardless of how many authors a particular blog has, I suggest the defining content feature is not simply the focus on celebrity culture, but the gossip-oriented approach that reflects the unique perspective of the blogger.

Rettberg (2008) claims that “the best way of figuring out what a blog is is simply to look at some examples” (p. 4). In that spirit, I here examine six different American–based celebrity gossip blogs. Though they are all related in topic because of their (at least partial) focus on celebrity gossip, I do not suggest each blog functions in the same way. Rather, I argue each occupies a point on a continuum of celebrity gossip blogs in terms of format, content, writing style, and community-building potential. As with other new media forms, these blogs are constantly changing in all of these areas, and these descriptions reflect these blogs as they existed during my fieldwork observation from February-March 2008. More detailed analysis of these blogs as texts is available in chapter five, but I briefly introduce each blog here in order to familiarize the reader with the various forms of celebrity gossip blogs and to point out why each was chosen from
the thousands of gossip blogs as part of this project. Each blog, its textual address, emphasis on blogger personality, and forms of audience engagement will be explored in greater detail throughout this dissertation.

Perez Hilton (www.perezhilton.com)

Perez Hilton is the gossip blogger, and his self-owned site, PerezHilton.com (PerezHilton) regularly places among the top 10-entertainment news sites on the web and draws an average of 1.7 million unique visitors per month in the United States alone according to internet tracking firm ComScore Media Metrix (cited in Navarro, 2007, para 12). His blog is frequently updated and regularly features paparazzi style photos of celebrities which Perez then alters using MS Paint as a way to break down the celebrity façade. He “scribbles nicknames—or penises, or bodily fluids—all over his blog photos in white ink” as a way to mock celebrity and foreground his own reading of a particular celebrity image, often reshaping the dominant meaning of that image through gossip (Stack, 2009, p. 34). Perez’s popularity and (in)famously sardonic or “snarky” take on celebrity culture has arguably brought celebrity gossip blogs to the attention of mainstream media and the general public as well as skyrocketed Perez himself to a certain sort of celebrity status.4 “Snark,” a combination of the words “snide” and

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4 Perez Hilton appears regularly in popular media as the representation of the “gossip blogger.” He has been interviewed by numerous print and television media outlets on the subject of celebrity and gossip blogging, was featured in his role as a celebrity gossip blogger on several celebrity reality television programs, and played a version of himself in several fictional television programs (http://www.imdb.com/ name/nm0491768/). In the fall of 2007, VH1 aired a series of specials called What Perez Sez, staring Perez in what is basically a televised version of his blog, but one without space for reader interaction, complete with MS Paint photo manipulations. In 2010, Perez announced he would host a weekly music countdown show on syndicated radio (Letkemann, 2010). A more thorough analysis of his celebrity status as it relates to his role as a blogger is explored in chapter five.
“remark,” is a sarcastic mode of communication not unique to the internet, but certainly used widely by both bloggers and audiences. This form of biting and often cruel humor is particularly relevant to gossip because it implies judgment and dis-identification through its sarcastic tone. The cruelty of a snarky comment can (and does) vary across the blogs, but all are rooted in the use of sarcastic humor as a form of judgment.

The snarky approach to celebrity culture offered by his blog is firmly rooted in camp and disidentification in which the artifice of celebrity is routinely revealed for the readers’ pleasure. While he fawns over those select few celebrities he likes, the blog more generally relishes in exposing the “real” selves of celebrities and the ways in which they attempt to hide those selves. For example, he is well known for “outing” gay celebrities as his way of removing the artifice of Hollywood and showing the real person behind that mask. Calling Clay Aiken by the name “Gay Aiken” is an example of snark because it uses cruel humor and sarcasm to make a larger judgment on Aiken’s self. Perez argues any aspect of the life of a celebrity or other public figure, unlike a “random stranger,” is “fair game,” but also says he uses such gossip as a way to reject any public stigma that surrounds homosexuality and construct a worldview in which homosexuality is accepted and celebrated (qtd. in Huang, 2006, para 8). He says, “some people have this stupid notion in their head that being gay is bad and being gay will hurt your career, and I don't believe that” (qtd. in Lostracco, 2006, para 10). His open and vocal identification as a gay man and a Latino are an important entrances to how questions of identity shape blog gossip and how audiences negotiate this identity in their reading of his blog.
Beyond the popularity of the blog, I include PerezHilton.com as an example of an individually authored blog that offers space for and often explicitly hails (in the form of “What do you think?” type questions) audience participation. However, unlike other blogs that require users to register and create a static screen name and identity, Perez’s comments section is an open forum with little regulation and commenters are free to choose a unique name for each post. Interestingly, while most posters tend to use a first name, initials, or other nicknames typical of online groups (e.g. Emily, vnl101 or lilmermaid), others seem to tailor their name to the particular story, in other words, use it as a sort of headline for their own comments, echoing or challenging Perez’s ideological authority. For example two responses to a July 15th 2007 post about Britney Spears being spotted at Los Angeles club Les Deux called “Mommy Wants to Party All the Time” featured posts from “You’re a Moron Perez” and “Pity Britney,” both of which worked against Perez’s (preferred) reading of Britney’s image in a way related to their names. The post from You’re a Moron Perez countered Perez’s assertion that Britney wore sunglasses to the club “cuz bitch don’t want you seeing her pupils” by arguing that the star was “wearing sunglasses because of the flashbulbs, you fucking moron” from paparazzi photographers that constantly follow her every move, not because of drug use, as suggested by Perez (Hilton, July 15, 2007; You’re a Moron Perez, July 15, 2007). By having comments sections on his blog, particularly ones with few technological or social regulations, Perez does cede some control over the content of the blog to the audience, and I am interested in what they do with that control.
Pink Is The New Blog (www.pinkithenewblog.com)

Pink Is the New Blog (PITNB) is an individually authored blog that is solely owned by its blogger, Trent Vanegas, who, like Perez, is an openly gay Latino who uses gossip as an intervention into celebrity culture. However, though Trent clearly takes a mocking stance towards celebrity culture, PITNB differs from Perez in both the more sophisticated use of Photoshop manipulations of celebrity photographs (an important space of interactivity) in the construction of his visual images and in his more loving, yet still snarky, look at celebrities. These two blogs share similar formats and content, but each blogger’s perspective shows the range of meanings that can be made through celebrity images. Furthermore, though explicit and public spaces for audience interactivity are absent from this blog, Trent’s audience is far from invisible.\(^5\) He regularly credits readers for bringing news items or updates to his attention and frequently gives “shout outs” to readers he meets at public events.\(^6\) This raises a question about the necessity of technological spaces of interactivity as a pre-requisite for audience participation and community-building. On a self-reflexive note, my own avid reading of PITNB is also part of my interest in studying it as part of this project.

Pop Sugar (www.popsugar.com)

Popsugar.com (Pop Sugar) is the celebrity blog section of the larger network of lifestyle blogs, offered on the Sugar Network, which includes blogs on food, home,  

\(^5\) The comments sections have since reappeared on PITNB and my discussion of my interview with Trent in chapter five explores his reasons for eliminating and then re-instating the comments sections on his blog.

\(^6\) Though Trent does have prominent links to his pages on social networking sites as another ways for readers to interact with him, I restrict my analysis to his actual gossip blog. Other gossip bloggers also have pages on these social networking sites, but these secondary spaces are outside the scope of this project.
technology, fashion, beauty, advice, weddings and other “women-focused” topics.

Essentially, Pop Sugar is like the celebrity gossip section of a women’s magazine, though it functions autonomously from the other sections. Pop Sugar adopts the same form as the other blogs discussed here, offering individual posts with the latest photos and gossip about celebrities. Though posts are attributed to two different authors (“Molly” and “PopSugar”), Pop Sugar blogger Molly Goodson told me that four other women help her write and manage the site. Pop Sugar’s approach to celebrity is more positive than any of the other blogs in my sample, generally taking a stance of identification with celebrities rather than mocking them and breaking down the façade of fame. This is not to suggest there is no snark or humor on the site, but rather Pop Sugar generally speaks positively of celebrities and, in keeping with its women’s magazine style approach, puts a great deal of emphasis on covering celebrity couples and celebrity babies. Pop Sugar commenters typically use gossip about celebrities as a way to reinforce heterosexual and gendered norms, suggesting a serious approach to celebrity often reinforces its dominant ideologies.

Though the blog can be read by anyone, users must register a unique screen name in order to post comments, thus presenting a more defined space of community than PerezHilton. Beyond inclusion of comments sections at the end of each post, the registered user can also participate in games, threaded forums, and real-time chat rooms dedicated to all the topics included on the Sugar network, including celebrity culture. The site itself has a “community” link, indicating the emphasis it puts on users connecting with each other through the content and creating their own content to share. The explicit use of social and technological protocols to create community as part of
one’s engagement with the blog makes this an attractive research site, as celebrity culture is clearly an important conduit for building relationships with other Pop Sugar readers.

**What Would Tyler Durden Do ([www.wwtdd.com](http://www.wwtdd.com))**

Another example of an individually authored blog, though the site itself is owned by the Fat Penguin Media group, is What Would Tyler Durden Do (WWTDD). Though it is similar in this sense to other blogs in my sample, I include an analysis of WWTDD for several reasons. First, unlike Perez and Trent, WWTDD’s author, Brendon, uses his identity as a heterosexual male to frame a different approach to celebrity culture. Both gossip and celebrity culture are often considered the domain of women and gay men, so the addition of a straight male gossip blogger challenges this stereotype and points to the importance of identity to reading the celebrity image. Brendon obviously takes a stance of disidentification, immediately evident in the blog’s description of itself in the “About” section at the time of my fieldwork, which describes the blog as “focused on bringing you the latest gossip and news about rich and famous celebrities. And then making fun of them. Why? Because fuck them, that's why” ([www.wwtdd.com/about](http://www.wwtdd.com/about)). In addition to mocking celebrity culture, this blog also exhibits a strong affinity for displaying the (female) celebrity body as an object of sexual desire as central component to many of the stories and gossip posted. Though male celebrities are occasionally featured, the emphasis is on the objectifying female bodies and judging their sexual attractiveness as evidence of their cultural value. The title of the blog, a reference to Brad Pitt’s character,

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7 “Brendon” is the pseudonym under which blogger Michael Donnelly writes What Would Tyler Durden Do? Brendon and Perez are the only bloggers in my sample who blogs under a pseudonym, and a discussion of how the bloggers use their own personality and/or sense of self in creating the blog (or not, in this case) will be discussed in chapter five.
Tyler Durden, from the 1999 film *Fight Club*, is meant to reinforce the hypermasculine and anti-consumerist, at least in terms of the cultural value of celebrity, stance of the blog.

**WWTDD** offers audiences a different way to consume celebrity images, and I will investigate how this rhetorical framing and emphasis on sexual desire for celebrity bodies shapes the audience and their meaning making practices. In particular, I question if and how this site makes celebrity culture and gossip “acceptable” reading for straight male audiences through the sexual objectification of female celebrities in ways not seen on other sites without this framing. Finally, **WWTDD** does include comments sections after every post, but, like on Pop Sugar, users must register with the site in order to participate, again combining social and technological protocols in order to promote community.

**Jezebel ([www.jezebel.com](http://www.jezebel.com))**

Jezebel.com (Jezebel) is a multi-authored or group blog that is a part of the Gawker Media Group, which produces numerous blogs, including the popular celebrity and popular culture blog Gawker⁸ ([www.gawker.com](http://www.gawker.com)), political gossip blog Wonkette ([www.wonkette.com](http://www.wonkette.com)) and consumer culture blog Consumerist ([www.consumerist.com](http://www.consumerist.com)), among others. This blog is produced by a five-woman editorial board who take turns writing the posts on this frequently updated site, with bloggers Tracie and Dodai most commonly, but not exclusively covering celebrity and popular culture content. Jezebel’s tagline “Celebrity, Sex, Fashion For Women. Without Airbrushing” provides readers

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⁸ I chose to follow Jezebel rather than Gawker because its explicitly feminist approach celebrity culture is unique amongst mainstream celebrity gossip blogs and because Gawker focuses on New York City gossip rather than a broader spectrum of celebrity gossip.
with an immediate clue to the perspective it takes on celebrity culture, namely as a feminist intervention that recognizes the pleasures and the problems of celebrity culture. On Jezebel, readers are invited to take pleasure in celebrity culture while simultaneously criticizing it for reifying unreasonable standards of attractiveness and behaviors for women. Thus, this blog is particularly useful for my investigation on the possibilities of resistance to hegemonic norms through engagement with celebrity culture.

Similar to WWTDD and Pop Sugar, Jezebel comments sections are publicly available to read, but restricted in terms of who is allowed to post comments. The audience participation on Jezebel is, however, the most restricted of any blog in my sample. Only “approved commentators” may post comments, and users must “audition” in order to win approval and earn a username and password to be used in future comments. The audition process and its impact on creating community amongst Jezebel audiences will be discussed in more detail in chapter eight. The editors use this system to maintain the feminist focus of the site, an assumption that will be central to my investigation of the blog’s community. Thus, Jezebel offers an interesting perspective on the blog audiences and the assumption of a community as a space for like-minded individuals through its explicit regulation of audience activity on the site.

**The Young, Black and Fabulous** ([www.theybf.com](http://www.theybf.com))

The final blog in my sample, The Young, Black and Fabulous (YBF), was chosen primarily because of its because its exclusive focus on black celebrity culture. While other blogs in my sample occasionally cover celebrities of color, it is usually only if that particular celebrity has broken through into the “mainstream” of celebrity culture typically dominated by white celebrities, indicating the hegemonic power of whiteness in
defining celebrity culture. For example, a major black star such as Will Smith, Beyoncé Knowles, Kanye West or Jennifer Hudson may occasionally be featured on mainstream blogs, but the sites, like celebrity culture, overwhelmingly feature white celebrities.

YBF, an individually authored blog written by a young African American woman named Natasha Eubanks, who also owns the blog herself, provides a forum explicitly focused on the wide range of black and other minority celebrities that are ignored by mainstream blogs. This focus means that the content of YBF differs significantly from the other blogs, as Natasha does not report even the “biggest” celebrity stories if they do not include non-white celebrity. For example, Britney Spears is a staple of gossip media in general and the other blogs in my sample all covered at least major events, if not the minutia of her daily life. YBF, however, does not feature any content on any aspect of Britney’s public or private life because she does not fit into the black celebrity focus of the site. Similarly, by virtue of its focus on black celebrity culture, YBF covers celebrities that are never or very rarely featured on most mainstream blogs, thus broadening the range of celebrity content that informs my analysis.

Though its explicit focus on black celebrity is unique amongst the blogs in my sample, YBF’s format and writing style are very similar to other mainstream blogs. The site functions just like any celebrity gossip blog, mixing gossip tidbits and paparazzi photos with Natasha’s commentary. Like Pop Sugar and Jezebel, YBF focuses on fashion and lifestyles as well as gossip about celebrities. A regular feature called “Fierce or Foolywang” and “Foolywang of the Week” allow readers to voice their opinion in comments about the fashion choices of the featured celebrity. “Foolywang” is a term regularly used on the site and is defined as “something or someone who looks utterly
ridiculous,” indicating that some mocking or disidentification with celebrity permeates the site (www.theybf.com/about). Though celebrities and celebrity culture are openly mocked throughout the blog, Natasha overwhelming paints a positive picture of black celebrity culture, a crucial intervention into mainstream celebrity culture.

In addition to the comments sections at the end of every post, the site also features an open forum for more general and reader-directed discussion. Though the forum is unmoderated, the comments sections, which are publicly visible, are subject to fairly strict social rather than technological rules. Readers do not have to register in order to comment, but their comments are moderated for content and will be removed if they do not uphold the rules set by Natasha. As will be discussed in more detail my audience analysis in chapter eight, the comments of this site generally retain the positive perspective on black celebrity culture forwarded by Natasha as an intervention into the invisibility of black celebrity within mainstream culture. This intervention draws on the history of the black press as a space that challenges the marginalization of black culture within “mainstream” or white popular culture as well as carves out a cultural “forum for the mass cultivation, appreciation, and dissemination of African American ideas, culture, values, talent, literature, thought, and analysis” (Everett, 2001, p. 2). Thus, YBF is worthy of closer analysis because it takes a fairly explicit political stance in its approach to celebrity culture, and also speaks to the increasing fragmentation of the gossip media audience within the new media landscape.

**New Media and the Metaphor of Community**

It should come as no surprise that academic and popular interest in online activity includes the discussion of online interactions as spaces of community. After all, the
characteristics of interactivity and participation frame blogs as an inherently social genre. Blogs are certainly not the only new media form where questions of community are relevant, but they do provide a useful point of entry to understanding how traditional definitions must shift in order to address new spaces of social interaction. Fernback (1997) points out, “new and reproduced patterns of social relations” are evident throughout cyberspace (p. 39). Similarly, Baym (1998) notes that “social relationships thrive on-line and have since the beginning of interactive computing,” leading many observers to intuitively adopt the label of “community” to describe the “sense of interpersonal connection as well as internal organization” that characterizes online interactions (p. 35). The intuitive tendency to ascribe the label of community to online groups makes some scholars uneasy because it disregards the potential physical and political limitations such a conception of community in favor of a romanticized version of a virtual democratic space. That is, to suggest something feels like a community does not sufficiently address how online communities are constructed, how they function, and how they are integrated into participants’ offline lives.

At the heart of these debates is the question of how exactly community is to be defined and, thereby, manifested within a virtual setting in which many participants rarely, if ever, meet face-to-face. Fernback (1997) offers useful insight to the basic notion of community saying:

community is a term which seems readily identifiable to the general public but is infinitely complex and amorphous in academic discourse. It has descriptive, normative, and ideological connotations. A community is a bounded territory of sorts (whether physical or ideological), but it can also refer to a sense of common character, identity, or interests as with the ‘gay community’ or ‘virtual community.’ Thus, the term ‘community’ encompasses both material and symbolic dimensions (p. 39).
Here, community is understood as both a feeling or sense of belonging and a means of materially experiencing the self as part of a group (e.g. a gay man who is part of the gay community) and as part of the larger society. Fernback (2007) elsewhere posits “community is not always about consensus or intimacy. It is about understanding that humans are bound together by a need to perpetuate society and culture” (p. 65). This diminishes the need for physical proximity in order to form community, and rethinks the category in terms of social practice amongst users. I here explore some relevant elements of that debate in order to illustrate that community remains a viable lens through which to analyze audiences’ engagement with celebrity gossip blogs. Following scholars like Fernback, I reject a normative model of community in favor of a more dynamic and flexible participant centered version that views blogs as social networks enabled, but not confined, by new media technologies. Rather than identify one overarching definition of community on celebrity gossip blogs, I suggest there are numerous and overlapping communities and the strength of each depends on the social conditions and practices that shape each specific blog.

Towards a Definition of Online Community

Originally published in 1993, Rheingold’s The Virtual Community is one of the first scholarly engagements with the concept of community in CMC technologies. In his analysis of early forms of online interaction, he foregrounds the social aspects of online communication as a way of shaping a sense of community. He says, “virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (1993, p. 5). Rheingold’s definition is a useful
starting point, as it moves the notion of community away from a simple aggregate of people, eschewing the idea that the physical presence of more than one person is a necessary condition for the creation of a community. Online audiences can be counted through the number of hits to a site, indicating a group presence, but a sense of community only emerges from the various forms of social communication that occurs on those sites.

Rheingold should not be considered the final word on community, as his definition has been widely critiqued for its romanticism of the possibilities of online community and its ambiguity in defining important terms “sufficient human feeling” and “personal relationships.” Building on Rheingold’s definition, Wellman and Gulia (1999) suggest traditional notions of community offer a limited view of people’s actual experience community-building in multiple and widespread social networks and contexts. They argue social relations and practices, not proximity, should be the basis of a definition of community. Indeed, multiple technological advancements, including cars, planes and telephones as well as the internet, have allowed people to maintain strong ties despite long distances that preclude physical proximity. Thus, technology has already moved the definition away from shared physical space and towards social relationships as the key factor to understanding community in modern society.

Chayko (2002) reminds us that even when community members share the same physical space, social connectedness remains “rooted in the mind,” through our use of cognitive processes to both understand the world around us and communicate that understanding to others (p. 19). She emphasizes the importance of “sociomental bonds,” those connections based on the “meeting” of two or more minds, as central to
understanding the “otherwise invisible forms of social connectedness” enabled by CMC technologies (p. 3). She says, “people are not (usually!) physically connected, bound or tied together; rather we call them ‘connected,’ ‘bonded,’ or ‘tied’ when we intuit that their relationship is sufficiently strong to warrant the metaphor” (ibid). This is a particularly useful conception of connection for online communities, as many members never meet face to face. Watson (1995) similarly argues for this sort of relational community metaphor in online research, saying:

after all, the imaginary borders of nation-states prove that we humans do not always communicate towards shared norms with the people nearest us, but rather make determinations of whom we wish to build community with and whom we wish to exclude through the construction of borders. We should begin thinking of community as a product not of shared space, but of shared relationships among people (p. 120, emphasis in original).

The focus here on the construction of borders through relationships as a defining feature of community again foregrounds the social function of community over any physical proximity.

Watson’s (1995) study of Phish.net, an online Usenet newsgroup9 devoted to the band Phish, defines these relationships “according to the ideas which bind groups together and which define them in relation to other groups of people and ideas” (p. 105). A common interest may bring the group together, but Watson does not claim this is all it takes to generate a sense of community. For example, he notes Phish.net participants created a number of “in-jokes” and other forms of expression “which can only be

9 Usenet newsgroups are essentially an internet-based bulletin board system through which users can read and post on thousands of discussion forums dedicated to a wide range of topics. Topics are threaded, so one can read and post under a specific topic of discussion pertaining to that group. While Phish.net requires users to subscribe or register in order to participate, many Usenet groups are completely public. Though the celebrity gossip blogs I analyze are not newsgroups nor are they distributed via Usenet, they are online groups with some resemblance to these earlier forms of online interaction.
understood and/or fully appreciated by members of that group” (p. 106). This group came together around shared ideas or topics, but become a community through their regular production of group specific meanings around those topics. Watson’s emphasis on relationships recognizes the agency of the individual in choosing which community(ies) to join, as it is not simply about being in the same place (or on the same Usenet newsgroup) as others, but sharing the sociomental connections between group members.

Similarly, Ward (1999) points out that in contemporary society, people are members of many different communities, “each serving a purpose and fulfilling a specific need in that individual’s life” (p. 103). Likewise, in the virtual realm “people drift in and out of numerous different virtual communities staying only as long as the virtual community is providing a solution or fulfilling a need in their life” (ibid). This flexible understanding of community recognizes the transitory relationships that characterize many online social networks as part of the experience of community within the virtual setting. The idea of individual choice in developing and maintaining multiple and varying relations as a form of community remains central to this definition and foregrounds the use of community to fill social and personal needs. This fits with the social orientation of new media engagements and is the starting point for my exploration of the social practices of reading and commenting on a gossip blog as a community-building process.

Though I claim communities do exist on celebrity gossip blogs, my focus on social practices is not meant to ignore the potential pitfalls of online community. Komito (1998) points out that virtual communities are often idealized as “positive alternative[s]
to the destruction of traditional community in modern industrial society,” offering increasingly isolated individuals a place to come together (p. 97). Simplistic definitions of community, like Rheingold’s, disregard the ways actual internet users understand their online engagements which may or may not include a sense of community. Lack of attention to the features of the online community under analysis, Baym (2006) suggests, “implies that any group involved in social discussion is necessarily a community” and dilutes the metaphor’s strength as an analytic approach (p. 45). Many scholars, including Baym and Komito, want to retain the community metaphor, but argue for a more rigorous use that recognizes the differences between online groups in terms of structure, content and commitment, and draws attention to the multiple modes of social interaction that occur within these groups. I argue that addressing the various audience practices on gossip blogs, as well as how audience members describe their own engagement on and sense of connection through blogs, helps recognize the complexity and range of communities that emerge. Furthermore, it recognizes that these community spaces may not be liberatory, dialogic, or supportive spaces of online engagement.

**Fandom and Online Community**

My focus on the social practices of audience communities has its roots in audience research on fandom, in both online and offline contexts. Jenkins (1992) emphasizes the fan experience as one situated within social networks of other fans, not isolated relationships to a media text. The social networks of fandom, he argues, are “semistructured space[s] where competing interpretations and evaluations of common texts are proposed, debated, and negotiated and where readers speculate about the nature of the mass media and their own relationship to [them]” (p. 86). The term “fan,” unlike
the broader concept of the “audience” or “reader,” implies a closer and more participatory relationship between text and viewer, though, of course, a range of participatory practices exist within this basic definition. Fans are not simply “consumers” of texts, they are:

active producers and manipulators of meaning…fans [are] readers who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests…Their activities pose important questions about the ability of media producers to constrain the creation and circulation of meaning. Fans construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images, articulating concerns which often go unvoiced within the dominant media (ibid, p. 23).

Jenkins identifies fan practices, such as participation in fan clubs or writing fan fiction, as engagements that move beyond audience consumption and into cultural production.

Gossip is, I have argued, a way to evaluate and negotiate the common texts of celebrity images, and gossip blogs facilitate cultural production as part of the practice of media consumption. Part of the pleasure of gossip is the ability of participants to create meaning through shared negotiation, aligning their productive and community-oriented practices with those of fandom. Though his focus is on these more obvious productive spaces, Jenkins also asserts that fandom is defined by the formation of group identity or community in less visible ways, suggesting a range of practices draw fans into community. He claims that fan practices “blur[s] any clear-cut distinction between media producer and media spectator, since any spectator may potentially participate in the creation” of cultural texts (pp. 246-247, emphasis mine). This mirrors the productive work of gossip within celebrity culture in which meaning is made through gossip talk. The interactive spaces on blogs offer space for the reader to participate in gossip talk if they choose, but web gossip draws readers into a sense of imagined community based on the shared perspective with the blogger and other commenters.
Of course, gossip blog audiences are a different sort of “fan” than the fans described in fandom literature. On one hand, gossip blog audiences do not typically produce the sorts of alternative texts, such as fan fiction, described by Jenkins in his analysis of television fan cultures, but nevertheless engage in the same sorts of “textual poaching” activities in which existing media content is reused and refashioned by fans. Gossip, whether written or “spoken” in the comments sections, enables blog audiences to mine media images for that which is most pleasurable to them. They appropriate and re-read celebrity images in ways that challenge producer control and speak to the negotiation of social and cultural identities through media consumption. Harrington and Bielby (1995) similarly argue that the “web of interaction” between viewing a media text (in their study, daytime soap operas) and connecting with other viewers in order to share viewing experiences “is vital to both the social construction of shared meanings” to the construction of a fan community (p. 47). Blog audiences read and interpret common texts and draw on shared cultural knowledge. The emphasis on the relational and interpretive functions of communities in fandom literature remains relevant to my project because it foregrounds the ways in which individual audience members use celebrity gossip as a form of currency that enables participation in larger social networks, both online and off.

Furthermore, unlike the fans of *Star Trek* (Trekkies) or *Doctor Who* described by Jenkins, it is challenging to define the exact object of fandom for celebrity gossip blog audiences. Some readers identify as fans of a particular celebrity and read blogs in order to find out more about that specific individual. At the same time, the wide range of celebrities regularly on offer on gossip blogs indicate a fandom based on celebrity culture
itself, and the attendant spectacle and scandal as fodder for gossip, rather than of any one particular celebrity. A fan of a particular celebrity may check the blogs for the latest on that celebrity, but my research indicates most readers are there for the full slate of gossip, regardless of the celebrity covered. Thus, perhaps they are fans of the gossip blog and the blogger rather than any specific celebrity. The complex reasons behind audience reading practices will be explored in more detail in chapter seven. Though blog audiences engage in the same sorts of interpretive social practices as the fan communities identified by Jenkins, I prefer the terms “reader,” “commenter,” and or “audience” to reflect the greater range of users of celebrity gossip blogs.

The Practice Approach to Online Community

These interpretive practices are not confined only to fan practices or communities. James Anderson (1996) suggests all communities develop their own meaning making strategies as a means to bind members together in shared cultural production. He argues:

> it is the community that develops the strategies, provides the means for dissemination and instruction, and supervises particular performances of them. The individual in any strategic situation is a local and partial representation of the interpretive community (p. 87).

By adopting or participating in the interpretive strategies unique to a particular community, one indicates belonging to that group. The choice to read one blog over another is itself a way to define community, as it aligns the individual with a certain set of interpretive strategies for reading celebrity culture. This approach is appealing because while it recognizes the collective interpretations of a particular online community, it does not lose sight of the fact that the community is made up of individuals, each of whom brings a unique set of resources and perspectives to the group.
Komito (1998) says researchers must be more flexible in their definition of community to address the role of individuals in shaping the group, suggesting:

a community is not fixed in form or function, but is a mixed bag of possible options whose meanings and concreteness are always being negotiated by individuals, in the context of changing external constraints. This is true whether group members interact electronically, via face-to-face communication, or both (p. 105).

Fernback (2007) echoes this idea, offering a social interactionist approach that views community as “a mutable construct, determined by the social actors who create meaning about it” (p. 66). In this conception of community, the emphasis remains on what groups do not just that they are.

In her study of the rec.arts.television.soaps (r.a.t.s.) Usenet group, Baym (2000) argues for the “practice approach” that assumes “that a community’s structures are instantiated and recreated in habitual and recurrent ways of acting or practices” (p. 22 emphasis in original). This minimalist definition of community does not require intimacy or close knit ties between members (though she does find that in her case study), but instead looks at the ordinary activities performed by group members towards shaping the group. She argues this approach is “well suited to the examination of audience communities given that their defining quality is the joint endeavor of making sense of the media,” acknowledging the aim of a community does not have to be about ties between members but rather a shared interest or project (p. 24). In the case of her soap fans community arises from the shared practices drawn from a wide range of media resources that “ultimately construct[ing] a social space that feels like community” (ibid). Gossip, I argue, is the sort of interpretive practice described by Baym that brings participants together through their shared negotiation of social norms and pursuit of moral consensus.
By judging others through these shared standards, gossipers on celebrity gossip blogs form a relational attachment that speaks to the idea of online communities as practice-based interpretive communities.

**Community and Celebrity Gossip Blogs**

Given the shifting nature of celebrity culture and public engagements with it, the flexible notions of community described here are necessary for my investigation of gossip blogs. Fernback (2007) asserts a fluid notion of community recognizes that individuals who participate in interpretive practices may not view this experience as a community relationship. This may be related to the ways in which popular discourse frames online community or their own personal views on what constitutes a community. Alternate pleasures and identifications may dominate their description of how and why they participate. I believe my decision to foreground the voices and interpretations of actual readers of celebrity gossip blogs in chapter seven will allow me to balance these multiple contexts and recognize if and how audiences view their online engagement as doing community building work. Lindlof and Shatzer (1998) point out the shifting sense of commitment within online groups can impact the conventional notions of community. They claim “when members can easily come and go, when many ‘members’ do not even post, and when identities cannot be verified beyond the current situation, the power of a community ethos may be weakened considerably” (p. 183). Though I do not intend to force a label upon an unwilling group, as my research indicates, some blog readers do not see their engagement with blogs as a mode of community building. I argue the practice approach to community illustrates communities do exist, even if they are based on weak or fleeting connections. The sense of community may not be about actual one-to-one or
even one-to-many connections with others on the blog, but the interpretive practices that occur on blogs demonstrate how bloggers and audiences use gossip to make sense of larger questions of culture and identity in their everyday lives.
As with other new media forms, there is a tendency to valorize celebrity gossip blogs as doing something completely “new” through a focus on the genre’s technological features. As a result of this technological determinism, this view ignores the historical predecessors of these forms in terms of content, style, and approach to celebrity culture and its audience. Downing (2001) observes:

a recurring and insidious temptation in media studies is to assess media from the singular vantage point of the contemporary moment. Both the impact and the origins of media become extremely foggy as a result (p. 6).

Though he refers specifically to the study of radical alternative media and oppositional cultures, “which are already vulnerable to premature dismissal as ephemeral and therefore irrelevant,” his point is certainly applicable to gossip media’s reputation as “fluff” that has no lasting historical or cultural value (ibid). His argument challenges the tendency to assume new media is completely distinct and, perhaps, superior to traditional print media because of its technological “newness,” a view that overlooks the complexity of the category of “new media” in contemporary media research as well as the connections between “old” and “new” media forms. Certainly technological changes, the rise of the internet being perhaps the most prominent, have had a profound influence on reshaping the production, circulation and consumption of media, but researchers, Downing suggests, ought to highlight the importance of technology in the engagement with new media without falling into a technological determinist model of audience analysis. As I argued in chapter three, the social, not just the technological, context of
new media development and use must be included in any study of new media. The technology is an important component, but the ways it is used may not actually be so new.

While I do suggest that celebrity gossip blogs are offering something “new” to the social context of media development and use, particularly in terms of audience interactivity, participation and cultural production, this chapter locates the celebrity gossip blog within a larger history of American celebrity gossip media. I contend that while the technological spaces for participation and shared cultural production offered by gossip blogs remain a crucial space of inquiry, the content and style of blogs can be traced back to their print predecessors: the gossip column and the celebrity tabloid magazine. After all, blogs, despite all their new media bells and whistles, are still text and image based media, and understanding the similarities between blogs and print media helps reveal how blogs have both embraced and reshaped traditional ways of writing and reading celebrity media.

Technology is important to the study of any online activity or culture, as it provides the medium through which people participate, but to put it at the center of analysis assumes that people did not interact in this way prior to the development of the internet. By engaging an historical perspective on the place of blogs within celebrity gossip media, I aim to avoid a technological determinist standpoint that assumes “technologies have an overwhelming and inevitable power to drive human actions and social change” (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006, p. 21). Later chapters will investigate how such style and content shifts relate to the actual reading practices of blog audiences, but here I explore blogs as texts within the history of celebrity gossip.
Many scholars have examined the role of print media in celebrity culture (Honey, 1972; Bird, 1992; Gamson, 1994; Hermes, 1995, 1999; Ponce de Leon, 2002; Turner, 2004; Holmes, 2005; Johansson, 2006). While these studies provide important insight into the role of gossip media in the production, circulation and consumption of celebrity culture, their tendency to focus on the tabloid magazine ignores the larger history of celebrity gossip. My historical approach addresses this omission by contrasting the early gossip columnists, specifically Walter Winchell and Louella Parsons, to the more “journalistic” approach of contemporary gossip magazines. I will compare the stylistic shifts in celebrity media across the twentieth century media by focusing on the major characteristics of these two major celebrity media forms and trace their influence on 21st century new media engagements with celebrity gossip.

Winchell and Parsons’ respective careers spanned more than forty years, making an exhaustive study of the various incarnations of their columns outside the scope of this chapter. Though they were certainly not the only gossip columnists active at that time, they were the most influential and thus I focus on their contributions as representative of the genre as a whole. Similarly, gossip magazines have existed in various forms since the early days of Hollywood and this short comparison could not do justice to the rich history of this media form. My goal in this chapter is to present a broad view of the history of celebrity media and the place of the celebrity gossip blog within the circuit of celebrity production. I examine the major style and format characteristics and contributions of each form to the general category of celebrity gossip media. I suggest blogs are not entirely new forms of gossip media, rather draw on previous formats to create a modern but historically grounded form of engagement with celebrity culture within the new
media landscape. Blogs combine a more conversational style, including an emphasis on a singular, first-person voice, use of “slanguage” and other colloquial forms of speech pioneered by Winchell and Parsons, with the tabloid’s prodigious use of visual images, particularly in the form of paparazzi photographs, as anchors for gossip stories. Understanding the contributions each form has made to the category of celebrity media connects the history of celebrity culture to media history, and illustrates how stylistic, technological and social shifts have impacted both histories.

**Media and the Production of Celebrity**

Scholarly engagement with stardom and celebrity has taken the production of the celebrity as a commodity as a central concept and media as a central site of the production and circulation of that commodity. These two cultural forms are therefore inextricably linked. Turner, Bonner and Marshall (2000) suggest that the category of “celebrity” is not “a property of specific individuals. Rather, it is constituted discursively, by the way the individual is represented,” drawing attention to the idea that celebrity images are produced and circulated in a variety of cultural spaces, including the mass media (p. 11). Marshall (1997) argues the public appearance of the celebrity image across a range of media forms is an attempt by the culture industries to both represent and stabilize the public sphere. He says:

> the mass is a site par excellence of affective power, a kind of power that is seen to be very volatile and dangerous but also very desirable if it can be effectively housed. In the culture industries, celebrities are then aligned with strategies for the connection of cultural commodities to this volatile affective power (p. 243)

Celebrities, as public figures, are useful symbols for cultural organization because they are publicly accessible, yet such access is always controlled. Mass media therefore plays a crucial role in the construction and circulation of the celebrity image.
Rojek (2001) argues “no celebrity now acquires public recognition without the assistance of cultural intermediaries who operate to stage-manage celebrity presence in the eyes of the public” (p. 10). Recognizing the celebrity as a commodity not only exposes the economic function of the celebrity image, but the range of workers whose labor produces and mediates our access to that commodity. Turner (2004) points out that contemporary celebrity has “turned into such an important commodity that it became a greatly expanded area for content development by the media itself…the manufacture of and trade in celebrity has become a commercial strategy for media organizations of all kinds—not just the promotions and publicity sectors” (p. 9). The celebrity is not simply a discursive effect of the increasingly expanding media landscape; it is a central commodity of that expansion. Any examination of the celebrity image and celebrity culture must include the range of “cultural intermediaries” outside the actual celebrity him or herself whose labor comprises that system, as the celebrity image is dependent upon that system for its existence.

**The Circuit of Celebrity Production**

Gamson (1994) suggests these workers fall into three distinct but linked industries responsible for packaging, promoting, and distributing the celebrity image to consumers: the independent celebrity producers, the entertainment institutions and the entertainment-news media (pp. 62-3). The “independent celebrity producers” include workers like publicists, agents, managers, stylists, and other specialists who “surround the celebrities to increase and protect their market value,” building up the celebrity’s attention-getting power as a means to sell that image to other commercial industries (ibid, p. 61). The development and institutionalization of the professional public relations industry in the
early twentieth century is tightly connected to the rise of celebrity culture in mass media.

Schickel (1985) argues:

during the period — roughly 1895-1920 — when the first blocks of the modern celebrity system were sliding into place everything was improvisatory, primitive. Something more was needed, something that could, on a fairly regular basis, provide the public with a reliable supply of sensations together with an equally steady, glamorous, and easy-to-follow real-life serial adventure. Something that could, as well, allow the press to return to a slightly more passive role in gathering and presenting the news of these creatures, not force it constantly to risk its reputation in prodigies of invention (pp. 33-4).

These celebrity producers function as “intermediate distributors” or gatekeepers who control the access to the celebrity product, building up the perceived value of the celebrity commodity through authorized media appearances that promote name recognition, which are in turn “promoted and cashed in…for jobs” with the second category of producers, the “entertainment institutions,” such as film studios, television networks, record labels, etc (Gamson, 1994, pp. 62-3).

The entertainment institutions profit from the celebrity in the short term and on the level of performance. For example, a film studio hires an actress to play a role in its new film and, more importantly, to promote the film in the mass media upon its release (ibid, p. 61). Though talent and ability are tied to performance, the entertainment industries are more concerned with the celebrity’s power to draw an audience, for whatever reason. The celebrity here is both a performer, capitalizing on her talent by playing the role, and a promotional tool, capitalizing on her attention-getting power as a celebrity. The role of the media is essential to complete the celebrity production circuit, as the previous two industries rely heavily on the “entertainment-news media” industry in order to function.
This third industry of celebrity production benefits from cooperation with the other two, but maintains separate interests in the celebrity image. For these workers, Gamson (1994) contends, “celebrities not only provide the obvious subject matter but are exploited to sell magazines or build ratings and thus advertising revenues” (p. 63). The entertainment-news media is interested in deploying the celebrity image to promote their own economic ends, not necessarily those of the film studio or the celebrity herself. They are interested in the success of the celebrity in as much as it keeps audiences buying their media products, which may or may not be directly related to the celebrity’s professional performances. The entertainment-news media are responsible for publicizing the general celebrity image in order to maintain the attention-getting capacity that is key to the celebrity’s continued presence in public consciousness and viability as a commodity in all spaces of production. In contemporary celebrity culture, this includes emphasis on both the public performance and, more crucially, on the private “behind-the-scenes” individual.

The entertainment-news media are thus linked with both the independent producers and the entertainment industries, but this symbiotic relationship is marked by a constant struggle for control over the celebrity commodity. Gamson (1994) claims:

to be competitive, media organizations need access not only to the celebrity image but to unmined pieces of the celebrity personality. For this, they must on some level fight the publicist and the celebrity. They face the dilemma, then, of fighting those on whom their work activities and livelihoods depend (p. 94).

The entertainment-media institutions must choose sides, “either resisting or giving in to the bids by others to control coverage” (ibid, p. 95). Entertainment media outlets like Entertainment Tonight, Vanity Fair, or People gain a certain level of legitimacy by giving in to the control of the celebrity by the independent producers. In exchange for
playing by their rules, for example limiting interview questions to certain approved topics or allowing the publicist to choose the reporter/interviewer etc, these sources are given more direct access to the celebrity, promising readers a glimpse of the real person behind the star façade even though that real is controlled behind the scenes.

This is not to suggest these “legitimate” outlets are purely mouthpieces for the other producers. Even when playing by the rules of the system, the entertainment-news media maintain a certain level of power in terms of circulation of the celebrity image. Without these outlets, the specific inflection of the celebrity so carefully produced by and through the other workers would lack the necessary public visibility (for the celebrity and for the specific project being promoted) the media provide. The public demand for information on the private lives of celebrities means the entertainment-news media’s access will benefit the entire system. Appearing in certain high-end magazines, like *Vanity Fair*, “enhance[es] the cultural capital invested” in the celebrity’s public image for all points on the circuit (Turner, 2004, p. 36). The direct access afforded these media outlets, with the potential for revelation of the authentic celebrity to an ever-hungry audience, is traded for a more controlled version of celebrity that benefits the other producers. But they can use their own power and aura of legitimacy in disseminating the celebrity image as leverage for greater flexibility in promoting a particular celebrity image.

**Breaking the Circuit: Autonomous Outliers**

However, those who resist this system are not without their own power. Gamson (1994) notes “autonomous outliers” like tabloid or gossip magazines such as *Us Weekly* or *Star* may lose direct access to the celebrity by resisting the independent producers’
attempts at control, but nevertheless play an important role in the production and circulation of the celebrity image in the public consciousness. They are autonomous because “their commercial interests do not coincide with those of the publicity operations” (ibid, p. 95). They do not generally promote the professional project of the celebrity, focusing almost exclusively on the details of his or her private life. But they are not so removed from the production of celebrity as to have no impact on the circuit itself. Turner (2004) emphasizes that while the celebrity may well (at least in her public admission) bemoan the public attention to her private life generated by tabloid exposés, it is a necessary part of the publicity process. He argues “this same level of interest can also attract people to see their next film or their next live appearance” which, in turn, may result in a positive feature in one of the more legitimate media outlets (p. 36). It is precisely the tabloids’ outsider status that makes them appealing to audiences because they break down the façade so carefully constructed by the other producers to reveal the “real” person. Here, the audience plays a role in the celebrity production circuit by demanding certain types of information about the stars that is not offered in the more legitimate entertainment-news media. Tabloids exist to answer this demand, profiting from the promise of unauthorized access to celebrity lives rather than playing by the rules of the system. Media, both legitimate and tabloid, thus play a vital role in connecting audiences to celebrity images and strengthening the economic and social power of celebrity culture.

**Media in Early Celebrity Culture**

In her analysis of movie fandom, Samantha Barbas (2001) describes how fans in early Hollywood used their economic power as ticket buyers and their social power as
fans to actively shape Hollywood culture. Prior to 1910 when Carl Laemmle of the Independent Moving Picture Company first publicized the names of his film actors, fans did not know who even played in their favorite films, let alone the details of their private lives. Increasingly interested in knowing about the players as real people, not just the roles they played on screen, fans bombarded studios and recently established fan magazines, such as *Motion Picture Story Magazine* and *Photoplay*, with letters requesting information about the private lives of their favorite stars (Barbas, 2001, pp. 10-11). By 1920, these movie fan magazines responded to audience demand by shifting focus from the technical and professional aspects of Hollywood to stories about stars’ “homes, vacations, cars, and in particular, their romances” (ibid, p. 28). These changes, Barbas argues, suggest that the industry and audiences began to perceive films merely as an excuse to see famous actors” and that fan magazine editors “sensed that fans were far more interested in the personal than the professional, [and] were happy to oblige—and to sell more copies” (pp. 28-9). Indeed, these magazines remained a vital extratextual source of information on stars through the 1930s and 1940s. While this again emphasizes the economic function of celebrity, as fans’ interest in the private lives of stars worked “to lead the reader back to the theater and into the economic exchange that was central to the function of the cinema as a business and as an institution,” it is important to recognize that audiences are not passive participants in this form of celebrity production (deCordova, 1990, p. 114).

While these magazines did provide details of the private lives of stars in response to audience demand, Barbas (2001) says “the vast majority of early fan magazine articles…insisted stars were similar if not identical to their roles,” in part because of their
tight partnership with the studios themselves (p. 26). Coverage was generally positive and even staged by the studios in order to promote the most profitable star image. But this control and regulation of knowledge about the stars began to break down in light of the star scandals of the 1920s, particularly the Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle rape trial in 1921 (deCordova, 1990, p. 128). In the wake of such scandals, star discourse shifted to emphasize the secretive or hidden self behind the mask of fame. De Cordova (1990) says, “the fascination over the players’ identities was a fascination with a concealed truth, one that resided behind or beyond the surface of the film…The private finally emerged as the ultimate or most ulterior truth” (p. 140). Audiences voraciously consumed movie trivia and celebrity news in both fan and mass market magazines throughout the 1920s and 30s, but had become increasingly skeptical of studio and media control over star images offered in these sources, recognizing that the star image is a social construction.

Yet such skepticism did not translate into a rejection of the new private life discourse around stars as purely fabricated; rather it intensified the pursuit of the real through gossip. Since the illusion of intimacy central to the star/fan relationship promotes a powerful curiosity about a star’s personal life as a means of authenticating the individual seen on screen, fan magazines shifted from a focus on the professional to the personal in order to profit from this audience need. As a result, Barbas (2001) argues, fan magazines tried to “out-scoop” each other and bring the audience more detailed and potentially sensationalistic stories about the stars’ lives, eventually circumventing studio publicity departments and turning to other sources for stories (p. 98). This “Hollywood information war” resulted in the rise of “conflicting, sensationalistic and often highly contested celebrity journalism” that continues to dominate the genre today (ibid, p. 108).
More bluntly, gossip about the private lives of celebrities, not professional discourses, became the standard of celebrity media and the celebrity images produced within it.

Studio and industry control never entirely released its influence over the legitimate entertainment-news media, and autonomous outliers like the tabloids used their “unauthorized” access to the private as a means to gain power in the circuit of production of the celebrity image. The lack of direct and authorized access to the celebrity may call into question the veracity of their stories, but allows audiences to actively participate in their own construction of the celebrity image by sifting through multiple reports in pursuit of the “truth.” Bird (1992) suggests that the celebrity gossip available in so-called “supermarket tabloids” acts as a source of images for the “hall of mirrors” of culture in which different components of culture are not simply linked, but actively reflect back on each other. Celebrity gossip stories “bounce off and add to the established image” of a star “derived from previous reading and viewing” (p. 2). Therefore, while the autonomous outliers like tabloids do exist outside of the more legitimate and controlled celebrity production system, their interests remain articulated to that system because they keep the celebrity image in circulation. At the same time, this outlier circulation of celebrity images benefits all points on the production circuit because the celebrity “will always need the visibility the media can provide” in order to maintain a continuing economic and cultural relationship with the audience (Turner, 2004, p. 36). No one point on the circuit can guarantee public interest in the celebrity image, further revealing the tensions between the players and their economic interests, but all are necessary to the pursuit of authenticity and the illusion of intimacy that characterize audience negotiation of celebrity culture.
Celebrity gossip blogs enter this circuit of production as autonomous outliers to the celebrity industry. They exist outside the boundaries and control of the system, but have an increasingly profound impact on the way that system operates. Gossip blogs draw on their historical predecessors in form and style by privileging the gossip-oriented details of the celebrity’s private life over a discussion of public performances. Celebrity gossip blogs go even further into the realm of autonomous outliers, distancing themselves not only from the celebrity industry but also from the entertainment-news media industry more generally. The first-person writing style of blogs rejects standards of journalistic objectivity in favor of direct communication with other fans through personal, gossip-oriented commentary. Understanding the development of the celebrity media industry through the rise of gossip columnists and the intervention of tabloid/celebrity gossip magazines helps understand blogs as a part of this industry, both continuing the work of their predecessors and offering new spaces of celebrity construction and audience negotiation.

**The Rise of the Gossip Column**

Arguably the progenitors of the modern gossip column, the influence of Walter Winchell and Louella Parsons on celebrity media has often been overlooked by celebrity media scholars, who tend to focus on the intervention of the tabloid into the production and consumption of the celebrity image. During the Golden Age of Hollywood, dozens of columnists, both syndicated and based at a specific papers, covered Hollywood for increasingly gossip-hungry audiences (Goodman, 1961; Barbas, 2001). The general interest in celebrity culture served as “a common frame of reference” for the large and rapidly urbanized American society. The columns used gossip about celebrities to
“create a national ‘backyard fence’ over which all Americans could chat” (Gabler, 1994, pp. 80-1). In the process, they reframed the cultural role of the celebrity and expanded the ways in which audiences engaged with popular culture. I here examine each columnist through a snapshot of their work in February 1935, a time when both columnists had clearly defined their style and were well positioned as powerful figures within celebrity culture. The four week time span of archive is similar to the time frame of my gossip blog fieldwork, offering a deep yet bounded analysis of the columns.

Though they were not the only columnists to emerge from the Golden Age of Hollywood, I chose Winchell and Parsons as representative of celebrity media in that era for several reasons. First, they were certainly among the first national syndicated columnists to focus on the private lives of celebrities, not just their public performances, laying the groundwork for celebrity gossip media as we know it today. In his biography of Walter Winchell, Neal Gabler (1994) argues:

in 1925, at a time when the editors of most newspapers were reluctant to publish even something as inoffensive as the notice of an impending birth for fear of crossing the boundaries of good taste, Winchell introduced a revolutionary column that reported who was romancing whom, who was cavorting with gangsters, who was ill or dying, who was suffering financial difficulties, which spouses were having affairs, which couples were about the divorce, and dozens of other secrets, peccadillos and imbroglios that had previously been concealed from public view. In doing so, he not only broke a long-standing taboo; he suddenly and single-handedly expanded the purview of American journalism forever (p. xii).

Claiming the title of journalist but rejecting the standing journalistic taboo against exposing the private lives of public figures, Winchell defined the genre of celebrity gossip and celebrity culture in the early to mid twentieth century. Likewise, though Parsons was not the first to write about stars:
by writing a daily column exclusively devoted to motion pictures and by extending the existing celebrity journalism tradition to film stars, Louella pioneered a new journalistic format and started a new chapter in the history of American celebrity (Barbas, 2005, p. 44).

Led by Winchell and Parsons, gossip columnists in the Golden Age of Hollywood “were among the most powerful journalists in the country; they were valued by their papers and followed religiously by their readers,” earning their place in the celebrity production circuit and setting the stage for later gossip media forms that focused on the pursuit of the private individual over the public star (Walls, 2000, p. 41). Their columns altered the balance of power between the celebrity production industries by diminishing the independent celebrity producers and entertainment industry workers’ power to define the celebrity image. Consequently, they offered audiences a way into that space of cultural production, albeit one controlled by the entertainment-news media and the columnists themselves. Such a shift set the stage for the rise of the tabloids and the gossip blogs that define contemporary engagements with celebrity culture.

In February 1935, Winchell was near the height of his career, having written a series of popular and influential columns and news stories about the trial of Bruno Hauptmann, the man accused and eventually convicted of kidnapping the Lindbergh baby that solidified his influence on popular opinion (Gabler, 1994, p. 209). Based at The New York Mirror after originating his column at The New York Graphic, his nationally syndicated column, “On Broadway,” covered a range of celebrities, politicians, and other public figures and was, according to a 1934 survey by the New York University Department of Marketing, “not only the most popular feature in the Mirror, but the most popular in all the city’s papers” (ibid, p. 206). Similarly, at this time, Parsons had already “cement[ed] her position as one of the city’s best read-columnists” in Los
Angeles at this time and her *Examiner* column was one of the most popular nationally syndicated columns (Barbas, 2005, pp. 112-15).

In the early 1930s, Parsons shifted her approach to gossip writing from the “flowery, saccharine descriptions of the stars” that characterized her 1920s columns to a more “pointed and judgmental” style that endured to the end of her career, indicating her role in the overall shift in celebrity culture and celebrity media (ibid, p. 138).

Furthermore, at this point, Parson’s position as the “Queen of Hollywood” had yet to be challenged by rival columnist Hedda Hopper, whose column debuted in 1937. While Parsons and Winchell were, in a sense, rivals, appearing in competing newspapers, the style and focus of their columns differentiated them in a way that, I will argue, made them complementary rather than competitive. This is echoed in the tendency of contemporary gossip blogs to fill a particular niche in terms of approaching celebrity culture, allowing audiences to read across blogs for various perspectives or focus on one blog based on their own interest in celebrities.

**Gossip Columns and Celebrity Journalism**

Together, these two columnists shaped the gossip column as a journalistic format, indelibly defining the writing style and approach of the celebrity media genre. Each columnist was distinct, but, importantly, both wrote in a conversational style emphasizing the larger context of an item, not simply reporting it. While Winchell adopted various characters/voices (regular features included “Memos from a Columnist’s Girl Friday” and “Notes from a Cub Reporter”) in contrast to Louella’s development of herself as the reader’s confidant, both used a first-person writing style that brought readers into the conversation rather than maintaining the journalistic concept of objectivity that typically
defines newspaper reporting. Bird (1992) says objectivity “holds that the facts speak for themselves, whether these facts are observations recorded by a reporter or quotes from sources” (p. 17). Journalists were encouraged to distance themselves from the story and allow the readers to draw their own conclusions based on the facts presented.

Though Winchell and Parsons both considered themselves journalists, they frequently editorialized, offering commentary on the story that both subtly and overtly shaped the reader’s perspective on the celebrity covered. Furthermore, the “facts” reported did not necessarily have to be verified in order to be printed as true. Rather, items became true by virtue of being printed by Winchell or Parsons. Both certainly made efforts to check sources, but a “good” item was not necessarily one that was verifiable but one that was sensational or at least presumed to be of interest to the reader.

In a 1940 profile of Winchell for *The New Yorker*, St. Clair McKelway says:

> [Winchell] continues to print gossip about the marital relations of people who have not applied for divorce, he does not hesitate to hint at homosexual tendencies in local male residents, and he reports from time to time attempted suicides which otherwise would not be made public. He believes that if a thing is true, or even half true, it is material for his column, no matter how private or personal it may be (p. 30).

In other words, their journalistic style was rooted in gossip as a mode of communication in which truth is determined through shared negotiation and judgment of information rather than objective analysis of facts.

This was most clearly seen in the first-person conversational tone of the columns, which emphasized each columnist’s perspective, not those of journalistic sources, as the authoritative voice. Winchell and Parsons both openly discussed visiting popular restaurants and nightclubs, attending film and theater premieres, and generally existing within the sphere of celebrity culture rather than maintaining a distanced objectivity.
Indeed, their insider access was offered as proof of their reliability as a source of the latest celebrity dish, rather than evidence of bias. As will be discussed further in my examination of their specific columns, their use of that access was quite different. Winchell acted as the everyman/outsider looking in (and often down) on the glitz and glamour, while Parsons reveled in it, giving readers a sense of being a part of the celebrity scene alongside a fellow fan. The columnist is not a celebrity, but provides the reader with a more privileged look into that world.

These portrayals, however, belie the true power these two columnists had within celebrity culture and the continued influence of the independent celebrity producers and entertainment institutions in the production of celebrity. A positive mention in either column was a boon to a celebrity, and studios worked diligently, typically through the use of press agents, to get their client’s names included. As independent celebrity producers, these agents worked to get their star clients’ names in the press in order to increase the public’s interest in the star and his or her latest project. The columnists relied on this steady stream of information, but certainly did not print every item brought to them and had other “inside” sources that helped feed the columns. Winchell and Parsons positioned themselves as autonomous outliers who flouted industry control and purported to bring readers an unvarnished truth about the private lives of celebrities. But they also quickly established themselves (and the entertainment-news media) as essential and legitimate components of the celebrity production system. In fact, as Gabler (1994) notes, the press agents were in constant competition to secure space in the popular columns like Winchell’s. This was a delicate balancing act of currying favor by offering “free” items “about people and places they didn’t represent” in exchange for plugs for
their clients as well as “submitting the same items to another columnist” (ibid, p. 244). But crossing either one of these columnists, by offering false information or, even worse, allowing the same item to run in two different columns at the same time, thus removing the exclusivity of information, could do incalculable damage to the press agent’s relationship with the columnist and the star’s public image.

Crossing the columnist meant ostracism from the column, which would likely lead to loss of professional work, and, most damaging, a downward turn in public opinion about a star. Press agents who worked with Winchell lived in fear of “winding up on what Walter called the ‘Drop Dead List’” (ibid, p. 245). Winchell would not print any items from press agents or stars on this list, a moratorium that could last “for months or even years and that would undoubtedly cost the transgressor clients and money and possibly his job” (ibid). Similarly, Barbas (2005) contends stars and studios who refused to provide Parsons with interviews or other information or, worse, gave items to rival columnists were subject to increasingly severe attacks in the column that “often erupted into long term feuds” that could permanently alter public opinion of a star (p. 140). Winchell and Parsons were thus an important component of the celebrity production system, offering audiences insider views, but at the same time exercising power of just what views would be exposed to the public.

Parsons, in particular, used her vast knowledge of the secrets of Hollywood stars and studios to secure her access to them and their loyalty to her. Parsons’ column could function as damage control for the studios, using her authority to give weight to their cover-ups. For example, when “It-girl” Clara Bow’s heavy gambling became national news in 1931, Parsons, in collusion with Paramount studio heads, countered speculation
of underlying psychological problems as the source of Bow’s gambling addiction by reporting that the star was simply stressed from “overwork at the studio” and was taking time off to recuperate (ibid, p. 154). Parson’s version, at least temporarily, averted further scandal for the star and her studio. Walls (2000) suggests Parsons functioned as “a protector of the stars” who “knew much more about them than she ever revealed” (p. 68). Such knowledge put Parsons in a position of power that earned her loyalty, or at least fear, from the stars and the studios alike.

As workers in the circuit of celebrity production, gossip columnists existed in a state of tension with the other producers and industries. The columnists were increasingly necessary to circulate the celebrity image and strengthen its cultural and economic reach. Yet their allegiance was not always to the industry, as audiences demanded insider and authentic information that could not always be had by playing by the industry rules. The columnists’ interests ultimately lie in their own media product, namely their columns, and they were not afraid to challenge industry constructions if such revelations were personally and economically profitable. Gossip columnists in the Golden Age “were among the most powerful journalists in the country; they were valued by their papers and followed religiously by their readers,” earning their place in the celebrity production circuit and setting the stage for later gossip media forms that focused on the pursuit of the private individual over public star (Walls, 2000, p. 41).

**Tell it to Louella: Celebrity and the “Queen of Hollywood”**

Louella Parsons did not simply play by the rules of the system; in the Golden Age of Hollywood, she was the system. Her columns provide a clear example of the necessary, though at times conflicting, tie between industry workers in the circuit of
celebrity production. While she supported Hollywood’s social order through her column, her popularity with readers also earned her the power to help shape that order. Gabler (1994) calls Parsons “the Walter Winchell of the West” and notes that her “power derived from her relationship with the studio establishment, and her column was largely a compendium of trade news, interviews, and other information which the studios wanted to have disseminated” (p. 254). This included details of the star’s public performances (industry gossip about upcoming films, casting decisions etc.) and the latest on her private life. Moreover, that such reports were available in a daily column, rather than a weekly or monthly fan magazine, opened “the world behind the scenes [of Hollywood] to a wider audience than ever before” (Barbas, 2001, p. 92). Movie fans wanted to know about professional and personal lives of their favorite stars, and Louella’s column answered this call. Her attention to the details of the stars’ professional work solidifies the function of the star as a commodity drawing audiences to the theater, but also offers a glimpse at the glamorous lifestyle of Hollywood as a point of aspiration and identification for everyday readers.

Every column in my archive begins with an item of industry gossip putting the professional persona and Hollywood as an industry at the forefront. In fact, Parsons’ column was so industry focused that it often included items about the studio executives and other business related items. Her February 5, 1935 column begins with a report that Emanuel Cohen “tendered his resignation as vice president in charge of Production for Paramount” and “this important post” will be filled by Henry Herzbrun “Paramount attorney and a man thoroughly familiar with the motion picture business” (p. 13). Though readers may not have been as familiar with these names, Parsons’ inclusion of
them reinforces the notion of Hollywood as an industry town and her status as an insider within it. From this position, Louella’s column had the power to harm stars’ relationship with the public and the studios, as “her coziness with the men who ran the studios could destroy [stars] with their employers” (ibid). This made her popular within the Hollywood “colony” but also offered the general public a glimpse of the process of Hollywood from the ground up. This inside look did not reveal Hollywood as a façade or illusion, rather reinforced the idea that work remained at the heart of the enterprise.

The major focus of Parsons’ columns, however, was the lives of Hollywood actors and actresses, though in ways that served the promotional needs of the industry. She cultivated a style that suggested she was responsible for the information, obscuring the direct influence of the studio on her column. Though she may report on industry gossip, her perspective, as the representative of the movie fan, shaped the meaning of the star in the professional context. For example, on February 6, 1935, she reports Ernst Lubitsch was chosen to direct Marlene Dietrich in *Josephine: Wife of Napoleon* for Paramount (p. 15). But this professional update is couched in judgment, as she goes on to say:

> just between us—Marlene needs a good story and how. If she doesn’t have a hit this time, all the king’s horses and all the king’s men can’t help her. America hates nothing so much as a repeated failure (ibid).

She calls into question Dietrich’s star status based on her film performances, suggesting that stardom emanates from (continued) success as a professional performer. Her reading of industry developments could also be positive, much to the benefit of the up and coming star and the studio. Claims to talent, or at least to audience popularity, as well as the work of displaying that talent, are central to her positive construction of celebrity. In
her column from February 26, 1935, Parsons highlights the importance of the performance side of celebrity:

when Constance Collier first came to Hollywood none of the directors on the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer lot were impressed with her past performances on the stage. And none were particularly anxious to give her a part. Then came ‘Shadow of a Doubt’ in which she proved that she is as good a trouper in the movies as she is on the stage. Since that time there has been a terrific battle among the directors to get her for their pictures (p. 11).

Collier has risen to Hollywood fame not only because of her talent, but because of her perseverance to prove herself. Parsons champions celebrity as simultaneously natural and earned throughout her column, masking the studio control over information about the star and foregrounding her own interpretation of events as evidence of her insider access and authenticity.

Parson’s writing style offered the reader unprecedented first-hand access to the private details of Hollywood culture, but she was more than simply a mouthpiece for the studios. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Parsons was “a genuine participant in the Hollywood scene…To many fans, Parsons was as much a part of Hollywood as the most popular actresses” and this insider access is expressed throughout her column (Barbas, p. 95). Every column in my sample ends with a section called “Snapshots of Hollywood collected at random” that details the private lives of stars, and positions Parsons as a privileged insider to this information. This includes the romantic and domestic lives of stars, as well as other personal tidbits presented as short items. She often inserts herself in the news, further bolstering its truth value (for she was a direct observer of the events) and her role as a trusted confidant of star and audience alike. For example, the February 12, 1935 “Snapshots” includes news that:
Helen Chandler wires that she will become Bramwell Fletcher’s bride on Valentine’s Day at the Riverside Church in New York: she invites me to be present at her wedding reception; sorry I can’t be with them (p. 9).

Similarly, the February 7, 1945 “Snapshots” reports that “Lottie Pickford, much improved, is leaving for Palm Springs to recuperate with Mary [Pickford] as her nurse” and “Rita Kaufman [is] christening her new hat shop with a cocktail party” (p. 13). This section reveals the private side of the celebrity image, allowing audiences to identify with their favorite stars as ordinary people who have average, although glamorous, lives off-screen.

Though she clearly had insider access, Parsons’ writing style often reflected a gushing and at times worshipful tone more akin to a fan’s approach to stardom, aligning her interests with those of her readers who seek the real person behind the star façade.

This is clearly seen in her February 12, 1935 item regarding actress Ruby Keeler:

There is never any pretense or affectation about Ruby Keeler. She is one of the real people who goes about doing nice things for others without telling the world. I happened to hear yesterday that Ruby’s little sister, age thirteen, is sick and must go to the hospital for a blood transfusion. Ruby, who is devoted to her entire family, appreciating the child’s fright, suddenly realized that a bone in her own instep needed to be operated upon, so she engaged one room and will go into the hospital to remain with the little girl (p. 9).

Referring to Keeler by her first name and providing intimate details of family struggles reinforces the illusion of intimacy central to the star/audience relationship. Parsons’ item reinforces Keeler’s existing “good girl” image in the eyes of readers by championing Keeler as displaying, in her private life, the same family values likely held by her readership. This also serves the needs of the studio, as the “merging of screen roles and offscreen personality was central to studio starmaking,” and this item reinforced the good girl type characters Keeler typically played on screen (Gamson, 1994, p. 16). Stars are
just like us, but Parsons’ column also routinely plays up the extraordinary and glamorous lifestyles of Hollywood stars, allowing audiences to fantasize about the magic of Hollywood celebrity. On February 25, 1935, she notes:

all Hollywood is coming up for air after the week-end of races and the Mayfair: Hal Roach’s Mayfair party the largest in the history of the club: one hundred and twenty sat down at his table and at the last minute he was trying to get reservations for more: but even King George couldn’t have persuaded the committee to increase the seating arrangements: stars, members of the front rank who forgot to order tables were without any luck. Marion Davies looking lovely in a filmy black gown a guest at the Roach party (p. 11).

Using a simple and chatty prose to share these intimate details, Parsons brings Hollywood to life and allows the reader to accompany her through the private world of Hollywood celebrities.

The true hallmark of her column is the way she combined the two perspectives, blurring the line between the public and private sides of the star’s life into one image while simultaneously offering judgment and commentary on this image. Though her earliest columns centered on stars as glamorous and untouchable idols, Barbas (2005) argues Louella’s rising popularity in the late 1920s and early 1930s was marked by a shift to a more realistic portrayal, and judgment, of the stars as real people with real problems who also happened to be famous. She says “no longer monogamous homebodies or prim jeweled divas entertaining genteelly in their mansions, actors now loved and lost, married and divorced, and became generally more human” (p. 138). By framing stars as ‘just folks’ whose lives and, presumably, values are ultimately similar to those of the reader, Louella’s columns policed larger social ideals through her judgement of the private and professional lives of the stars. Her February 23 1935 column provides an illustrative example of this approach:
Ann Harding, in the Orient trying to forget the bitter last few months, when she had to fight so valiantly for possession of her little daughter, Jane Bannister, had a cablegram summoning her back to Hollywood. That cablegram invites her to play the lead in Edmund Goulding’s screen drama, “The Flame Within.” Eddie, whose heart it set on this play, has interviewed something like fifteen well known stars for the role and he is pleased that Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer has finally agreed with him on Miss Harding. Franchot Tone plays opposite her (p. 9).

Here, Parsons valorizes Harding’s private life struggles as a mother and, by connecting it to Harding’s success in landing a new screen role, frames her as a star deserving of her success and our attention. Harding is a mother, a role with which many of Parsons’ readers can identify, and a willing and talented professional actress, both of which support her deserved fame.

Parsons’ revelation and discussion of the private lives of stars did not always celebrate stars as role models and she often used her column to critique stars both professionally and personally. She was certainly not above harsh criticism of those stars she felt were not living up to their end of the fame bargain by proving themselves worthy of the public’s attention. Though celebrating the glamour of stardom, she also “suggested that stars paid a heavy emotional toll for their fame,” particularly those stars “who ‘went Hollywood,’ who forgot their true identities” and values (Barbas, 2005, p. 139). She reinforced dominant social stereotypes, particularly about gender and sexuality, through her judgment of the personal and professional lives of celebrities who she felt betrayed their fans and sullied their claims to deserved fame by losing sight of “the virtues of personal growth and hard work” (ibid). Barbas says, “‘verbal spankings’ were administered to actresses who, according to Louella, showed too much will and sexual independence and thus threatened their careers” (p. 141). But this sort of overt negativity was not common, and was usually reserved for stars who she felt had slighted
her by refusing interviews or giving information to a rival columnist, and her wrath had the potential to damage their relationship with the studio and with the general public.

My sample includes only a few overtly negative attacks on celebrities, such as the February 4, 1935 “Snapshot” item in Parsons’ column, “Mary Brian plans to take her dance act on the road for a year: what about Dick Powell and their expected marriage?” Brian is here openly critiqued for putting her career ahead of marriage (p. 4). Overall, my sample revealed Parsons’ loving and celebratory approach to celebrity culture. However, as Barbas notes, Parsons was capable of vicious attacks. She says, “throughout the 1930s, Louella maintained feuds with several well-known producers and actors, whom she routinely lambasted in the column” (p. 140). The aforementioned comment about Marlene Dietrich’s flagging career is an example of such an on-going feud that had a negative impact on audiences’ perception of a star. Those sorts of blatant comments about her troubles with the studio were consistently reinforced in other less obvious jabs at the actress, thus promoting an overall framing of Dietrich as an ungrateful and therefore unworthy star. On February 28th, 1935 Parsons says:

Marlene Dietrich, who has been as coy as an ingénue over her Paramount contract, yesterday put her name on the coveted piece of paper. However, Madame Dietrich will not get Ernst Lubitsch as her director. Neither will she have Josef von Sternberg, but Ernst Lubitsch will endeavor to get her a capable director, for, as all the world knows, it’s highly important that she get a good picture (p. 15).

Such negative framings of celebrities are accomplished not through the items themselves, as certainly Dietrich signing a new contract seems to be a positive moment in the construction and maintenance of celebrity. But through Parson’s claim that “it is highly important she get a good picture,” the negative reading of Dietrich remains the preferred one.
As Louella was closely tied to the studios for access to the stars, such critiques often served to reinforce the economic interests of the studios as well as the conservative social norms of the general public. During the studio system, all aspects of a star’s public image were carefully controlled by the studio, and those who defied such control, such as Dietrich and her unwillingness to sign a contract, were swiftly attacked. Sometimes this criticism was veiled, such as when she suggests in her February 14, 1935 column that:

> even if Gloria Stuart, one of Hollywood’s prettiest blondes, has put on as much weight as her friends say, she needn’t bother to reduce for her next picture. She will play Lillian Russell in ‘Diamond Jim Brady’ with Edward Arnold…Lillian Russell, who was so beautiful at the age of sixty that young girls envied her, never tried to reduce (p. 17).

Stuart’s reported weight gain, as reported by her “friends,” apparently inappropriate for “one of Hollywood’s prettiest blondes,” is acceptable only in the context of this specific role and, presumably, should be lost in order to earn future roles. Interestingly, however, Louella’s praise of Lillian Russell’s (and, by extension, Stuart’s) full figured beauty reflects, perhaps, a moment of critique of contemporary standards of feminine beauty and body image forwarded by Hollywood. Louella herself was constantly dieting and certainly understood the pressures of the Hollywood standard of beauty (Eells, 1972, p. 142). Nevertheless, she also knew comments about a female star’s weight could have real repercussions on future roles. Barbas (2005) quotes a 1933 column in which Louella opines that “perhaps if Miss [Jeannette] MacDonald intends to remain on the screen, she should guard her weight as carefully as she does her voice” (p. 141). Despite a potential moment of ideological rupture, Louella’s columns generally reinforced the conservative norms of femininity that served the economic and political interests of the Hollywood studios.
Parson’s chatty and intimate style made readers feel a part of the Hollywood scene as she saw it, using this sense of familiarity with her readers to construct or deconstruct stars. She ends every column with the phrase “that’s all for today. See you tomorrow!” emphasizing that for all her insider access to Hollywood celebrities, her real alliance is to an ongoing conversation with her audience about their shared love of Hollywood celebrity culture. At the same time, her power and access to celebrity remains rooted in her relationship with the studio establishment and her columns, even when negative, can be understood as upholding their interests. This is in stark contrast to her contemporary, Walter Winchell, whose column focused on gossip as a way to bring down the powerful elites rather than build them up and whose power was rooted in his insolence towards, rather than respect for, celebrity culture. Parsons and Winchell effectively operated as two sides of the gossip media coin, with each contributing a distinct but critical perspective on celebrity that shaped modern celebrity gossip media.

**Walter Winchell: “On Broadway” and Beyond**

Beginning his career as a daily columnist at *The New York Graphic* in 1924, Winchell was an instant success. His column was nationally syndicated in the fall of 1928 and he moved to *The New York Mirror* in 1929 (Gabler, 1994). Though Walter Winchell is considered by many to be the originator of the modern celebrity gossip column, his column did not focus exclusively on Hollywood, nor, for that matter, exclusively on entertainment celebrity the way Parsons’ did. Gabler (1994) says, “he worked hard to fill the column’s insatiable maw, or more accurately, its maws, since the format changed each day and no single type of material would satisfy them all” (p. 107). Based in New York City, Winchell’s column, “On Broadway,” regularly included items
about the world of theater and music as well as Hollywood, anecdotes of city life, gags, jokes, and details the lives of the political elite. Winchell’s column does serve a publicity role, as, like Parsons, he does include at least some information about the latest project from a celebrity, particularly theater actors, emphasizing their talent and public performances as the core of their image. These items highlighted a new play or song that Winchell enjoyed or a film he is anticipating, and were likely tips from press agents printed in exchange for some other juicier item. But the majority of Winchell’s items focused on the private side of celebrities’ lives, using his populist perspective to judge the lives of the rich and famous. By bringing celebrities’ private lives and private scandals into the public’s purview, Winchell indelibly changed the audience’s relationship to celebrity culture.

Winchell maintains his authority across these worlds by speaking as the “voice of the people,” revealing the seedy underbelly of so-called “elite” society and critiquing the idea that those famous individuals covered in his column are better than the everyday American. Winchell’s column, unlike Parson’s, engages a populist tone characterized by the promotion of disidentification with celebrities and other elites that championed the moral superiority of the lives of everyday citizens rather than holding up celebrity culture as a site of aspiration. This populist tone, often expressed through biting humor, permeated all aspects of his column, but was particularly obvious in his coverage of Hollywood. On February 12, 1935, he writes:
Hollywood has a romance right under its Durante\(^{10}\) that it will never film…A director persuaded his wife, who is suing him for divorce, to name an extra girl as co-respondent, instead of naming the well known lady who is guilty of DuBarrying\(^{11}\) him…The director has promised the extra girl a good part in a picture if she agrees to the disgrace…And then Will Hays will ban her! (p. 10).

Though he does not name the players, this item alleges that behind the scenes, this director, as part of the Hollywood elite, is not just an adulterer, but also a morally bankrupt individual willing to exploit his own power in order to protect himself. In contrast to Parsons’ celebration of and collusion with the Hollywood system, Winchell explicitly reveals their willingness to cover up scandals for economic gain. The populist tone of his columns promoted disidentification with Hollywood and its suspect values.

He frequently highlighted items about the average American as a means to illustrate that it is the everyday person, not the celebrity or elite politician, who is truly worthy of our adulation. For example, in his column from February 11, 1935, Winchell exclaims, “oh, Mayor LaGuardia! Orchids to Shield 5751 at Spring and 6\(^{th}\) Sts., who spreads sand on the streets so children can cross in safety to school” (p. 10). Offering verbal “orchids” is Winchell’s way of honoring individuals in his column, with verbal “scallions” serving the opposite purpose. This reflects his conversational and slang-filled writing style, an element which will be addressed in more detail below. This offering to the nameless police officer is in direct contrast to earlier items in the same column that frame elites as frivolous and pathetic:

\(^{10}\) “Durante” is a reference to actor Jimmy Durante whose large nose was one of his most distinctive and well known features.

\(^{11}\) “DuBarrying” is a reference to Madame Du Barry who was mistress to Louis XV and thus alludes to adulterous behavior.
The legend is that J. Widener not only cut off his daughter for marrying Alex Wichfeld a few seasons ago, but they aren’t even on speaking terms... What gigolo’s wife is suing a socially listed Mrs. for 200 Gs alienation?... King George’s Jubilee in May will cost the nation a million smackers, unemployed and all (ibid).

In contrast to his praise for the police officer who looks out for the well being of children, Winchell chastises the values of the elites by mocking them, reinforcing a populist tone of his column. Readers are given the insider view of the world of the rich and famous, but without the sense of reverence often evident in Parson’s columns.

Celebrities could be celebrated as positive role models when they adhered to the average American’s values. For example, on February 5, 1935, he calls for:

as many scallions as you can throw in a month at the bosses of a Philly spot, who discharged a performer named George Scotti for ‘missing’ a performance...They knew all the time why he missed it. He played two charity affairs held for the President’s birthday parties in the vicinity...That is the height of low dealing—firing a fellow for helping to make the affairs for the infantile paralysis suffers a success (p. 10).

Scotti is praised for his support of the charity, while the bosses are ridiculed for valuing personal profit over helping children. Similarly, marriages and births were typically treated as positive news, perhaps as a reflection that some celebrities possessed legitimate family values. Yet even when praising celebrities, he still maintained a more cutting commentary than Parsons. For example, on February 23, 1935, he writes:

they call it irony: Bramwell Fletcher, who just married Helen Chandler, will spend his honeymoon with her poring over a new play manuscript...They will be featured in it. The plot is based on the tribulations of a newly-wedded pair. The curtain rises on the two scrapping fiercely...They claim they don’t know how to quarrel! (p. 10).

Winchell’s mocking tone about a couple who “claim they don’t know how to quarrel” is in stark contrast to Parsons’ loving and congratulatory commentary on the same item.

Furthermore, whereas Parsons’ coverage of the Fletcher/Chandler marriage centered on
the fact that she herself was invited, but unable to attend, Winchell’s joke demonstrates that while he clearly has insider access to such information, he does not let it cloud his view of elites.

As the voice of the people, Winchell more often set up celebrities as examples of excess and improper behavior, in sharp contrast to the American values he championed in the everyday person. In his February 25, 1935 column, he notes:

Henry Clive and the heart for so many years, Sonia Karlov, have liquidated for the tenth time…Sally Rand kicked a fireman in the kisser backstage of a local theater ‘for staring that way,’ she screamed…Agnes Franey of the ‘Thumbs Up’ charm choir, will marry another bundle of money from Park Ave, when her final decree from Logan Metcalf arrives any moment (p. 10).

His critiques are not particularly subtle and reinforce the idea that fame, wealth and power are a poor substitute for moral values embodied by the everyday Americans he champions.

Winchell goes beyond critiquing moral values and behaviors to expose celebrity as a media fabrication, thus reaffirming the authenticity of the values he champions and bolstering his own power as a media producer in creating and circulating the celebrity image. This is central to a critique of Carole Lombard on February 12, 1935 in which Winchell frames her as an ungrateful star who has forgotten that the media is responsible for maintaining her fame. He relates the following story:

if anyone thinks the news photographer is a lowly and unimportant part of the newspaper business, he might change his mind…The case of Carole Lombard is an illustration…When Miss Lombard came to the city recently some of the lens boys met her at the train…The complaint, to hear it, is that the cinemadonna ritzed them…Whether or not it is important when a news photogger is ritzed, isn’t the point…The point is that they wield a terrific power, so far as the ladies are concerned…The aggrieved boys put the ‘zing’ on Miss Lombard—and after the word was passed she was photo’d at the cafes in worst possible angles and poses—until she looked veddy ‘lahzay’…And she wondered why (p. 10).
Lombard “ritzed” or snubbed the photographers by refusing to pose for pictures. Winchell reads this as an example of haughty elite behavior from a star who fails to recognize the efforts of others in constructing her fame. By recognizing the work of the photographers in constructing the star image, Winchell reveals the star as a fabrication, and, in this case, an individual who, behind that fabrication, is unworthy of our adulation.

His chatty and cutting tone permeated the entire column, always mocking the celebrity or public figure while simultaneously offering the latest information on his or her private life.

Key to his populist tone is the fact that Winchell, like Parsons, wrote his column in the first-person, creating a sort of conversation between the reader and the columnist. But, as evidenced in the previous examples, his style was much choppier and more fast-paced than Parson’s, giving the reader a sense of urgency and relying on quick bits of information rather than lengthy descriptions and narratives. Each column is divided into a series of paragraphs, some as short as one or two sentences divided by ellipses:

*Men About Town*: Leslie Howard, the play-actor and John Mason Brown, the play critic, listed as speakers at the Drama League—dining with their heart-thumps at the Rainbow Room instead…R.H. Lyman, who edited The World Almanac, who pauses to say: “It is the Almanac, not the editor that should be mentioned,” after we apologized for overlooking his name in the column recently about that grand tome (Winchell, February 17, 1935, p. 10).

This frenetic writing style created a sense of excitement that gave readers the impression of getting the very latest celebrity gossip, but he also supplemented juicier items with more detail and longer commentary. Unlike the typical tabloid article format which mimics a more traditional journalistic style, the blogger follows this style in the creation of short posts with breaking news supplemented with longer commentary on a juicier
item. Perhaps Winchell’s most important contribution to the gossip genre is his use of vivid and slang-filled prose. Gabler (1994) says:

couples didn’t get married in Winchell’s column; they were ‘welded,’ ‘lohengrinned,’ ‘Adam-and-Eving it.’ They didn’t have fun; they ‘made whooppee!’ They didn’t have babies; they had ‘blessed events.’ And when they got divorced, they were ‘Reno-vated’ or ‘phffft!’ Movies were ‘moom pitchers’ and movie lovers were ‘cinemaddicts.’ Legs were ‘shafts.’ Passion was ‘pash.’ Debutantes were ‘debutramps.’ Jews were ‘Joosh’ (p. xii).

As evident in all previous examples from his column, Winchell’s “slanguage” was central to his writing style and breezy approach to celebrity culture. While most bloggers do not use as much or the same slanguage as Winchell, blog posts certainly engage slang and conversational tones in comparison to the more objective tone of tabloid magazines. It is doubtful that bloggers are consciously trying to emulate Winchell’s style, but the fact that this sort of slang filled prose continues to influence gossip writing speaks to the importance of his column in shaping American journalism.

Winchell’s populist tone also afforded him a greater influence on mass culture and the public sphere, indicating the broader reach of celebrity journalism. Maintaining an editorial commentary in his columns, his coverage of events such as the Lindberg kidnapping case, Hitler’s rise to power and attempts to dominate Europe, and the Red Scare hunt for Communists in America had a profound influence on public opinion of these events (Gabler, 1994). In the case of the 1935 trial of Bruno Hauptmann, the man accused of kidnapping the Lindbergh’s infant son, Winchell devoted “virtually all of his columns” to the case and the events leading up to the trial, inserting himself into the proceedings to the point where prospective jurors were asked if they read Winchell’s column or listened to his radio broadcast in order to ensure their impartiality (ibid, p. 209). Through his columns, Winchell demonized Hauptmann in the public eye,
essentially convicting him in the court of public opinion well before the jury delivered their verdict (ibid). Thus, his influence on public opinion moved beyond Hollywood gossip, using the trial to comment on contemporary society, immigrants, and the threat of fascism.

Winchell’s ability to influence political and cultural events outside the scope of celebrity culture speaks to the power his column afforded him as a spokesperson for the common man. Furthermore, it draws attention to the ways in which celebrity culture and celebrity media are increasingly important sites of social and political meaning making and, more importantly, that gossip media is not always just fluff and can have wider impact on American culture. More recently, the effects of this shift can be seen in the 2009 scandal surrounding Miss USA contestant Carrie Prejean and blogger Perez Hilton. In this case, Hilton, a judge at the Miss USA pageant in April 2009, a role which speaks to his popularity as a cultural figure, asked Prejean (Miss California) whether or not gay marriage should be legalized in the United States. She “stunned judges and millions of viewers by saying she didn’t believe in gay marriage” (Goodwin, 2009, para. 4). While her fumbling answer that her beliefs were just “how I was raised” and that Americans have the opportunity to choose between gay marriage or “opposite marriage” was certainly ripe for mocking, blogger/judge Hilton took to his blog after the show to lambaste Prejean for her answer, calling her, among other things, a “dumb bitch” and suggesting he would have “snatched that crown off her head” should she have been named as the winner (ibid; Hilton, 2009). The ensuing media circus around “the blogger and the beauty queen” was fed, in part, by Hilton’s continuing coverage of the event and the fallout on his own blog. Hilton, like Winchell, used his blog to bring attention to his
point of view on contemporary social issues that are not necessarily directly related to celebrity culture. That both men have been criticized for their somewhat glib and self-serving approach to a serious issue further illustrates the connections between the gossip column and the gossip blog and their influences on mass culture.

**The Continued Influence of Gossip Columnists**

Columnists used the public fascination with gossip to shape public opinion about Hollywood and celebrity culture in unprecedented ways. By bringing the private side into the public eye, the audience’s relationship with celebrity was indelibly changed. Stars were no longer confined to the silver screen and their images were “the principle source of motive power in putting across ideas of every kind—social, political, aesthetic, and moral” (Schickel, 1985, p. vii). Parsons’ close relationship with the studios led her to generally hold up stars as shining examples of the social rewards for hard work and perseverance. Colluding with the studios to cover up the more salacious scandals of the stars, Parsons helped rehabilitate Hollywood’s seedy image, making its products (both films and stars) into wholesome and moral forms of entertainment. Winchell, on the other hand, was less concerned with protecting Hollywood’s interests and, while he certainly received tips and stories from press agents and other industry workers, he did not have the close relationship with the studios enjoyed by Parsons. But this outsider perspective was key to his overall approach to gossip, namely as the voice of the people not the servant of the industry. Gabler (1994) says:
he became an opinion-maker largely because he understood, as no one else then seemed to, the bitter subtext of the gossip he purveyed. Having grown up in poverty himself, attention-starved and nursing deep resentments against his social betters, he understood that gossip, far beyond its basic attraction as journalistic voyeurism, was a weapon of empowerment for the reader and listener. Invading the lives of the famous and revealing their secrets brought them to heel. It humanized them, and in humanizing them demonstrated that they were no better than we and in many cases worse (p. xiii).

As “the voice of the disenchanted and the disenfranchised,” Winchell tore down the same glamorous façade of and sense of reverence for Hollywood that Parsons so lovingly built up (ibid). This is not to suggest that Winchell’s columns always chastised celebrity excesses and Parson’s always forgave them in the name of idolization, rather than the general distinction between these two columnists approach is one of identification (Parsons) versus disidentification (Winchell).

This distinction continues to shape celebrity media, as both magazines and blogs can be distinguished by their approach to celebrity culture and their alignment with the interests of the industry. The role of the tabloid as interloper in the entertainment-news media, as will be explored in more detail below, is to present stories “with an occasional coating of skepticism” and offer photos that “can be used to set up celebrities as objects of ridicule as well as admiration”(Turner, 2004, p. 73). Similarly, as discussed in chapter three, blogs like Pop Sugar tend to speak lovingly of celebrities, emphasizing that behind the façade of glamour, stars are “just like us.” Other sites, like WWTDD explicitly seek to break down the celebrity façade and reveal the ridiculousness of the media system that idolizes these individuals. Many bloggers, such as Perez Hilton, straddle this line, lavishing praise on those celebrities he likes and openly mocking those he does not. Furthermore, for blogs like YBF and Jezebel that have an explicit ideological perspective, this balance between identification and disidentification helps the blogger express her
particular perspective on celebrity gossip. For all the blogs in my sample, the thinly veiled bias that characterizes blog writing rejects strict objectivity and echoes Parsons and Winchell’s interpretive and gossip-oriented style approach to covering celebrity culture.

**Celebrity Gossip and Ideology: The Black Press and Celebrity Gossip**

YBF, in particular, creates a specifically African American niche within celebrity gossip blogs by foregrounding identification with black stars over identification with white celebrity culture. This ideological perspective and approach to celebrity gossip is part of a larger history of the independent black press as media source created by and for the black community as an alternative to white or mainstream media. Though black audiences certainly read columnists like Winchell and Parsons and were also fans of white stars, the role of the black press in creating a uniquely black celebrity culture is an important part of the history of celebrity gossip media. Anna Everett (2001) argues the advent of independent black press and the rise of the African American spectator in the early twentieth century allowed black audiences to reject “discomfited spectatorship generated by the displacement of their visual pleasure onto white cinematic heroes and heroines” and instead “indulge their escapist fantasies and ego gratifications” through a celebrity culture that spoke to their specific cultural experiences as African Americans (2001, p. 110). The coverage of celebrity culture in the black press addressed the exclusion of blackness from mainstream popular culture by celebrating black actors, actresses, and other cultural producers using the same sort of discourses available in mainstream celebrity culture, as well as foregrounding the unique culture of the black community. Stories about black participation in the business of filmmaking, as well as
details of the private lives of black stars, were prominent features of the celebrity gossip in the black press. These sorts of stories inserted black culture into the same discourses that shaped mainstream celebrity gossip media and used these public figures as examples of the vibrant and respectable black culture excluded by mainstream culture (Everett, 2001). More importantly, the independent black press used coverage of black celebrity culture as a means to challenge racist imperatives of mainstream popular culture and to envision a uniquely black cultural experience.

Black celebrity media encouraged identification with black stars whose on- and off-screen personas represented positive aspects of black culture and were individuals “in whom the community can take great pride” (Everett, 2001, p. 164). Everett notes coverage of early black cinema star Edna Morton compared her glamorous and beautiful image to that of [white silent film star] Mary Pickford as a means to “signify the beautiful black female body long hidden from America’s general film audiences” but grounded that image in a story of “accessibility” and “dignity” that promised a bright future for positive images of black celebrity for audiences hungry for more than Hollywood stereotypes (2001, p. 162). Stars like Morton were celebrated by the black press for their blackness, not for their willingness to acquiesce to white standards of beauty or to relegate themselves to stereotypes. At the same time, the black press recognized that black stars (and black audiences) remained tied to mainstream Hollywood standards that marginalized this positive version of blackness, and often used gossip to reclaim a positive black identity. For example, Lincoln Perry, the actor best known for his “Stepin Fetchit” character that embodied many negative black stereotypes, was portrayed in the black celebrity press as an intelligent and shrewd business man whose performance as
Stepin Fetchit brought him wealth and happiness. Furthermore, in his private life, the “real” Perry was celebrated as an honest and virtuous black man who was a positive role model for black audiences, despite his stereotypical character (ibid, p. 163-165). His image was reclaimed by black culture as positive through identification with his off-screen persona. Thus, identification with black stars was closely tied to goals of racial uplift and the promotion of positive and community-defined black role models.

However, the black celebrity media also encouraged dis-identification with those black stars who did not uphold these goals. For example, Everett details how black actress Louise Beavers was taken to task by Pittsburgh Courier in 1934 as a “racial sellout” who put her “individual interests” above those of the community because she willingly reproduced negative black stereotypes in films that naturalized real life racism and, more problematically, openly supported the Hollywood studio system that continued to marginalize black actors (2001, pp. 209-210). By moving away from the cultural values and goals of the African American community, Beavers undermined the goal of equality as well as the goal of creating a black culture freed from racist white stereotypes. Thus, at this particular moment in her career, audiences were encouraged by the black celebrity press to dis-identify with Beavers because she did not embody the values of black culture. This stance of celebrating a uniquely black celebrity culture as well as defining that culture by chastising those who do not uphold its values and goals remains central to the style and content of YBF. Natasha’s coverage of black celebrity culture seeks to address the exclusion of black celebrities on the mainstream sites, but, more importantly, also works to define a positive vision of black culture for audiences through identification and dis-identification with black stars.
Celebrity Gossip and “Voice”

No matter what their ideological perspective, the idea that one person is responsible for the content, tone and style of the gossip is perhaps the clearest connection between the blogs and gossip columns of the Golden Age of Hollywood. As gossip texts, blogs represent a return to the more conversational style of the original gossip columnists, eschewing journalistic objectivity claimed by gossip magazines in favor of more direct commentary and judgment typical of gossip talk. All the blogs in my sample use the singular, first-person voice, use of “slanguage” and other colloquial and familiar forms of speech, and sense of insider access as a means to support their ideological framework, just as Winchell and Parsons did in their columns. This more conversational tone, I suggest, is key to their popularity with new media audiences who are encouraged to participate in the conversation through comments sections.

However, it is important to note that foregrounding of the individual voice as center of the column or blog is often an illusion specifically constructed, I suggest, to reflect a more one-on-one conversational engagement for the reader. Both Winchell and Parsons not only relied on press agents for information, but had their own teams of reporters and ghostwriters who contributed to the column (Eells, 1972; Gabler, 1994; Barbas, 2005). These writers were not typically given credit in the column itself, but were essential to its creation. Positioning the columnist as the primary voice, even if it is an illusion, nevertheless creates the sense of direct conversation between the columnist and the audience that characterized the genre. Though some bloggers, like Trent Vanegas of Pink is the New Blog, do write all their own content, they certainly rely on
help from outside sources to secure content for their blogs. Even group blogs, like Jezebel, that feature a team of editors responsible for posting content still rely on a first-person perspective and each editor has a distinct personality, but still uphold the blog’s overall feminist approach to celebrity culture. As discussed in chapter three, this is a crucial element of the celebrity gossip blog, as the blogger’s commentary and specific perspective on celebrity culture draw audiences to the blog.

The illusion of the individual author continues to be perpetuated on gossip blogs, as the idea of consistent style and tone are central to drawing readers to the blog. Recently, reports have surfaced on other gossip-oriented blogs that Perez Hilton no longer writes any of the content on his site, limiting his actual contributions to occasional video blogs (Perl-Raver, 2009). In June 2009, Latino-focused celebrity gossip blog Guanabee.com claimed to have multiple “exclusive” sources who claim to have ghostwritten for Perez as far back as 2006, though none of them were willing to be named in a story. In order to verify these claims, Guanabee.com consulted a handwriting expert to compare a sample of writing from PerezHilton.com (taken from the handwritten comments on photos that are a trademark of his site) to a laptop autographed by Perez. The expert concluded that while most of the content was “probably” written by the same

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12 Celebrity gossip blogs, like many blogs, act as a filter for existing web content in which the blogger posts links from other sources, filtering celebrity content according to his or her point of view and supplementing those links with commentary. This is a crucial difference from the columnists like Winchell and Parsons who strove to bring original information to the reader. Since bloggers do not generally consider themselves journalists, as the columnists did, the true content of the blog is the commentary rather than the gossip items themselves. As I will argue in more detail in chapter five, readers are drawn to a blog more for the particular perspective on celebrity culture offered by a blogger in his or her commentary rather than the promise of exclusive information.
individual, there were some variations that indicated at least one additional content author (Cesares, 2009).

Publicly, Perez maintains that he writes his own content, though admitted in a May 28 *Time* magazine video interview that he has “finally hired some help” without specifically addressing what these assistants do (Keengan, 2009). However, Gawker.com uncovered legal documents related to an ongoing lawsuit between Perez and gossip blogger Jonathan Lewandowski (who blogs under the name Jonathan Jaxson) that claims Perez violated a settlement by continuing to mention Lewandowski on PerezHilton.com. In these documents, Perez’s attorney claims the post in question was written by Perez’s sister, Barbara Lavandiera, thus disclosing the fact that Perez is not responsible for all content on his blog (Tate, 2009). Nevertheless, the site retains the same style and approach, keeping the singular voice that initially drew audiences to the site. I suggest this is another tie between the blogger and the columnist, as readers turned to Winchell and Parsons for their style as much as their information. But blogs are not simply online gossip columns, and draw important stylistic elements from their more immediate predecessors, the celebrity tabloid.

**Tabloids and the Intervention of the Autonomous Outlier**

The sensationalistic and scandal-oriented reporting commonly associated with tabloid and celebrity journalism grew out of the British penny-press tradition and its journalistic preoccupation with graphic true crime reporting aimed at immigrant and working class audiences (Bird, 1992; Emery, Emery, & Roberts, 2000). As these audiences were among the least literate members of society, the papers, in contrast to other mass market newspapers of the time, incorporated a “more direct news style, using
vivid active language and colloquialisms, and breaking up stories into more manageable paragraphs” and used illustrations in addition to the text (Bird, 1992, p. 13). While these penny press style newspapers had a profound influence on early American mass media, a new wave of sensationalistic journalism known as “interpretive journalism” emerged in America during the 1920s, a decade “marked by a rapid rise in emphasis on techniques of interpretive reporting, not only in the newspaper field but also in magazine publishing and broadcasting (Emery, Emery, & Roberts, 2000, p. 281). Moving away from the strict objectivity of turn-of-the-century journalism that

consisted of sticking to a factual account of what had been said or done, reporters of all types began to focus on the ‘why’ of a story, placing events in proper context if truth was really to be served (ibid, p. 311).

This allowed writers to maintain journalistic standards while still offering a specific perspective on a story in the name of context, a position central to the tabloid reporting.

Tabloid newspapers such as *The New York Daily Graphic* and *The New York Mirror*, followed in the footsteps of British tabloid predecessors *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Daily Mail* by combining this interpretive journalism with extensive use of photography to anchor the context and events discussed in stories (Emery, Emery, & Roberts, 2000). That Winchell’s commentary-laden column originated in these early American tabloids is further evidence of the overall shift to interpretive journalism in mass media. Winchell’s column is more extreme in its emphasis on interpretation, despite his claim to uphold journalistic standards. Yet there remain key differences between his reporting style and that of the tabloids. Most crucially, tabloids distinguished themselves from other forms of journalism by relying heavily on
illustrations and photographs, laying “another foundation stone” for the tabloids and other forms of celebrity media familiar to modern audiences (Bird, 1992, p. 16).

Drawing on this history, Bird (1992) suggests the term “tabloid” in contemporary media has come to signify a paper “whose stock in trade is the human-interest, graphically told story, heavy on pictures and short pithy, highly stereotyped prose” (p. 8). Indeed, the use of photos and illustrations became so widespread “that captions began to replace longer textual reportage,” solidifying the visual as central to the tabloid format (Ponce de Leon, 2002, p. 63). But Bird’s (1992) definition centers on the supermarket tabloids, like *The National Enquirer*, which “serves up a mixture of celebrity gossip, human-interest features…stories about occult and psychic phenomena, UFOs and so on” indicating that celebrity news is important, but not central, to these media forms (p. 8). Several authors point out that celebrity news and gossip quickly became a regular feature of virtually every American newspaper and mass-market magazine as part of an increasing emphasis on human-interest stories in the twentieth century (Bird, 1992; Emery, Emery, & Roberts, 2000; Ponce de Leon, 2002; Turner, 2004). The public demand for celebrity content led to the “development of what became a new genre of mass-market magazine, the celebrity gossip weekly,” a form devoted exclusively to celebrity news, gossip and lifestyles (Turner, 2004, pp. 72-3). Even within this media category, there exist numerous approaches to celebrity culture, but all include celebrity in every facet of content.

**Tabloids and Celebrity Journalism**

As previously discussed, some magazines, such as *Vanity Fair*, are “tightly articulated to the industry and its promotional needs” in order to maintain “a reliable
supply of pictures and stories” from the celebrity, and thus stay away from the more scandalous and salacious celebrity gossip (Turner, 2004, p. 73). Johansson (2006) distinguishes the tabloid or gossip press coverage of celebrity culture from the more “legitimate” celebrity media in terms of their reverence, or lack thereof, towards their celebrity subject. Tabloids, she argues, focus “on ‘exposés’ of details the celebrity would like to remain unknown—something that is often the result of invasive journalistic methods such as cheque-book journalism and paparazzi coverage,” echoing the sensationalistic and scandal-oriented stories of the early tabloids (p. 344).

Existing as autonomous outliers who remain economically tied to celebrity culture, yet refuse to submit to the control of the entertainment industry, tabloids “seem paradoxically not above a lie and yet somehow ‘closer to the truth’ than other journalism”(Brauer & Shields, 1999, p. 8). Unlike legitimate media’s formulaic and often pandering coverage of celebrities, tabloids promise to “tell readers the truth…[and] uncover what had been hidden about the stars” in these other industry-controlled sources (Desjardins, 2001, p. 214, emphasis in original). Part of this appeal to the truth can be seen in the tabloids purported use of journalistic techniques and objectivity as a means to uncover the truth the industry tries to hide from audiences. Through their emphasis on interpretive journalism and use of visual images, these autonomous outliers to the celebrity production circuit retain ties to the broader category of “tabloid” as defined by Bird. My own use of the term tabloid reflects this connection, but recognizes these magazines are dedicated solely to celebrity content from an “unauthorized” perspective.

Though celebrity tabloids are rarely held up as paragons of journalistic integrity, they do retain a certain adherence to interpretive journalism and its standards of
objectivity, particularly through the use of attributed quotes, outside sources, and an apparent refusal to kowtow to industry demands in exchange for access to celebrities. However, Bird (1992) points out that these forms still moralize in their reporting, but such comments are less overt and tend to come from quoted sources rather than the writer him or herself (pp. 92-7). Under the standards of journalistic objectivity, a “story is ‘accurate’ if it faithfully reports what was said or written by sources,” thus allowing tabloids to claim what is written as accurate, provided it has a source, without having to take personal responsibility for the content. This is distinct from the gossip columnists whose personal opinion more blatantly shaped their reporting of the latest celebrity gossip (ibid, pp. 92-3). Despite the claim that “tabloids are often characterized by distorted quotes, pure fabrication of information and sources, absence of any balancing point of view, and the use of paid tipsters and informants,” the process and rhetorical style of reporting is similar to the “mainstream” newspapers (ibid, p. 102). In other words, the moralizing and editorializing is couched within a claim to objectivity and interpretive journalism, allowing the audience to come to their own conclusions based on the brief text and, more significantly, from the photographs that dominate the layout.

Indeed, as Bird concludes, in terms of style and technique, “the line separating [tabloids] from the ‘real newspapers is not as clear-cut” as their detractors would like to believe (p. 104). Likewise, I argue that the claim to journalistic objectivity is a fundamental difference between celebrity tabloids and gossip columnists and bloggers who foreground their own voice and perspective as part of their style. Tabloids still engage gossip as a form of communication, setting boundaries of what is socially acceptable and what is transgressive, but in a less direct way than the columnists and
bloggers. The tabloids present “facts” and images as evidence, rather than rely on the vivid rhetorical style of their text, to shape the meaning of the gossip and let audiences come to their own conclusions. But it is the way these facts and images are deployed that allows for the moralizing and judgment typical of gossip to emerge.

**Visual Images as “Objective” Evidence**

In modern tabloids, photographs, illustrations or other visual images, whether or the specific incident or not, serve to anchor the story and make it more real for readers by offering “proof” that the event or action occurred. Desjardins (2001) argues that the visual element is so important to the scandal narratives of tabloid magazines because it legitimizes their reporting by reminding the audience “that the story was the result of ‘on the scene’ reporting” (p. 211). Speaking specifically of *Confidential* magazine, she adds:

> most articles that did not have photos taken at the scene were accompanied by one or more ‘composite’ photos — photos that were taken at another scene, usually when the celebrity was caught off-guard, or that were doctored so that material from one photo would be combined with another (a trick of tabloid newspapers for many years). Together, these composite forms imputed that the celebrity had engaged in immoral or indecent conduct (ibid).

The contemporary celebrity-oriented glossies like *Us Weekly* and *Star* continue this format, using a mix of celebrity sanctioned photos and paparazzi pictures as the anchor to short articles with a chatty yet distanced tone. These magazines present “facts” for the reader, and though they may be skewed, are not typically editorialized in the way columnists and bloggers’ writings are. But it is the images that really let the reader inside the world of the celebrity and direct the overall tone of the story.

Paparazzi photographs of celebrities in their unguarded moments are presented to readers as evidence of the real person behind the celebrity façade, or at the very least, the
anchor for discussion and/or judgment of that celebrity adding to and drawing from existing knowledge about his or her image. Holmes and Redmond (2006b) argue:

this constant search for truth – even if it is a search for the ‘lies’ that hide behind the idealized mask of stardom and celebrification – is intensified in an age where new media technologies and new media formats have increased the range and nature of surveillance. Digital audio, video and stills photography, for example, have enabled bugging, filming, capturing the star or celebrity, to escalate to a stage where one can argue that there is no longer a ‘private’ realm that the famous person can retreat to, or a ‘mask’ that cannot be shown to be just that. Alternatively, such panoptic devices can be argued to be the very things that show how ‘real’ the star or celebrity is (p. 210).

That these photos are (at least ostensibly) unauthorized or ‘stolen’ images, rather than sanctioned promotional photos, adds to their sense of authenticity because they interrupt the circuit of controlled celebrity production. They offer candid moments of public visibility in which the celebrity performs quotidian or mundane tasks or, even better, is “off-guard, unkempt, unready” for the camera, offering the audience a penetrating view into the private side of the star they were not meant to see (Holmes, 2005). Unlike the columnists who often withheld information to bolster their power within the celebrity industry, tabloids value the revelation of private details over concealment, thus openly challenging the power of the industry to control the celebrity image. McLean (2001) suggests that in the contemporary celebrity media landscape in which revelation of private details is valorized over concealment, “the question is no longer whether scandals will occur but at what point they will be made public” (p. 5, emphasis in original).

Tabloids thus disrupt the industry control over the celebrity by offering the audience a different, scandal-oriented point of entry into its production and circulation.

While the unsanctioned photograph remains central to the tabloids’ disruptive power, the “truth” revealed by these images remains highly dependent upon the context
in which they are placed within the magazine. For example, a 1956 story in *On the QT*, a contemporary of *Confidential* and precursor to modern celebrity scandal magazines like *Us Weekly*, claimed that actress Maureen O’Hara engaged in a heavy make-out session with a boyfriend in the balcony of Grauman’s Chinese Theater. No photos of the alleged event or even O’Hara with her so-called “Latin American boyfriend” were used. Instead, the story was illustrated with “a photo of O’Hara taken elsewhere in which she seems to be adjusting the top button of her dress or blouse” as evidence that some sort of inappropriate behavior must have occurred (Desjardins, 2001, p. 212). The use of such unrelated photos actually bolsters the claims because:

they seemed to offer plausible chronologies for events that had a ring of truth about them because readers had probably encountered some aspect of them before in newspaper gossip columns, traditional fan magazines, other scandal magazines and tabloids, and even sometimes in feature stories of the mainstream press (ibid).

Here, the photograph of O’Hara creates its own facts, supporting the story of her transgression simply through its use in an article about the scandal.

Captions also work to shape the reader’s meaning making of the tabloid photograph. In an examination of the 1997 tribute to Princess Diana in *People*, Brauer and Shields (1999) describe how captions of photographs speak to existing ideologies and information about Diana, leading the reader to meanings that are not necessary signified by the photos themselves. They maintain that:

in a section called, ‘Inside the Palace’, over half of the 12 photographs detailing Diana’s married life with Charles are contradicted by the accompanying caption. For example, one shot taken at a 1985 polo match shows Charles and a smiling Diana greeting each other with a kiss. The caption cautions that while Charles ‘could be persuasively affectionate with Diana in public…Charles never gave up his longstanding friendship with Camilla Parker Bowles’ (p. 17).
Here, the caption calls up existing discourses about Diana’s public image, specifically her marital struggles, that are not actually apparent in the photos, in order to use them as validation of that truth. Photographs in tabloids rarely speak for themselves, but offer a glimpse of the private person that is then contextualized through existing knowledge and discourses about the specific celebrity image. However that framing is obfuscated by the overall appeal to journalistic objectivity and the notion of photographs as having a privileged relationship to truth.

Bird (1992) says, “the construction of celebrity personas depends on encouraging fans to believe they are getting the ‘truth’ about the individuals, and much of tabloid celebrity reporting helps in those constructions” (p. 154). But since they are not the only purveyors of the celebrity persona, tabloids are not so much revealing “truth” through their celebrity stories as a believability in the sense that they fit in with and contribute to established discourses of that star. Given the tabloids’ focus on scandal and sensationalism, these are often negative discourses, revealing what celebrities do not necessarily want public because they break down their carefully constructed and controlled façades. But this revelation strengthens the tabloids’ claim to truth because in breaking down the celebrity persona, they reinforce their distance from industry control.

This is a crucial distinction from the gossip columnists, whose use of photographs in their columns was much more sparing. Each Parsons columns in my sample did include some photographs, including frequent appearance of a headshot of Louella herself or, occasionally, of one of the stars mentioned in the column. But these are studio produced head shots not paparazzi or other candid or unauthorized photos. Furthermore, though the item that accompanies the photo may include some personal information, the
overall focus is on the star’s professional role. For example, her column on February 21, 1935 includes head shot of actor Richard Allen. The accompanying paragraph reveals Allen will replace actor Jack Holt in the new James Cagney film, a purely professional item. The paragraph also notes that actor Alan Hale who “has been laid up with the flu and has been very sick for two weeks” was drenched with a hose as firefighters put out a blaze at the apartments next to his home (p. 15). This personal information has no accompanying visual image, nor is there any image of Hale either in his professional role or during his illness. It is unclear how Parsons decided which photos to include, but given that they generally accompany positive news of professional activities, they are likely a concession to the studios in exchange for other information. These photos are thus largely superfluous. They do not add to the gossip and, given that most items have no photo attached, do not detract from it either. None of the Winchell columns in my sample included any visual images, only text.

It is important to note that the technology was available to include photos or other images in the columns, as their magazine contemporaries certainly used them at this time and the columns themselves are surrounded by advertisements and other news stories that contain visual images. Thus, the lack of photos, or at least of unauthorized photos, appears to be a conscious choice by the columnist and/or the publisher. Instead of using visual images as evidence or to anchor their reading of a celebrity gossip item, Winchell and Parsons relied on vivid language and their authority as insiders to celebrity culture to give support to their gossip. The tabloids expanded celebrity journalism by using images to anchor their written text, thus moving away from the vivid and personal writing style that characterized the gossip columns.
Columns, Tabloids, and Blogs

My goal in this chapter has been to draw attention to the historical predecessors of the gossip blog in order to locate “new” media gossip forms within this spectrum. The history of celebrity gossip has not been widely studied, and I argue such a perspective broadens our understanding of that media form. Celebrity gossip blogs engage the technological advances of new media to take celebrity gossip in new directions, reshaping the production and circulation of the celebrity image in the media as well as audience engagement with that image. At the same time, blogs remain tied to their print predecessors, incorporating the vivid and intimate writing style of the gossip columnists with the tabloid magazines’ emphasis on the visual impact of photographs. In other words, I argue that gossip blogs combine crucial elements of each form to create a unique, but not unprecedented, form of celebrity gossip media.

Though blogs may represent a key future direction for celebrity media, these earlier gossip media forms continue to have an impact on the category more broadly. The rise of the tabloid did not end the gossip column as a celebrity media format. Indeed, there several well-known and revered columnists, such as Liz Smith or Michael Musto\(^\text{13}\), continue to write regular columns that appear in both print and online formats. But their

\(^{13}\) Smith wrote a gossip column for The New York Post for 33 years before her contract was eliminated as a cost cutting measure in February 2009. She still writes a syndicated column that appears in over 70 newspapers nation-wide and is a regular contributor to wowOwow.com, a women’s culture, politics and gossip website (Grove, 2009). Musto has been the regular gossip columnist for the New York City alternative weekly, The Village Voice, since 1984 and continues to write a column for that paper as well as writing his own blog, La Dolce Musto (Hays, 2009). That even these established columnists have entered the online realm of celebrity gossip speaks to further connections between the columnist style of celebrity gossip and that of the blogger, but an in-depth analysis of these columnists and their transition into electronic media remains outside the scope of this chapter.
power is nowhere near that of Winchell or Parsons in their heyday, partially due to the increased power of the celebrity-gossip magazines. Similarly, the popularity of online gossip and gossip blogs are not necessarily sounding the death-knell for tabloid style print magazines. Instead, these forms exist in the sort of tension-filled symbiotic relationship that has always defined the circuit of celebrity production. While gossip columns, print gossip magazines and blogs are all autonomous outliers to the celebrity production circuit “structured on an institutional divorce from those in the entertainment industry trying to control publicity,” the degree to which they are distanced from the control of the industry varies in important ways (Gamson, 1994, p. 97).

Tabloids, as established entertainment-media outlets are often given, if begrudgingly, greater access to celebrities because “tabloid coverage can be extremely valuable” in terms of name recognition and attention getting (ibid). As will be explored in chapter five, bloggers rely heavily on the magazines, not only “borrowing” their content in the form of hyperlinks, but they also need the print celebrity media of all types for their more legitimate access to celebrities in order to keep the cycle of production moving. Tabloid magazines have the economic and cultural power to investigate and pursue stories about celebrities that many blogs simply do not possess. Nevertheless, the increasing popularity and cultural power of celebrity gossip blogs have shifted the production, circulation and consumption of celebrity images across the entertainment-news media industry. This chapter’s historical perspective on the changing approaches of media to celebrity culture grounds my more in-depth analysis of gossip blogs as part of the entertainment-news media.
CHAPTER 5

CELEBRITY GOSSIP BLOGS AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION

Blogs incorporate textual and visual elements from their print predecessors, but engage the interactive and participatory possibilities of new media as a means to reconfigure the gossip blog as a space of cultural production. This space of production is complex, blurring boundaries between producer and audience and between fan and journalist to create a new space of engagement with celebrity culture. The immediate and interactive nature of blogs bring producers and audiences together in a gossip-based community in previously unprecedented ways that necessarily shifts research on gossip reading and meaning making practices. Yet all this “newness” often obscures the fact that such practices of production and consumption remain rooted in the same modes of writing and reading gossip that have historically characterized print celebrity media.

Bloggers and audiences are still using celebrity images as a means to negotiate social ideologies and identities through gossip talk, constructing and negotiating meaning through the consumption of media texts. This chapter examines the blogs as texts in order to understand what is said about celebrity on the six gossip blogs in my sample and how the technological features of new media shape the production and consumption of these texts.

My intent is not to create a single definition of gossip talk on gossip blogs, rather to recognize how the various discussions of celebrity evident across the blogs contribute to the shared social ideologies that bind members together in a virtual interpretive communities. In one sense, a gossip community is defined by the blogger because he or she provides the initial framing of celebrity culture. That is, he or she writes the posts
that shape the approach to celebrity culture that defines the specific blog and serve as a springboard for gossip talk by the commenters. As the primary author and controller of the site’s content, he or she retains the power as the most authoritative and, in a sense, loudest voice in any gossip community. In order to address this elevated role in the cultural production of meaning on gossip blogs, I here include discussion of my oral interviews with the bloggers in addition to an analysis of the texts of their respective blogs. This allows the bloggers to specifically speak about the process of blogging and their approach to celebrity culture that broadens my analysis of the content of their blogs.

The six bloggers in my sample play slightly different roles on their blogs, but I argue all are the primary cultural producer of that blog. Four of the bloggers, Perez Hilton from PerezHilton, Trent Vanegas from PITNB, Brendon from WWTDD, and Natasha Eubanks from YBF are the sole and primary author of their respective blogs. Perez, Trent, and Natasha also own and control all aspects of their blogs. Brendon originally owned WWTDD, but sold it to Fat Penguin Media and is currently employed as the site’s sole author. Molly Goodson is one of two bloggers who writes for Pop Sugar (the other is referred to only as “PopSugar” and serves as a name for multiple Sugar Inc. staff members who post on the site. I will similarly refer to the blog as Pop Sugar and the blogger as PopSugar). Finally, Anna Holmes is the Editor-in-Chief of Jezebel, and oversees all the bloggers who post on the site, assigning stories, editing copy, and

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14 As discussed in chapter four, Perez has been accused of using ghost-writers to write his blog and has recently admitted to having help from at least one assistant. However, the fact that his blog still gives the illusion of him as the sole author leads me to analyze his blog in that way.
occasionally writing posts herself. Four of the six interviews (Trent, Brendon, Natasha, and Anna) were conducted the summer after my online fieldwork, thus my questions related directly to my observations of each blog as well a more general investigation of blog writing practices and approaches to celebrity culture. My interview with Molly from Pop Sugar occurred the summer before my fieldwork, and served as a pilot study that shaped subsequent interviews and my online fieldwork. After several attempts to contact Perez for an interview, he declined to participate in my project. However, his popularity and reach outside of the blogging world enabled me to compile an archive of mass media interviews with him on the subjects of blogging and celebrity culture that approximates my interview questions.

I begin with a general discussion of the major textual characteristics in order to define celebrity gossip blogs in terms of format and content. I emphasize blogs’ place in media history and recognize the impact of new media technologies on gossip and community on these sites. Comparisons between blogs will illustrate how their various approaches to celebrity speak to a broader definition of gossip blogs as a celebrity media genre and to the specific community engendered by gossip talk on the individual blog. This analysis focuses on the texts of posts written by bloggers and the reader comments sections that follow each post (if available) during my five-week fieldwork observation in February 2008. All of this text is publicly viewable and though readers may need to register to write comments, anyone can read them. By incorporating the comments sections, this analysis attempts to recognize how audiences are directly involved not only

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15 After this initial introduction, I will refer to all the bloggers by their first names, as that is typically how they refer to themselves on their respective blogs and also speaks to the ways in which bloggers position themselves as in conversation with their readers.
in the production of content on the blog, but, more importantly, in the construction of meaning through gossip talk. However, since not every reader becomes a commenter, this is not intended to be a full representation of audience engagement with celebrity gossip blogs. A more detailed audience analysis will be discussed in chapters seven and eight. Ultimately, this discourse analysis of blog posts, comments, and blogger interviews will demonstrate the various forms of cultural production that take place on and through celebrity gossip blogs.

**Building the Blog: The Post**

The most basic content unit of the blog, no matter its focus or topic, is the post. The post refers to any single entry, regardless of length, written and published to the site by the blogger. The post consists of three major elements—links, visual images, and commentary—each of which will be discussed in greater detail in order to illustrate how it contributes to the textual, technological, and social features of gossip blogs. Most blogs arrange posts in reverse chronological order, with the most recent at the top of the web page, thus allowing readers to more readily see what is new on the site. For the celebrity gossip blogs in my sample, the updates occurred primarily between 9am and 8pm (EST) Monday through Friday, with most bloggers not updating much beyond 5pm (EST). Weekend posts were less frequent, and some, like Jezebel and WWTDD did not post at all on weekends during my fieldwork, barring some big celebrity event (such as the Oscars) or breaking celebrity gossip story (such as Britney Spears shaving her head). Though all the bloggers generally follow this business day posting schedule, Brendon and Molly discussed this not as a personal preference, but an attempt to meet the needs of their desired audiences. Molly suggests gossip blog audiences are “people who are bored
at work‖ (Goodson, personal interview, May 27, 2007). Brendon elaborates, saying blog audiences are just, “click[ing] around, [trying to] pass the time and hopefully read something funny or see some hot girl mostly naked,” thus blogs must offer new posts throughout the day to keep readers returning to the site (Brendon, personal interview, July 22, 2008).

**Physical and Technological Layout of Posts**

The physical layout of the post varies somewhat between blogs, but tends to feature a main headline followed by text and images. Each post is generally focused on one particular topic. For example, a Perez Hilton post from February 19, 2008 titled “A Process of Healing” features only photos and text regarding the latest developments in Britney Spears’ mental and physical recovery after her well-publicized public meltdown and hospitalization in late January and early February 2008 (Hilton, February 19, 2008). Restricting each post to a particular celebrity or topic allows the blogger to limit the audiences’ engagement to the latest gossip about a specific celebrity, as opposed to functioning as a chat room where any celebrity gossip can be brought up. Commenters who go off topic are known as “threadjackers,” in that they “hijack” a post about one topic in order to discuss something completely different, and are generally criticized or reprimanded across all the blogs in my sample for such commenting behavior.

This single-topic post format is seen across all the blogs in my sample, though some blogs, such as YBF and Jezebel, occasionally combine multiple items under a single post, echoing the gossip roundup style of the columnists. For example, a post from February 29, 2008 titled “YBF Folks Still in Paris + Tracee Ellis Ross & Janet Hit The Town + Mya Finds A New Label Home?” featured three different and unrelated short
items with photographs in one post rather than in different posts, partially because these stories were short and required little commentary from Natasha (Eubanks, February 29, 2008).

PITNB is a more obvious exception to this format. For the first 22 days of my fieldwork, the blog consisted of one long, multi-topic post per day with no space for comments included. Though the various items were clearly separated, often by images acting as sub-headlines within the post, there was generally only one post per day, supplemented only if new information relevant to the stories covered became available. Readers could scroll down the page through one post rather than having unique tags and URLs for each item. This format is similar to the gossip column style in which one column per day covered a range of celebrity gossip items. On March 3, 2008, the site was redesigned to a multiple post design. PITNB blogger Trent says this “more traditional” blog format is “more freeing” for him as a writer, though it does “make the day longer” because he must update more frequently throughout the day instead of finishing his day after he published the single, multi-topic post (Vanegas, personal interview, August 20, 2008). By the end of my fieldwork, all the blogs in my sample followed this “traditional” format of frequently updated, short, single-topic posts.

Another important technological feature of the post format is the way in which individual posts are displayed to the reader. Some blogs showed the entire text of a post on the main page, while others provided only a few lines or a visual image as a way to introduce the topic of the post to readers who must click on a link that redirects them to a secondary page containing the full content of the post. For example, the main page of YBF features only an image and the first few lines of text followed by a link to “click to
read the rest” that redirected the reader to a new page featuring the entire text of the post. Readers can scroll past items that do not interest them without seeing the entire post and click only on those they want. This element of choice is a key characteristic of blogs as interactive media forms. Jezebel also uses this linked format, with the shortened version on the main page acting as a teaser to draw readers to the full story. Pop Sugar, WWTDD, PerezHilton, and PITNB (both before and after the redesign) generally display the entire post on the main page, only using the “read more” link if a post was particularly long or as a link to additional images. However, readers on all blogs do have to click on the post in order to view and/or participate in the comments sections. This prioritizes the blogger’s perspective as the preferred one, as any reader generated content is not typically visible on the main page of the blog.

The use of the truncated main page post can also serve to bolster the preferred reading of the post, indicating a social dimension of this technological feature. Perez occasionally uses a link to a unique URL as a tease for the readers that uses a scandalous or salacious claim to prompt further reading, particularly on “blind items” where the celebrity is not (initially) named in the gossip item. For example, a post entitled “Pregnant and Boozing!!!!” published on February 27, 2008 featured a photo of a pregnant woman holding a glass of wine with her face blocked out with a white circle (Figure 1).
Somebody pulled a **Gwyneth**!!!!
What actress was spotted drinking the alcoholic beverages at the Oscars on Sunday night????
**CLICK HERE** to find out!
We hope she's right and has a good lawyer! (Hilton, February 27, 2008).

Clicking the link takes the reader to an extended version of the post that begins with the same image and text, but continues to include a quote from a *New York Post* report alleging pregnant actress Nicole Kidman was spotted drinking white wine at the 2008 Oscars and displays a picture of Kidman on the red carpet. It is crucial to note that the image of the pregnant woman on the initial teaser post is clearly not Kidman nor is Kidman drinking in the image of her included in the longer post. The first image simply serves to visualize the issue discussed, similar to the tabloids use of images to legitimize the story even if no actual photographs of it exist (see chapter four).

The teaser image and text promise juicy gossip as a means to encourage readers to click the interactive link, enabling them to further engage with the site. As described
above, Perez is particularly fond of this sort of bait and switch use of images that are not directly related to the text as a way to encourage readers to click to new pages. However, all of the blogs in my sample at least occasionally engage in this sort of interactive “tease” that invites readers to visit a longer version of a post and/or other pages on the blog. But this usually takes the form of truncated text or references to previous posts on a particular celebrity on the blog. Though they are interactive, these technological features offer a prescribed form of engagement and their mere existence on the post does not yet address the social factors of online participation. These technological features do, however, speak more to the economic interests of these advertiser supported blogs, as increased pageviews translates into more advertising revenue. In fact, the Gawker Media Group, which owns Jezebel, promotes a pay-per-pageview system in which the group’s bloggers are given bonuses if they meet certain pageview targets for their posts (Seward, 2009). Though not all the blogs monetize pageviews in this way, all are advertiser-supported blogs and thus rely in some way on page views for revenue. Getting readers to click through to individuals posts from the main page increases the overall number of pageviews for the blog.

**Comments as Blog Content**

The final component of the post, the comments sections, is also the clearest illustration of the intertwined nature of interactivity and participation on gossip blogs. Always appearing at the bottom of the post page and constantly updated as new reader comments are published, the comments sections are spaces of participation in which readers engage in gossip talk with the blogger (who may or may not respond in these sections) and each other through the use of interactive technology. Using the initial post
as an anchor, commenters contribute content to the blog, shaping the social meaning of a celebrity through their gossip talk. As comments are visible only after the blogger’s initial post and not on the main page of the site, the technological format of the blog supports the blogger’s perspective as the preferred reading of the celebrity. Not all readers choose to use this interactive feature to participate in the gossip community, but the comments sections are critical to the overall negotiation of meaning on the blog, as it provides a space for readers to voice their agreement or disagreement with the blogger’s ideological standpoint and to engage in dialogue with each other within the social protocols established by the blogger and the other commenters. Yet, as celebrity news and gossip can be found in thousands of places across the internet, it is this unique perspective on celebrity culture that draws in audiences.

All of the blogs in my sample had active comments sections during my fieldwork period, except for PITNB. The lack of comments sections on PITNB, however, speaks directly to how technological features of blogs take on a social dimension in terms of how, why, when, and where they are used by readers. Though bloggers can exert control through the implementation of technological protocols that govern audience interactivity, such as requiring users to register in order to post comments, the social practices of commenting are largely out of the blogger’s hands. In its original incarnation, PITNB did include comments sections, but Trent took them down in the summer of 2005 because they no longer fit with what he perceived as the tone of his blog. That summer, he and a friend had witnessed a hit and run accident in which a young woman was killed. Trent says:
the next day, there was no way I could talk about anything funny or anything snarky. I just didn’t want to deal with anything. I was like, you know what? I can’t do [celebrity gossip] today. I put up all this information about what we saw and who to call because it was a hit and run, you know, descriptions of the car. I filed a police report and that sort of thing…and the first comment someone left was ‘oh get over it, give us the gossip’ or something like that. And it just occurred to me that what if [the victim’s] friends read that or what if [the victim’s] family read these? It’s fairly sensitive. And it’s so easy for people on line to be hateful or as hurtful as they want to be because it’s faceless, it’s anonymous, you leave a message and no one knows who you are. And at that moment, I took the comments section down and I left it off (Vanegas, personal interview, August 20, 2008).

While Trent’s decision to remove the comments sections because of the negativity is a radical move to control it, as blogs are defined, in part, by their interactive spaces, all of the bloggers certainly recognize that the comments sections can get out of control. For this reason, the blogger imposes various technological and social protocols to police the content added to the blog by the readers. In this case, Trent decided that the sensitivity of the topic and the fact that some of the commenters refused to treat it respectfully, a hallmark of his approach to celebrity culture, meant that he could not include any sort of dialogue. He removed the technological space of interactive engagement, though other spaces of social participation continued to exist.

The very existence of these policies as well as Trent’s decision to do away with comments sections altogether illustrates that social, as well as technological, protocols shape the audience’s cultural production on gossip blogs. Jezebel is a key example of how the balance between the technological and social protocols allows audiences to create content within the ideological framework of the blog. On one hand, one may only post on Jezebel after successfully “auditioning” and must continue to abide by rules regarding proper commenting behavior or have commenting privileges revoked. Most importantly, Jezebel has a strict social rule prohibiting “body snarking” that supports the
building’s feminist approach to celebrity culture. Related to the sarcastic and often cruel verbal attacks I defined in chapter three as snark, body snarking is a term I first encountered on Jezebel that refers to the scrutiny and policing of (female) celebrity bodies through malicious mockery. Jezebel highlights the importance of the comments to the overall content of the blog post, recognizing that the communities of readers and commenters are part of the negotiation of meaning on the blog. But rules of conduct ensure that the readers stay within the boundaries established by the bloggers.

**Building the Blog: Interactive Links**

Though readers are invited to comment at the end of a post, the blogger alone is responsible for the main content of the post. As previously discussed, this content is based upon “links with commentary,” combining existing (online) content with the blogger’s observations and interpretations (Blood, 2002). Celebrity gossip bloggers, for the most part, are not breaking gossip stories on their blogs, and none of the bloggers in my sample (except Perez) make this sort of claim about their blog. Instead, they take existing information from other sources and comment upon it, providing a link back to the original story or using a photograph as a springboard for their discussion and, importantly, commentary on and judgment of the latest information for their readers. Celebrity gossip blogs can thus be understood as reactive and interpretive approaches to celebrity culture because they negotiate and judge existing content through their individual ideological lenses.

**Links to Outside Sources**

Despite claims that new media forms like blogs are killing traditional journalism, gossip blogs could not exist in their current form without other sources of celebrity news.
and gossip as a starting point for blogger commentary. All of the blogs in my sample include links to outside sources for their information in most, if not all, of their posts. This includes print tabloids and their online counterparts as well as other “legitimate” online news sources, such as CNN.com or MSNBC.com. Occasionally, the blogger will credit a reader or other “inside” source for sending in a tip via email, but citing existing web or print sources is most common. Brendon from WWTDD addresses reliance on existing sources, saying:

…me and everyone else just has Google alerts set up for every celebrity you can imagine…I have about, say, 25 things that I check all day, every day. Like People and Us and OK and the English tabloids and the New York tabloids and of course TMZ and all that stuff. And whatever’s interesting, I try [to incorporate in my posts] (Brendon, personal interview, July 22, 2008).

Bloggers typically rely on these existing sources, rather than investigating celebrity stories themselves, but make the information unique through commentary. Trent of PITNB similarly described the gossip blogger as:

more of a commentator or a watcher…I have a group of sites that I, you know, news sites and gossipy sites and message boards where people are talking about stuff. And I’ll just say this is where the story comes from and I’ll post a site if I use it. And then I just give my two cents (Vanegas, personal interview, August 20, 2008).

In fact, all of the bloggers in my sample, including Perez, framed their work in this way, emphatically stating that the work they do is not journalism because they react to, rather than break or even simply report, celebrity stories.

That these bloggers do not see themselves as journalists is not surprising, as few of them had any experience working within any facet of the media industry before starting their blogs. The only bloggers with any professional journalistic experience are Anna and Perez. Anna worked for print media outlets Star and InStyle before becoming
the editor for Jezebel. Perez worked at *Star* (coincidentally at the same time as Anna) at the same time he started an early version of his gossip blog, called PageSixSixSix.com (Holmes, personal interview, August 9, 2008; Denizet-Lewis, 2009). Despite this journalistic background, Anna still sees blogs as platforms for:

> what the writer is personally feeling. Like if they have a very, very strong opinion about something, they’re going to insert themselves and their opinion much more than if they were just, you know, announcing that something had happened (Holmes, personal interview, August 9, 2008).

As editor, she assigns stories to certain writers because a strong connection to a topic or celebrity, not a distanced objectivity, will make a better post. Bloggers reject the label of journalist precisely because it frees them from the more rigid standards of writing and fact-checking such a label implies and allows them to emphasize their own voice in a more conversational and gossip-oriented style. Natasha from YBF sees this as an important distinction between bloggers and traditional celebrity journalists:

> I’m well aware of journalistic standards and the journalistic integrity and ethics standards that a journalist has to take. None of us in the blog world do that and so we don’t really have the right to call ourselves journalists. But, however, a lot of people do. So I think that’s the main difference between us and the gossip tabloids. They’re more journalists, I’m more saying what I feel like saying. We still need to have responsibility for what we say. But [even] if we didn’t, we’re not typically gonna get sued for it (Eubanks, personal interview, July 23, 2008).

This firmly places blog content within the category of gossip talk, as bloggers use existing information, evidenced by the sourced link, to negotiate social meaning. This frees the blogger from the restrictions of journalistic objectivity in analyzing the events because she is speaking about them, not reporting them.

The link is also the most basic space of interactivity and participation on gossip blogs, as it is both a technological feature and a springboard for social participation. The link gives the audience the ability to instantly check the information sourced to the link,
and also presents a space in which bloggers encourage readers to read more in-depth and supplement existing knowledge, should they choose to do so. This is particularly useful for short bits of gossip. For example, every morning, Jezebel compiles a list of the latest developments in celebrity culture in a regular feature called “Dirt Bag Roundup.” Each item is explicitly sourced and often readers need to click the link in order to see an image or read more about the issue, particularly since the wide range of celebrities covered in the post means including photos for each item would be impractical. The following is an excerpt from a typical “Dirt Bag Roundup,” illustrating the interactive role of the link:

- A source calls Lindsay Lohan’s new friends “leeches.” Maybe LL is used to that? CoughmommyDinacoughcough? [Page Six]
- Dina Lohan on her show, Living Lohan, which begins shooting on the 16th and will air around Memorial Day on E!: ‘Be nice to us.’ [Gatecrasher]
- Yeah, yeah, we know. Patricia Heaton has no belly button. [TMZ]
- On her MySpace page, Brooke Hogan speaks out against her friend who had a fling with her father, Hulk Hogan: ‘I think she shoulda thought about what kinda press she was gonna get when she slept with her best friend’s famous father . . . I think we’re all seeing just exactly how karma works Christiane. Nothing you say will ever put my family back together.’ [Page Six]
- Blind item! Which 8-year-old son of a daytime TV personality told gossip reporters on the red carpet that he had recently come down from bed to find his famous mom drinking margaritas on the terrace? ‘She told me she was going to do the dishes, but she lied to me!’ the tyke complained earnestly. [Gatecrasher] (Stewart, March 11, 2008)

The most interesting bit of information culled from the original sources is presented here couched within brief commentary from the blogger (in this case, Jezebel blogger Dodai). Readers are given the ability to click the link at the end of each item to read more or see related images, but this is not generally necessary in order to understand the meaning of the item.

Even in longer posts dedicated to one particular celebrity and/or story, the blogs in my sample include links to the original sources that informed the post, either at the end
of the entire post or within the text itself. For example, in the post alleging pregnant
celebrity Nicole Kidman was drinking at an Oscars event, Perez includes not only a link
to the original source, but also a direct quote:

The NY Post’s Cindy Adams is reporting: ‘Boozing backstage during the
Oscarcast is a no-no. But if you're pregnant Nicole Kidman it's a yes-yes.
She wanted white wine. She got it.’ (Hilton, February 27, 2008).

The bold text, taken from the original blog post, indicates the sourced quote, but the
reader could also click the link on words “is reporting” to visit Cindy Adams’ original
column in the New York Post. But since the necessary information to judge Kidman’s
(alleged) behavior is available on the PerezHilton post, the reader does not have to click
the link to grasp Perez’s meaning and share in the judgment of Kidman’s behavior.

**Self-referential Links**

Bloggers frequently use links to refer back to their own blogs and previous
discussions of a particular story or celebrity within their blogs. This reinforces the
authority of the blogger in covering a developing story because it provides background to
the current post. It also strengthens the blogger’s preferred reading as the dominant one
by keeping readers within that frame. In other words, the reader can verify the story not
only through outside sources, but from the blog itself as a source. Pop Sugar does this
the most of any of the blogs in my sample and provides an excellent example of this self-
referential sourcing. In a February 19, 2008 post that centers on a paparazzi picture
(credited to National Photo Group) of supermodel and reality television star Heidi Klum,
her husband, singer Seal Samuel, and their children wearing face paint during a visit to
Disneyland, Pop Sugar blogger Molly writes:
It's official: The Klum-Samuel family loves face paint more than anyone else. Seriously, though, it seems like every other time we see them, at least one member is looking all colorful or catlike. I'm not complaining though, totally love it. This time the occasion was Seal's 45th birthday, celebrated at Disneyland over the weekend. Little Leni even took it up a notch with her princess outfit. Clearly the happiest place on earth is even more so when you've got extra special makeup on (Goodson, February 19, 2008).

Each link refers back to previous posts on Pop Sugar about the Klum-Samuel family in which they are similarly framed as adorable and fun-loving, with the final link ("princess outfit") referring to an additional photograph from this particular family outing. Pop Sugar is generally positive in its coverage of celebrities, promoting a sense of identification with celebrities and promoting desire to emulate their lifestyles. This is particularly evident in their celebration of celebrity couples and celebrity babies, as in this and previous Heidi Klum posts.

That Pop Sugar includes these self-referencing links in every post not only solidifies their approach to celebrity culture for readers, it also demonstrates the use of technological features to limit interaction, in this case to keep the community within Pop Sugar instead of giving page views to other (competing) gossip blogs or celebrity news sites. Pop Sugar certainly credits outside sources for content when appropriate, but typically combines that with self-referential links, such as in this February 14, 2008 post regarding Britney Spears:

Beyond her new hobby as a dance instructor and finally better-looking hair, things have been pretty quiet with Britney since she was released from the hospital last week. Jamie Spears is still in control of Britney's estate at this point, but today there will be a hearing to determine whether or not his role as conservator will be extended. So, tell us — do you think Britney’s dad should get to stay in control of her life? (PopSugar, February 14, 2008)

The first two links refer back to previous Pop Sugar stories on Britney, but the last refers to a new People.com report about an ongoing legal battle to determine a conservator for
Britney’s estate as she recovers from a widely publicized psychological breakdown and involuntary hospitalization (Brueur, 2008). This post combines information from outside sources about Britney’s ongoing mental issues with the previously posted commentary from the blog itself, thus reaffirming the blog’s authority to speak on this issue and giving details to support Pop Sugar’s particular reading of Spears’ image.

**Other Interactive Features**

In addition to links and comments sections, some blogs offer other interactive features, such as polls, to shape how readers engage with the site. Such polls are seen on Perez and occasionally on Jezebel and YBF, but appear most frequently on Pop Sugar. This is consistent with Pop Sugar’s attempts to involve readers in a variety of interactive and community-oriented activities as part of their reading practices. Though such polls offer readers a chance to engage, they also necessarily limit that engagement on both technological and social levels. Take, for example, the following poll regarding the continuing legal battle for control of Britney Spears’ estate during her treatment for mental health issues (Figure 2):

![Poll](image)

**Should Britney’s Dad Get to Stay in Control?**

- Yes — She’s still a long way away from being able to take care of herself.
- No — She seems much better and should be in charge of her own life!
- Maybe — So long as her family is around to ensure things don’t get out of control again.
- Other — I’ll tell you below in comments.

Figure 2: Pop Sugar poll
Though it limits the ways of reading Britney’s image only to those available in the poll, Pop Sugar polls always include a choice to “tell you below in comments” thus creating a climate that encourages broader participation than simply clicking one of the stated options. That an overwhelming 91% (2,942) of those who responded thought Britney’s father should stay in control keeps with the preferred reading of Britney’s image on Pop Sugar, namely that while she has shown some signs of improvement, she has also been too resistant to her family’s help and is not yet ready to resume control of her own life or regain custody of her young sons. This reading of the celebrity image, as is typical of celebrity gossip blogs, focuses not on the celebrity as a professional, but as a private person. Furthermore, the gossip talk about her private life allow the commenters to actually discuss ideas of proper behavior and standards for motherhood through their discussion of Britney’s life, a social protocol promoted by the existence of the comments sections.

**Building the Blog: Visual Images**

The broad definition of blogs focuses more on the use of links and commentary, but the visual image is, I contend, equally important to the format of celebrity gossip blogs. It is extremely rare to see a celebrity gossip blog post without at least one visual image accompanying the written text. In fact, most of the blogs begin with an image at the top of the post, using it to draw readers’ attention to the text below or to encourage readers to click a link to read more about the featured celebrity. Unlike the link, which navigates the reader away from the original post, the visual image, typically paparazzi style photos of the celebrity in her private and unguarded moments, unifies all elements
of a particular post. The photo acts as evidence, anchoring the gossip talk and supporting the blogger’s reading of the celebrity image.

Through the use of photos, blogs speak to the ambiguous nature of the celebrity image, often moving between an emphasis on the private celebrity and his or her public performances, illustrating Dyer’s claim that stars are at once extraordinary and ordinary. Blogs do include more officially sanctioned red carpet or other industry events, as well as video clips or production (behind the scenes or actual performances) stills from a celebrity’s work. For example, YBF and PerezHilton regularly post new music videos and PITNB and Jezebel regularly provide screen captures and discussion of new episodes of certain television shows, such as The Hills and Project Runway. By promoting the public and professional work of the star, the blogs do, to some degree, serve the promotional needs of the celebrity industry. However, they are more typically aligned with the autonomous outliers, like the tabloids, in their emphasis on the revelation of the private celebrity though the use of paparazzi photographs as an anchor for gossip talk.

**Paparazzi Photos as Ideological Anchors**

By providing up-to-the-minute details through near constant visual surveillance of the celebrity and her daily life, photographs act as both catalyst and anchor for gossip talk. They are a catalyst in that they initiate gossip talk by providing gossipers with details to discuss, e.g. a sighting of the celebrity in public, and an anchor in that they are always read through existing discourses of the celebrity available on that particular blog. Despite being the main focus of a post, these photos often do not actually offer any new information, but can only be made meaningful through the negotiation of existing information and judgment typical of gossip talk. Outside of specific moments of scandal,
the photos and gossip on blogs work to reveal the quotidian, though at times glamorous, lives of the stars. This can be as innocuous as a sighting of a star in public, with the photo acting as evidence and as a springboard for blogger commentary, such as the previously discussed Pop Sugar post about Heidi Klum and her family visiting Disneyland. There is not any sort of scandal revealed by the photograph, so it serves as a visual anchor for further discussion of the couple and their family, a major theme of gossip on Pop Sugar. It assumes the reader has some sort of familiarity with the celebrity (further bolstered by the linked references to previous posts about Klum and her family in the text) and finds pleasure in seeing the star in an everyday and relatable setting.

At the same time, use of seemingly banal images also works to create a story and propagate a reading of the celebrity based on the blogger’s perspective. Like their tabloid predecessors, photos are central to the blog format and are highly dependent upon the context in which they are placed. Photos rarely appear without some sort of caption or commentary by the blogger that frames the reader’s engagement with that image as the preferred one. Thus, bloggers hold a great deal of power to define the meaning of the celebrity image. In her analysis of PerezHilton, Peteresen (2007) notes that Perez:

> disseminates this ‘news’ to an audience of millions, thus amplifying public awareness. Even if a star were not previously in public disfavor, the fact that Perez reports that she is effectively morphs rumor into reality (p. 4, emphasis in original).

He uses photos as evidence to support this morphing of “rumor into reality.” For example, his post, “A Process of Healing,” strengthened Perez’s reading of Britney’s

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16 Klum and Samuel are an interracial couple, but this was not a site of scandal when images and stories about the couple were published during my fieldwork. Not all the blogs featured this couple, as I saw no posts about either Klum or Samuel on WWTDD, for example. If any sort of derogatory comments were made about the interracial couple or their mixed race children on any blogs, they were removed before I saw them.
recovery through the use of paparazzi photos of the star engaged in ordinary and
everyday activities, not professional work, in public as evidence of her progress (Figure
3).

Figure 3: Britney Spears on PerezHilton

The text written on the photo by Perez further reinforces his (newly) positive reading\textsuperscript{17} of
her image available in the text of the post:

Look at her. LOOK at her!
We can just see a very noticeable difference in Britney Spears. She seems calmer,
happier and more at peace.
Now that the negative influences have been removed from her life, the once and
future pop star's family is ensuring that their beloved daughter gets healthy.
With the chaos gone from her life, a dressed up Brit Brit was subdued and smiling
sincerely as she went out to dinner at SHU sushi restaurant in Los Angeles on
Monday night with her new bodyguards and assistant.
If Britney keeps things up, hopefully she will be able to see her children soon.
That would be very nice! (Perez Hilton, February 19, 2008)

Interestingly, Perez does not offer links back to previous stories to support existing
knowledge (such as the claim that “negative influences have been removed from her

\textsuperscript{17} Though he was a big supporter of Britney in her early days, he was quite critical of her
in more recent years. In particular, before her bizarre public antics were revealed to be
the result of mental illness and possible drug abuse, Perez gleefully mocked her “train
wreck” behavior as evidence of her (deserved) fall from pop stardom.
life”), but seems to assume readers have this knowledge or can simply take his reference as authoritative because it is supported by the image of a smiling Britney appearing in public. Whether supported by links or images, it is ultimately the blogger’s commentary that shapes the reading of the celebrity image and uses that particular focus as a way to draw in audiences and encourage the construction of shared meaning through gossip talk.

The primacy of the photo is illustrated in Jezebel’s “Snap Judgment” posts. This regular feature, often appearing four or more times per day, offers only a paparazzi photo and a caption/headline with no additional commentary. The title “Snap Judgment” is an explicit invitation for readers to scrutinize and judge the image presented and offer their own commentary in the comments section. These captions/headlines are generally meant to be humorous and act as a way to get conversations about a specific celebrity started in the comments section. The photo and caption thus work in concert to attract readers to this post. In a Snap Judgment from March 10, 2009, a pregnant Gwen Stefani is caught by paparazzi cameras while walking with her husband, Gavin Rossdale, and first child, Kingston (Figure 4).

Though headline/caption of “special delivery” references her pregnancy, its brevity suggests the reader has prior knowledge of this facet of Stefani’s private life that she will bring to bear in reading this photo (Holmes, March 10, 2008). Indeed, Stefani had already publicly announced her pregnancy, so this image is not intended to break that news, rather to follow the progression of her pregnancy, a favorite pastime of the blogs called the “baby bump watch” that will be explored in greater detail in chapter six. That

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18 Gwen Stefani is the front-woman of the popular rock band No Doubt and also has a successful career as a solo artist and fashion icon. Gavin Rossdale is the former front-man of 90s rock band Bush, though arguably his contemporary fame is more rooted in his marriage to Stefani.
the caption mentions both Gwen and Gavin by first name only also assumes prior knowledge of this celebrity couple. As there is no new information here, the use of paparazzi photos to anchor these posts encourages scrutiny and judgment of the celebrity image through gossip talk, and this frequently takes the form of body policing, both in terms of fashion choice and in terms of beauty and sexuality.

**Gwen & Gavin's Special Delivery**

![Gwen Stefani and Gavin Rossdale on Jezebel](image)

On Jezebel, however, such visual policing is regulated not only by the approach to celebrity defined by the bloggers but also by explicit rules governing the comments section. This is particularly important for Snap Judgments, as the limited framing by the blogger allows the readers to take a larger role in determining the meaning of this image and the celebrity within it, but within the rules established by the blog. The feminist stance of the site shaped the rules and the approach to celebrity, allowing celebrities to be ridiculed for fashion choices, but without engaging in body snarking, a practice particularly evident on WWTDD and PerezHilton. On Jezebel, a dress may be deemed
unflattering or unattractive, but the woman is not to be called “fat” or “ugly.” Jezebel commenters on this Snap Judgment discuss Stefani’s dress, whether or not they like the two as a couple, and whether or not they have “real” or a “Hollywood” marriage. The comments are not universally positive, but they are not excessively cruel in their criticisms, as on other blogs. But the photo itself is the catalyst and anchor for continued discussion of this particular celebrity/celebrity couple.

Snap Judgments are unusual for the small amount of blogger commentary framing the photo. This is not typical of the other blogs, or even other Jezebel posts, which tend to include more blogger commentary. However, the photos remain central to this commentary, and are often used to make a joke or to further a previous discussion of a particular celebrity within the framework offered by the blog. The image offers an anchor for the ideological framework of the blog, and how it is read varies between blogs. This is important, as most images do not usually offer any new information or, in fact, even depict anything more than the celebrity in a banal and everyday activity. Thus, it is the way in which the blogger presents the image that creates the story for the post. For example, WWTDD regularly features paparazzi photos of female celebrities in swimsuits or other skimpy outfits, which fits with the blog’s emphasis on objectifying female celebrities in order to police the boundaries of acceptable femininity and female sexuality in addition to generally mocking celebrity culture. On March 7, 2008, Brendon posted a paparazzi picture of singer Melissa Etheridge and two of her children playing on a beach (Figure 5).
While this image of a fully clothed, older, publicly out lesbian woman with her children does not seem to fit with the blog’s usual approach to celebrity culture, the commentary serves to make jokes and to reinforce the typical heterosexist viewpoint of the blog as the preferred lens through which to read this photo and the celebrity in it:

Between yesterday and today, I’m starting to get the suspicion that porn movies lied to me about the secret life of lesbians. Where are the co-eds who can’t afford to repair their car? Where are the cheerleaders helping their team celebrate the big win? Where are the co-ed cheerleaders who can’t afford to repair their car after the big win? I was led to believe lesbians led secret lives of sexy passion, where looks of desire turned to an exotic journey of the flesh. Not ... this.

They say lesbian parents are no more likely to raise gay kids than traditional parents, but if all these boys know about vagina is that it looks like Melissa Etheridge and her (kill me) lover, that kid is full blown gay. Like how when kids get bit by a dog as a baby and then they hate dogs all their life. This is like that, except that I’d rather have my dick in the mean bitey dog. (Brendon, March 7, 2008).

Again, there is no new information or even any discussion of any gossip stories related to Etheridge in this post, rather the image is used to make a joke and to offer an anchor for commenters to police feminine bodies and lesbian sexuality.
The comments section of this post definitely reinforced Brendon’s reading, evident in the following comments selected from the five pages of comments that followed the original post:

Al Gore: More proof lesbians are just ugly that couldn’t get cock. God hates ugly lesbians, only loves the hot ones

StinkyChalupa: …instead of posting shit like this post something that will give me a boner

Purplemonkeydishwasher: Yeah, I’d hit that….with a hammer until it stopped breathing (comments on ibid).

As will be discussed in more detail in chapter eight, the comments sections on WWTDD often go way beyond the taboo humor offered by Brendon in the initial post. He describes his own approach to celebrity as rooted in comedy, likening it to other taboo humor outlets like *Jimmy Kimmel Live* or *South Park*. Brendon says, “I’m not homophobic. I’m not racist. And I don’t want the page to seem like it is. But if it’s a joke, if it’s clearly a joke, yeah, I have no problem making it” (Brendon, personal interview, July 22, 2008). Many commenters on his site, however, do not seem concerned with such distinctions and more openly make racist, sexist, and homophobic comments without even attempting to couch them within a taboo humor framework. This sort of gossip talk would not be tolerated on blogs like Jezebel or YBF, as each has clear rules about what constitutes an appropriate comment as well as a core group of commenters who work to maintain positive dialogue on the site. But as it does uphold the preferred reading originally offered by Brendon, such audience created content is consistent with the rest of the blog.
Manipulation of Images as Commentary

As with links, all of the blogs in my sample rely on other sources for their images. These are typically photos found in web searches, purchased directly from photo agencies, such as WENN, Splash or X-17, or, more rarely, sent in by readers. However, the interactive nature of new media allows bloggers to choose how to present these images within the post and, in some cases, to obviously manipulate them in the service of their preferred reading of the celebrity. Though all the bloggers use captions and clever juxtapositions to give photographs new meanings, Trent and Perez are unique amongst the bloggers in that they manipulate these images as a way to comment upon the celebrity gossip story. Their manipulations are not intended to mislead the reader or verify a false story with photographic evidence, as the composite photos of early celebrity tabloids did. Their manipulations are obvious and played for humor, acting as visual commentary on a celebrity or event. Trent is most adept at this of all the bloggers in my sample, regularly using Photoshop in creative and skillful ways to poke fun at celebrity culture. In fact, he suggests this is a hallmark of his blog and part of what makes it stand out amongst the competition:

I feel like my strength is more the photos, like trying to be funny...and that’s something only I could do. I think only I could do! The writing on the pictures is something I did before anyone else did (Vanegas, personal interview, August 20, 2008).

Though his images are always contextualized with text, as the writing of the blog is equally important to him, his use of manipulated images can stand alone as humorous commentary. Figures six and seven are two examples of such image manipulations for the sake of humor and mocking of celebrity culture.
Figure 6 celebrates the birth of singer/actress Jennifer Lopez’s twins by picturing two babies exploding from a previous paparazzi photo of a pregnant Lopez. Trent had been speculating that Lopez would “pop” any day for several weeks leading up to the birth, using paparazzi photos of Lopez appearing in public during the late stages of pregnancy as evidence of her imminent labor. It is extremely unlikely that audiences would think this was an actual photo of Lopez giving birth or that the babies pictured bursting from her stomach are even her actual children because the manipulation is so obvious and reflects back on his playful assertion that she is going to pop. Celebrity audiences certainly could have found the news of the birth on any number of sites after the official announcement was made, but Trent brought the news to his readers in his own unique way through this photo manipulation. It is a humorous but not cruel reading of the hoopla surrounding celebrity babies that easily fits into PITNB’s overall approach to celebrity culture.
Figure 7: PITNB Photoshop: Britney vs. Heidi (Vanegas, March 3, 2008)

Figure seven is a collage of images that accompanied a report that reality television star Heidi Montag had released a duet with Britney Spears in her bid for pop stardom. Prefacing the image, Trent claims:

Radio station KIIS FM here in LA debuted a new Heidi Montag track titled Dramatic that was described as an ‘exclusive Britney Spears and Heidi Montag song’ which ‘features both starlets’ ... so natch, I assumed it was some sort of mash-up or maybe even a bona fide duet ... but after listening to the track, I do not believe that either is actually the case (Vanegas, March 3, 2008).

His conversational and conspirational styleforegrounds his own opinion, as if participating in a gossip-based conversation with the reader. But his humorous take on what eventually proved to be an erroneous rumor is made clear in the manipulation of the images to tell a story about the alleged duet. He combines existing promotional photos of Britney and Heidi at the top, and the caption “It’s Heidi, bitch” references a recent
Britney Spears single, “Blackout,” that begins “It’s Britney, bitch,” thus tying the two celebrities together as performers.

But the screen capture of an image from a television interview with Britney (that had nothing to do with the alleged single) at the bottom with clever captioning indicating Britney’s horror at the duet reveals Trent’s mocking of the story as so false as to be ridiculous. Readers would not need to know exactly where these images came from in order to recognize the manipulation because the pink text and speech bubbles were obviously added by Trent, who routinely uses those colors and fonts across his site. The manipulated image and the post are grounded in gossip because they work together to evaluate a recent rumor within the context of existing knowledge about both stars, both of whom are frequent topics on his blog. He admits in text of the post that he does not know if the rumor is false at this point, nor does he know what Britney’s response would be to a potential duet, but his take does seem plausible, and therefore a valid reading of the story. The images are not to be taken as real, rather as a space of humorous speculation, a characteristic of gossip talk made possible through interactive technology on the blog.

Perez has also made photo manipulation a hallmark of his blog. The judgment of celebrity is sometimes conveyed through intentionally juxtaposed images such as this critique of Madonna at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction ceremony headlined “Separated By Plastic” and tagging it under his regular photo juxtaposition feature, “Separated at Birth.” Here, he pokes fun at Madonna’s hair and makeup choices as well as her rumored plastic surgery, by comparing her to the horror film character, The Bride of Chucky. The juxtaposition of these photos does the work of deconstructing the celebrity image without any additional text in the blog post. Furthermore, Perez engages
in body snarking by implying that the aging female, particularly one who has plastic surgery to attempt to hold on to her youth, is like a monster.

![The Bride of Chucky and Madonna](image)

Figure 8: Separated By Plastic (Hilton, March 11, 2008)

Perez also uses MS Paint to manipulate images for humorous and ideological effect, though this manipulation is much less sophisticated than Trent’s use of Photoshop. Using white “ink,” he writes directly on photos, draw penises on celebrities faces and bodies, stick figure babies over the stomachs of allegedly pregnant celebrities, and/or dots under the noses of those he alleges are using drugs. These simplistic expressions of Perez’s like or dislike of a particular celebrity are then echoed in the text of the post, though, again, the manipulated images often need no further explanation. This remains rooted in the negotiation and judgment of the celebrity image that characterizes gossip talk, but, in accordance with Perez’s overall approach to celebrity culture, is much more malicious and cruel in its mocking. Perez’s obvious manipulation of images (see Figure 9 for more examples) serves to strengthen his own reading of that celebrity as the preferred one for the audience.
Figure 9: Manipulated images on PerezHilton (clockwise from top left Mischa Barton in “Go Away!” (Hilton, March 3, 2008); John Mayer in “What’s He Smoking????” (Hilton, March 27, 2008); Diablo Cody in “The Stripper Strikes Again” (Hilton, February 28, 2008); Paris Hilton in “Is This A Publicity Stunt???” (Hilton, March 2, 2008)
These manipulations are used for humor, but a closer reading illustrates how these simple manipulations reinforce some of the larger ideological approaches that permeate his blog. On February 21, 2008, Perez published a new “Headline of the Week Weak,” a semi-regular feature where he posts non-celebrity news headlines/items. These stories appear to be only tenuously related to his blog’s focus, but through his humorous use of images, are given a different meaning. The main page post featured only the headline “Israeli PM blames gays for quakes” and Perez’s request to click the link to “read the incredulous article accompanying this headline” (Hilton, February 21, 2008). This is the only direct textual commentary by Perez, as the post that appears after clicking the link is the full text of a BBC news report in which the Israeli Prime Minister “blamed Parliament’s tolerance of gays for earthquakes that have rocked the Holy Land recently” (ibid). Given Perez’s openly gay identity and vocal support for gay equality issues on his blog, this post could be read as a reinforcement of his beliefs and practices wherein Perez posts the story to draw attention to ongoing issues of homophobia in order to fight against such discrimination.

However, this reading is complicated by the use of a manipulated image on the full post that not only re-emphasizes the celebrity focus of the blog but also potentially undercuts the post’s ideological meaning. No image appears on the short teaser post on the main page, but when the reader clicks the link, she is presented with a large photo of pop singer Clay Aiken prior to the full text of the BBC report. The image of Aiken is manipulated by Perez to make it appear that he has a white substance dripping from his mouth in a simulation of semen, a frequent image manipulation used by Perez that signifies homosexuality for men or excessive sexuality for women (Figure 10). On the
surface, the image and the text seem unconnected. However, the juxtaposition is played for humor, and the “joke” here is that the manipulated photo of Aiken is used with an article dealing with a gay issue. This relies somewhat on reader’s previous knowledge of Perez’s ridicule of Clay as a closeted homosexual, most evident in the fact that Perez refers to him as “Gay Aiken.” But the juxtaposition of the manipulated image and the news story about gays also speaks for itself.

Figure 10: Clay Aiken in Headline of the Week

This example speaks to the complicated ideological stances that permeate PerezHilton. Like Brendon, Perez claims he is simply making a joke or using his blog persona as a way to generate controversy and, thereby, draw readers to his site. In particular, Perez is well known for “outing,” or attempting to out, gay and lesbian celebrities who have not discussed their sexuality in public. Beginning in September 2005, Perez famously began speculating about the sexuality of former N*Sync member Lance Bass after paparazzi photos surfaced of him with Reichen Lehmkuhl, the winner of the reality show The Amazing Race. Perez continued to feature stories and pictures of
Bass and Lehmkuhl as a way of outing the celebrity in a public forum. Bass publicly came out as a gay man in July 2006, in part, because of this pressure (Huang, 2006). Perez argues any aspect of the life of a celebrity or other public figure, unlike a “random stranger,” is “fair game,” but also says he uses such gossip as a way to reject any public stigma that surrounds homosexuality and construct a worldview in which homosexuality is accepted and celebrated (qtd. in Huang, 2006, para. 8). He says, “some people have this stupid notion in their head that being gay is bad and being gay will hurt your career, and I don't believe that” (qtd. in Lostracco, 2006, para 10). Perez sees this outing as an important and positive project for the gay community, saying “the only way we're gonna have change is with visibility. And if I have to drag some people screaming out of the closet, then I will. I think that lot of celebrities have an archaic fear that being gay will hurt their career but look at Rosie [O'Donnell]. Look at Ellen [DeGeneres]” (qtd. in Access Hollywood, 2006).

From this perspective, using the photo of Aiken with this post illustrates that homophobia is a widespread problem, and the archaic views of people like the Israeli prime minister, keep gay people from revealing their true selves and achieving social and political equality. By bringing it up on his site, Perez claims to be promoting dialogue about political and social issues using celebrity culture as an entry point. However, the mean spirited way in which Perez outs potentially gay celebrities, such as the semen on mouth manipulation, speaks more the reasons why celebrities might choose to remain closeted. Indeed, the few commenters who actually take up the issue of this juxtaposition (as opposed to simply talking about the BBC story itself or posting something unrelated to either, which happens frequently on his unmoderated and largely
unregulated comments sections), mostly take the opportunity to mock Aiken’s sexuality along with Perez. Vanessa says, “Can I please tell you how funny it is you chose Gay Aiken as your picture for this post? I'm cracking up” (comment on Hilton, February 21, 2008). There is little evidence of dialogue about the issue of homophobia, as Perez’s readers seem more interested in his continuing attempts to out Aiken than the larger social issues of gay politics.

**Voice and Commentary: The Blogger as Cultural Producer**

Beyond the technological features and format of the blog, the defining characteristic is the blogger’s commentary and personal voice as the point of entry into celebrity culture. Though the information itself may not be exclusive, the blogger’s commentary is, and the immediacy of and lack of industry control over that commentary gives bloggers a unique voice in celebrity culture. Perez says the ability to update in such a frequent and timely matter means he “can react more quickly than print media…It also means that publicists have less leverage because they have less time to control a negative story” (Day, 2007). This sense of immediacy is intensified by the need for pageviews to keep the site profitable by keeping readers engaged. Brendon says:

…”if I go three hours without checking my email I start freaking out. Because you never know what’s going to happen. I remember the day that Britney shaved her head. My girlfriend and I took off a night and a morning. Got home at like 11 at night, you know, and I had thousands of emails just saying “Britney shaved her head! Britney shaved her head!” And so you don’t ever want to miss…you don’t ever want to be last. I mean…if something big happens…you just have to be on it all the time. And, you know, on a lot of days when I don’t feel like writing, like I’m not in a funny mood, or I had a fight with my girlfriend or whatever, I don’t want to do this. No one cares. No one cares if it’s a holiday. No one cares if I’m depressed. They just want the website. And I’m the only one here. It’s just me (Brendon, personal interview, July 22, 2008).
This anecdote, echoed in similar ways by other bloggers, reveals that the audience is not necessarily relying on the blog solely for the latest information, but primarily for the blogger’s commentary on it. Brendon regularly mocks Britney Spears on WWTDD, so readers would certainly want to hear his perspective on this latest moment in her public meltdown. To meet the demands of the genre, all the blogs in my sample published at least six to eight posts per weekday, with some posting much more than that. For example, PerezHilton regularly publishes twenty or more posts per day, though these posts tend to be much shorter than the others in my sample. Even PITNB’s one long post regularly featured multiple items complied throughout the day, and after the redesign, he regularly published ten or more posts per day.

Behind the blog’s frequent updates and up-to-the-minute photos and details is a blogger whose work day is not defined by deadlines in the way print magazines are. In fact, every moment is a deadline, as bloggers must constantly keep abreast of celebrity gossip through their various sources, a process that is aided by technological features such as Google alerts (as mentioned above by Brendon) or RSS readers for online gossip sources. Perez, for example, claims he regularly works 18 hour days to ensure his site always has the latest information (Morgan, 2008). Anna suggests this immediacy makes blogs distinct from print magazines:

I’d say the insanity of running a blog, it can’t be compared to working at a magazine. There were times [when I worked for magazines] when, you know, I worked very long hours and it was very busy. But there wasn’t this need to immediately comment on something the way there is on a blog (Holmes, personal interview, August 9, 2008).
The technology of the internet enables information to be accessed and spread instantly, and bloggers must quickly comment upon the latest developments in order to stay relevant and popular.

However, since the internet can be accessed anywhere in the world, the reliance on online sources for their links means that gossip bloggers can keep their fingers on the pulse from anywhere. Unlike their columnist predecessors, bloggers do not have to be located in Los Angeles or New York City in order to have access to celebrity news and events. All the bloggers in my sample are based in urban centers, but this was largely unrelated to their ability to access and comment on the latest celebrity gossip. In fact, several are located in areas not typically considered hubs of celebrity culture, namely San Francisco, Atlanta, and Alexandria, Virginia. Trent began PITNB in Detroit, Michigan, hardly a capital of celebrity culture, but was able to make it a success through the use of the internet and ability to attract an audience by providing a unique perspective on celebrity culture. Speaking of the early days of his blog, he says:

because I lived in Detroit…I didn’t have access to these parties, I didn’t go to these premieres. So what I did was I basically ingested everything that was happening and I kind of put my spin on it…And that’s the only way I know how to do what I do is [through] my voice (Vanegas, personal interview, August 20, 2008).

He has since moved to Los Angeles, but insists the move was not for the benefit of the blog. It was the success of his blog that enabled him to afford the move, as it made him more financially independent, but he does not see it as changing the way in which he writes his blog or gathers his information, as he still relies primarily on other online sources (ibid).
Though all the blogs in my sample clearly rely heavily on existing online sources, they also receive email tips from readers or, occasionally, some industry insiders. As the blogs gain popularity, they also gain access to these inside sources, though most, with the exception of Perez, do not trumpet this inside access as part of their commentary. For example, YBF blogger Natasha says,

I have several sources in several different ways. I have email sources. I have managers, publicists, friends of celebrities, families of the celebrity, random people that maybe work in the clubs that see certain celebrities every weekend, just random people walking on the street that maybe saw something. I have set correspondents in the major cities who attend events in my place as a media person and they take pictures, they do the red carpet, they take pictures of celebrities on the red carpet. They, of course, go to the parties, sit down and watch everything that’s going on. People won’t know who they are. They’re just real people, you know, they’re just going and chilling. They have their friends with them. But little do they know, they’re scoping the scene for everything that’s going on. That’s how I get my info (Eubanks, personal interview, July 23, 2008).

Natasha, like the other bloggers, is not just publishing any tip a reader sends to her. Her sources are people she knew in advance and trusts to report accurately or with whom she has built relationships in which they proved themselves by providing her reliable and verifiable information.

This is important to maintaining the blogger’s credibility with audiences and to building the overall power of the gossip blog in celebrity culture. Molly says:

I think that more and more people who work with celebrity and sometimes the celebrities themselves are taking notice of the blogs and getting in touch and making sure they look good on both, in the magazines and on the blogs... there definitely have been times when people have come directly to me with stories and stuff. But most of the time I don’t print them because I’m not gonna trust X [without verifying it through other legitimate sources] (Goodson, personal interview, May 27, 2007).

This indicates the blogger is gaining relevance in the circuit of celebrity production.

Blogs are not just fan sites, but are recognized by celebrities and other industry workers
as legitimate, if difficult to control, media sources. This relevance may translate into more access to the industry itself, but may also threaten the blogger’s authority with readers, as the commentator on, rather than the mouthpiece for, celebrity culture.

Perez is the best example of this shift in the relevance of the blogger to celebrity culture itself, as he has parlayed his status as a Los Angeles-based blogger into “Hollywood player” who “often parties with A-list celebs like the Hiltons and the Simpsons” (Navarro, 2007; Huang, 2006). He claims to have an array of insider sources, including “publicists, dog walkers, cleaners, [and] sometimes even the celebrities themselves,” feeding him information in addition to using online sources (Day, 2007). Like Louella Parsons and Walter Winchell before him, Perez brings the reader a view of celebrity culture from within it as well as relying on existing content like the other bloggers. But, unlike the columnists, Perez rejects the label of journalist to describe the work of a gossip blogger. He says, “I don’t have to be objective…I love that it’s my opinion, and I love that people disagree” (qtd. in Stack, 2009). Instead, he frames his persona as “the quintessential ‘schwag-loving’ star-fucker,” creating a character to engage in camp appreciation of celebrity culture (Petersen, 2007, p. 8). At the same time, he firmly stands behind his stories and his sources:

of course, I regret when I get things wrong, but fortunately, that doesn’t happen very often. I’m very careful about what goes on my site. Unlike a lot of other [tabloid media outlets], I don’t make shit up. I don’t have anything if I don’t have the trust of my readers. I always tell the truth (qtd. in Denizet-Lewis, 2009).

But as a commentator, rather than a reporter, he is free to exaggerate and heighten his claims “just to piss people off or get a laugh” (ibid).
This importance of putting yourself in your blog is echoed by Molly, Trent, and Natasha, who each stated that they write as if they were talking with their friends about celebrity culture, not creating some sort of false blogger persona. Trent says:

what I did [when starting my blog] was I basically ingested everything that was happening and I kind of put my spin on it. If you and I were talking about The Hills last night, it would be exactly, well for the most part, pretty much what’s up on the site… I can’t be a reporter… I’m more conversational. I’m more ‘oh my god, can you believe this?’ Or ‘what do you think about this?’ or ‘isn’t this ugly?’ or ‘isn’t this funny?’ or ‘I love this so much.’ It’s very much me (Vanegas, personal interview, August 20, 2008).

This allows the blogger to inject his or her individual identity and worldview into the blog not only as a way to define the approach to celebrity culture, but also to make it more readable and entertaining. Brendon, like the other bloggers, points out that humor is central to gossip blogging. He says:

I don’t pretend to be a reporter or anything like that. I don’t pretend to have sources or like any of this is like I’m breaking some story. I’m just trying to write something funny and try to be entertaining and the stories are just the springboard, you know, something to base a joke on (Brendon, personal interview, July 22, 2008).

However, he also blogs under a pseudonym and though he tries to write what he thinks is funny, he says, “I don’t want the page to be about me…The page isn’t me. The page isn’t supposed to be about me. It’s supposed to be about celebrities and jokes and pictures” (ibid). This is very different from the other bloggers in my sample, who see their blog as an extension of themselves. Yet all these blogs exemplify the distinction between celebrity gossip blogs and online versions of print celebrity media forms. Celebrity gossip blogs are not simply compendiums of gossip items taken from other, more journalistic, sources, but a gossip talk style conversation about celebrity culture that foregrounds the blogger’s voice and uses that talk to create a sense of connection between
blogger and reader. Since the same sources inform all the blogs, it is the commentary and perspective on celebrity offered by the blogger that draws the audience rather than claims to exclusive or breaking information.

The importance of the blogger’s voice to the blog speaks to their role as the primary producer of meaning through their commentary and the ideological projects that are behind such meaning making practices. Since blogs are reactive, they draw their audiences based upon the perspective on celebrity culture they present. Molly says:

I think that’s what makes blogs fun, and that’s what makes people loyal to certain blogs and certain bloggers because you feel like you want to know what Molly feels about that or what Bill from Egotastic feels about that. So you actually feel like you know the person instead of just dry (Goodson, personal interview, May 27, 2007).

Like the columnists who inserted their own voice and selves into their columns, bloggers write as if in conversation with the reader, using gossip to make meaning through the celebrity image. The two clearest examples of this are YBF blogger Natasha and Jezebel editor Anna, as each run a blog with an explicit appeal to a particular ideological viewpoint that stems from their personal identities and views. YBF exclusively covers black celebrity culture, including celebrities from film, television, music, and sports, though Natasha does also cover Latino or Asian-American celebrities, though less frequently than black celebrities. If a white celebrity appears at all, which itself is extremely rare, it is only in reference to a black celebrity or black celebrity event. This is an explicit move to increase the visibility of black celebrity culture, which she felt was being left out of “mainstream” gossip blogs and, more importantly, to do so in a positive and affirming way. She says her blog focuses on:
the fabulous side [of celebrity culture]… and more positive. And of course I talk about, you know, foolywang and the ridiculousness that people do…But it’s all in fun…I also take a lot of social responsibility [for what I post]…Anything that’s just 100 percent negative or 100 percent disrespectful to a whole entire group, especially a group that I fit into as a black woman, is just unacceptable [and I won’t post it]. The best way to combat ignorance is to completely ignore it (Eubanks, personal interview, July 23, 2008).

Her posts serve to maintain this perspective that celebrates black celebrity culture and pokes gentle fun at some of its ridiculous aspects in ways that still reaffirm the beauty and value of black culture.

Similarly, Jezebel provides a forum for celebrating the pleasures of celebrity culture, particularly through a focus on fashion and glamour, but also openly critiquing it and the celebrity media industry for promoting racist, sexist, and heterosexist ideologies. The blog itself is not entirely devoted to celebrity culture, rather covers a range of political and popular culture issues through a decidedly feminist lens. However, celebrity content tends to be among the most popular posts in terms of page views and number of reader comments. Like YBF, Jezebel defines itself against the negative and oppressive readings of celebrity culture that permeate both the mainstream gossip media and mainstream gossip blogs. Anna says:

when I was thinking of what the site should be, and what I saw being marketed to young women, I wanted us to weigh in or at least acknowledge there is a large interest in celebrity stuff, but that it’s often presented in a very sexist and misogynistic way on what I would call the gossip sites, whether that be Perez Hilton or any other number of popular ones. So the only way we would differentiate ourselves…we would certainly weigh in on celebrity stuff and talk about it, but not by scrawling nasty things on pictures or making fun of the way a female celebrity looks in terms of her body (Holmes, personal interview, August 9, 2008).
Jezebel provides readers with the latest in celebrity news and gossip, but uses humor and mocking of celebrity culture to make larger arguments about the treatment of women in media and culture.

For example, Jezebel blogger Dodai wrote a weekly feature during my fieldwork, which has since been put on hiatus, called “Missdemeanors” in which other gossip bloggers were taken to task for racist, sexist, and/or homophobic comments and other “crimes against Womanity.” The following examples from the February 22, 2008 “Missdemeanors” illustrates how Jezebel uses humor to reveal its feminist standpoint:

**The Accused:** The unfortunately monikered Yeeeah! **The Crime:** Mocking Kirstie Alley’s weight struggles. **The Evidence:** ‘After working for Jenny Craig for the last three years, actress Kirstie Alley is ‘stepping down’ as the spokesperson for the weight loss company. Translation: her fat ass got fired... She's also grateful for KFC's big box variety meal and Sam's Club bucket o' bread pudding. And those Fresh Bath-Bathing Wipes for those days you're too fat to bend over in the shower.’ Newsflash: Crass≠Funny. **The Sentence:** Carry around an extra 75 lbs. of bodyweight for 30 days while simultaneously going without hot water for 30 days. Enjoy!

**The Accused:** Hollywood Tuna. **The Crime:** Suggesting petite actress Natalie Portman needs breast implants. **The Evidence:** ‘Natalie, on the other hand, still has some work to do. Surgical work that is. Yes, she's flat and I know it's not politically correct to talk to about a girl's shortcomings, but if she's not going to make an effort to show off what she does have - that being her ass - then just stay home!’ So! Women have two choices: Get elective, dangerous, possibly life threatening surgery or stay home. What a wonderful world. **The Sentence:** An excruciating dental procedure sans anesthetic, while being forced to watch Natalie's shitty movie *Where The Heart Is*. Open wide! (Stewart, February 22, 2008)

The comments section on this post, as with other celebrity posts, tend to reinforce this framing and readers engage in further recognition of the problems of popular culture while still participating in it. The bloggers of Jezebel and YBF explicitly position themselves as alternative to what they see as the problematic nature of mainstream gossip.
blogs, and invite readers to share this world view or, at least, to use gossip talk as a means to create about these issues in a respectful way.

The remaining bloggers certainly use their voice to frame celebrity culture through particular ideological lenses and make larger social meanings through celebrity gossip. For example, Perez’s efforts to out closeted gay celebrities, as previously discussed, reflects his own personal identity as an out and proud gay man and his belief that homosexuality is not shameful. However, others in the gay community suggest this approach does not help the movement or public perception of homosexuality. Kim Ficera, contributing writer for AfterEllen.com, a lesbian-oriented entertainment blog, says, “although Hilton talks a good game, saying that closeted Hollywood celebrities are hypocrites who, as public figures, deserve to be exposed, his delivery sucks. Why sabotage the validity of his argument by being mean and immature?” (qtd. in Raezler, 2009). Similarly, Trent from PITNB suggests gay identity can be relevant to blogs in a different way. He says:

I don’t do outing stories because I feel like for me, it wasn’t like that huge of a deal, but I know that being gay, depending on where you live, can be a life or death situation, whether it’s with your family or with your community. And everyone’s struggle is their own struggle, so I would never ever want to impose any sort of undue hurt on someone who’s going through that. So I don’t do that sort of thing (Vanegas, personal interview, August 20, 2008).

He will post paparazzi photos of gay celebrities and couples, but only mentions their sexuality if they are publicly out. Furthermore, unlike PerezHilton’s unregulated comments section that are routinely filled with homophobic slurs, many of which are directed at Perez himself, Trent will remove comments and ban users who use such defamatory language.
Many of the ideological frameworks available on gossip blogs tend to be much less explicitly stated, reflecting the ways in which ideology functions as a “commonsense” understanding of the world. In addition to outing celebrities under the guise of a pro-gay agenda, Perez also perpetuates misogynistic views of women, routinely calling female celebrities “bitches” or “sluts” in the name of humor and entertainment. He says:

Do I really think [teenage pop singer] Miley [Cyrus] is a slut? No. But I am going to call her one because it's fun! I don't claim to be objective. I don't really believe everything I write. What I write is an exaggeration of what I believe. It's heightened reality. I write a lot of things just to piss people off or get a laugh. I'm not The New York Times. I'm Perez Hilton (qtd. in Denizet-Lewis, 2009).

Though he may not claim a specific ideological stance, the fact that gossip about celebrities has historically been a site of social meaning making and negotiation of social and cultural norms means blogs and blog gossip are deeply implicated in the creation and maintenance of such ideological norms. In the next chapter, I do a close reading of a particular gossip story across the blogs in my sample in order to illustrate how each blog engages its ideological standpoint in the production of gossip talk and how the audience is involved in the production of meaning through gossip talk within the framework offered by the blogger.
CHAPTER 6
READING THE CELEBRITY BODY THROUGH GOSSIP: ASHLEE SIMPSON-WENTZ AND THE “BABY BUMP WATCH”

In his pioneering work on stardom, Richard Dyer (1986) stresses that the star is an intertextual sign “made up of screen roles and obviously stage-managed public appearances, and also of images of the manufacture of that ‘image’ and of the real person who is the site or occasion of it” (pp. 7-8). Merging semiotic and sociological approaches, Dyer recognizes the importance of intertextual discourses in the construction of star images, but suggests the tension between the glamorous persona on screen and the ordinary life of the “real” person is the primary way stars articulate the notion of the individual in modern society. However, in contemporary media stardom, as Geraghty (2000) contends, the core of the star’s image has been displaced, and well-known individuals appear in and are made meaningful through a wider range of media sources that focus on the private with little or no discussion of the public performance of talent that brought the star into the public eye.

The notion of intertextuality remains central, but in the age of reality television, paparazzi cameras and gossip blogs, the category of fame has shifted away from historical conceptions of stardom which “emphasiz[ed] a balance between the site of fictional performance and life outside” in favor of discourses of media-produced “celebrity…whose fame rest overwhelmingly on what happens outside the sphere of their work and who is famous for having a lifestyle” (ibid, pp. 185-187). Though the public performance or “talent” that initially brought the individual into the public eye always remains tied to her image, the extratextual focus on the private life of celebrities, primarily through gossip, has become the main locus of stardom in contemporary.
celebrity culture. For contemporary celebrity-watching audiences, “it does not matter for
gossip how celebrities got there, or even how they manage to stay there, but how they
behave once they’re there” (Gamson, 1994, p. 175). I here examine the “gossip game”
known as the celebrity “baby bump watch” as an entry into the construction, circulation,
and reception of the celebrity image.

**Gossip Games and the “Private” Celebrity**

Gossip media, such as tabloids and, their latter day incarnations, online gossip
blogs, have played a crucial role in the shift away from the public performances or talent-
based claims to fame of the individuals covered by offering “access to and celebration of
intimate information from a variety of texts and sources,” thus further blurring the line
between the private and public individual that comprises the image (Geraghty, 2000, p.
189). For these extratextual sources, Gamson (1994) says, “what’s important is not only
the opportunity to ‘know’ things’ about people but the activities of discussion,
storytelling, interpretation, judgment” (p. 176). In other words, gossip is not simply
about the pursuit of the real celebrity; rather it is a process of narrativizing and judging
the contrast between the public and private celebrity image. Gamson (1994) defines
gossip as an active engagement with celebrity culture that takes the form of a game in
which the public and private selves are negotiated. Most audiences do not accept the
celebrity as they are presented in the media, recognizing that the controlled façade of the
public individual is generally highly constructed. Audiences are active because they pick
and choose elements of the image that work for them, finding pleasure in the process of
intertextual negotiation. Thus, the gossip game does not rest on straightforward belief,
rather the negotiation of “truth” and “fiction” that emerge through the blurring of the private and public celebrity image.

An increasingly wide range of celebrity media texts offer the audience the chance to see behind the mask of celebrity, promising uncontrolled access to the private as evidence of the “real” celebrity. These texts overwhelmingly rely upon the paparazzi photograph as a point of access to the (purportedly) unguarded and unauthorized private moment of the celebrity, again emphasizing the private self as the locus of fame. Margaret Schwartz (2008) suggests “the paparazzi are powerful agents” in the construction of this new private as public celebrity image not simply for their ability to catch the star in a potentially scandalous moment, but because the vast majority of images circulated reject the extraordinary and glamorous activities of the stars in favor of the ordinary and banal activities of the private individual (para. 20). She argues “the new paparazzi culture…move[s] this ‘intimate, everyday’ knowledge out of the interview or magazine space, and circulate[s] it widely online and via multiple shots of what are otherwise extraordinarily banal activities” (para. 25). The unauthorized and uncontrolled nature of these images makes the star even more ‘real’ to the audience precisely because it stands in contrast to the controlled public image, offering game players a point of contrast. They humanize the celebrity as someone “just like us” while simultaneously holding the star up as an exemplar of what it means to be an individual in contemporary society (Dyer, 1986).

The immediacy and interactivity of the internet have, “thrown into question, or have heightened, the relationship between the authentic and the manufactured, the real and simulated” (Holmes & Redmond, 2006b, pp. 211-212). On one hand, the constant
surveillance made possible by new media technologies seems to suggest that the celebrity can no longer hide behind a mask of public performance. Unlike the controlled glimpses of the private life of stars during the studio era, the nature of contemporary celebrity is such that “there is no longer a ‘private’ realm that the famous person can retreat to” outside the panoptic gaze of the paparazzi camera (ibid, p. 210). At the same time, the increasing media attention to the private over the public/talent based conception of fame suggests that celebrity has “never seemed so manufactured, media-produced, and simulated” (ibid, p. 209). The decreasing importance of talent to the construction of the star image has opened the field of available celebrities to a wide range of individuals whose claim to fame is tenuously, if at all, connected to any sort of talent or public performance, and is instead grounded in media interest in their private lives.

Yet what ties these two disparate views of fame together is the rhetoric of authenticity in the celebrity image. Is the celebrity like she appears, even in her private life, or is it all an act? Dyer (1991) says “authenticity is established or constructed in media texts by the use of markers that indicate lack of control, lack of premeditation and privacy” (p. 137). This would seem to indicate that paparazzi images of the unguarded and private celebrity work as markers of this authenticity for celebrity watching audiences. However, contemporary audiences are increasingly aware of the media manipulation and manufacture of celebrity, and do not automatically read such private images as evidence of the real celebrity. Dyer says, “corroboration that a star is really like she/he appears to be may work, but may be read as further manipulation” (ibid, emphasis in original). In the case of the baby bump watch, the body is read not only as a marker of truth (i.e. whether or not she is pregnant) but serves to locate that truth within
the rhetoric of authenticity in which the star appears to authentically embody the values her image signifies.

**Celebrity Gossip and the (Gendered) Body**

Scholarly approaches to stardom have historically been rooted in the body, as it is the physical form through which audiences create and negotiate meaning. In his influential work, *Heavenly Bodies*, Dyer (1986) says:

stars not only bespeak our society’s investment in the private as the real, but also often tell us how the private is understood to be the recovery of the natural ‘given’ of human life, our bodies (p. 13).

Yet this is always a mediated body, as our engagements with celebrity come primarily through publicly circulated images (photographic and filmic) rather than in-the-flesh encounters. The rise of “the digital and virtual technologies” in the contemporary media have “opened up the number of spaces where the star or celebrity can be found out, re-written, and seen in the flesh as they really are,” but also reveal the ways in which the public star image is itself a construction (Holmes & Redmond, 2006c, p.4, emphasis in original). As celebrity-watching audiences become increasingly savvy about the production and manufacture of celebrity images across these media spaces, “the body takes its place as the ultimate visually verifiable realm of the private” simultaneously revealing a truth about the private life of the celebrity and illustrating the ways in which the public image itself is manufactured (Knee, 2006, p. 169, emphasis in original).

In his analysis of the unauthorized images of celebrity bodies that fill celebrity skin magazines, Knee (2006) argues the celebrity body acts as

a crucial site of authenticity, as that which reveals the truths hidden by publicist-controlled facial iconography and clothing…the body is significant not only for its erotic value but as an arena of potentially revelatory non-control, which can provide insight into what a celebrity is literally made of (pp. 169-170)
The body thus plays an important role in the gossip game approach to celebrity culture. It stands in as evidence, often counteracting the controlled discourses that historically shape celebrity images. The paparazzi photograph of the “off-guard, unkempt, and unready” celebrity body shows us what she is really like by stripping away the glamour and control of the celebrity façade (Holmes, 2005). Holmes and Redmond (2006c) say “if one gets to see the star or celebrity body as flawed (fat, spotty, wrinkled), then one is supposedly getting a more natural or unmediated picture of them” (p. 4). Within the gossip game of searching for the real celebrity, the body acts as a crucial piece of evidence to be read and negotiated by celebrity-watching audiences.

A closer analysis of this emphasis on the body as the point of access to the real individual behind the celebrity façade reveals the ways in which contemporary discourses on celebrity are deeply gendered. Female stars have historically functioned as a site of spectacle and to-be-looked-at-ness that foregrounds their bodies as the site of meaning-making in textual sources, such as films (Mulvey, 1975). In the shift to the extratextual emphasis that marks celebrity culture of the late 20th century, Geraghty (2000) observes that “the common association in popular culture between women and the private sphere of personal relationships and domesticity fits with the emphasis, in the discourse of ‘celebrity,’ on the private life and leisure activity of the star” (p. 196). Female stars are “particularly likely to be seen as celebrities whose working life is of less interest and worth than their personal life” and therefore more likely to be the object of the gossip game focused on uncovering, and judging, the real person behind the façade (ibid, p. 196, 187).
Male celebrities, such as Tom Cruise or Mel Gibson, are not completely exempt from the scrutiny of the gossip media, but even a casual glance at a magazine rack or gossip blog page illustrates that it is stories about female celebrities that drive the gossip genre. Jennifer Davies (2005) reports that the players in the love triangle between Jennifer Aniston, Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie appeared on the cover of *In Touch* magazine more than 33 times in 2005, and most of these appearances pitted Aniston and Jolie in feminine competition over Pitt (p. C1). Britney Spears, whose recent existence in the public eye has been framed almost exclusively in terms of the trials and tribulations of her private life, “comprised up to twenty percent of [paparazzi agencies’] coverage” in 2007 (Grigoriadis, 2007, p. 49). That same year, Perez boasted “[Britney] is by far the top person I have written about on my Web site, ever” (qtd. in ibid). All this attention to the private lives of female celebrities elevates women into the public sphere, and “gives them a voice and a platform [audiences] don’t have, [but] it also constantly polices them and their femininity” as the price for such public visibility (Douglas, 2010, p. 243).

The hegemonic struggle around questions of femininity is apparent throughout celebrity media’s coverage of the personal lives of female celebrities, but is particularly marked in the constant scrutiny of the female body as the site of the authentic celebrity and, more perniciously, as a marker of cultural value. By drawing attention to the private as the site of authenticity and truth, the celebrity body serves as a concrete anchor for social ideologies worked out through gossip talk. Holmes and Redmond (2006a) argue:

> the famous body is often the medium through which dominant ideological messages about gender, race, class and sexuality are transmitted. The body of the star or celebrity is often implicated in the construction of hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity; in stereotypical ideas about racial difference and Otherness; and in normative assertions about sexual desire and class relations (p. 124).
The female celebrity body is positioned in gossip media as a site of visual spectacle that is policed for authenticity of both the individual star and the values she embodies. This focus on the female body as site of spectacle and site of truth is particularly evident in the recent gossip game of speculation about a celebrity’s potential pregnancy known as the baby bump watch. I here explore the baby bump watch as a particular symptom of the gendered discourses of contemporary celebrity culture tied to the corporeal body as a site of authenticity and social meaning making.

**The Baby Bump Watch**

Celebrity mothers and celebrity families have long been a staple of the celebrity media industry as both a means to emphasize the private individual behind the celebrity façade as the authentic celebrity and to connect that image to larger social norms about gender, sexuality, and motherhood. McLean (2001b) points out that gossip media discourses surrounding celebrity pregnancy scandals, such as the Ingrid Bergman’s out of wedlock pregnancy in 1949, have historically illustrated “what happens when women violate social ‘norms’” of proper female sexuality (p. 164). More recently, in their book *The Mommy Myth*, Douglas and Michaels (2004) point to the proliferation of the “celebrity mom profile” in women’s magazines in the 1990s as an expression of hegemonic ideals of motherhood through the celebrity image (p. 113). In these profiles, which continue to be a staple of celebrity media, celebrity moms embody a highly romanticized and idealized vision of the maternal that frames motherhood as the pinnacle of “natural” feminine achievement and chastises, both implicitly and explicitly, women who do not live up to this ideal. They say:
celebrity moms loved their kids unconditionally all the time; they loved being mothers all the time; they yearned for babies if they didn’t have them and yearned for more if they did. They had everything under control and their children were perfect because celebrity moms always did everything right. The celebrity mom profile, then, offered a symbolic, fantasy response to the very real deficiencies mothers experienced in everyday life (p. 116).

Though these profiles often include discussion of how celebrity moms lost their “baby weight,” a clear connection to the body, the overwhelming emphasis is on the (idealized) post-birth mothering practices or the social role of the mother as the point of access to the private real celebrity. In both the pregnancy scandal and the celebrity mom profile, the pregnant female celebrity signifies an idealized (or the violation of an idealized) view of socially constructed ideas of gender, sexuality, and motherhood for their predominantly female audiences.

Rebecca Traister (2004) notes that the 21st century media coverage of celebrity mothers continues to idealize the social role of the mother by fetishizing the visibly pregnant body. She claims:

the big four entertainment weeklies -- People, Us Weekly, Star, and In Touch -- have read like high-gloss versions of ‘What to Expect When You're Expecting,’ if that childbearing classic were littered with cheerful arrows pointing to the ‘bumps!’ on otherwise lithe famous bodies. The bumps turn to bellies bulging out of Juicy Couture waistbands before our eyes. Heavily pregnant stars get gussied up and lumber precariously down awards-show red carpets…Stretch mark for stretch mark, the gestations of the rich and famous are more intimately dissected than the gravidity of our own closest girlfriends (para. 2).

Traister labels the glut of images of pregnant or potentially celebrities as “pregnancy porn,” suggesting that such images work to increase the audience’s sense of intimacy with the star in her most private moment by focusing on her body as the point of access to her ‘real’ self. The baby bump watch is, I argue, rooted in the historical role of the celebrity mother/family in gossip media but engages the characteristics of new media,
particularly the emphasis on visual images and interactivity, as a means to construct new discourses about female bodies through the celebrity image.

The “baby bump” refers to the small bulge in the belly typical of early pregnancy, though the term is certainly still applied to women in the later stages of pregnancy as well. The true power of the bump is its role in the “baby bump watch.” The bump is evidence, an undeniable truth written on the body that reveals a pregnancy before an official announcement from the celebrity. To claim a celebrity has a bump is, on one hand, to challenge the carefully controlled production of her public persona. At the same time, the bump watch is also rooted in the idea that only a pregnant woman could justifiably have such a bump. Either way, to prioritize the search for a bump as the way to read the celebrity image reinforces the celebrity media’s role as, according to Douglas (2010), “persistent, unforgiving primers on what constitutes successful femininity, and what does not” (p. 246). Audiences are invited to scrutinize the proffered images of female celebrities for any signs of a baby bump under the suggestion that any curves or weight on a female celebrity’s (ideally) thin frame, or her decision to wear clothes that are either too loose or too tight, can be interpreted as visual proof of her pregnancy or inappropriate weight gain.

In one reading of the bump, I argue, the mother’s body is desexualized in the sense that it is preoccupied with creating life. The celebrity mother-to-be may still be fashionable and attractive, as a stylish and glamorous pregnancy is an important corollary of the emergence of the celebrity baby bump, but is no longer read as a sexual object, particularly if she is safely contained within a heterosexual relationship (e.g. has a husband or “baby daddy” who is firmly in the picture). On the other hand, the baby
bump is more typically read as evidence of feminine excess. If the celebrity is actually pregnant but not sufficiently contained within a heterosexual relationship, her bump is evidence of excessive sexuality. If she is not pregnant, but still read as having a bump, her body no longer fits the idealized slender body, indicating excessive appetites and feminine failure. Using the body as an anchor for these discourses, the bump watch works as an indicator of authenticity, revealing the real celebrity beneath the controlled surface while simultaneously policing exactly what the appropriate feminine surface should look like.

**Playing the Game: The Bump Watch on Gossip Blogs**

Though it appears in both print and online media forms, baby bump watch is a type of gossip game particularly well suited to the visual emphasis and interactive nature of celebrity gossip blogs. I do not suggest that blogs created the baby bump watch as a gossip game only to be imitated by the print magazines. However, several key characteristics of gossip blogs, as discussed in chapter five, are particularly well suited to the baby bump watch as a gossip game. I argue the bump watch relies on the three key elements in order to function as a gossip game: reading the private through existing knowledge of the public persona of the celebrity (i.e. a celebrity does not become famous by being pregnant, rather must already be a celebrity in some right in order to be considered an object of scrutiny for the bump watch game), policing of the body through scrutiny of visual images, and appeals to audience interactivity and participation in such scrutiny. I suggest the immediacy and interactivity/participation characteristic of new media forms of engagement with celebrity culture privileges the gossip game playing
mode of engagement with celebrity culture. Thus, the popularity of the bump watch as a gossip game is particularly tied to the popularity of the celebrity gossip blog.

**Celebrity Body as Evidence**

The bump watch begins with a visual image either as a catalyst for the gossip or as evidence of verbal rumors. That is, the bump watch may originate in an image where a celebrity “looks” pregnant, thus prompting bloggers and audiences to begin speculating, or images may be used to corroborate an existing rumor of a star’s pregnancy. Either way, the image is meant to offer visually verifiable proof of the truth about the star’s private life and pregnant body, often in contrast to her public denials of pregnancy. In one typical example of the baby bump watch in action, YBF blogger Natasha, published a picture of fashion designer and reality television star Kimora Lee Simmons on February 19, 2008 (Figure 11) with the following commentary:

> and typically I wouldn’t speculate the preggers rumors with no credible source to back it up, but that pic right there is extra reminiscent of J.Lo right before she made the official announcement none of us would have guessed on our own. </sarcasm> KiKi is officially on YBF Preggers Watch (Eubanks, February 19, 2008).

The idea that “preggers watch” is a game is reinforced by Natasha’s admission that she does not have a credible source *except for the picture itself* to support her claim that Kimora (often referred to as KiKi on this blog) is pregnant.
Furthermore, by comparing Kimora’s body to Jennifer Lopez’s (J. Lo) pregnant body, Natasha calls upon existing knowledge of visual images of other pregnant celebrities as evidence for this celebrity’s pregnancy. By drawing the comparison to Lopez’s bump watch, as opposed to a “mainstream” or white celebrity, Natasha also reinforces her gossip blog’s focus on celebrities of color. She invites readers to use this existing information and the new image to speculate on the rumor or to participate in the baby bump watch simply by studying the new image of Kimora and, for some more active audience members, posting their own thoughts on her potential pregnancy in the comments section. Though my discussion of readers’ engagement is limited to the comments from baby bump watch posts, it is important to recognize that any reader of such a post may participate in the bump watch by scrutinizing the proffered image as part of their own reading practices, even if they choose not to use the comments sections.
YBF and its readers participated in the gossip game by scrutinizing pictures of Kimora for evidence of the baby bump. As Kimora is not a top tier or “A-list” celebrity, the bump speculation was relatively muted and infrequent, indicating that existing star power plays into the intensity of the bump watch. YBF did not post a new picture every day, but when new photos of Kimora were published they were explicitly policed for visual evidence of pregnancy. In other words, during this time, Kimora only appeared on the blog in the context of the bump watch. Kimora stayed on YBF preggers watch until she officially announced her pregnancy a month later, a move that officially ended the game (though certainly not the judgment of Kimora as a mother) by confirming the speculation. Even after the bump watch game itself ends, comments about the pregnant celebrity’s growing bump typically continue until she gives birth, at which time a new game begins around photographs of the baby, as previously discussed.

In the case of YBF, this policing was not malicious or mean spirited, but clearly aimed at scrutinizing the body. On March 5, 2008, Natasha published several red carpet photos of Kimora at the premiere of Never Back Down, a film starring her boyfriend (and presumed father of her child) Djimon Hansou beneath a headline stating “Couples Fab: Djimon & Kimora Are Still on Preggers Watch” (Eubanks, March 5, 2008). This

19 As with all celebrities, Kimora’s image is marked by multiple discourses, including an existing emphasis on her as a celebrity mother. She and former husband, hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons, have two daughters, Aoki and Ming, and the girls have appeared in advertisements and in runway shows for Kimora’s fashion lines. Her marriage to the much older Simmons as well as her association with the fashion industry and her own conspicuous consumption also lead many audiences to read her as a “gold digger.” Though these discourses certainly inform any reading of her image, I here am interested in the visual policing of her body as an example of how the gossip game of the bump watch is played by audiences. Though they may draw on such discourses to shape the meaning of her as a celebrity mother, I am here interested in the process of determining whether or not she is pregnant through the scrutiny of the image.
explicitly reminds the readers why we are looking at pictures of Kimora, and invites them to continue to police her body for signs of pregnancy. After the last preggers watch photo published before Kimora officially announced her pregnancy (Figure 12), Natasha writes, “so are we still saying chick just ate a cheeseburger so that’s why she’s a lil’ thicker than usual around the middle? For the second week in a row? I’m just sayin’” (ibid).

![Kimora Lee Simmons on YBF Preggers Watch, March 5, 2008](image)

The readers take up this invitation in the comments section, discussing whether or not she is pregnant in the same manner. Unlike other mainstream gossip blogs, as will be discussed below, Natasha and her readers do not rigidly hold female celebrities to a standard of beauty defined by a slender ideal. This is in part due to the blog’s focus on black celebrity culture and explicit rejection of white standards of beauty as the only acceptable norm. Furthermore, Natasha also works to “bring a more positive aspect” to
celebrity gossip and to be “different than most [bloggers] out there that are…as cruel as possible and just hide behind [their] keyboards” (Eubanks, personal interview, July 23, 2008). Thus, though the commenters agree she looks “thicker” than usual, it is the fact that she looks so “happy” that makes them think she must actually be pregnant. Despite a more positive stance, they nevertheless scrutinize the image and her body as part of the gossip game of YBF preggers watch.

**Celebrity Body as Visual Spectacle**

Though Kimora Lee Simmons was, in fact, pregnant when the preggers watch speculation began, it is important to recognize that many of the celebrities subjected to the baby bump watch in the media are not actually pregnant, indicating the power of the bump watch as a mode of policing a range of gendered ideologies, such as acceptable standards of beauty and feminine behavior, through the female celebrity body. Bordo (1990), following the Foucauldian notion of “docile bodies,” sees contemporary discourses idealizing the slender body as “function[ing] within a modern, ‘normalizing’ machinery of power…that functions to reproduce gender relations” (p. 85). Thus the bump watch is not just, or even primarily, about motherhood. The bump watch positions the female celebrity body as the embodiment of idealized slenderness and uses the potential of a bump as the means to police that body. Should the celebrity not actually be pregnant, the body policing of the bump watch recuperates wayward female subjects through ridicule and shame. If she is pregnant, her impending motherhood may be celebrated by audiences, but the body continues to be policed for signs of “proper” weight gain and, after the birth, weight loss.
But it also foregrounds the female body (whether actually pregnant or not) as a site of spectacle that reveals the truth about the celebrity and a visual catalyst for the gossip game and its attendant social meaning making. The bump is, I suggest, the ultimate marker of the contemporary emphasis on the private celebrity because it makes public what is inherently a private, inner process. That the celebrity image is already wrapped up in the discourses between the public and private self makes the bump watch a useful means for audiences to search for the real person behind the celebrity façade through the gossip game. The bump is a public display of the private life of the celebrity, and the game is to expose this truth within the existing knowledge of the celebrity as a means of interpreting the bump (i.e. is she pregnant or just fat; is the pregnancy real or a publicity stunt).

Furthermore, in order to refute the claim that she is hiding a baby bump, the female celebrity must put her body on visual display in a way to dispel those rumors, reinforcing Geraghty’s claim of female celebrity as site of private-as-public spectacle. In other words, the female body itself is the site of visual spectacle that is policed for authenticity of both the individual star and the values she embodies. For example, in late February 2008, many blogs began speculating that actress Kate Hudson was pregnant after multiple paparazzi photos surfaced of the typically svelte actress wearing baggy clothing in public (Figure 13, right image). PopSugar speculated that her “new baggy wardrobe” was “getting suspicious” even though she “hadn’t had a serious boyfriend since her days with [actor/comedian] Dax [Shepard], but that doesn’t rule out a surprise pregnancy” (PopSugar, February 21, 2008). This sort of framing confirms that the bump watch is not simply about the policing the body, but about policing the sexuality of the
potentially pregnant celebrity as Hudson’s lack of a committed partner is a potential site of scandal should she be pregnant. Though an out-of-wedlock pregnancy would not be inconsistent with Hudson’s “free spirit” persona, it nevertheless opens space for the judgment of female celebrities who engage in such behaviors as part of the practice of reading gossip blogs.

This framing of the bump watch is evident in this February 21, 2008 Pop Sugar post that included a poll for readers to vote on if they thought Hudson was pregnant:

**Do You Think Kate Hudson Is Pregnant?**

- Yes — She’s clearly trying to cover a bump!
- No — Maybe she just put on a few extra pounds.
- Maybe — But who is the father?
- Other — I’ll tell you below in comments

[Vote]

The commentary for each choice limits the meaning of the bump watch to excessive bodies or excessive sexuality. The commenters did not universally agree with these framings, and, indeed, some offered resistant readings, indicating that the gossip game is also marked by an active struggle over meaning. For example, “stephley” rejects the dominant reading by both Pop Sugar blogger Molly and the other commenters, asking, “could we stop analyzing every famous woman's tummy? It's really creepy and sexist how so many magazines and websites zero in on them” (comment on ibid). Though some agreed with this statement, most were content to continue the game of the bump watch using the visual evidence to support their belief that she was pregnant and that her single status opens space for judgment of her sexual behaviors. It was only when several blogs, including Pop Sugar, published series of paparazzi photos of a red bikini-clad
Hudson poolside in Miami on March 3, 2008 (Figure 13, left image) that the game ended because her body looked like it “should” (PopSugar, March 3, 2008). In both images, Hudson’s body was the object of scrutiny and served as evidence to forward or stop the gossip game of the baby bump watch.

These two examples of the baby bump watch illustrate the process of the game and the primary role of the visual image as evidence that propels the game, keeping the body as the focus of the gossip. This roots the bump watch firmly in the realm of the private, and reads these celebrities through their private lives with barely any attention to their performing selves. I argue the emphasis on the private and physical self in the bump watch speaks to the gendered notion of media-produced celebrity, as subjecting the female to the baby bump watch foregrounds her private life as the primary reason for her fame and as evidence of her authentic self. Focusing on the baby bump watch centered on Ashlee Simpson in April 2008, I will analyze and compare the coverage of this gossip story across the gossip blogs in my sample to see how visual images of Simpson’s body were policed by bloggers and readers as well as the ideological meanings worked out.
through such images. Furthermore, I will discuss how emphasis on the private and physical self functions as the new locus of contemporary media based celebrity, particularly in the case of Simpson whose claims to talent based fame have historically been called into question.

**Reading Ashlee Simpson’s Star Image**

Gossip is based on broadening or negotiating existing knowledge about a star, so it is useful at this point to provide a brief overview of Ashlee Simpson’s star image, as her existing claims to fame play an important role in policing her bump as a sign of authentic celebrity and proper femininity. Though the public performance or “talent” that initially brought Ashlee into the public eye always remains tied to her image, the extratextual discourses on the her private life and related ruptures within her claims to talent have, as will become clear, become the primary markers of her celebrity status. Thus, her image provides an excellent illustration not only of the bump watch in action, but the way in which such private discourses work to structure fame in contemporary celebrity culture.

Ashlee Simpson began her career in 2002 as an actress, appearing for two seasons on the squeaky clean teen drama, *7th Heaven* (Mock, n.d.). Her good girl image was reinforced by the fact that she is the younger sister of established pop princess Jessica Simpson, whose own image, at this time, was firmly rooted in discourses of wholesomeness and nonthreatening girl-next-door sexuality. After leaving *7th Heaven*, Ashlee quickly made the transition to music. She released her first album in 2003, the recording of which was also documented in a reality television show (*The Ashlee Simpson Show*) on MTV (ibid). At this point, she attempted to adopt an “edgier” look
and persona by dying her hair black and embracing a more “punk” style in terms of her clothing and music. This worked to distance her from her sister’s image, though her “edginess” was clearly stylized and not particularly threatening—more Spice Girls girl power than Riot Grrl revolution. However, this distinction continues to inflect her image as a foil for her sister, whose good girl status and religious upbringing was much more central to shaping her early career. Jessica publicly discussed wearing a “purity ring” and that she was a virgin prior to her marriage to singer Nick Lachey in 2002, reinforcing the girl-next-door sexuality expressed in her music (Vineyard, n.d.). Ashlee’s shift was not a radical departure, as she certainly retained some good girl inflections, but, in particular, her lack of discussion of abstinence and virginity was in stark contrast to Jessica’s chaste public image.

Though she began as an actress, Ashlee is primarily recognized as a singer, having released “two multi-platinum albums that debuted back to back at the top of the charts, and collectively sold more than 4 million copies in the US alone” (Ashlee Simpson biography, n.d.). Despite her album sales, she tends to be regarded as a talentless singer whose existence in the public eye is the result of her father/manager’s relentless attempts to secure fame for both his daughters at nearly any cost. Her media-produced, rather than talent-based, celebrity image was solidified by two events in late 2004 and early 2005. First, a technical snafu revealed Ashlee to be lip synching during a Saturday Night Live appearance and she was widely lambasted in the press not only for lip-syncing, but for attempting to claim she was only doing so because she was suffering from acid reflux (Walls 2004). Shortly after the SNL incident, her attempt to sing live at
the Orange Bowl half time show resulted in a “screechy-off-key performance” that only reinforced the notion that she has no real talent (Graham, 2005).

Despite these scandals, she continues to perform publicly and release albums. It is particularly noteworthy that her third album, *Bittersweet World*, was set to release in late April 2008, around the same time she became the focus of the baby bump watch. Nevertheless, the core of her celebrity is rooted not in her talent or public performances as a singer, but in media coverage of her private life—who she is dating, her father’s influence on her career and life, and her rumored, but never explicitly confirmed, plastic surgery. She shrugs off these rumors and public blunders with coy denials that further encourage a reading of her image as constructed and the result of media attention. For example, in May 2006, she “laughed off” rumors that she had a nose job, saying “maybe. Who knows?!” (qtd. in Silverman, 2006). She has never officially confirmed or denied the surgery, telling *Us Weekly* in 2008 that “as long as people have two eyes” they could make their own judgments about her alleged nose job, a move that explicitly foregrounds attention to her body as a primary site of her fame, but one that has been obviously manipulated (qtd. in Bruce & O’Neill, 2008, p. 64).

This complicates the idea that audiences search the celebrity image for evidence of authenticity or that she is what she appears to be. In the case of Ashlee Simpson, most celebrity-watching audiences search her image for the lack of authenticity, for further evidence that her image, including the public display of her private life, is nothing but construction, a point which will be made clear in the discussion of her baby bump watch. Given the framing of Ashlee Simpson as a highly constructed and media-produced celebrity, examining her baby bump watch reveals two intersecting and increasingly
blurred discourses of the private and public central to the contemporary celebrity. The baby bump watch functions as a means to police her public body and also reinforces that the private is the primary way celebrities are made meaningful in contemporary society.

The Bump Watch Begins

Ashlee began dating Pete Wentz, bassist for the popular rock group Fall Out Boy, in late 2006 and the couple officially announced their engagement on April 9, 2008 via a blog post on Wentz’s own blog on music site friendsorenemies.com (Fleeman & Shelasky, 2008). Five days later on April 14, pregnancy rumors begin in earnest, based on reports from OK! and Us Weekly magazines. Pete Wentz vehemently denied the rumors to MTV News, saying “there is a witch hunt for people to be pregnant whenever they get engaged in Hollywood” (Montgomery, 2008). Simpson also denied the pregnancy during an appearance on MTV’s Total Request Live as part of the promotion of her new album, which was set to release on April 22. The fact that Ashlee was promoting an album at the time of the bump watch rumors led to speculation that both the marriage proposal and the pregnancy rumors were simply publicity stunts to garner media attention, a common reading of her image as constructed rather than authentic.

Nevertheless, the baby bump watch swung into full gear on the blogs even as the couple continued to publicly deny the rumors. All of the blogs in my sample cited tabloid reports regarding the pregnancy rumor, and posted numerous and frequently updated paparazzi images of Ashlee as an anchor for blogger/audience judgment of whether or not there is evidence of a bump. Rumors that the couple would wed within a month intensified the baby bump watch by providing further “proof” that she must, in fact, be pregnant. The couple did marry on May 17, 2008 and gave People magazine
exclusive photos of the ceremony and reception. No mention was made of any pregnancy rumors in the story, nor was there any denial or confirmation of these rumors, likely because of an official deal with the Simpson camp in exchange for the exclusive on the story (Laudadio & Wihlborg, 2008). However, the photos, particularly one of Ashlee and sister Jessica in which Jessica has her hand placed on Ashlee’s abdomen, quickly made their way across the internet. These photos were generally read as further evidence of the bump and that Ashlee was trying to milk the publicity, of both the marriage and the pregnancy, for all it was worth. Interestingly, paparazzi photos of Ashlee wearing a bikini on the beach during their honeymoon also surfaced on May 23, 2008. However, unlike the Kate Hudson bikini photos which were widely circulated across internet and the blogs in my sample, only Pop Sugar posted these photos during the bump watch. In the post accompanying the bikini photos, PopSugar claims that “we still can’t make our minds about whether or not there is a bump there,” as the still-thin Ashlee does look somewhat rounder than usual (PopSugar, May 23, 2008). At this point, the game had too much evidence to support the reading of her as pregnant to be refuted by this unconvincing public display of her body. Shortly after, on May 28, 2008, the couple officially announced 23-year-old Ashlee’s pregnancy (again on Wentz’s own blog). This officially ended the bump watch game, though the media scrutiny of her pregnancy continued, with less intensity, until their son was born the following November.

**Tracking the Bump Watch**

All of the blogs in my sample participated in the baby bump watch surrounding Ashlee Simpson to at least some degree. Some blogs, such as PerezHilton and Pop Sugar, who published 21 and 22 posts on this story, respectively, were much more
invested in this story and the bump watch game. PITNB published a total of 14 posts on this story, though many of them focused on Pete and Ashlee’s engagement and wedding rather than the pregnancy rumors. WWTDD published nine total posts and Jezebel published only eight, illustrating that these blogs were less invested, but nevertheless participated in and commented on the bump watch. This frequency of posting and interest in following this particular story is related to each blog’s overall approach to celebrity culture. This is most clearly seen in the fact that YBF did not participate in this particular bump watch, except for one short mention at the bottom of a roundup post filled with random gossip tidbits. YBF blogger Natasha writes:

and in non-YBF news, Us Weekly is confirming that Jessica Simpson’s 23 year old lil sis Ashlee is pregnant. Her 28 year old fiancé Pete Wentz of Fall Out Boy (they conveniently just got engaged last week) is indeed the daddy. Congrats to them if true (Eubanks, April 14, 2008).

No further discussion of the rumors, denials, and eventual confirmation appeared on the blog. That YBF did not participate in this particular baby bump watch is due to the fact that Ashlee Simpson and Pete Wentz are both white celebrities, and thus fall outside of the scope of the blog’s explicit focus on black celebrity culture. Though the blog did not take part in this particular bump watch, YBF does participate in the bump watch, or what Natasha calls “preggers watch,” as discussed above. This indicates that this gossip game is not confined to “mainstream” blogs, but is a mode of engagement that is seen across gossip media forms.

The frequency of posting itself does not reflect the way in which the game actually emerged on these blogs, nor the various meanings that circulated in the course of the game. For example, Pop Sugar, as previously discussed, is one of several blogs in the Sugar Network, which essentially functions as a women’s magazine. Blogs across the
network focus on stereotypically feminine interests, like fashion, dating, and babies, and this tone clearly extends into the coverage of celebrity culture. Indeed, the baby bump watch is a popular feature of the blog in general, as evidenced by the Kate Hudson discussion above. As is typical of gossip blogs, Pop Sugar relied on outside sources, such as *In Touch* and *People*, for the latest developments in the story, but always had a new paparazzi picture of Ashlee as the focus of the post and frequently ended posts by asking “do you think she is pregnant?” to prompt participation in the comments section. In fact, one Pop Sugar post written by blogger Molly was specifically dedicated to prompting discussion of this question (Goodson, April 16, 2008). After laying out recent developments in the story, including Pete’s denial and reports that the couple planned a May wedding, and posting yet another paparazzi picture of Ashlee, Pop Sugar readers were invited to vote in the following poll on the April 16 post:

Do You Think Ashlee Simpson Is Pregnant?

- Yes — This wouldn’t still be going on if she wasn’t.
- No — Pete said no, these “sources” have no idea what they’re talking about.
- Who cares — She’s just trying to get press before her album comes out!

Vote

This post and the poll usefully illustrate the ways in which the visual image of Ashlee’s potentially pregnant body works within existing knowledge about contemporary media-produced celebrity to promote a gossip game aimed at discovering the truth about the private life of a public celebrity. These categories intersect and blur, but remain anchored in the body of the female celebrity.
Pete Wentz’s claim that there is a “witch hunt” for pregnant celebrities in Hollywood is not completely unfounded, as the bump watch surrounding Ashlee Simpson did begin as soon as the couple announced their engagement on April 9, 2008. PITNB was the first to post the engagement announcement that evening, though the story itself is credited to *In Touch* magazine and the official announcement from Wentz’s blog. PerezHilton.com posted the story later that night, with Pop Sugar, Jezebel, and WWTDD all posting the story the next morning. Though Pop Sugar and WWTDD did not actually mention any pregnancy speculation in their engagement posts, all of the other blogs certainly did. In fact, Perez made it the central way of reading the engagement news. Perez posted a picture of the couple, whom he refers to as AshWentzday in the common practice of creating portmanteau names of celebrity couples (see Brangelina or TomKat), and announces “**AshWentzday** are engaged! Let the pregnancy conspiracy theories begin!!!!” before providing details from the *In Touch* story, which did not include any mention of pregnancy rumors (Hilton, April 9, 2008). Perez prioritizes attention to Ashlee’s body even before any specific stories alleging she is even pregnant surface. Perez prides himself on being the first to break celebrity gossip, so it is likely that his speculation was simply an anticipation of possible gossip narratives, including those of his own invention. PITNB and Jezebel both mention the pregnancy rumors, attributed in both cases to an *Us Weekly* story, but also suggest there is no evidence to support it, even in the images accompanying the text. Trent from PITNB notes that some are speculating the sudden engagement announcement may be related to a pregnancy, but notes “there is really NO BASIS for the pregnancy rumor but you know someone had to throw it out
there” (Vanegas, April 9, 2008). The bump watch has become such a common gossip game that bloggers and audiences anticipate it, as the Kate Hudson and Ashlee Simpson examples both illustrate. Furthermore, that the regime of slenderness is so rigid for female celebrities, blogs can use most any visual image to support it.

In this early stage of the gossip game, the publicly visible body of the celebrity is scrutinized for the visually verifiable evidence of the private details of her life, embodied in the bump or lack thereof. Though rumors continued to circulate and the couple and their publicists continue to deny the pregnancy, paparazzi photos of Ashlee at LAX airport on April 15 (Figure 14) really set the game in motion. This photo is framed as the bearer of undeniable truth about Ashlee’s pregnancy, in contrast to the hidden truths, or at least thinly veiled publicist denials.

![Figure 14: Ashlee Simpson at LAX on PerezHilton, April 15, 2008](image)

As Barthes (1977) suggests, the “photograph is not an isolated structure; it is in communication with at least one other structure, namely the text” that loads the image
with meaning (p. 15). This is particularly true in the baby bump watch, as the LAX photograph has no relation to the idea of pregnancy until the text (including captions or photo manipulations by the blogger) imbues it with such meaning by calling up existing knowledge and rumors. The blogger’s framing of the photo through his commentary is thus crucial to making it meaningful and to starting the gossip game. For example, PerezHilton published the photos in a post titled “We See No Bump (Yet)” in which he draws a stick figure baby and a question mark next to Ashlee in the LAX photo (Figure 14) and writes:

Is she or isn’t she pregnant????
It’s hard to tell!
**Ashlee Simpson** was spotted in public Monday, just hours after news of possible spermination broke.
The engaged singer was spotted at LAX airport looking no more plump than ever before, but, then again, she may be early on.
Or, she just might not be pregnant! (Hilton, April 15, 2008)

The only way to “know” at this point is to scrutinize the image for evidence, which Perez suggests may or may not be there, but does not stop the game for lack of any such evidence. Indeed, his very suggestion that it may be true asks readers to search the image for just such evidence, prompting their participation and offering an interactive space for them to do so in the comments section. Readers take up the game in the comments section, using a combination of existing knowledge and visual scrutiny to pass judgment not only on the truth of the rumor, but also whether or not it is appropriate for a young, unmarried woman to get pregnant.

On a later PerezHilton post featuring a paparazzi photo of Ashlee and Pete Wentz leaving a New York City restaurant, Perez reports that Ashlee and her father were already trying to sell exclusive photos of the baby to print tabloids, despite the fact they continue
to deny the pregnancy (Hilton, April 17, 2008). In this post, Perez no longer even questions her pregnancy as rumor, rather presents it as fact, again drawing the stick figure baby over Ashlee’s midsection. Commenters follow his lead and scrutinize the image to reinforce this as truth. Commenter “jdks” says, “shes totally trying to cover her stomach up. ALL BLACK CLOTHES?? and [Pete’s] hand is oh so strategically placed to cover up her tummy” (comment on ibid). At this point in the game, the celebrity is read only through the context of the baby bump watch and is made meaningful only through her body and the frames placed on it by the text. In other words, audiences are primed to search the image for the bump because the blogger suggested it might be there or, in the case of the latter Perez post, that it is there. Even though she had an album coming out, her presence in media was framed entirely through the scrutiny of her body.

The blogger’s power to frame the meaning of the image is not absolute, nor do all bloggers read the image in the same way. Gossip is a process of negotiation of meaning, thus some participants use the body and existing knowledge to reject claims that the celebrity in question is pregnant. However, even when it is used as a means to dispel rumors, the female body remains the site of scrutiny and policing. In an image from PITNB (Figure 15), Trent uses Photoshop arrows to explicitly draw attention to Ashlee’s midsection as evidence that she is not pregnant (Vanegas, May 6, 2008).
Commenters across the blogs similarly take up this task, using their scrutiny of the photograph to suggest Ashlee is not pregnant. The judgment of the body is not necessarily negative, as commenter “Amanda” recognizes the way the female body changes during pregnancy:

if she got pregnant in mid to late January she wouldn't be showing yet. I was very thin when i got pregnant with my daughter and i had a flat stomach until i was nearly five months along. Then overnight POOF! Ashlee doesn't look plump although , to me, her hips and ass look wider and that is one of the first things that happen when a women gets pregnant. Her hips and butt get wider..so it's possible. Although i doubt it and agree with those of you saying it's a ploy by Ashlee's crew to get rumors started ..her album is dropping very soon. I think it's a publicity stunt (comment on Hilton, April 15, 2008).

The image remains critical to the critique of the regime of slenderness because it is the site of visually verifiable truths, but, for these readers, the meaning of those truths shifts in order to critique dominant discourses rather than work within them.
This is most evident on Jezebel, as its explicitly feminist stance means that participation in the baby bump watch took on a decidedly different tone, one that criticizes the rigid regime of slenderness women (particularly female celebrities) are held to in contemporary culture as well as the baby bump watch’s particular role in reinforcing these standards. On April 18, 2008, Jezebel blogger Tracie writes of Ashlee’s appearance on *The Today Show*:

[Ashlee] tried to dress her belly down by wearing very loud pants, a slimming black top, and an opened blazer, but thanks to screen caps, we're able to get a look at her tummy, after the jump…Lookit, I'm not one of those people that's like, ‘Is she pregnant or did she just eat a bagel?’ I'm sensitive about body issues and if someone is a little bloated or something, it's pretty asshole-ish to assume they're pregnant. But these shots are sorta convincing (Egan, April 18, 2008).

On one hand, the close reading of Ashlee’s clothing choices and the visibility of “her tummy” prioritizes a scrutiny of the image for evidence of her pregnancy, even as Tracie suggests such scrutiny is inappropriate and harmful to women. Commenters on Jezebel largely support this reading and do not engage in the body snarking typical of the bump watch on other sites. That is, they do not equate a potential weight gain with decreased feminine value. However, the commenters to this post, and indeed to most of the posts across the blogs centering on Ashlee’s bump watch, still use her body as a starting point for discussion of other issues related to pregnancy and celebrity.

In this moment of the bump watch, the body is read as an ideological marker of acceptable female physicality, whether such judgments are supportive (as on Jezebel) or derogatory. Deviation from the regime of slenderness, whether it is in the form of bodily curves or baggy clothing (both of which are used as evidence in Ashlee’s case) is read not only as proof of pregnancy, but also leads bloggers and commenters to position Ashlee’s sexuality as excessive. Though her engagement to Pete Wentz helps mitigate this claim,
she is certainly still called a “slut” and “whore” by some commenters, particularly on WWTDD and PerezHilton. This is partly due to the low level of moderation of the comments sections on those sites, which allows users to remain anonymous and provides little regulation of comment content. But the overall cruel and mocking approach to celebrity on these blogs also encourages such responses from commenters. These commenters seemed uninterested in the gossip game or Ashlee Simpson, instead seemed to view the discussion of any celebrity pregnancy as an opportunity to make derogatory comments about women who do not adhere to hegemonic norms of femininity as well as the general stupidity of celebrities. On other, more moderated blogs, such negative readings of her sexuality did still emerge in ways much more clearly tied to the gossip game of the bump watch. Pop Sugar commenter “Freefromgrace” asserts, “as for these unplanned pregnancies, whatever happened to birth control? Is there some shortage of the stuff available to famous musicians/actresses” (comment on Goodson, April 16, 2008). This and similar comments are aimed more at Ashlee’s own poor judgment more so than simply judging the fact that she is sexually active. More interestingly, however, Ashlee’s bump watch serves as a site of negotiation of her authenticity, with most bloggers and commenters reading the ongoing speculation, and indeed the pregnancy itself, as a publicity stunt to keep her name in the press.

The Bump Watch and Policing the Authentic Celebrity

Given Ashlee’s existing inauthentic and highly constructed image, the baby bump, which normally acts as a marker of truth, is actually read as further indication of manipulation. Though the idea that the pregnancy (whether real or fake) was a publicity stunt did appear in actual blog posts on WWTDD, Pop Sugar, and PerezHilton, this
reading of Ashlee’s image was much more common in the comments sections across all the blogs. This demonstrates the power of audiences, not just bloggers, to construct the meaning of a celebrity image within these media texts. Jezebel commenter “TheaterChick73” provides an illustrative example of this sort of reading, saying, “she is totally enjoying being back in the spotlight. All these ‘stories’ and ‘rumours’ certainly do attract attention don't they? Enjoy it while you got it kiddo (comment on Stewart, April 15, 2008). As the bump watch escalated, particularly in light of Ashlee’s coy denials during public appearances that echoed her responses to previous rumors, so did the narrative of her pregnancy as evidence of her constructed celebrity. Pop Sugar commenter, “renascencern,” demonstrates how the current reading of her baby bump draws on existing knowledge of Ashlee’s inauthentic celebrity image:

this is so typical of her. She's never been able to own up to anything: her nose job, the SNL debacle, the Orange Bowl mess…[all] she's ever done about the last two was brush it aside with a, ‘Well, now I have to work harder.’ She's incapable of being an adult about these things and that's why I don't like her anymore (comment on Goodson, April 15, 2008)

Similarly, a PerezHilton commenter, “emily” says, “eww she probs planned to get pregnant right when her album would come out for the much-needed publicity” (comment on Hilton, April 17, 2008). For these readers, the truth of the pregnancy is less important to the gossip game than the process of determining how it acts as evidence of the construction of Ashlee’s celebrity image itself. Thus, the bump watch provides a means of separating the authentic from the inauthentic celebrity through the policing of the body.

As previously discussed, each blog offers a unique approach to celebrity culture that is typically mirrored in the comments sections. Thus, one would expect a blog that
explicitly aims to break down celebrity façades and mock the very constructedness of
celebrity culture, such as WWTDD and PerezHilton, to be the most vocal in terms of
reading Ashlee’s bump as a publicity stunt. Interestingly, however, my research found
that the bloggers and commenters on Pop Sugar were the most vocal about the bump
watch (both ‘real’ and fake) as a publicity stunt. This may be because the site’s
overwhelmingly positive emphasis on celebrity families and babies on the site means
these readers are particularly responsive to this sort of manipulation of celebrity image.
At the same time, as evidenced by the poll discussed above, the large number of
comments related to this story show that multiple readings of her image do circulate
amongst different audiences.

As is typical of Pop Sugar polls, the poll choices reinforce viewpoints already
expressed in previous posts on this story as well as explicitly invite continued dialogue
about the issue. Though many commenters continued to support the notion that all
women should wait until the end of the first trimester to announce the pregnancy or that
celebrities have a right to some level of privacy, a position more consistent with the
blog’s positive view of celebrity families, more are annoyed with Ashlee’s continued
denials because they reinforce the existing notion that her celebrity is based on artifice
and media manipulation. That is, they agree on a publicity stunt/media constructed
celebrity narrative, even if they differ on whether or not she is actually pregnant, which
illustrates that the gossip game is not only about finding out the truth, but using that truth
to negotiate larger social ideologies. Douglas (2010) argues that judgment is the key
mode of reading celebrity culture. She claims:
the scandals, betrayals, bad behavior, and admirable or appalling maternal skills...invites us to participate in a particular moral universe where we can be full-fledged authorizes and get to judge the rich and famous. And with each question, betrayal, triumph, or crisis a judgment is required; it is a given that you are an authority on such matters and will bring your own social knowledge and moral compass to bear on the topic at hand (p. 249).

Celebrity gossip is an important space of social meaning making, one that is contingent on the participation of the audience in the established parameters of engagement on blogs that requires the breaking down of the celebrity façade.

For example, Pop Sugar commenter “fleurfairy” suggests Ashlee is pregnant as a means of gaining attention, saying, “no Hollywood babies are accidents. They are carefully planned publicity stunts for otherwise sinking careers” (comment on PopSugar, April 14, 2008). In contrast, “holly814” says of Ashlee:

i am seriously convinced that the girl is NOT pregnant....the only reason she is responding like this is because look what she gets from it...WAY more press because everyone is speculating whether she is or isn't.....after he cd promo tour is over...she will finally admit she isnt and it wont matter anymore...but she is trying to get those sales!!! (comment on PopSugar, April 24, 2008)

This discourse on the authentic or constructedness of Ashlee’s celebrity image becomes, not incidentally, a discourse on the authenticity of her motherhood. Dyer (1991) suggests a star’s authenticity, really being what he or she appears to be, not only secures star status, but also “guarantees the authenticity of the other particular values the star embodies” (p. 133). The discourse of the pregnancy as publicity stunt suggests that not only is her celebrity a site of false value, but Ashlee’s role as a mother is similarly false. She is not the idealized mother of celebrity mom profile discussed in The Mommy Myth’s (2004). Instead, motherhood is a constructed effect of media-produced celebrity. Her body may provide undisputable evidence that she is pregnant, but the meaning of that pregnancy remains tied to constructedness and fakery.
On WWTDD Ashlee is held up as an example of bad mothering before she has even confirmed the pregnancy, let alone given birth, because she is inauthentic.

WWTDD blogger Brendon scoffs at the entire story:

[Pete] better just come right out and be honest because he and his dopey girlfriend aren’t nearly interesting enough to play coy. It's like a fat girl playing hard to get. This isn’t a hostage negotiation. I’m only barely interested so let's just cut to the chase. They’re gonna screw this kid up anyway so who cares. It's not like the off-spring and Pete Wentz and Ashlee Simpson is gonna end up on the Supreme Court. These two dorks shouldn’t be allowed to raise a cactus, much less a human being (Brendon, April 16, 2008).

Commenters similarly connected her image to social mothering practices, suggesting not only that Ashlee would be a bad mother, but that her example as a public figure has ramifications for young women who might try to emulate her. For example, PerezHilton commenter “Jewelbug” exclaims:

bwahahahahahaha- have a fun life being a future single-mother. just try not to drop your children on the concrete, like the other cheetos smellin’ fame-whore that america seems so obsessed over. ew, ew, ew, ew, ew, ew!!!! and since when is it cool for little girls to get knocked-up? just WATCH how many young girls begin following suit with this young-moms trend~ groans! I bet the need for children services workers goes through the roof~sad! women truly are regressing, aren't they! (comment on Hilton, April 24, 2008)

However, though these sorts of readings of the social role of motherhood as read through Ashlee’s image do appear during the bump watch, the majority of the focus is on the policing the body. More detailed discourses on the social role of the mother emerge more after the baby is born, but are outside the scope of my focus here on the body of the celebrity during the bump watch.

**Policing the Body, Policing the Self**

Though the concept of stardom has historically rested on the contrast between the public performing presence and private ordinary person, such intense media scrutiny of
the pregnant or potentially pregnant celebrity body is part of a contemporary shift in the concept of stardom away from the public performance towards an emphasis on the private individual behind the façade of stardom. Though individuals emerge into the public eye through some sort of talent or public performance, it is the audience’s engagement with their private selves that increasingly defines celebrity status and attendant social meanings of the celebrity image. In other words, audiences are not interested in her private life because she is a public figure, rather she gets to continue to be a public figure because of coverage of her private life. Blogs, and other gossip media sources, do encourage audiences to pull back that façade of the celebrity image and actively participate in the construction of the meaning of that image in previously unprecedented ways. This is particularly true in the case of Ashlee Simpson, as her baby bump watch allowed audiences to negotiate the distinctions between private and public and between the authentic and inauthentic celebrity. Yet such meaning making activities are not necessarily resistant, as the very act of scrutinizing that celebrity body in the bump watch game often works to reinforce dominant ideologies about gender, sexuality, and motherhood.

As New York Sun columnist Lenore Skenazy (2008) declares, our “fascination” with celebrity baby bumps “may also have a darker side. When we emphasize the importance of stars’ pregnancies and motherhood, we are reducing them to their most basic, biological beings” (para. 14). But, as I have argued, the baby bump watch is not simply about motherhood or biological reproduction. It also serves to reinforce hegemonic norms about female sexuality and physicality through the celebrity body. The focus on the body certainly reduces women to biological roles, but it also essentializes
their social roles by equating proper female behavior and value with proper female bodies. The fact that women comprise that majority of the audience for, and participants in, celebrity gossip makes the body policing that defines the baby bump watch a particularly troubling mode of playing the gossip game that makes audiences complicit in the process of policing the hegemonic boundaries of gender through the female celebrity body. Fairclough (2008) asserts, that celebrities and audiences alike are “accustomed to such policing” of the body to the point where participation in the bump watch is simply a part of (female) celebrity culture (para. 19). Even when such policing was challenged, as on Jezebel, the critiques centered on how the body was read, and did not address the fact that the body itself stood in as the marker of truth. Audiences can only know celebrities through mediated texts, and within a contemporary celebrity culture centered on the private as the locus of fame, the bump watch demonstrates that the (female) body is the primary marker of the private and authentic self.
CHAPTER 7
READING PRACTICES AND AUDIENCE COMMUNITIES ON CELEBRITY GOSSIP BLOGS

The audience is a central force in the production and consumption of celebrity gossip blogs. From an economic perspective, the audience, or more specifically the size of the audience, is essential to understanding the blogs’ popularity and profitability. Page views and other web-traffic tracking data offers one clue to understanding celebrity gossip blog audiences, and all six of the blogs in my sample regularly rank in the top 25 entertainment/celebrity blogs, according to web tracking site Technorati (http://technorati.com/blogs/directory/entertainment/celeb/). However, relying on traffic tracking statistics to define the audience is limiting in several ways. First, it assumes a “transmission” view of communication “whereby a message is transmitted to a receiver, with variety degrees of interference or ‘noise’ affecting the impact of the message” (Bird, 2003, p. 4). In this view the audience is a singular entity comprised of individuals who all glean the same meaning from media texts, which is simply not the case with celebrity gossip blog audiences. Not only is there evidence of multiple reading positions within a particular blog, the range of perspectives evident across the blogs calls into question exactly what “message” a singular audience is meant to receive. Other than revealing how long audiences spend on a blog or how many pages they view, these data do little to describe what audiences do when they visit the site and the specific cultural contexts and identities that shape their various reading practices.

Understanding what audiences do on celebrity gossip blogs is particularly crucial because, as with other forms of interactive online media, blogs rely on audiences not just as readers but also as content creators. Gossip blogs not only tolerate active audience
participation but encourage it as a central feature of the site. The relationship between media consumption and cultural production is publicly visible on gossip blogs in ways simply not available in earlier print forms, and such reconfiguration of audience engagement must be taken into account. At the same time, defining the audience solely by the publicly visible activity reifies a technological determinist argument, as looking only at those who use the interactive features of a blog does not give a complete picture of the blog reading audience. After all, blog audiences are always readers, as even participation in the comments sections presumes that the commenter has read the blog post or perhaps even other readers’ comments before writing her own. The two most popular blogs in my sample in terms of audience size, PerezHilton and PITNB, include only minimal spaces for interactive engagements, yet were able to attract large audiences. To classify these audiences as simply passive receivers of information belies the complexity of the reading practices undertaken by these readers and the invisible ways these practices create a sense of community on the blog. Relying only on the data gleaned from comments sections or other forms of visible engagement on blogs excludes certain segments of the audience and fails to directly address a range of less visible community-building practices.

In order to address these shortcomings, I begin my analysis of the audiences of celebrity gossip blogs by understanding them as readers before moving to their more visible forms of active engagement. The actual reading practices are an important starting point because blogs are fundamentally texts and necessarily retain ties to the solitary reading practices of earlier gossip media forms. My access to this level of audience engagement is drawn primarily from an online survey I conducted from
November 2008 through February 2009. Through the survey, which will be discussed in more detail below, I aim to address the invisible audience of readers on gossip blogs, or the “lurkers,” who read but do not engage in the interactive features on gossip blogs. I am interested in a broader definition of audience activity on gossip blogs and use the survey data to explore who these readers are, what draws them to gossip blogs, and the range of reading practices that help them engage with the blog and with each other. The qualitative nature of the survey also allows these audiences to describe their various reading practices and sense of connection to other in their own words, thus allowing the readers to define how celebrity gossip blogs function (or not) as online communities.

**Reading Gossip, Creating Community**

Gossip talk itself is about creating social connections between gossipers based on sharing, interpreting, and judging information and is central to understanding how reading practices of gossip blog audiences begin to address questions of community. Hermes’ (1995) research on gossip blog readers relates the practice of reading gossip magazines to the idea of imagined communities, as readers are drawn into relationships with both the celebrities covered and the other readers of the magazine. Reading about the private lives of celebrities can make audiences feel they “know” the celebrity. Some critics assume audiences’ investment in this illusion of intimacy is simply another symptom of the celebrity as a “compensation for the loss of community” in contemporary society (Turner, 2004, p. 6). However, this critique, as Rojek (2001) and others point out, does not recognize the complexity of the celebrity-audience relationships or the ways in which such relationships “offer peculiarly powerful affirmations of belonging, recognition, and meaning” (p. 52). Most audience members recognize that their
relationship with the celebrity occurs only through the media, but it is the feeling of intimacy and commonality with a particular figure that sparks a sense of connection.

Hermes’ work illustrates that audiences also use their sense of intimacy with celebrities to create community, both imagined and real, with other readers. She asserts:

by either reading gossip or talking about what they have read with friends they appeal to and thus construe shared standards of morality (with an imagined community of other gossip readers, or with other readers who are present in the flesh) that alternate between disapproval and understanding. Gossip brings together by creating an intimate common world in which private standards of morality apply to what is and what is not acceptable behavior. It is about basic human values and emotions, about the fact that, in the end, all human beings are equal, whether they are rich or poor, whether they live in the glittery world of showbusiness or whether they only read about it (Hermes, 1995, p. 132).

Gossip blogs also promote a sense of imagined community because the interpretation and judgment of information is central to their textual content. The blogger’s commentary specifically mimics the interpretive practice of spoken gossip, suggesting that to read gossip blogs is to participate in creation of shared meaning that draws gossipers together. One respondent described a basic sense of connection with other readers that arises from consuming the same media by saying “there is high traffic to the blogs, so we must be somewhat on the same wavelength.” This shared “wavelength,” I argue, goes beyond a common interest in celebrity culture. That readers specifically seek out blogs with a certain perspective on celebrity culture suggests they see this shared meaning as important to their connection with the blog and other readers. Other survey respondents

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20 I use the term “real” to refer to traditional face-to-face communities. I do not wish to imply that imagined or virtual/online communities are not “real” or actual communities. My use of the term is simply to distinguish the site and form of interaction that characterizes each community.
similarly described the shared interests and values promoted on a gossip blog as a space of connection:

when you read that people have the same opinion that you do about something, it makes you feel connected to them

it's almost like a club and the meetings are held everyday and you go over the latest news and keep up with stuff together. A whole lot of people are looking at the same thing you are, it's cool.

only a select set of people read blogs, so i feel I have something in common with the other readers that is out of the ordinary.

I feel like it's a giant community of people just like myself who are interested in this stuff.

Readers do not necessarily engage with others through the blog through interactive features. Nevertheless, they recognize that seeking out blogs that share their own values and judgments about celebrity culture draws them into a common community with other readers.

While gossip blogs are texts, they differ from traditional print media in important ways that shape reading and community-building practices amongst audiences. The technological features of gossip blogs would seem to open more possibilities for readers to engage with each other as part of their reading practices and to build community through gossip talk. Interactive features, like comments sections, enable audiences to move from imagined community to a more direct mode of engagement with the blogger and other readers. But how these features actually connect readers is not merely a question of the availability, as research shows only a small percentage of internet users actually use these technological features. My own survey of gossip blog readers reflects this finding, as only 2.7% indicated they regularly post comments and 29.2% occasionally post comments compared to 68.1% who say they never post comments.
When the occasional commenters are included, audience participation numbers amongst this cross-section of readers are relatively high. However, the number of readers who also comment still represents less than half of the total number of readers surveyed. Thus, understanding the role of interactivity in shaping reading practices and promoting community is more complex, as availability of technological features does not always translate to audience engagement.

Keeping with Jenkins’ (2006a) distinction between interactivity and participation, Preece (2007) suggests successful online communities need to strike a balance between the technological and social protocols that shape audience engagement. Technological protocols must promote “good usability so that people can interact and perform their tasks intuitively and easily” (p. 26). But the usability of these technological features must be closely tied to the social protocols of engagement that influence people’s interactions and foster participation and community building on the site. These two concepts are closely related, as Preece describes, but must also be considered separately. She claims:

the decision to enforce a registration policy is a sociability decision. It strongly impacts who comes into the community and, thus the social interactions in the community. The mechanics of registering are determined by software design, which involves usability decisions. The design of the registration for, how it is displayed, the nature of prompts and help messages associated with completed the form are usability issues (p. 28, emphasis in original).

The technological usability promotes sociability or participation, but does not guarantee nor completely control its form. As Jenkins (2006a) points out, “participation is more open-ended, less under the control of media producers and more under the control of media consumers” (p. 133). The relatively high level of audience participation evident amongst my survey respondents is, on one hand, related to the usability, as the interactive
features offered on blogs are quite easy to use and do not require much time or technical savvy from the user. As discussed in chapter three, The Pew Internet and American Life Project identified a broad range of acts of “content creation” amongst internet users and found that simple forms of interactivity, such as uploading digital photos or writing comments on existing sites, were more common than complex ones, such as maintaining a blog or uploading videos (Lenhart, Horrigan, & Fallows, 2004). Writing a comment, the most common interactive feature on blogs other than the hyperlink, is, presumably, much easier than creating and uploading a video on YouTube for the average internet user. This suggests that gossip blog audiences may appear to be more active than general internet audiences, because the interactions on offer are limited to very basic functions that even the most casual user could easily engage. But, as I will illustrate through this chapter, social dimensions of participation are important to shaping the actual use of these technological features and more importantly, to how audiences understand such engagements as ways to connect to others and build community.

Yuqing, Kraut and Kiesler (2007) offer a basic definition of online community as “an internet-connected collective of people who interact over time around a shared purpose, interest or need” but go on to suggest it is the level of “voluntary commitment, participation, and contributions” from the individuals within that collective of people, or the social dimensions of community, that determines its strength (p. 378). Gossip blog audiences certainly fit the first part of the definition, as they share an interest in celebrity culture and gossip, and the technological features offer space for them to voluntarily interact around that shared interest. But the diverse ways these audiences use (or do not use) a particular site’s interactive features must also be included in a definition of the
types of participation that occurs on the blog. In other words, the sense of community that emerges amongst readers may be expressed in ways not captured by the use of interactive features. I do suggest a stronger and more traditional sort of community can exist within the comments sections of gossip blogs, an issue which will be more fully explored in chapter eight. In this chapter, however, I am concerned with identifying the more invisible and imagined communities experienced by gossip blog readers, particularly those who choose not to participate in the interactive features of the site.

**Defining Celebrity Gossip Blog Audiences**

In order to address the range of audience engagements occurring on gossip blogs, I conducted an online survey of blog audiences’ reading and content creation practices, and asked how readers saw these practices as fostering a sense of community with others. This survey, hosted on Survey Monkey (http://www.surveymonkey.com) included quantitative measures of reading practices as well as open-ended questions that allowed respondents to discuss, in their own words, how, when, and why they read or comment on gossip blogs. See Appendix B for a more detailed discussion of the survey and a complete list of questions. Every effort was made to survey readers from all the blogs in my sample, and I asked each blogger if he or she would post a link to my survey somewhere on his or her blog. Though all the bloggers initially agreed during our interview, several later declined or did not respond to follow up emails regarding my survey. In the end, only Trent Vanegas from PITNB posted the link to my survey as part of in his daily news link roundup post on November 19, 2008 (Vanegas, November 19, 2008). In an effort to include a wider range of readers in my survey, particularly since PITNB did not include comments section during most of my fieldwork, I approached the
bloggers who author Buttercup Punch (http://buttercuppunch.wordpress.com/) about posting a link to my survey. Buttercup Punch was founded by a small group of active commenters on Jezebel who, during a period of upheaval in that community which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, decided to create a separate forum outside of Jezebel that retained the feminist content and perspective but featured a more open commenting structure. The founders and readers of Buttercup Punch were (and many still are) active commenters in the Jezebel community, and were also targeted for their greater tendency to use a blog’s interactive features as part of their reading practices. A post broadly describing my study with a link to the survey was posted on Buttercup Punch on February 25, 2009 (Kadinsky, February 25, 2009).

As I had no other means to directly access readers from YBF, WWTDD, Pop Sugar, or PerezHilton, short of breaking the sites’ rules and posting the link myself (something I chose not to do), I was unable to specifically survey the readers of these blogs. However, the responses I did collect reveal that most respondents are aware of and/or read blogs beyond the one where they found the link to my survey. Therefore, even though my sample appears limited, it actually includes readers of multiple blogs and a range of reader positions, including lurkers and frequent commenters. Between these two sites, I was able to collect 260 completed surveys by American adults (over the age of 18) for analysis. I deemed a survey complete if the respondent went through all the questions, even if a few individual questions within the survey itself were skipped. This was not common, as most respondents answered every question. I have indicated the rare occurrence when the total number of respondents for a particular question is less than 260, though this difference is typically less than five respondents.
As I expected based on existing data on audiences of the celebrity gossip blogs in my sample from Quantcast.com, my respondents are overwhelmingly white, heterosexual women. Nearly 95.8% (248) of the respondents are women, 84.6% (219) are white, 90.8% (236) identify as heterosexual.\(^{21}\) Existing research also indicates that the readers of gossip blogs are primarily young women. This was borne out by my survey data, though there was slightly more variation than I expected in the ages of those who responded to my survey compared to other categories of identity. Seventy-one percent (185) are under the age of 30, but 24.6% (64) of readers are between the ages of 30 and 40 and 4.6% (12) reported they are over 40. This may be a result of the particular cross-sample of blog audiences who answered my survey, as most data suggests audiences are under the age of 30 (see audience data for each blog on http://www.alexa.com). But my survey findings do recognize that gossip blogs do attract a somewhat wider spectrum of ages than originally anticipated. As a result of the overall youth of my sample, 56% of the respondents (146) are current college students or have earned a college degree as their highest level of education and 27.9% (72) of respondents have at least some graduate school or have earned some sort of advanced degree.\(^{22}\) This is consistent with Alexa’s tracking data, which suggests college educated audiences tend to be over-represented on each of the blogs in my sample. The cross-section of gossip blog readers represented in my survey are generally fairly well-educated women, and it is possible that those who are currently in college or have some college education (52 and 24 respondents, respectively) will continue their education.

\(^{21}\) One respondent declined to identify gender and a different respondent declined to identify a racial identity, thus the total N for these two categories is 259.

\(^{22}\) The total number of respondents for the question on educational level is 258.
In addition to students, some of whom indicated they worked part-time retail jobs, most of the respondents indicated they were employed in some sort of office job, reflecting their higher levels of education. This included clerical workers (such as executive assistants or billing coordinators) as well as attorneys, office and business managers, and accountants. Having access to a computer at work, as most office workers do, enables audience members to read blogs throughout the day. Indeed, several of the bloggers characterized their audience as people who are “bored… working at a job they don’t necessarily like and spend more time [reading blogs] then actually being productive” (Goodson, personal interview, May 27, 2007). This perception was, in part, supported by my survey data, as readers overwhelmingly indicated they read gossip blogs as a distraction or break from work or as a way to alleviate boredom at their jobs.

However, the actual workplace is clearly not the only location where audiences use gossip blogs as a break or distraction. Interestingly, most gossip blog reading occurred at home, with 211 of 256 respondents indicating they typically read blogs at home compared to 126 who read at work and 30 who read at school. Many read in multiple places, with 83 respondents indicating they read at work and home, and 27 read at home and at school.

This is consistent with overall internet traffic patterns in North America. According to Labovitz (August 24, 2009), while overall internet usage remains high during the business hours and drops somewhat between 5pm and 8pm (EST), the daily peak of usage is actually at 11pm and remains fairly high through 3am (EST). Though he suggests this 11pm peak is in large part due to online gaming and video streaming, it does indicate that Americans are using the internet in high numbers after business hours,
presumably at home (Labovitz, August 20, 2009). Though blogs are not generally updated after 6pm, the number of readers who identify home as a reading location may simply be catching up on the latest gossip as a form of entertainment after work. Furthermore, as I did not ask readers what specific time of day they read blogs, those reading from home may include students or others who work at home and/or have their home computer as their primary point of internet access.

Given that this sample was largely drawn from readers of PITNB and Jezebel/Buttercup Punch, the fact that they are so overwhelmingly white was somewhat unexpected. PITNB blogger Trent Vanegas is a Latino male and Jezebel is written by a racially diverse group of women, so I assumed the readers of these blogs might reflect that diversity. However, the celebrities that are covered on those sites are predominantly white, reflecting the “mainstream” celebrity focus of those blogs as well as the general audience for celebrity gossip. I do not have official survey data on YBF readers, but blogger Natasha Eubanks indicated that she believes her audience to be predominantly people of color because she covers black celebrity culture (Eubanks, personal interview, July 23, 2008). While Quantcast.com tracking data indicates that 43% of YBF.com’s audience is African-American and 44% is Caucasian, African-Americans are overrepresented in this audience compared to the average internet population (Quantcast, 2010). If I had been able to post my survey on her site, I believe that while white audience numbers would remain high, there would be more evidence of non-white readers of celebrity gossip.

I was also somewhat surprised by the lack of gay male representation in my sample, particularly since Trent openly identifies as gay and foregrounds a gay
perspective on celebrity culture on his blog. However, the low representation of gay men appears to be a result of the low numbers of male readers overall, as only 11 respondents identified as male. Even given the small number of male readers, it is notable that nine of them identified as gay and that all nine found the survey through PITNB, a blog written by a gay man. I cannot make any generalizations about male or gay audiences from the small number of respondents, and further research is needed to determine if gay men are more likely than heterosexual men to read celebrity gossip blogs. But it is clear that gossip blogs are a media genre consumed by white heterosexual women who, based on education and employment data, are predominantly middle or upper-middle class.

What draws these young white heterosexual women to celebrity gossip blogs, particularly since, as I have demonstrated in earlier chapters, many of the blogs reinforce oppressive norms of femininity as a key feature of the gossip? On the most basic level, blogs offer pleasurable and fun escape, not only from daily tasks but also, as one reader put it, “distraction from the doldrums of my everyday life.” One reader suggests she reads blogs because of “the fun factor. For just a few minutes you can laugh, ogle, or swoon and it has nothing to do with your life, it's just an escape.” Gossip blogs, like their print magazine predecessors, are easy to skim through and put down at a moment’s notice, thus easily serve this need for a temporary pleasurable escape from everyday life. In fact, most readers do not spend a great deal of time reading blogs. The average amount of time my respondents reported spending reading blogs was just over one hour per day (61.2 minutes). This seemingly high number was impacted by the fifteen (5.9%) of the 254 respondents to this question were very heavy users who indicated they spent three to five hours reading per day. However, most readers (146 or 57.4%) reported they
read less than an hour per day and 117 (46.1%) reported they spent 30 minutes or less per day reading blogs. Such self-reporting can result in respondents underestimating their actual media use, but I suggest the overall amount of time spent reading blogs remains relatively low for most readers. Blog reading is about momentary distraction and my data indicates readers typically return to other activities fairly quickly rather than spending extended amounts of time on a blog. Additionally, most readers indicated they read throughout the day, spending only a few minutes at a time on a particular blog and the daily total is based on multiple short visits to a site.

But blogs are about more than just distraction, as the range of reader engagements demonstrate. I certainly do not suggest readers are cultural dupes who passively accept dominant oppressive norms disguised by pleasures of celebrity culture. As I will show throughout this chapter, the actual texts and reading practices embody a greater complexity and even some spaces of resistance. Through the survey data, I examine what draws readers to these sites as a form of entertainment and what they do on the sites once they are there that speaks to the negotiation of social and cultural ideologies through the pleasures of gossip talk.

**Reading Practices and the Technological Features of Blogs**

Regardless of which blog or blogs audiences regularly read, my survey indicates that celebrity gossip blogs, like other online media, are drawing readers away from traditional print formats. Just over half of the respondents (53%) indicated they never or rarely read print gossip magazines. The popularity of print sources of gossip has not been completely erased by the rise of gossip blogs, as 16.5% of respondents indicated they still read print magazines at least three times per month in addition to reading blogs. Given
that most gossip magazines are published weekly, a reader who only reads three times per month may still be reading multiple issues of a particular title. Frequent reading of magazines did not deter them from reading blogs, as this group, on average, reported spending over an hour a day reading gossip blogs (69.4 minutes), which is actually higher than the average for all my respondents (61.2 minutes). These readers appear to have a strong interest in celebrity gossip and use blogs to supplement, rather than replace, their reading of celebrity gossip magazines. But most respondents consider magazines to be sources of “old news” that simply rehash the same stories and images already seen on blogs. One reader says celebrity gossip blogs “are updated many times throughout the day. You can read about it as it happens, as with other news. You have to wait for the new issue of the print magazine.” As new media platforms, blogs offer audiences up-to-the-minute access to the latest breaking celebrity gossip that simply cannot be matched by the print magazines. Thus, the technological feature of immediacy is a primary draw for gossip blog audiences.

**Immediacy**

The appeal of immediacy is described by respondents through two dimensions: the ability to access the information on his or her own schedule and the frequent rate at which the information on the blog is updated. Blog reading, for most readers, appears to be a momentary pleasurable distraction that helps break up their day. Only 21.4% of readers indicated they constantly check gossip blogs throughout the day to keep abreast of the latest updates as they are posted. Most readers (89.3%) indicated they read only when bored or have free time.\(^\text{23}\) Many of these readers said they read blogs as a

\(^{23}\) The total number of responses for this question on when they read blogs (Q8) was 252.
“distraction from work” or “as a little break in my day” as a means to momentarily “escape from reality” through a pleasurable and fun diversion. That gossip blogs are easily and quickly accessed from readers’ computers, which many of them are using for work, makes them appealing for this purpose. Relatedly, many readers also stated their preference for blogs comes from the fact that they are free to access, thus further increasing the ease with which the latest celebrity gossip can be consumed. Overall, the sense that celebrity gossip is fun and frivolous is a primary part of the appeal because it disengages the reader from the seriousness of work or of life for a moment and offers a space of social interaction with others around this pleasurable media consumption. As one reader put it, “I feel like it keeps me...able to keep up with the pop cultural moment. You can't always be talking about Iraq and politics over the water cooler; everyone would think you're a downer!” Hermes (1995) found that gossip magazine readers valued the pleasant and undemanding distraction these texts provide. Gossip blogs serve a similar function with the added benefit of easy access that allows readers to pursue the pleasures of reading and sharing gossip whenever they choose, even at work. Many respondents return to the blogs several times a day to pursue this pleasurable distraction, but most do not spend all day on the blogs.

The immediate access to the latest developments is also important, as according to my survey respondents, keeping current with the latest celebrity gossip and other pop culture developments is a major reason why they read celebrity gossip blogs. Readers like the fact that blogs offer the latest news about a celebrity’s professional projects

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24 Though readers do not have to pay any fees in order to view a blog, all the blogs in my sample are commercially-supported and prominently display multiple advertisements on their sites.
(including details about upcoming films, albums, television shows and other public performances as well as red carpet and other “official” appearances) as well as the latest dish about his or her private life. Access to a range of information or, as one respondent put it, the ability to “know what's going on, who is married to whom, who is pregnant, who is giving birth. Just general knowledge” makes blogs appealing entry points to celebrity culture. Another insists that keeping current on celebrity gossip is key to understanding popular culture more broadly:

because the connection between celebs' personal lives and their work is so fluid these days, I find that reading about celeb gossip gives one a good idea of what's going on in the film & music industries. Like, the best way to get a scoop about a film or TV show I'm curious about is to read the gossip rather that the trade blogs.

Even though 50.8% of my respondents suggested there are specific celebrities they like to read about on blogs, most of this group listed several celebrities and/or topics they enjoyed reading. This indicates blog readers are interested in the range of celebrity gossip and culture news more so than using blogs to follow one specific celebrity. Either way, the immediacy of new media certainly plays a key role in the popularity of celebrity gossip blogs, as the speed and ease of access to the most up-to-date information about popular culture draws these readers to gossip blogs over magazines.

**Immediacy as Reading Strategy: Believers and Non-believers**

Immediacy is a technological feature but has important implications for the social dimensions of reading practices. While respondents clearly value the frequent updates available on gossip blogs, they are less confident that what they read is accurate or true, and this sense of belief shapes their reading practices. Though 63.1% (164) say the accuracy of celebrity stories is important to their enjoyment of the blog, 76.9% (200) recognize that blogs only sometimes report the truth about celebrities’ lives. One reader
maintains, “I believe online blogs are more subject to out-of-the-blue rumors being spread quickly, not based on a grain of truth. I feel SOME print magazines may be more ‘legit’ in their information.” Another acknowledges, “I think it is easier to edit material [on blogs] on a constant basis which leads to stories that may not be as well researched being posted and then removed more frequently.” Any content posted on a blog can be easily retracted or removed, another nod to the role of immediacy in shaping blog content, but perhaps one that allows innuendo and rumor to circulate as truth.

This is not to suggest that readers believe magazines are always telling the truth, as they generally recognize that similar information appears in both sources. But several readers suggest the editorial process involved in writing for magazines means there are more checks on content even if it slows down access. One respondent asserts, “we might believe something to be true because there are pictures on a blog, but if it's in print, we KNOW it's true” (emphasis in original). This more rigid view that print guarantees truth is uncommon amongst the respondents, as even those who suggest magazines may have greater access to verifiable stories still think there is fabricated information in magazines. However, the immediacy of blogs allows information to be spread as soon as possible without checking facts, thus the information must be taken with a grain of salt. This does not diminish the pleasure of reading blogs, and, as many respondents suggested, determining what is real and what is rumor is part of the pleasure.

Many other readers, however, see the immediacy of blogs as a feature that makes them more reliable than magazines precisely because they provide instant access to the latest developments. One reader claims, “I think I trust [blogs] more because of their currency. At this point, celebrity ‘news’ happens every day, and I feel the print format
just can't keep up.” More importantly, because bloggers do not have to answer to editors, publishers, or, indeed, the celebrities themselves, when writing their posts, some readers see them as more truthful than magazines. One respondent points out that blogs “are far less likely to face serious professional repercussions for their work, whereas print gossip rags have to maintain both advertiser relations and source relations with the studios/PR agencies/subjects themselves.” For these readers, the blogger’s outsider status provides privileged access to the truth because blogs are “uncensored” and more “free” in their discussion of celebrity culture. Bloggers are reporting the latest rumor and scandal as it happens and before the more legitimate celebrity producers, including publicists, managers, agents, etc, can intervene and kill the story. This gives readers the sense, even if it is an illusion, that they have access to the “real” celebrity, not the stage-managed version. One reader says:

I like the genuinely nice items that aren't obviously handed out by publicists. I [also] loved [that blogs posted] the Christian Bale freakout because it was real and not carefully plotted out shenanigans to keep the publicist's client in the public eye.

Another argues blogs are a better source for the “real” celebrity because blogs feature “celebrities in photos that aren't so carefully managed, [and allow audiences] to hear them say things that their publicists haven't approved. It's like peering behind the curtain.” The immediate access to information is interpreted by these readers as unfiltered and, therefore, more reliable. Blogs give readers a different view of celebrity culture that print tabloids, despite their own autonomous outlier status, cannot provide because they retain closer ties to the circuit of production than bloggers do.

25 This reader is referring to an audio recording of actor Christian Bale berating a crew member in an expletive-laden rant during the filming of Terminator: Salvation that was leaked to the internet in early February 2009 (Christian Bale rant, 2009).
The different strategies of interpreting truth and accuracy are social practices of reading gossip blogs that are influenced by the technological feature of immediacy, but draw on existing approaches to celebrity culture. Gamson (1994) describes a range of celebrity-watching audience positions that are ultimately rooted in the audience member’s “awareness of celebrity-production activities” and “belief in the veracity or realism of texts” (p. 148). Some audiences, Gamson calls them “traditionals,” find pleasure in “believ[ing] that what they read is a realistic representation of the celebrity” and will “ignore or resist” knowledge that suggests otherwise (ibid). These readers align with Hermes’ (1995) serious gossipers in that the pleasure of consuming celebrity gossip comes from a developing sense of intimacy with the celebrity. Reading the details of a star’s private life makes these readers feel connected to the celebrity and pleasure is rooted in discovering the authentic celebrity through the details of her private life.

On the other extreme is a “postmodern audience, opposing the possibility of arriving at truth as hopelessly naïve, reading the celebrity text as a fictional one, undisturbed by evidence of manipulation” (Gamson, 1994, p. 148). These audience members read the celebrity image as nothing but artifice and their pleasure is rooted in exposing the processes of production at work in the creation of that image. Thus, whether or not a piece of gossip is true is irrelevant to their enjoyment of celebrity culture. Gamson notes these are extreme ends of the spectrum of celebrity-watching positions and most audiences fall somewhere between the two and, in fact, “actively travel the axis of belief and disbelief in their everyday celebrity-watching activities” (p. 149).
As Gamson’s spectrum of celebrity-watching positions demonstrates, it is impossible to arrive at one definitive classification of the celebrity gossip blog audience precisely because it is an inherently fluid concept defined by a range of individual practices. Readers of celebrity gossip blogs are drawn to gossip blogs, and indeed celebrity culture itself, for very different reasons that cannot be encompassed by a singular notion of audience activity. All seek a form of pleasure through their reading practice, but what constitutes that pleasure is actually quite different. The pleasures sought by traditionalists, who value the authenticity and coherent nature of the celebrity image, is in fact opposite to that of the post-moderns, who engage with celebrity culture to break down the celebrity as artifice.

As this discussion of the role of truth in influencing audiences’ reading practices illustrates, my survey respondents are aware of the production processes behind celebrity images, but vary in terms of how pervasive they believe such production actually is and whether or not artifice matters to their enjoyment. That both believers and nonbelievers read the same celebrity gossip blogs indicates a range of pleasures are on offer. Furthermore, as I argued in chapter five and six, the blogs themselves move back and forth between belief and disbelief. This fluid movement between truth and artifice contributes to the game playing aspect of gossip in which new information is placed into the context of existing information in order to make it meaningful. It is this game playing that seems to be the primary pleasure for gossip blog audiences, regardless of whether they fall more into the category of believer or non-believer.

Though the particular perspective of the blog may speak to one type of audience over another, both believers and nonbelievers can, and do, read and participate on
celebrity gossip blogs. Readers with a high level of belief tend to question what they read in terms of whether or not it is accurately reported rather than sensationalized:

I don’t want to read about events that didn’t occur on a blog about real people; that’s why I read novels!

…otherwise it is really just a waste of time you don’t want to think something about a person if it isn’t true…we base our opinions of these people on the gossip we read.

I read perezhilton.com 5 out of 7 days a week but I don’t agree with some of the things he does to his posts. I feel that I can read these posts and take from it what I want to see as truth and what I chose not to believe. I mean even the bloggers aren’t sure what they’re printing is God’s honest truth. That’s evident in how many ‘updates’ they do to correct their misinformation.

A different sort of truth is important for the pleasure of the non-believers. Instead of searching the stories for what is accurate and “real,” these readers are more concerned with enjoying the artifice constructed on top of reality to create the fun of celebrity culture:

it’s like storytelling for me. It’s all fiction. It’s not about whether or not the actual story is true, and I don’t believe a quarter of the things reported…it’s how the stories are written that interests me.

[truth] doesn’t matter because the sense of voyeurism that leads me to read celebrity gossip lends itself to the more outrageous, and less accurate stories, which I find most entertaining, regardless of truth value.

These nonbelievers are more interested in the over the top and salacious nature of celebrity culture, and do not necessarily if such stories are true in order to enjoy them. It is more fun to speculate about the lives of celebrities than to know the truth. Regardless of their reading position, the immediacy of blogs is central to promoting the gossip game on blogs as it allows readers to quickly and continuously participate as new information arises.
Most readers fluctuate between the two positions based on their existing knowledge of a celebrity, and even engage the immediate access of information to double-check a story. As discussed in chapter five, bloggers include links to their sources, in part, to establish the credibility of their information for the reader and to offer a basic form of interactivity on the blog. The readers (may) engage with this content by clicking a link, and easily and instantly verifying the blogger’s claims, something they cannot do with print gossip. As one reader puts it, “online blogs can reference other sites so you get multiple sources so you aren't believing one person.” This is an active engagement with the text that is invisible on the site itself but is nevertheless enabled by the immediacy of celebrity gossip blogs. At the same time, that rumor and innuendo can so easily be spread on gossip blogs suggests that misinformation can be elevated to truth by virtue of appearing on multiple celebrity-oriented sites. Thus, even if readers are actively clicking links to read source material or reading across gossip blogs, such practices do guarantee readers access to the “truth” nor to resistant ways of reading.

Interactivity and Participation

The idea of immediacy helps explain the overall audience shift away from print magazines, but it does not fully explain why readers, given the range of perspectives they display, are drawn to certain blogs over others. Readers’ knowledge of multiple blogs indicates they are aware of a range of sites that offer the latest celebrity dish. Eighty-five percent (220) of my respondents indicated they had heard of at least three of the six blogs in my sample and over half (51.9%) indicated they had heard of at least four. PerezHilton, PITNB, and Pop Sugar maintained the high levels of awareness across the readers, reflecting these blogs’ status as “mainstream” blogs. Jezebel, WWTDD, and
YBF, likely as a result of their more specialized focus, were less widely known amongst readers surveyed, though as the number of blogs a reader had heard of increased, so did awareness of these less mainstream blogs. YBF had the least amount of recognition amongst my readers no matter how many blogs they knew, suggesting it speaks to a niche audience that I was unable to access with my survey. YBF does not cover “mainstream” celebrity culture and, as a result, is not often linked on other mainstream blogs. It is likely that only those readers interested in black celebrity culture, a smaller segment of the general gossip blog audience, would be aware of this site. But, as these gossip blogs share the use of frequent updates to keep abreast of celebrity news, immediacy alone cannot explain the popularity of certain gossip blogs over others.

My survey data shows that most (42.2%) of the 258 respondents to this question indicated they read only one blog.\textsuperscript{26} Seventy-four respondents (28.6%) indicated they regularly read two blogs and 47 (18.2%) read three. Though there were a few heavy users who indicated they read six or more blogs regularly, they represented only 3.5% of the respondents. These numbers suggest that while readers want instant access to a variety of information about celebrities and celebrity gossip, they turn to a specific blog or blogs to get it. While they are certainly drawn to sites that offer frequent updates, my

\textsuperscript{26} As readers were given the opportunity to list blogs other than the ones on my sample in this question, these numbers reflect any website the reader defined as a celebrity gossip blog. This includes a few mentions of sites like TMZ.com, x17online.com, and bestweekever.tv that do not fit the definition of celebrity gossip blogs I laid out in chapter three, as well as numerous mentions of other examples of sites that do, such as Dlisted.com or gofugyourself.com. For this analysis, I argue it is more important to recognize what the reader seeks out as a gossip blog rather than count only those I use in my sample. Though the blogs in my sample are among the most popular, a point which was reflected in readers’ response to this question, they are certainly not the only gossip blogs or news sites readers visit regularly. I intend these numbers to reflect the general online gossip reading habits, which appear to favor blogs over official sites.
respondents overwhelmingly indicate that it is the blogger’s perspective and commentary on the latest dish that keeps them returning to the site. As previously discussed, blogs are unique forms of online media that foreground the opinion and perspective of the blogger. Gossip bloggers are not simply reporting on a story; they infuse the latest gossip with their own wit and interpretation, more closely reflecting the actual process of gossip talk rather than the distanced objectivity of journalists.

Given the extraordinary number of online sources for celebrity gossip, the blogger’s perspective helps readers narrow their choices. One reader points out “you can pick a blogger who is interested in the same topics you are and most of what you read is interesting to you. You don't have to sift through as much junk.” The role as media filter is not unique to celebrity gossip blogs. Indeed, Jenkins (2006b) points out that political blogs filter certain ideological perspectives and tend to draw readers who already share the blogger’s point of view. Nor is this filter unique to blogs as a genre, as certainly the range of approaches to celebrity culture available in print magazines also serves a filtering function for self-selecting audiences. Nevertheless, it is clear that celebrity gossip blog readers view their blog reading as a means to strengthen, not challenge, their existing ideas and perspectives on celebrity culture. As one gossip blog reader succinctly described her reading preferences, “[The blogs I read] tend to…mimic my own thoughts about celebrity.” I argue gossip blogs are able to draw a young female audience despite implicitly and explicitly promoting sexist or misogynistic readings of celebrity culture because they reinforce dominant ideologies that already shape the audiences’ social world. That is, blogs did not create these hegemonic ideologies, rather are one of many
cultural forms that uphold and reinforce them, or at the very least mask them under the guise of humor.

Many respondents maintain that sharing the blogger’s personal perspective and sense of humor, not the specific gossip itself, is the main reason why they visit the site. As one reader declares, “I mostly enjoy the blogger's point of view and humor in reporting the gossip. If I don't like the blogger's style of writing/sense of humor, I most likely will not read that blog.” Readers want to keep current with celebrity gossip, but filtered through a particular lens that adds value to the reading experience by speaking to existing social ideals. One reader suggests blogs offer, “light-hearted entertainment with some intelligent reflection on the subject at hand. [t]he sites I read, they're not just empty.” Readers, such as the one above, enjoy reading gossip blogs because they break down celebrity culture through humor, while still remaining grounded to larger ideals.

While most see the writing style and humor as contributing to the overall entertaining nature of gossip blogs, some readers recognize this as a pleasurable intervention into celebrity culture and its embodiment of larger social ideologies. In some cases, this way of reading is clearly prompted by the blogger, such as Natasha’s decision to cover a neglected category of celebrity culture and to bring her own “positive” spin to black celebrity gossip. Similarly, Jezebel’s overtly feminist focus is designed to attract like-minded readers who want to challenge the misogyny of celebrity culture without giving up all pleasure associated with it. One survey respondent said, “I only read Jezebel, and I read [it] because it aggregates all the gossip out there while simultaneously viewing it through a feminist lens.”
Both YBF and Jezebel make their political perspective obvious in their coverage of celebrity gossip, but other sites draw in audiences based on a less clearly defined perspective that is more about the blogger’s personality and ability to create a sense of connection with readers. One respondent says, “with the celebrity blogs you get a more personal view and interpretation from the author, rather than just viewing images with captions in magazines.” This further distinguishes gossip blogs from print magazines, but also from other more “official” online celebrity news sites, including online portals of print magazines (such as usmagazine.com, the online counterpart to Us Weekly) as well as online only celebrity media sources, such as MSNBC.com’s celebrity news page.

Several readers specifically indicated that the light tone and conversational style typical of gossip blogs are more enjoyable than magazines because they make blogs feel more “personal” and “entertaining” than the journalistic objectivity used by gossip magazines.

These findings point to the importance of interactivity and participation as well as immediacy in shaping the content on gossip blogs and the ways in which readers actually access or engage with that content. Certainly interactive features, like links, blogger email addresses, comments sections, and other features discussed in chapter five are offered as clear examples of technological protocols that shape how readers may engage with a blog but do not guarantee such engagement. Some of the respondents to my survey cited their own use of such features as important to their enjoyment of the blog, but they also, unexpectedly, indicated they enjoyed technological spaces only available to

Perhaps as a result of the popularity of gossip blogs, my casual observation of these sorts of online sites suggests they are changing their tone and style to reflect the more personal approach of the gossip blogger as a means to attract a larger online audience. Further research is needed to compare the styles of print magazines and their online portals with the styles of celebrity gossip blogs, and such work falls outside the scope of this project.
the blogger. In other words, according to my survey respondents, they are drawn to specific blogs because of the ways in which the blogger uses technology in the creation of content as a way to reflect his or her particular perspective, which itself is a major draw for readers.

For example, several readers suggested Trent’s skillful and humorous use of Photoshop on PITNB clearly offers a visual commentary on the latest celebrity dish and contributes to their reading pleasure. Similarly, some readers pointed to Perez’s use of MS Paint to write on pictures of celebrities as a space where he inserts his point of view, though some readers felt that such manipulations are often harsh or mean-spirited rather than humorous. Even the most basic acts of content creation, namely the text-based discussion of the latest gossip item, are initially and overwhelmingly produced by the blogger. Jenkins (2006a) argues that “within convergence culture, everyone’s a participant—although participants may have different degrees of status and influence” (p. 132). In the case of celebrity gossip blogs, the blogger has greater influence and status in terms of interactivity and participation in part because she structures the available technological spaces of engagement (such as comments sections etc) and foregrounds her own use of interactive features of Web 2.0 as content for the blog (manipulation of images, creating of .gif files or screen caps from larger video files etc). At the time of my fieldwork, none of the blogs featured ways for readers to post videos or images (other than avatar icons) within the comments sections, and YBF even went so far as to specifically ban the inclusion of any outside links in reader comments. Readers’ contribution to content is thus generally limited to posting text-based comments to individual posts. This suggests a hierarchy of interactive engagement on gossip blogs in
which the blogger, as the primary author of the site, is also the primary participant in interactive features while the audience engages in traditional modes of engagement, like reading or watching. Nevertheless, it is precisely this dominant perspective and technological engagement that draws readers to a particular blog and fosters a sense of connection between reader and blogger that speaks to the possibility of building community through gossip talk on celebrity gossip blogs.

**Online Connections and Community**

In order to better understand what sorts of connections readers do (or do not) feel as part of reading gossip blogs, they were asked to rank their feeling of connection with others, including the blogger, commenters and other readers, on a seven-point Likert scale, with one representing no connection, four representing some connection and seven representing a very strong connection. Though 113 (43.7%) of 258 respondents claimed they felt little or no connection to others when they read celebrity gossip blogs, a majority of readers (145 or 56.2%) reported they felt at least some connection to others when reading gossip blogs. This combined with the overwhelming evidence that readers choose specific gossip blogs because of the perspective on celebrity culture points to at least an imagined interpretive community amongst blog readers.

It is important to note that this particular question addresses *reading* practices, not the use of other interactive features on the blogs. Reading blogs remains a solitary practice, and many respondents do not directly connect it to any sense of community, real or imagined. Since these readers value blogs for entertainment and distraction, it may be that considering any level of community takes the practice of reading too seriously. As
this respondent suggests, entertainment, not community, is the primary source of
pleasure:

I never read comments from other people reading the blogs or anything. I am just
checking the stories or videos on the certain celebrity I'm looking up and that is
all. It is a few minutes of entertainment and that is it.

Though this reader seems to recognize a shared interest in a particular celebrity draws her
to the blog, the actual process of reading is for herself and not to make connections with
others. Finally, the weak sense of connection felt by many readers appears to be
associated with the level of negativity they see in the comments section, indicating that a
certain type of supportive and dialogue-based community may be desired by readers but
not available on certain gossip blogs.

When readers moved from simply reading to participating in the comments
sections, the feelings of connection increased. Readers who reported they at least
occasionally posted comments were asked to report the strength of connection they felt
when posting comments using the same seven-point Likert scale. The overall number of
readers who post comments was low (83 or 31.9% reported posting at least occasionally),
and only 81 of these respondents rated the level of connection felt with others when
posting on blogs. However, 53 (65.4%) of these 81 respondents reported connections
ranging from “some” to “very strong,” demonstrating that part of the pleasure of gossip
blogs for these readers involves connecting with others through the interactive features:

because you can start having really deep conversations with someone just by
having a comment out there they read and respond to, or sometimes I comment on
something I read as several times many people will get in on the comments.

others are able to learn your thoughts on the matter and can reply, which can start
a dialogue.
I think reading blog comments that reflect my own opinions, beliefs, pop culture experiences, or sense of humor help me to feel connected to others. I also like blog comments that present different viewpoints for me to consider, much like one would get from interacting with people in the real world.

These feelings are similar to those engendered by reading, but have a more concrete expression because readers can actually participate in conversation through the comments section.

Many of the survey respondents who felt a sense of community in reading or posting comments on blogs pointed to the role of dialogue and discussion in connecting them to others. Echoing the idea that shared perspectives draw them to gossip blogs, other respondents posit that comments sections offer a space to connect with others and gain new insight through negotiation of celebrity gossip. The possibility of building a real or imagined community is tied to the way gossip talk builds community in the real world. Readers come to gossip blogs with a sense of shared knowledge about celebrity culture, but expand and, more importantly, judge that knowledge through discussion and negotiation of the latest dish. They feel connected when someone, such as the blogger or a fellow commenter, shares a similar opinion or when that individual’s opinion makes the reader think about the meaning of a story in a different way. As will be explored in the next chapter on commenter communities across the blogs in my sample, this dialogue is not always positive or productive, which again may explain why many readers resist the notion of community on celebrity gossip blogs. Nevertheless, the gossip orientation of the blogs offers readers social space to reinforce and resist the dominant meanings associated with celebrity culture.

The presence of interactive spaces certainly does not guarantee readers will use them. The social practices of participation influence how readers engage with each other
in ways not tied to the specific technological features of the blog. For example, it is clear that some respondents do not see reading or posting comments on gossip blogs as a meaningful way to connect with others precisely because such interactions occur online. As one respondent put it, “it doesn’t really create a feeling of being connected to others because it is an online thing where you don’t know these people or anything else about them, especially intellectually.” For readers like this one, even though blogs feature interactive ways for readers to create content or participate in other ways, the fact that such interactions do not occur face to face or between individuals who know each other offline means that such engagements are not real. Though readers are drawn to a blog for its particular perspective and may feel a sense of connection to the blogger, this sense of shared meaning does not necessarily translate to the community of commenters in a social sense.

Furthermore, many respondents see the comments sections not as a place of dialogue and mutual understanding, but as a place too rife with negativity and mean-spiritedness to promote any meaningful sense of connection or community:

if I don’t read the comments, I can generally continue to believe humanity isn’t overrun with hateful morons.
I read The Superficial only thru RSS, as the commenters on that site are generally mean-spirited, unclesver, and I don’t want to waste my time reading those comments.

the commenters tend to freak me out with their A) illiteracy, B) stalkerishness, or C) need to be first

I find that usually [the comments section] ends off topic and someone is saying nasty/wrong/inappropriate things about stuff that may or may not be what the original story is about.

These readers recognize that some sort of more active audience community is happening on celebrity gossip blogs, but simply want no part of it. This is not to suggest they do not
use their reading practices to build connections in other ways, both online and offline, but they do not see the participatory possibilities offered by gossip blogs as a meaningful place to build community.

**Offline or “Real Life” Connections and Community**

Though I am primarily concerned with online communities that emerge from celebrity gossip blogs, there are ways that the technological and social features of blogs work to promote a sense of community between readers offline. Offline communities are “real” life communities in which members build and maintain social connections in more traditional or face-to-face ways, but, in a contemporary culture saturated by new media technologies, are often supported by online interactions as well. Hermes (1995) argues gossip magazine readers find “talking about…favourite stars a comfortable way of spending [her] time with other people,” and as a media source for gossip, blogs work in the same way (p. 131). Shared knowledge about celebrities gleaned from blog reading can help build real life connections between people who are not already intimately connected. One reader describes the shared knowledge gleaned from reading blogs as:

> a connecting factor as many people know the same ‘facts’ you do- you can talk about these strangers and their strange lives with nearly anyone (i work retail & sometimes end up doing this with customers).

For this reader, celebrity gossip provides an easy way to have conversations with strangers by finding a momentary connection through the sharing and evaluating of knowledge about celebrities. Another reader sees celebrities and celebrity gossip as “an easy topic of conversation” in most social settings. Their pleasure comes not from the knowledge itself, but through the process of gossip talk and forging community with
others in their everyday lives. The blogs are a source of information that supports participation in such communities, but not the site of those community interactions.

Beyond offering a way to discuss what one reader describes as “light current events,” the evaluative and moral dimensions of celebrity gossip talk can help establish or maintain deeper connections. In fact, most readers who felt real life connections because of their blog reading pointed to celebrity gossip as a topic they regularly discuss with co-workers, friends and/or family, thus using gossip to further strengthen ties within existing relationships. One survey respondent clearly separates online and offline life, saying, “it is the internet…connection is divorced from reality…I do however feel a kinship with those people I KNOW in real-life who read the same blogs as me. We have a shared knowledge base.” Keeping current is important to strengthening these relationships through gossip talk because the reader needs new information to bring to the conversation. One reader states “if I find a piece of gossip amusing and worth further discussion, I'll discuss it with my best friend.” Another reader specifically describes her blog reading as a way to connect with real life friends, saying, “my girl friends read the same ones so we talk about what ‘holly’ said or what ‘trent’ is doing.” In this case, these real life friends have included a virtual friend, the blogger, in their circle, thus blurring the boundaries between real and imagined communities. Similarly, as several readers specifically indicated they talk about celebrity gossip with co-workers, it seems the distraction element remains important, as they use celebrity gossip as a way to take a break from work. In other words, beyond just reading gossip as a distraction, they use the latest knowledge gained from blogs to connect with others on a topic other than work.
These readers have already established connections with others and use celebrity gossip to strengthen those ties.

There is some evidence of offline communities visible on some blogs, thus further blurring the boundaries of real and online communities. Both Perez and Trent regularly post pictures sent in by readers identifying themselves as fans of the blog. These images make visible several ways audiences use their blog reading practices to form community. Figure 16 provides representative examples of these reader generated images from PITNB from February 16, 2008 and February 23, 2008.

![Figure 16: PITNB readers (Vanegas, February 16, 2008 (left) and February 23, 2008 (right))]()

Readers create this content using various levels of technological expertise, indicating a range of technological protocols that support this social dimension of participation. Some use Photoshop to caption or manipulate their photos, mimicking Trent’s photo manipulations, while others simply hold hand-written signs in the photos. But these are not celebrity photos manipulated by the audience, rather are images of the
audience that all take a similar form, indicating a social protocol governing this technological interactivity. All of the images express their love for the blog through the use of the “Pink is the New _____” phrase and, typically, pink fonts that mimic Trent’s style. These images carve out a space for the individual within the larger audience, but also illustrate their allegiance to the particular blog and a sense of connection between the reader and the blogger. In my interview with Trent from PITNB, he recognized that the presence of the audience, their clear connection with his own perspective, and his own feeling of connection to his readers is central to PITNB’s success. He claims:

I only know how to do my perspective…[and] I really do think that’s what people respond to…a huge segment of…people will send me photos. Like women who give birth and within hours send me a photo of their child because they want to share. That is something that you wouldn’t necessarily want to send to Sam Donaldson or Anderson Cooper or someone who does the news. It’s more of a friend thing. And I’m so flattered and so thankful and I’m very happy that one people want to share that with me and I’m happy to share that with everyone else (Vanegas, personal interview, August 20, 2008).

Finally, that Trent regularly posts these images on his blog strengthens the imagined community of readers, as those who read the blog recognize that there are others who do as well.

Occasionally, the more active members of these online communities build offline relationships with those they meet through the sites. One survey respondent told me, “I am an active Gawker/Jezebel commenter and I’ve actually made many friends in real life with other commenters,” suggesting that active participation on the blog can translate into real life connections. Jezebel allows, if not actively encourages, readers to use the site to promote regional offline meet-ups. Though announcements of such meet-ups are posted on the blog (as opposed to simply mentioned by readers in comments sections), these are not officially organized or sponsored by Jezebel or its authors, rather are put together by
readers. During my online fieldwork, there were two announcements for commenter meet-ups at local bars in Los Angeles (February 15 and March 7) and one in New York City (February 29). These public meet-ups give readers a chance to meet others who share their interests, by virtue of being Jezebel readers, create and/or maintain connections and communities offline.

Readers/commenters from other blogs may make connections with each other that translate into offline relationships, but they are not visible on the site nor did respondents reveal them in the survey. For example, private messaging capabilities on Pop Sugar allow readers to communicate directly with each other outside of the public forums and may be used to announce meet-ups for particular users. But these and other forms of private engagement amongst users are not publicly visible on the sites, nor were they discussed on my survey. Nevertheless, it is clear that real life or offline communities can be created and strengthened by gossip blog reading practices.

**Resistance to the Label of Community**

The interactive features and participatory possibilities of celebrity gossip blogs leads to an easy assumption that people use these sites, as with other online activities, to connect with others. Yet my survey data demonstrates that most readers do not see community-building as an important component of their blog reading practices. Given the uncertainty surrounding the metaphor of community within new media as described in chapter three, such attitudes are not entirely surprising. Some audience members may hold onto a more traditional or face-to-face notion of community, and thus not apply the term to the imagined or virtual communities more typical of online groups. At the same time, many of the survey respondents did identify some type of connection with the
blogger and/or other readers that speaks to the flexible definition of online community building I also outlined in chapter three. These connections are not necessarily strong, but readers recognize that engaging with others through gossip talk is an important part of their enjoyment of celebrity gossip blogs. Of course, there is also great deal of evidence on the gossip blogs that readers do find connection with others as a part of their reading practices. In the next chapter, I explore the different types of community evident in reader engagement with and through celebrity gossip blogs.
CHAPTER 8
GOSSIP AS PARTICIPATION:
BUILDING VISIBLE COMMUNITIES ON CELEBRITY GOSSIP BLOGS

Celebrity gossip blog audiences, as the discussion of my survey in chapter seven reveals, cannot be easily categorized into a homogenous group. They are united by their interest in celebrity culture and gossip, but the ways in which they engage with that gossip varies markedly. Some are content to remain readers, engaging with the text on an individual and solitary, yet nevertheless active, level. Others are more explicitly involved in content creation, posting comments or sending photos to the blogger. Most fall somewhere in between these two extremes, but all participate in some form of social meaning making through their consumption of celebrity gossip. The diverse range of practices described by the survey respondents points to the challenges of understanding the formation of community on gossip blogs.

Even when more visible and interactive spaces of engagement are put at the center of analysis, as I aim to do in this chapter, the idea of one coherent sense of online community on celebrity gossip blogs remains slippery. On one hand, I do not want to fall into a technological determinist argument that sees any use of interactive features as a space of community. This not only fails to recognize invisible practices of community-building, as discussed in chapter seven, but also fails to address the social rules that govern these more visible forms of participation. At the same time, relying only on a social perspective is equally problematic, as it is evident that technological features both enable and limit interaction in ways that are relevant to understanding a community. By engaging a more flexible definition of community, it is clear that some sort of connection and community does emerge on celebrity gossip blogs.
Fernback (2007) and others advocate for flexible notions of community that define community as process, not a single entity. This view rejects any prescriptive definition of community and recognizes that online community is best understood through the actual forms of audience engagement exhibited within a particular virtual space. Therefore, I am here interested in the visible spaces of community available on celebrity gossip blogs. Defining the relationship between technological protocols and social protocols on a particular site is, I argue, an important way of beginning to understand the various types and strengths of these potential online communities. The interactive spaces on blogs make reader engagement visible, but what readers do in these spaces must be more closely examined in order to understand community as a process. In a broad sense, the visibility of the comments sections to all readers is itself a technological feature that aims at creating a sense of community by allowing audience the virtual space to connect with the blogger and/or with other readers. How readers use this space, as well as why some readers choose not to participate in the comments sections, reveals something about the social dimensions of participation and the strength and quality of the commenter community on that blog. Ultimately, I argue even though community may not be the primary goal of celebrity gossip blogs, the negotiation of shared meaning central to gossip talk and the interactive space in which to do this negotiation promotes community in multiple constantly evolving ways.

“**He seems like someone I’d be friends with**: Community Between Blogger and Reader

Hermes (1995) describes the shared experience of reading gossip magazines as a space of imaginary moral community as similar to that created by spoken gossip. It connects readers through a sense of shared perspectives and values, using the textual
negotiation of meaning to meet “an unconscious need to belong” (p. 141). As gossip blogs are fundamentally texts, blog readers forge a similar sort of imagined community. But the first-person and commentary-laden style of gossip blogs make reading a blog much more like engaging in spoken gossip with the blogger. Therefore, the first type of community on celebrity gossip blogs is expressed through the connection between the reader and the blogger. This connection is expressed in both imagined and publicly visible ways.

As my survey indicates, readers are drawn to particular gossip blogs based on the blogger’s perspective, thus appear to be forging an imagined community based on shared knowledge, interpretation, and judgment of the celebrity image with the blogger. Readers recognize that they do not actually know the blogger, but feel a strong sense of connection to him because his personality and perspective are so central to their engagement with celebrity gossip. Many respondents describe this connection in terms of friendship or other close relationships, indicating the social dimensions that shape their reasons for reading particular blogs:

the authors of the two main celebrity blogs I read are people I'd love to meet and probably would love to hang out with. Reading their blogs (and, in the case of Trent of PITNB, telling me about their day) makes me feel like it's a conversation between friends, especially in the way they're written.

I began reading Pink is the New Blog because I enjoy reading the gossip, and because I enjoyed the blogger's writing style. Over time I have become ‘connected’ to the blogger because I enjoy reading about what he does, such as going to concerts and shows, and he seems like a cool, interesting person.

I feel a bit of a connection to the blogger…if the blogger has a sense of humor that I can relate to, it sometimes makes it seem as though you're reading an e-mail from a friend or something.
The fact that many readers express a sense of connection with Trent from PITNB is particularly telling because, as discussed in chapter five, he did not have comments sections at all from late 2005 through June 2008. But, by foregrounding his personality so strongly, Trent clearly created a meaningful, if imagined, community with his many members of his audience.

The interactive features of a blog also play an important role in creating and intensifying a sense of community between the blogger and the reader, as well as making that connection a visible part of the content of the blog. All the blogs in my sample include an email address for the blogger where readers can send tips, feedback, or other messages directly to the blogger, offering a space of one-to-one communication between blogger and reader. Bloggers do not typically respond to all these messages, but the technological features give the readers the sense that there is a way to speak directly to the blogger. It is clear from my survey and fieldwork that some readers see the comments sections as a place to directly address the blogger as if in conversation with him or her, regardless of whether or not bloggers actually ever respond to, or even read, the comments. As one survey respondent says, “commenting on blog posts, to me, adds to the conversational and friendly nature of the [connection between] blogger/bloggee,” suggesting the opportunity for dialogue between the blogger and the reader is important to cultivating a sense of community. Since the blogger is the primary creator of content and meaning on the blog, it makes sense that this space of connection would emerge as part of the practice of reading. Gossip implies the shared construction of meaning, so these readers are participating in the gossip talk, using Jenkins’ (2006a) definition of participation, by connecting with the blogger through the comments section. This moves
the community away from a purely imagined one by enabling the reader to more directly produce, rather than just read, the gossip. In other words, these audience members choose to use the technological features of the blog to contribute to the gossip, a more visible mode of cultural production than the more solitary meaning making associated with reading.

Survey respondents who discussed this sort of connection painted it as a positive and friendly connection between reader and blogger. This may be because these readers found my survey posted on blogs that are generally positive in their coverage of celebrity and maintain a civil discourse in the comments sections. PITNB, the main source of survey respondents, is positive in its coverage of celebrities because while Trent gently mocks celebrities and makes jokes at their expense, his commentary is not mean-spirited. He describes his approach to celebrity culture as positive and reflective of his own interests in pop culture, positioning himself as a fan of, as well as a commentator on, celebrity culture. He says:

I talk about movies I’m interested in, like something that I want to see or something that I think would be good...I like talking about positive things. You know, I don’t really like making fun of people when they’re breaking up or when someone has died, so I try to be respectful (Vanegas, personal interview, August 20, 2008).

The blogger’s approach to celebrity culture impacts that type and strength of community that emerges on the comments sections. In fact, my fieldwork observations suggest that while some readers are clearly using the comments sections to engage in gossip talk directly with the blogger, it is not necessarily always as positive, particularly on sites like Perez Hilton that are based on a more malicious type of gossip. While there is evidence of this sort of attempt at dialogue between commenter and blogger in the comments
sections, it does tend to remain one-sided. Bloggers do not typically participate in their comments sections, but readers nevertheless direct their comments at him or her. The most obvious example of this sort of participation is on PerezHilton, where many commenters use the comments section to directly criticize Perez as a means of participating in the community.

For example, Perez posted a red carpet picture of British model Agyness Deyn at the Elle Style Awards and proclaimed her “fresh and fun” and “our latest obsession” (Hilton, February 12, 2008). In the comments sections, readers participate in gossip talk by responding to his take on Deyn’s style, adding their own perspective as a form of negotiation of what defines “stylish.” Most of the comments reflect the snarky and often harsh commentary that characterizes Perez’s own gossip style, reinforcing the idea that the blogger sets the tone for the entire community. Commenter “puhplease!” says, “stylish?! its like a box of highlighters exploded on her! not good man. not good” (comment on ibid). Though members may share a common perspective on celebrity culture, gossip community does not require absolute agreement, as this commenter uses her disagreement as a way to contribute to the community. Tellingly, this commenter retains the judgmental tone typical of Perez’s posts, thus aligning with the social goals of the community even as she disagrees with his preferred reading of Deyn’s image. The ability of the blogger to set the tone for the gossip on the site is evident in the content of many of the comments. Commenters across PerezHilton site also engage the same conversational style and frequent use of slanguage that characterize his site. This includes repeating words and phrases commonly used by Perez in his posts, such as “sperminated” (to refer to a pregnant woman), “yummy yummy screw” (to refer to a
physically attractive individual) or using the celebrity nicknames he coins (such as “Gay Aiken” or “Shitney Spears”), as well as embracing his overall mean-spirited and malicious tone.

By challenging Perez’s assessment of Deyn, commenter “puhlease” and others also challenge Perez’s credibility as the dominant voice in the community. Such exchanges illustrate that commenters are active participants in the cultural production of meaning on the blogs and do not universally accept the blogger’s reading of celebrity culture. “Miss D-Licious” says, “first of all, she is not fierce with this outfit. Second she is nothing new to modeling she has been out for a while now stop trying to act like you are the first to bring her to the public” (comment on ibid). “Androgynous” adds, “she looks like a fucking 15 year old boy! Ohhh…maybe that's why you like her Perez” (comment on ibid). Finally, representing a type of comment that frequently appears on PerezHilton comments section regardless of the topic of the original post, “anne” says, “Perez…You’re a fucking Idiot.” (comment on ibid). These sorts of direct attacks on Perez, often ridiculing his weight or appearance as well as calling him names, are quite common, in part because they go unchecked by a moderator. It seems there is an entire category of commenter on Perez that visits the site in order to disagree with, and ridicule, Perez. Given the mean-spirited and malicious comments Perez regularly makes about celebrities in his posts, this sort of connection fits within the established tone of the community on PerezHilton and demonstrates a point of connection between the reader and the blogger. By promoting this social mode of engagement on the site and not enabling technological features that control who comments and what they may write, the
community on PerezHilton is a fairly inhospitable place, but nevertheless a space of community.

**Creating Content and Creating Connections**

The second dimension of community on gossip blogs involves the way readers use their engagement with the site as a means to make connections and build community with other readers. I have already argued that these audiences, at the very least, are connected in an imagined community by their shared interest in gossip and celebrity culture. But the interactive nature of celebrity gossip blogs has the potential to take the connection beyond the imaginary by offering readers the virtual space to participate in actual gossip talk and more direct one-to-one conversation. Interactive spaces, like comments sections, make the audiences’ cultural production a visible part of the content of the blog. Commenters use the celebrity image as an anchor for larger discussions of social and cultural ideologies, thus creating connections and community with other readers through gossip talk. Discussions that emerge in the comments section are not simply about separating truth from fiction, but place that information into context in order to expand and/or limit social meanings. In other words, commenters on gossip blogs are not just talking about celebrities, but making social meanings through the negotiation of the celebrity image.

Though the technological protocols that govern online interactions limit the types and strength of connections between readers on gossip blogs, these spaces serve a social function of bringing audiences together into a community of commenters. Such a community is fluid, as it changes not only between blogs but also varies greatly for different readers of a specific blog. Of course, not all readers become commenters, and
these visible commenter communities do not represent the full range of cultural production practices that occur on celebrity gossip blogs. Nevertheless, recognizing how readers build community through the creation of content in these interactive spaces is important to understanding the full range of engagements on gossip blogs. I here offer an analysis of the various levels of community that emerge amongst commenters on five of the six blogs in my sample.28 I do not intend this to be an exhaustive account of everything that goes on in the community of commenters on these gossip blogs. Instead, I offer a discussion of how the technological and social protocols structure and promote commenter community on each blog with attention to what makes each community unique and the types of social meanings that bind these communities together.

**PerezHilton**

The low level of moderation combined with the high traffic on the site makes PerezHilton’s comments sections by far the largest in terms of number of comments. Though PerezHilton does have the largest audience of all the blogs in my sample, I argue the lack of any technological and social moderation is related to the large volume of comments on the site. It is not uncommon to see the total number of comments quickly reach well over 100, and for especially juicy items, one can expect to see an even greater number. For example, in February 2008, a series of nude photos of actress and tabloid darling Lindsay Lohan taken for *New York* magazine (as a recreation of the final photo shoot of celebrity icon Marilyn Monroe) were leaked to the internet. PerezHilton was among the first blogs to post the images, with his post containing the images going up at

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28 As PITNB did not have comments sections during my fieldwork, I do not include it here, though I discuss various forms of reader communities in this chapter and in chapter seven.
9:20 am on February 18th (Hilton, February 18, 2008). By the afternoon of February 23, the post racked up over 2200 comments from readers, most of which occurred within the first 24 hours after the initial posting.

These high numbers might suggest a robust online community of commenters, as online community “members’ frequency of interaction with others is a major determinant of the extent to which they build relationships with one other” (Yuqing, Kraut, and Kiesler, 2007, p. 387). However, Yuqing et. al (2007) observe that frequent interactions in a large online community can actually be a detriment to building strong connections because the high volume of communication can overwhelm individual members. The strength of an online community, therefore, is not determined by quantity of interactions but by the quality of those interactions in terms of promoting an ongoing sense of dialogue or at least thoughtful engagement. A typical PerezHilton post has multiple comments that simply say “first!” as commenters race to have their comment at the top of the page rather than actually engage with the content of the post. In fact, there is usually no other comment or discussion of the particular post in these “first!” comments, and it seems they are simply trying to demonstrate they were the first to read, or at least click, on the post on this frequently updated site. This is a clear appeal to the immediacy of gossip blogs, as commenters can quickly read and comment upon the latest gossip. Of course, as the reader must refresh the site in order to see any newly posted comments, not everyone is first, and “first!” comments can and do appear anywhere on the comments section. A more moderated site, like Jezebel, employs a higher level of technological and social protocols to moderate the comments sections and weeds out these sorts of comments as distracting from the overall goals of the site.
A closer look at the content of comments for the Lindsay Lohan post supports my claim that lack of moderation results in interactions of less quality. The vast majority of comments on this post, and indeed most PerezHilton posts, are individualized and highly repetitive, and thus support only a weak sense of connection between readers. By individualized, I mean comments which are simply statements of a reader’s opinion without any connection to other comments. This gossip is simply “idle talk” that Spacks (1986) argues does not connect gossippers on a deeper level. She describes it as “derive[ing] from unconsidered desire to say something without having to ponder too deeply. Without purposeful intent, gossippers bandy words and anecdotes about other people, thus protecting themselves from serious engagement with one another” (p. 4).

That the same ideas and sentiments, and indeed often even the same phrasing, appear throughout the comments sections, suggests an imagined moral community does exist here, but commenters are not using this interactive feature of the blog to create dialogue with others in pursuit of a stronger sense of community.

Participation in the comments section on PerezHilton is more of a race to be the first and/or the “loudest” commenter rather creating a space for dialogue, debate, or community-building. This is supported by the loose technological protocols that allow anyone to post under any username rather than requiring commenters to register with the site. The first ten comments from the Lindsay Lohan post address the specifics of that gossip item, but also serve as a representative example of the types of disconnected comments seen across the site:
Readers jockey to be the first to appear on the list of comments, dashing off at most a short sentence expressing their opinion on the post in order to be included at the top of the comments sections, which appear in chronological order, rather than putting the most recent comment at the top of the list. Those rare comments that are more thoughtful and engaged are simply drowned out by the cacophony of disconnected comments.

These comments are representative of most PerezHilton comments because they reflect the malicious and judgmental type of gossip that permeates the site. As described in earlier chapters, Perez offers a serious reading of celebrity, using Hermes’ (1995) categories of gossip reading, but one which largely dis-identifies with the celebrity and
revels in pointing out their foibles. This also fits with Spacks’ (1986) claim that gossip can serve “serious (perhaps unconscious) purposes for the gossipers, whose manipulations of reputation can…gratify envy and range by diminishing another, generate an immediately satisfying sense of power, although the talkers acknowledge no such intent” (p. 4). Gossip is a resource for those without power, and certainly celebrity-watching audiences (including bloggers) have little cultural power compared to those they read about. But talking about and judging the lives of celebrities offers a fairly risk free way to, at least indirectly, address this power imbalance. As one respondent described it:

[blogs] also reaffirm a certain feeling of moral superiority: I can say to myself, ‘If I made 50 million dollars and became famous, I would NEVER behave like that because I am AN INTELLECTUAL with MORALS. I know who my friends are and I don't need money and plastic surgery to be happy and self-confident.’ It's a little bit of enjoyable self-congratulation.

At the same time, using gossip to critique celebrity culture, particularly on PerezHilton, often also reinforces dominant moral and cultural norms. On one hand, Perez first challenges Lindsay’s hubris for even attempting to recreate these iconic photos without the same sort of talent to back up her fame. He points out that “she has no movie coming out. That new album won't be released for a while. Lindsay has NOTHING to promote, other than herself. Lohan is addicted to fame!” (Hilton, February 18, 2008). His critique devolves from evaluating her talent to using the nude images as evidence that she is “addicted to fame” and will do anything, including shamelessly putting her body on display, to maintain celebrity. Framing the photos as desperate and sad, he becomes the judge of what a female celebrity can and cannot do with her body and what an appropriate female celebrity body should look like.
Both of these perspectives are upheld in the comments sections for this post. In fact, the early comments on the Lindsay Lohan post are also somewhat tame compared to the general tone of those that appeared later:

#108  lisa p says – reply to this
drag queen, hairy pits, saggy tittie balls, nasty nasty nasty

#250  Not Even Close!!!!!!!!!!!! says – reply to this
She couldn't be a zit on Monroe's Ass!!!!!!!!!!!! Skank needs attention as usual. besides the fake breasts she has noooooooooooooooooothin. Go OD or have a drink and drive. Put a fork in that freckled waste. Goodbye…….

#1045 HOLY CRAP! says – reply to this
LOOK AT ALL THOSE NASTY FRECKLES….that just repulses me. She is just about the skankiest thing in Hollywood..and every guy makes fun of her. Firecrotch has been around the block waaaay too many times (comments on ibid)

This ratcheting up of the judgmental tone may also be an attempt by the commenter to make his or her voice heard even after many other similar comments have made. That is, if one cannot be first, then one can attract attention by making the most inflammatory comment. These commenters attempt to circumvent the technological protocols that bury their comments amongst so many others by embracing or even surpassing the social protocol of judgmental and malicious gossip. The comments sections on PerezHilton build an interpretive community using shared judgment as a basis for connection. But it appears to work on a weak or even imaginary level in part because of the idle talk orientation that defines participation and the weak technological protocols that structure the interactions.

Yuqing et. al (2007) point out that online communities that included technological protocols that “carefully screen and admit new members” exhibited “much better quality participation in…discussion” than those sites “that have no screening” mechanisms (p. 266).
The lack of “quality” on PerezHilton in terms of dialogue and connection between the commenters is certainly influenced by the loose technological protocols that do little to limit who interacts on the site and the form such participation takes. One particularly striking example of how technological features shape reader engagement is the placement of the comments field on the page itself. The fields for user name and comments appear directly under the initial post (occasionally separated by an advertisement) and before the reader comments that have already been posted. Thus, readers do not even have to scroll past other comments, let alone actually read them, in order to contribute their own.

PerezHilton.com does include the “reply to this” link that enables a reader to speak back to an earlier comment (and will create a link to the original in the new comment text so other readers may follow the conversation). Commenters do not typically use this feature, and even when they do, it even more rarely results in an ongoing discussion between two or more commenters. This may be due, in part, to the high volume of comments, as readers who are just interested in a fun moment of distraction are not going to wade through all those comments to find ways to engage with others who may not even return to read later comments.

On the Lindsay Lohan post, for example, 91 comments were logged before someone replied to an existing comment. Commenter #92 (“Ms Dolo D”) replied to commenter #67 (“mrspmrsp”):

#67 mrspmrsp says – reply to this
I still don't quite get why this girl is famous….
Beautiful? No
Star Quality? No
Brilliant Actor? No
Clues anyone?
I suspect it is highly unlikely that “mrspmrsp” read through all those comments to see the reply, as no further dialogue between these user names appears in the comments section. However, this was the second comment from “Ms Dolo D” on this post, indicating that some commenters do read (and reply to) other comments. But overall, the technological protocols on PerezHilton encourage readers to interact with the text and images from post itself or with Perez as the author of the post more so than with each other.

All of these technological features have an impact on the social protocols that shape participation as well. The most obvious example is that since commenters are not required to register (at the time of my fieldwork), there is no way to track regular commenters nor can a commenter establish an online identity that other readers may recognize and/or seek out. McKenna, Green and Gleason (2002) suggest the anonymity of the internet reduces the risks of intimate self-disclosure between individuals and may actually enable connections to be made more quickly and deeply. However, their study presupposes individuals use their online interactions as a space of personal disclosure about their “real” lives. The idle gossip talk on PerezHilton is about making social meanings, but not social connections. The high level of anonymity that results from the lack of static user names, combined with the lack of a moderator and the overall mean-spirited tone of the blog, seems to embolden commenters, to put it bluntly, to post whatever they want without consequence. My observation of PerezHilton indicates that even if commenters do respond to each other, it is typically to deride or mock an earlier comment not attempt to promote back-and-forth dialogue with another reader. Though the
comments on PerezHilton are related to gossip talk, celebrity gossip blogs are certainly
not the only place where anonymity and low levels of moderation encourages mean-
spirited and aggressive comments between commenters. Similar sorts of attacks are
commonplace on large online forums, such as comments sections on YouTube.com or
CNN.com. In other words, it is not the social protocols of gossip talk that leads to this
sort of behavior, but the technological protocols structuring the online community.

This is evident in the following exchange between at least two commenters (the
exact number is unknown, since the user names can be changed every time an individual
posts a comment) regarding a post on Britney Spears:

#33 - h says – reply to this
Yeah the bad influences have gone in her life YET somehow, she still is a fat ugly
worthless slut, who is shopping for herself, always thinking about herself
this whore is NOT mentally ill she is just a spoiled whore and child neglecter.

#37 - Lynn Spears says – reply to this
Re: h – I agree, someone tell that little brat that when you have kids…you're not
the baby anymore. She's the only one I ever heard in Hollywood lose their kids.
That shows you just what a trashy selfish whore she is. Sorry folks, I wished I
never had her, but the money is nice.

#42 - LickMyNutz says – reply to this
Re: Lynn Spears – THE ONLY TRASHY WHORE AROUND HERE IS YOU
AND YOUR PROSTITUTE MOTHER WHOSE ASSHOLE YOU FELL FROM
😊 (comments on Hilton, February 16, 2008).

This exchange is representative of what occurs in the comments sections of PerezHilton
for several reasons. First, the judgmental and derogatory language used to describe a
celebrity reflects the tone established by Perez in his initial posts. Though in this case his
initial post was supportive of Britney’s improvements and said positive things about her,
the overall tone of his blog (and indeed towards Britney before her mental breakdown) is
usually malicious and judgmental. Here, the judgment centers on Britney’s perceived
violation of gendered ideological standards. Britney is not only “fat” and “ugly” but she is also a “whore” and a selfish and unfit mother according to these commenters. The second commenter uses the name “Lynn Spears” to refer to Britney’s mother in order to underscore this judgment of both women as unfit mothers. Additionally, the anonymity of the comments section allows commenters to lob insults at other readers for stating an opinion without consequence. This sort of behavior is largely tolerated on the site as any commenter who tries to intervene is met with similar comments or is, most commonly, simply ignored. As discussed above, it seems some commenters are drawn to PerezHilton precisely to make caustic and derogatory comments, and the technological and social protocols enable this sort of community to emerge.

This is not to suggest that there are never positive or supportive comments on PerezHilton. They appear on every post, but particularly on posts that try to show positive sides to celebrities, such as posts on Britney’s improved mental health or celebrities’ charitable works. In general, the comments sections typically include contributions from readers who want to stick up for a particular celebrity or celebrities in general. The Lindsay Lohan nude pictures post provides a clear example, as some commenters rejected the negative body policing and general disparagement of Lindsay’s image exhibited by other commenters:

#112 jules vardon says – reply to this
Gorgeous! I think she looks exactly like Ann Margaret though

#214 KellyBabieXxxX says – reply to this
Your all knob's! [sic] All you people have done is dis Lindsey but your real problem is that your all just jealous as you'll never have the life that she does! And to say she's fat...what a bunch of hypocritical prick's you are...a few months ago people were complaining that she was a bag of bones and now she's gained weight all you do is Bitch! Seem's the poor girl will never win...get a grip on yourselves people...no one is perfect!!
"KellyBabieXxxX" and "AZ Bob" seem to have read other comments before writing their own because they are referring to ideas expressed in other comments and specifically mention/criticize others and their negative responses to Lindsay in a broad sense ("Your all knob’s!" and "You are the true losers"). But the use of insults as well as the generalized rebuttal suggests neither commenter is attempting to build connection with others by engaging in a back-and-forth conversation. Their comments keep with the overarching tone of the site, as most comments are derogatory towards the celebrity covered in the post, Perez himself, and/or other commenters.

Interestingly, many of my survey respondents indicated both directly (expressly naming PerezHilton.com) and indirectly cited these sorts of interactions as reasons why they do not participate in or even read comments sections. As will be demonstrated in the remaining blogs, combining stricter technological protocols with clearly stated social goals for participation creates a much stronger sense of community amongst commenters on celebrity gossip blogs. This is not to suggest readers want the blogger to exert total control over the interactions in the comments sections, as will be evident my discussion of the reactions to Jezebel’s strict community rules. But there is ample evidence that some levels of technological control in the service of the social goals of the site works to create a stronger sense of community.
Pop Sugar

Pop Sugar provides an excellent example of how a closer relationship between the technological and social protocols promotes a stronger sense of community on celebrity gossip blogs. This blog has more interactive features than any of the other blogs in my sample, suggesting it relies heavily on technological protocols to structure its reader communities. But these protocols all have clear connections to the social goals of the site. That is, they are not arbitrary features but aim to provide some sort of bounded community in the interest of maintaining the social goals of the site. Commenters are not only held accountable for their content, but they are given the sense such creation of content is essential to the overall functioning of the blog.

More interestingly, Pop Sugar offers technologically-based rewards for various forms of social participation on the site. Readers become members of the site by registering a username and (optionally) uploading an avatar image, and then earn “Pop Sugar points” when they participate in any of the interactive features. For example, a user earns one point when she posts a comment to a blog post, 25 points if she correctly answers a “Guess Who?” post (readers guess which celebrity is pictured in a paparazzi photo), and 35 points if she takes an online quiz. By accruing points, users gain “Sugar Status,” an indicator of membership level based on participation on the site. Silver members have at least 100 points, Gold at least 1,000, Platinum at least 5,000 points, Diamond at least 10,000 points, and this status and total number of points a user currently
has are always visible under the user’s avatar whenever she participates on the site (Community Manager, August 24, 2009)\textsuperscript{29}.

The Sugar Status establishes user’s credibility as a participant in the community, creating a sort of hierarchy amongst the commenters in terms of frequent activity. While I am interested in only the use of comments sections as a way to create connection with other readers, Pop Sugar clearly recognizes the importance of community to its blog and uses this as a way to draw active audience members to the site. The Sugar Network continually updates its technological protocols and creates new ways for readers to generate their own content and participate on the blogs across the network.

Pop Sugar’s comments sections offer a range of technological and social features that encourage and enable users to interact with the site and with each other. The comments sections begin after the post and the field for a user to add her own comment is included after the first page of comments (no more than 50 comments are posted per comments page and readers must click to view next page if want to keep reading comments). Comments sections are moderated by Sugar Network staff, and readers are reminded of this at the top of the comment field where it informs readers that “we like a happy community, therefore we moderate our comments. Vicious attacks on other users, extremely bad language, and other things that don’t make for a happy place will not be allowed.” This is a specific instance of a technological feature (e.g. the removal of offending comments) enforcing the social protocol (the posting rules). However, as will be evident in examples of comments, the moderators are fairly tolerant and do not often remove entire comments, preferring instead to redact individual letters of offending

\textsuperscript{29} This is the current list of activities that earn points, and many were added after my fieldwork when PopSugar added many more community-oriented interactive features.
words and let the commenters work out problems themselves. Readers are invited to report inappropriate comments by clicking a link to flag the comment, but largely self-police the social goals of the site by engaging in dialogue with each other. They praise comments they like and openly challenge those they deem inappropriate. They uphold the serious reading of celebrity culture evident in the posts of this blog, as discussed using Hermes’ (1995) terms in chapter five, and make connections with others through their participation in the comments sections.

I do not intend to fall into a technological determinist argument that suggests these technological protocols are a sufficient condition for community to emerge on a celebrity gossip blog. As Jenkins’ (2006a) definition of interactivity suggests, the simple presence of technological protocols promoting engagement does not guarantee they will be used. Nevertheless, as Pop Sugar demonstrates, I do argue these protocols provide a necessary condition for a stronger sense of community on gossip blogs when they are designed to support the social goals of the community. That is, rather than the unrestricted free-for-all seen on PerezHilton, Pop Sugar’s community is much more cohesive and consistent in terms of tone, content, and promotion of dialogue because the technological and social features create a safe space for readers to comment without the risk of vicious ridicule from other commenters. As the users are registered, moderators can penalize those who disobey the rules of the community by revoking posting privileges. But commenters on Pop Sugar do engage in dialogue and discussion with each other in ways that are not strictly related to the technological protocols of the site.

As discussed in chapter five, Pop Sugar frequently posts polls for readers to voice their opinion on a recent development in celebrity news. On February 14, 2008, a poll
asking whether or not Britney Spears’ father should retain his position as conservator of her estate is a clear technological protocol that gives the audience a specific way to engage with the site (PopSugar, February 14, 2008). By the time I archived the post on February 23, 2008, 3,245 readers had responded to the poll, with 2,952 (91%) agreeing that Britney’s father should stay in control. However, the way they discussed the story in the comments section reveals the social goals of participation are much broader than what is allowed in this limited interactive space. Not only do several of the commenters make more than one comment, there is also evidence that they are reading and engaging with the ideas expressed by other readers. The comments include both responses to the initial post and specifically engage other commenters in dialogue. The following series of comments to that post provide a representative example of how gossip talk occurs on the Pop Sugar comments section and how it speaks to a notion of community between the commenters:

#1  pinkprincess1101   GOLD   
DUH

#2  Briandiesel   GOLD   
that pretty much sums it up for me too Pink!

#3  DesignRchic   DIAMOND   
Despite the fact that I think she's irresponsible and totally incapable of caring for herself or others, she IS an adult. Let her be in control of her life. She should take responsibility for her actions and her life.

#4  Dbtabm   SILVER   
She's not capable of being in control. That's the whole point! She has an illness and until it's fully controlled with medication and therapy she needs help. She will thank her family once she is able to have contact with her boys again.

[...]
The social culture of commenting on Pop Sugar built on serious gossip talk, as the commenters are negotiating existing and new information in order to come to some sort of shared meaning. There is not necessarily agreement, but comments are made respectfully and draw upon existing knowledge about Britney Spears’ personal life and the commenter’s own social and moral values.

On this particular post, the back and forth between various commenters is the most common form of engagement, though a few posts not directed at previous comments (and more so at the content of the post itself) do also appear. Several commenters address each other by name, either to support or agree with a statement (comments #10 and #11) or to add a new or different dimension to an existing comment.
This is unrelated to the technological features of the comments section, as there is, surprisingly, no “reply to this” feature included on this blog. Instead of using this lack of technological control and the anonymity of the internet to say anything, these gossipers “use talk about others to reflect about themselves...[and] enlarge their knowledge of one another” (Spacks, 1986, p. 5). They create intimacy through their participation in gossip talk. This community is shaped by the technological protocols encouraging interactivity throughout Pop Sugar, but is solidified by the social practice of serious gossip undertaken by the commenters.

However, as the blog itself does not promote a feminist or other oppositional reading of popular culture, the interpretive community evident on Pop Sugar retains ties to dominant ideologies about identity forwarded by celebrity culture. Commenters often take a strong stance on celebrities who violate dominant norms of femininity, particularly in terms of sexuality and motherhood. Britney Spears may have gotten more respectful treatment because of the tragic turn her personal life had taken at this point, as in addition to first losing primary custody of her children and then all visitation rights, she was also placed under psychological care against her will after a series of bizarre public incidents, such as shaving her head in front of paparazzi cameras and being taken away in an ambulance while reportedly under the influence of unknown substances (Orloff, 2008). However, this was a shift in the reading of her image, as she certainly was criticized when rumors of her substance abuse first surfaced in the wake of her divorce from Kevin Federline and when she repeatedly failed to appear in court regarding custody issues. Other celebrities are not necessarily afforded the same treatment, even when they are believed to be experiencing similar issues, such as substance abuse or mental health...
issues. For example, a post titled “Lindsay Aims High With Leo and Adrian” published on February 15, 2008 chastised Lindsay Lohan, who has her own history of substance abuse issues, for allegedly spending her Valentine’s Day drinking and unsuccessfully flirting with actors Leonardo DiCaprio and Adrian Grenier. PopSugar notes:

her love for men wasn't the only thing in overdrive that night, apparently the starlet was drowning her sorrows in vodka and champagne. As expected, since we saw her take her first swing from the bottle on New Year’s, LL may be on another downward spiral that will only get worse (PopSugar, February 15, 2008).

This gossip was met with the sort of extreme derision and body policing more common to PerezHilton but not without precedent on Pop Sugar.

Frequent commenter “pinkprincess1101” says “what makes her think she looks good in these leggins there as nasty as her face” (comment on ibid). Another commenter, “marybethrizalu,” adds “Linsay Lohan! You are a disgrace to all women. Learn to love yourself and then maybe people will learn to love you, otherwise you will always behave and be looked at as a nasty wh*re” (comment on ibid, letter redacted by moderator). “Jenny86” says “What a slut! No wonder she's not getting offered any movie roles. Her stupid ass album is going to tank too” (comment on ibid). In fact, most of the comments on this post follow this sort of mean-spirited judgment of Lindsay’s feminine shortcomings rather than attempting to empathize with Lindsay as they did with Britney.

But even as the tone of the language changes, the overall serious reading of celebrity remains. That is, the commenters combine this new information about Lindsay with existing negative information to come to a moral consensus about her value as a celebrity and, more troublingly, as a woman. Continued rumors of her promiscuity lead these readers to reject her as a role model or a celebrity with whom they want to identify. So, unlike the PerezHilton comments that seem more interested in name calling only, these
comments, while derogatory, are aimed at making meaning through gossip talk and defining acceptable standards of female sexuality and beauty as markers of social worth.

The Young, Black and Fabulous

Whereas Pop Sugar offers a range of interactive features to expand the ways users can create content, YBF’s technological protocols aim at restricting this form of engagement. Entrance to the YBF community is fairly open, as commenters do not register for the site in order to participate, and, as on PerezHilton, could adopt a different username every time they comment. Some readers appear to adopt the same username, and this may be related to their participation in other interactive features on the site, such as the chat rooms, where they do have to register. However, despite these loose technological protocols limiting who enters the community, stricter ones are employed to control the type of content they can create once they are there.

Natasha does moderate the comments section and will remove offending comments and ban individual email addresses from posting if a commenter breaks the clearly defined commenting rules that, during my fieldwork, are listed above the comment field:

YOU WILL BE BANNED IF:
- You Disrespect The Owner Of This Site
- You Spell Out URL’s In Name Or E-mail Fields
- You Mention and/or Link To Any Other Site Outside Of YBF In Your Comments
- You Advertise In The Comments
- You Hotlink Any Images

Interestingly, these rules explicitly include technological protocols as social goals for the community. They work to keep the community within YBF by disallowing any links or

30 As email addresses are not visible to the reader, I cannot know for sure that the same usernames are always attached to the same user.
advertisements in the comments section that would direct readers to other sites or outside images. This technological feature helps Natasha maintain authority as the primary producer of meaning on the site and protects the “brand” of YBF by controlling the form of content creation. That the only rule governing a social goal for the community relates to not disrespecting Natasha herself, rather than governing exchanges between commenters, further emphasizes her place at the top of the hierarchy of meaning making. Commenters can disagree with her, and many frequently do, but it must be done in a respectful manner. Thus, the sorts of hateful comments that commenters lob at Perez would be removed from this site.

With these technological limits on content, Natasha also ensures the social goals of the community reflect the overall tone and content for the blog. Like Natasha’s posts, black celebrity culture is celebrated in the comments sections, though the ridiculous or “foolywang” nature of celebrity is also gently mocked. This is particularly evident in discussion of fashion choices of stars, as commenters enjoy mocking outlandish or inappropriate outfits while praising those who properly embody glamour and beauty. As this is a black celebrity site, comments celebrate ideals of black beauty and culture that are not recognized on mainstream sites. Their gossip reflects Hermes’ serious orientation in two ways.

First, commenters identify with and aspire to the glamour and fabulousness of fame, but also recognize that (some) fame is constructed. Though the private lives of stars are fair game, Natasha also focuses a great deal on the work behind these stars’ fame, recognizing that star status takes effort and drive. In an entertainment industry dominated by whites, celebrating the achievements of black celebrities in their work is
important to validating their status as role models. Relatedly, the commenters’ gossip is serious because “it provides a resource for the subordinated…a crucial means of self-expression, a crucial form of solidarity” (Spacks, 1986, p. 5). In addition to using gossip to voice the value of black celebrity culture, the gossipers on this site frequently engage oppositional readings that challenge dominant definitions of racial and gender identity expressed within mainstream celebrity culture.

On February 25, 2008, Natasha posted an Oscars red carpet pictures of music mogul Quincy Jones and his “now 20 year old girlfriend he started dating when she was 19,” sarcastically suggesting that we “can’t hate our favorite septuagenarian for trying to stay young” (Eubanks, February 25, 2008). While most of the commenters take up her slight critique of the age difference, several focus instead on the fact that Jones, a black man, is dating a woman who is not:

Jobell:
I’m not feeling it… where’s all tha sistas?
Kiki68:
Seriously !! I could almost stomach it…if she were a sistah. Wait a minute strike that, UUUUHHHH !

Annie:
Quincy should be ashamed of himself. He has daughters older than this chick. Not a good look at all. A lot of people judge a man on who they pick as a girlfriend. It does say a lot about their character. Here are some examples:

1) ice-t and coco = Not Good
4) Will [Smith] and Jada [Pinkett Smith] = Good

BlackNProud:
So… Has anyone EVERY asked Quincy Jones why he NEVER dates Black women.. but he has so much ‘black pride’? Isn’t that like an Oxy MORON…. What’s the problem he has with Black women??? BASTARD!! (comments on ibid).
The photos of the celebrity couple provide the commenters an anchor for discussion of questions of gender and race within the black community. For these commenters, suggesting that black men should date black women is about having pride in one’s racial identity and community. Black male celebrities, in particular, are criticized as “selling out” for dating white women or even light-skinned black women, a reading particularly evident in Annie’s comment that chastises mixed races couples as “not good” and black couples as “good.” The gossip here serves to reinforce the commenters own sense of cultural identity while also challenging values that may disparage such self-pride. Gossip is a space of solidarity, and the commenters use the technological space on YBF to create connections with others by creating moral consensus outside of the dominant norms.

**What Would Tyler Durden Do?**

Technological features structure a community and how readers may interact in that community, but they cannot address all the social components that connect commenters. What Would Tyler Durden Do? defines who engages in the community of commenters through technological protocols that require readers to register a username and email address before they are able to post comments. Users also have the ability to upload an avatar image that will appear every time they comment from that account. These technological features take on a clear social dimension when used by the commenters to create an online identity that is coherent with the social goals of the community. For example, many of the avatar images are lewd photos of women’s body parts, such as close-up photos of breasts or buttocks, or other sexualized images, thus reflecting the tone and perspective of the blog itself. This relationship between technological and social protocols is certainly seen on other blogs in my sample, but
WWTDD’s community is unique in terms of the audience that comprises this community and the ways in which they define their participation outside the blogger-imposed technological features.

WWTDD is a celebrity gossip blog that attracts an audience consisting predominantly of heterosexual white men (http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/wwtdd.com), which expands the definition who comprises audiences of celebrity gossip blogs. As a result, this audience engages in a type of gossip talk that reflects a perspective not typically seen on the other blogs in my sample. WWTDD definitely does not share the serious gossip perspective exhibited on Pop Sugar or YBF. Instead, they exhibit a particular sort of oppositional and ironic form of gossip that, as Hermes (1995) argues, mocks celebrity culture as means of justifying their engagement with it. Though the shared interest in the perspective of the blog draws them in, the robust community of commenters on WWTDD moves beyond the technological and social parameters established by blogger Brendon to create and enforce their own culture of commenting. This community demonstrates how participants are involved in the definition and maintenance of the social goals of an online community. In other words, the blogger may control the technological protocols and set up initial social goals, but on this blog in particular, the users do more to define this community.

WWTDD, as I have argued, aims at mocking celebrities and celebrity culture, but in a way that distinguishes itself from the malicious gossip of PerezHilton through the use of taboo or “ironic” humor to deconstruct celebrity culture rather than reify it. Unlike the camp readers identified by Hermes (1995), the commenters on WWTDD use their mocking to dis-identify with celebrity culture rather than “aggressively flaunt” their
interest in it as a means of subverting “conventional morality and taste” (p. 134). Hermes describes an ironic approach to reading gossip as embodying:

parody rather than outright subversion…It is a much more defensive stance on the part of those with enough cultural capital to feel sure that they will distinguish themselves as ‘cultured’ by admitting that they feel critical about the system of taste and the exclusiveness of high culture…Irony is a means of detaching oneself from what one reads (or watches on television) (ibid).

The stance adopted by commenters on WWTDD is not a retreat into high culture typical of the ironic readers described by Hermes, but it is a deflection of the typical meanings of celebrity culture through the use of ironic humor. By sexualizing, objectifying, and/or mocking celebrities, these commenters reframe what it means to gossip about celebrities. WWTDD commenters are not particularly concerned with *knowing* the latest details of a celebrity’s private life as a way to stay current or feel closer to the celebrity. Instead, the pleasure in celebrity gossip comes from rejecting a serious reading of celebrity culture that views the interest in the private lives of celebrities as a legitimate cultural pursuit. They use knowledge about celebrities as a source of humor that distances from “real” interest in or engagement with celebrity culture. This audience, unlike those from the other blogs in my sample, is made up of young men. The humor justifies their interest in celebrity culture, a move which is particularly important to differentiating this group from the typical gossip blog readers, namely women and gay men.

All efforts at distancing themselves from typical celebrity-watching audiences aside, these commenters are still engaged in a form of gossip talk that aims at creating and policing the shared moral standards in order to promote connection and community. Though Brendon certainly writes his blog from this mocking and ironic perspective, the comments sections often go far beyond his original framing in terms of using ironic
humor as a means to uphold dominant norms, particularly around gender and sexuality. The culture of commenting is grounded in the perspective of the blogger, but goes well beyond it in ways that readers, not Brendon, define and enforce. Though there is no “reply to this” feature, the commenters do specifically address comments to each other (often using bold or italicized text to indicate they have pasted in an earlier comment), suggesting the social protocols of the community support dialogue and conversation between commenters. But this dialogue does not resemble the supportive negotiation seen on Pop Sugar, and is typically a space for readers to mock each other in the service of the overall ironic humor that shapes this community.

The importance of this gossip orientation to defining this community is evident in the way the comments sections are policed by the commenters themselves. In a post from March 5, 2008, Brendon reports Britney Spears had been teaching dance classes to children at a Los Angeles dance studio, mocking her dancing skills and calling the kids who reportedly liked her “idiots” (Brendon, March 5, 2008). Frequent commenter “Mongro Jackson,” rather uncharacteristically, attempts to defend Britney saying:

> there are a very few times that I'd just like to reach through the computer and break Brend()n's teeth, and this is one of those times. If she's flashing her cooter and beating cars with an umbrella, it's one thing. When she's doing something positive and constructive, and fuckfaced cockboys like you find a way to guffaw at it, I really question what the fuck I'm even looking at this assed-out site for. (comment on ibid).

His more serious and thoughtful reading of the story is quickly mocked by the other commenters, who say things like, “I that suspect Mongro is that "leave her alone" queer on YouTube,” and “Haha Mongro loves Britney! Mongro and Britney sitting in a tree! K-I-S-S-I-N-G!” (comments on ibid). Commenter “Observer” reinforces the social protocols of commenting on the site, saying:
Mongro…..I hope you've only temporarily lost your mind. Let us obeserve with ‘irony’. …she's teaching kids to dance yet she has not seen her sons in weeks. That is enough to slam the formerly fatty. However….as soon as she is back in fucking trim…..I'm (mentally) in (comment on ibid).

Commenters uphold the community’s social goals by posting “appropriate” comments, and, more importantly, police the rules of the community by calling out others who do not. On this blog, a comment is appropriate if it rejects the value of celebrity culture by pointing out its moral flaws while simultaneously sexualizing and objectifying the female celebrity in a way that equates her value with dominant standards of feminine attractiveness. For “Observer” and most commenters in this community, the idea that celebrities are more important than the average individual must be challenged, reflecting the use of gossip by subordinated groups to challenge power. But such challenges attempt to diminish celebrity power by objectifying, sexualizing, or dehumanizing the celebrity in a way that actually serves to reinforce many other dominant ideological norms.

Gossip is an active engagement with culture, but not necessarily a liberatory one. Though this white male audience’s use of gossip reaffirms their own cultural power, it is clear, on other sites as well as this one, that women use gossip to reassert hegemonic norms that may actually keep them in a less powerful cultural position. On WWTDD, the use of humor tends to mask the exercise of dominant power behind the gossip talk. For example, frequent commenter, and one of the few who is obviously a woman, “Doctress Leisa,” is often called upon by others to make a comment if she has not spoken

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or is engaged in conversation by other commenters when she does post. She, and other regular commenters, help police the boundaries of the community by setting the tone and, on occasion, pointing out when others have broken one of the rules that promote sociability on the site. She does both in her comments on February 29, 2008, a post which also provides an excellent representation of the typical types of dominant social meanings that shape this community.

The original post was brief, featuring several paparazzi photos of black actress Gabrielle Union cavorting on the beach in a bikini during a magazine photo shoot in which Brendon says:

I like to think *this* is exactly what Gabrielle Union would look like if I got on top of her to sling my ropes. Except she wouldn’t have that content smile on her face. Despite a media brainwashing to the contrary, experience has taught me that the female orgasm is only a myth (Brendon, February 29, 2008).

The comments section, as is typical for WWTDD, goes much further than Brendon in terms of sexualizing and, indeed, dehumanizing, the woman pictured. After one commenter, “She Cums For the Jokes,” alleged that Union, “got her start in a strange way,” saying:

she worked at Payless or something, was robbed and raped by a guy who apparently was on a robbing and/or raping Payless employees spree, sued Payless for negligence since they knew about the guy but didn't tell their employees or take precautions, and took acting lessons with her money. Funny how rape can change your life (comment on ibid).

Many commenters followed suit in making rape jokes, such as:

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31 I assume “Doctress Leisa” is a woman not simply because of her username, but because she and other commenters have made reference to her identity as a woman.
Zack says
Yeah, SCFTJ, that's why I only rape people at their place of employment, and then afterwards point out that they could probably sue said employer for negligence. I like to think of it as my way of giving something back.

She Cums For The Jokes says
Well Zack, do it at your own risk. He had a gun, she got a hold of it, pulled the trigger, and missed. Rape can be tricky; you have to find the right balance I guess.

Pennsylvania's Finest says
thats why i rape little kids....they don't fight back

Miss Mabel says
Rape is such an ugly word. I prefer U.S.E. (Unplanned Sexual Event).

Doctress Leisa says
Rape is such an ugly word. I prefer U.S.E. (Unplanned Sexual Event).
Miss Mabel, I'm partial to the term "surprise sex" myself (comments on ibid).

Though an outsider could easily be shocked and offended by these sorts of comments, for these community members, they actually work to strengthen the community according to the social goals of the group. These comments reflect the dominant ironic reading of celebrity culture in which celebrities and celebrity culture are to be mocked and ridiculed rather than revered. Within the framework of ironic humor, these “offensive” jokes actually serve to strengthen ties between the commenters because they are all “in” on the joke. This “joke” works largely because they are mocking a celebrity, not attaching these meanings to a “real” person. In many ways, the community on WWTDD is among the strongest in my sample because the commenters have clearly established acceptable forms of participation and police them through rewards and punishments that uphold the goals, however dubious, of the group.
The commenters on WWTDD maintain the social protocols of the community by engaging the sort of taboo and ironic humor that permeates Brendon’s posts, but move even more towards offensive comments as a means to secure their status in the community. Typically, the more offensive the joke, the more the commenter is rewarded by other members. Such rewards include praise from or dialogue with other commenters within the particular comment section, as evidenced above, as well a broader sense of status and recognition from other members, such as when Doctress Leisa is called upon to comment by other members. This strengthens the community by increasing ties between members as well as continually reinforcing the social goals as defined by the members themselves. Brendon does not participate in the comments sections at all and the site features relatively low technological moderation of comments. Thus, the over the top tone of the comments sections draws from Brendon’s ironic humor framework, as that is what draws these atypical celebrity audiences to the site, but is more strongly tied to the social protocols of commenting established and policed by the participants themselves.

As on the other celebrity gossip blogs, the commenter community on WWTDD uses celebrity gossip as a means to create shared meaning around issues of identity, particularly gender, race, and sexuality. But here the emphasis is on using humor to distance oneself not only from celebrity culture, but also from claims of racism, sexism, and/or homophobia. The content is, Brendon claims:

just jokes… I’m not trying to change the world here. I’m just trying to tell a joke. And, so the joke’s in bad taste sometimes? Yeah, so what? It’s a joke… Hopefully people know the difference between a joke and venom (Brendon, 2008).
On one hand, the use of jokes and ironic humor to break down celebrity culture is an oppositional stance that challenges the reification of celebrities and the moral and cultural values they embody. However, that the community of commenters so clearly upholds rigid standards of both what acceptable feminine beauty and sexuality looks like, even under the guise of humor, suggests this gossip community aims at more than just making jokes. It clearly reinforces oppressive cultural ideologies that reinforce male dominance and equate women’s value with their heterosexual desirability and availability and adherence to hegemonic standards of beauty. For example, in the discussion of Gabrielle Union above, Union’s status and value as a celebrity and as a woman is tied not only to her body, but to the violation of her body. Brendon initially frames her as a sexual object, a celebrity who exists for nothing more than his (and the reader’s) objectification and sexual pleasure. But the ensuing discussion of her rape as how she “got her start” takes this sexualization further by using ironic humor to frame women (and even children) as sexual objects to be consumed rather than having any other value. Thus, while the community is strengthened by the shared ironic humor perspective, such “jokes” have ideological consequences that reach beyond the comment sections.

**Jezebel**

Jezebel’s community has strong and clearly stated social goals, namely to read celebrity culture through a feminist lens, and engages strict and clearly defined technological protocols to support it. The usability of the site addresses the social needs of the community and also involves them in the evolution of the community in ways not seen on the other blogs, even those with a stronger sense of community, such as Pop Sugar. Jezebel, and indeed all of the blogs under parent-company Gawker Media,
strongly encourage user-created content, but regulate it in several ways. Readers not only register a static username and email to create a Jezebel account, they must also “audition” before they are allowed to freely post. The audition process is an excellent example of how Jezebel engages technological usability and sociability to support the community.

In order to audition, a new commenter simply writes a comment in the available comment field and then is prompted to create a username and password and, if they choose, upload an avatar image. But the new comment does not instantly appear on the site, as all comments from new accounts are first read and approved by a moderator. After a new comment is approved, the new member is admitted into the community of commenters and is free to comment at will. At this point, these features are all technological features designed to limit who enters the community. But the actual audition process is also a social protocol that impacts the type of social interactions that occur on the blog. According to the blog’s commenting FAQ, comments are approved if they fit with the social goals of the site and are “interesting, substantial, or highly amusing” (gfutrelle, 2009). This definition is necessarily vague and allows moderators to easily approve a wide range of comments. But it certainly would weed out many of the comments made on PerezHilton or WWTDD, as they simply do not address the goals of the blog.

This protocol was established across the Gawker blogs as a means to control the number of commenters, which was rapidly expanding as the sites gained popularity, and to prevent “trolls,” or individuals who post simply to start online fights or engage in what
regular internet users call “flaming.”\(^{32}\) But, as Jezebel editor Anna says, it also helps promote a certain level of discourse and to connect readers with each other:

When we first started, it was different. We didn’t have a lot of commenters, so if there were problems with the commenters, well there just weren’t very many of them… But there has to be some sort of control, otherwise the comments would be come much like what you would see on, say, a YouTube video. Which are bananas. Which are crazy! Or Perez Hilton…I mean, people already complain enough that we have too many comments. ‘You have too many commenters, I can’t read through all these!’ And if we were to have nothing in place in terms of keeping out some of the riffraff, it would be…no one would want to look at the comments (Holmes, personal interview, August 9, 2008).

As seen on PerezHilton, a huge volume of comments can be a detriment to community-building. Jezebel fights this not just by limiting numbers of commenters but helping all commenters make “quality” contributions to the blog through site moderation.

Jezebel, as with all the Gawker sites, is interested in creating a community where readers can participate in the creation of content and engage in dialogue with each other. Other technological protocols are in place to support this goal, such as a “reply to this” feature that enables commenters to specifically quote and respond to an earlier comment. At the time of my fieldwork, the comment field itself was placed at the bottom of the comments section, thus forcing the reader to at least scroll past, and hopefully read, the existing comments. Thus the technological protocols aim to create a viable space for community to be built through shared dialogue and negotiation of meaning.

What makes the community on Jezebel so strong, I suggest, is the fact that these social protocols are shaped and enforced by the bloggers/moderators and, more importantly, the commenters themselves. Both groups see themselves as having a stake

\(^{32}\) Though it is unclear who first coined the term “flaming” or “flame wars”, its use reflects the need to give names to certain sorts of online behaviors. Mitra (1997) describes “flaming” as “the process where users resort to highly inflammmable language exchanged between individuals for no apparent reason” (footnote 7, p. 77).
in creating and maintaining the tone of the site and actively engage in policing the boundaries of the community in order to achieve their social goals. As moderator Hortense puts it, “I think the attraction to the site comes from the fact that unlike many female-oriented sites, the Jezebel editors tend to talk TO women, and not AT them” (Hortense, personal communication, September 7, 2008). While this explains why audiences read the site, I suggest the active commenter community is attracted to Jezebel because the bloggers talk with them and leave space for them to talk with other women.

At first, these social rules of commenting were not clearly set out, compared to the commenting rules on YBF, but the standards are quite evident in the comments sections. The audition process offers users some insight into what sorts of posts are acceptable, but generally it is through participation (reading and/or posting) that Jezebel audiences become familiar with the standards of the community. As they are already, presumably, drawn to the blog because of its feminist approach to celebrity and popular culture, it is no surprise to see this reflected in the comments sections. Commenters certainly find pleasure in mocking celebrities, but these comments are generally snarky rather than outright mean. They do not identify with or show reverence for celebrities to the same degree as Pop Sugar readers, nor do they seek to break down and deride celebrities as a site of false value as on WWTDD. Celebrity culture is pleasurable for Jezebel readers, but it is also a critical space of intervention into popular culture representations of identity. Most notably, as discussed in chapters five and six, Jezebel

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33 This was true at the time of my fieldwork. Since that time, another round of commenter executions took place, Hortense was named site moderator, and a post called “The Girl’s Guide to Commenting on Jezebel” was posted on the blog (Holmes, April 7, 2008). Regular commenters and Hortense also frequently post links to these rules, and updated versions of them, to remind new commenters of the rules if a particular comments section becomes unruly.
commenters do not tolerate any form of body snarking. Commenters may critique a celebrity’s clothing or style, but not in a way that overtly criticizes her physical body. The refusal to “body snark,” or objectify, sexualize, or negatively judge the female celebrity body is of primary importance to distinguishing the content and the community from that on other gossip blogs because it reframes the value of celebrity culture in feminist terms.

For example, when the nude photos of Lindsay Lohan recreating the Marilyn Monroe photo shoot appeared on Jezebel on February 18, 2008, the initial post explicitly stated that Jezebel is a place to “debate the real issues affecting women today…are Lindsay’s considerable assets her own, or surgically-enhanced?” (Coen, February 18, 2008). On the surface, this appears to be a way of getting readers to scrutinize and judge Lindsay’s body. However, within the context of Jezebel, the post and the comments actually focus on discussing the range of shapes and sizes of “real” women’s breasts as well as the unbelievable pressure in and from Hollywood to have a “perfect” body by any means necessary. They also celebrate Lindsay as beautiful, a perspective not commonly seen on other blogs in my sample when these images were posted. The post itself included a poll for readers to vote on whether or not Lindsay’s breasts are real, an uncommon technological feature on Jezebel that limits participation to clicking “yes” or “no.” Readers overwhelmingly (83.7% or 4957 votes) voted for “yes, she was born with freckles and a huge rack. Deal with it, haters” (ibid). These numbers suggest that more readers participated in this poll than actually commented, but that the overall reading of her image was positive and grounded in less rigid standards of beauty.
Those who did comment on the post used the negotiation of shared knowledge characteristic of gossip talk to discuss the larger implications of these photos. Commenters drew on their knowledge of Lindsay’s celebrity image, their knowledge of women’s bodies (largely based on personal experience with their own breasts), and knowledge of the pressures of celebrity culture to engage in a more thoughtful discussion of these images than on other blogs in my sample. Some representative comments from the 181 made on this post illustrate not only the way this community talks about bodies but also how they engage with each other through their comments:

BY LINKURA AT 02/18/08 04:07 PM
Real. My boobs ended up suddenly ballooning when I was around 19 1/2 or so. Lindsay probably had a similar experience, and the dumbass media of course had to say she got implants.

BY ELIN AT 02/18/08 04:11 PM
Real. They change size like normal breasts. @linkura: Hah, mine still do. I outgrow bras about once a year. Going on a E-cup now :p Lucky I'm not in the spotlight.

BY BADMUTHA AT 02/18/08 04:14 PM
I think they are real b/c the one on the left (picture left)is slightly larger than the one on the right. Which is exactly how people look. Most docs can't deal with assymetry (sp?) so they don't look real. My left is bigger than my right too. Stars! Their boobs are just like ours!

BY THELADYVANISHES AT 02/18/08 04:16 PM
They're probs real, as is the palpable desperation. I used to love this girl. Now that she ostensibly has to rely on her (real or not) tits to remain relevant, that's the end of the line for me.

BY SIRSNARKSALOT AT 02/18/08 04:19 PM
i say not only are they real, but there just about the last morsel of herself she has left that is actually attractive. She wrecked the rest of it with tanner, coke, LI makeup, leggings, and partay-ing. And soon enough, the nice ta-ta's will be gone too. Couldn't happen to a trashier girl.
BY MSDIRECTOR AT 02/18/08 04:22 PM
Can I ask why this is such a big deal? I don't care if they're real or fake. Frankly, I think if there's a question that people have this much trouble answering, who cares? If real, rock on. It's good to be you. If fake, then yay, you actually got a good boob job, so bully for you. go enjoy 'em.

She's quite young, so I hope they're not fake just because I hate to see anyone that young surgically altering their bodies for purely cosmetic purposes, but otherwise, why does everyone care so much? I'm not trying to be snarky - I really don't get it.

BY BANGIEB AT 02/18/08 04:24 PM
@sirsnarksalot: Please refrain from using the term "trashy girl". Thanks (comments on ibid).

As these exchanges between commenters illustrate, dialogue between commenters occurs more often on Jezebel than on the other blogs. While some conversations are simply echo chambers of people stating their agreement with a previous comment or praising the commenter for a particularly witty or insightful comment, important strategies of support that bind this community, many are aimed at a more in-depth and shared analysis. The pleasure of engaging with celebrity culture comes from the critique of it but does not lose the fun and glamour associated with it. The interpretive community on Jezebel shares an interest in celebrity culture, but an interest that is couched in the recognition of the constructedness of celebrity and the potential problem, for women especially, of taking it at face value. Like YBF, Jezebel’s community uses gossip as a form of solidarity to differentiate themselves mainstream celebrity culture. They take their reading seriously, but as a way to recognize the constructedness of celebrity culture and its role in promoting hegemonic norms.

An important facet of the social goal of solidarity is educating other commenters to the proper forms of participation on the site rather than relying solely on the technological features to limit the boundaries of acceptable community engagement.
Though Jezebel has more recently posted an explicit guide to commenting, these rules already existed on the site and were continually negotiated as part of the daily discussions amongst commenters. If a commenter makes an “inappropriate” comment that does not fit within the boundaries of the community, other readers tend to address the situation before the moderator has to act, as in the previous comment from BANGIEB to SIRSNARKSALOT on the Lindsay Lohan post. Even if the moderator or editor has to get involved, Anna points out that, the author of the problematic comment is not only warned, but her history as a commenter is also taken into account. In other words, being a part of the community is learning about participation and about recognizing that mistakes can help improve someone’s participation. She says:

…there are some commenters who are wonderful commenters and then they fuck up once and they’re much less likely to get banned for one fuck up because of their history. I mean, all that has to do with their history. And then some commenters come on and they’ve never commented and each comment they’ve ever made has just been, you know, ‘I hate this, I hate this.’ And we’re like, you know what? They’re not going to give them as much leeway because we can look at their comment history. I can go to the commenters’ page and see all the comments that they’ve left, and if I see a history of them just being obnoxious, then it’s like, well, forget it (Holmes, personal interview, August 9, 2008).

If one establishes a place in the community by commenting regularly and productively, the social protocols may allow you to stay whereas a strict technological protocol (such as the removal of certain words or phrases) would not. Commenters are warned privately and publicly, and in September 2008, Jezebel instituted a “disemvoweling” warning system, in which the offending comment is left on the site, but all the vowels are removed from it. Unlike the single letter redaction on Pop Sugar, disemvoweling essentially removes the offending content from the site by making the comment indecipherable to
other readers but allowing it to stand as a warning to original commenter that banning may result if such commenting behavior continues.

For example, on the May 21, 2008 Dirt Bag Roundup, commenter “mommymash” had her comment disemvoweled:

ky, jzzs, ’v gts t knw: why s bdy snrkng ky whn t's bt mn?? tht rsr dwsn/kvn jms blrb rks f snrknss t m. mgn f th sttmnt wr smthng lk "krst lly s st t str ppst brd ptt n nw mv...wh't s p wth schlbbly lds gtng ht dds?" ’d gt dsmvwld fr smthng lk tht, n? (comment on Stewart, May 21, 2009).

Disemvoweling is intended to promote more thoughtful and engaged content in the comments section, but also lets commenters feel a sense of responsibility for their own community by giving them a chance to improve the quality of their comments before being banned. However, mommymash, as evident in a reply to her own disemvoweled comment, felt she was unfairly disemvoweled, as she thought she was simply trying to “open a dialogue about why we, as women, react so strongly to snarking about our bodies yet allow and even encourage the same thing to happen to men” (comment on ibid). I assume she was commenting on an item from the post regarding comedian Kevin James, who is a large man, starring in a new film with Rosario Dawson in which Dodai says, “what’s up with the schlubby dudes getting hot ladies?” (ibid). Mommymash’s follow-up questions about why she was disemvoweled were allowed to stay visible, but Dodai responded to her privately to discuss the issue, as indicated in her reply to mommymash’s follow-up comment.

Disemvoweling thus works best as a warning to the individual, as the other commenters are not necessarily aware of exactly how the original comment violated the rules. Furthermore, because the disemvoweled comments are mostly indecipherable, other commenters are unlikely to reply to disemvoweled comments in any way that helps
police the community standards. Some commenters, like mommymash herself, find this individual policing problematic, and it seems she has left the site, apparently of her own volition, as her profile indicates no further comments after this date. Only the Jezebel bloggers can disemvowel a comment, but most of the work policing of the community standards is shared between the bloggers and the commenters. Nevertheless, it is clear from this example that a strong community is not necessarily completely unified in terms of how the social goals should be maintained.

A particularly vivid example of this sort of shared responsibility that speaks to the marriage of social and technological protocols on Jezebel emerged during my fieldwork in the form of the “commenter executions.” The growing popularity of the blog in 2008 led to an influx of new commenters who were making it past the audition process but not upholding the ideals of the community, particularly in terms of “girl-on-girl crime” where women criticize other women’s appearances, behaviors, and values in misogynist and malicious ways. This includes comments made about female celebrities as well as inappropriate conversations between commenters. Though this rule about participation was implicit in the content of the posts on Jezebel, Anna first made it “official” in a post on January 2, 2008 in which she explicitly calls for an end to the practice:

maybe you don't notice, but, unlike the female-helmed celebrity rags, we take special care not to criticize the weight, wrinkles or cellulite of the women we feature. (Of course, their fashions, not to mention their actions, are fair game). Thing is, many of our readers don't notice this fact, or, more disturbingly, don't care, peppering many posts (particularly Snap Judgments) with their own offensive commentary about how women age, or gain weight….For those readers who want to rip into other women's appearances, consider yourselves notified: We will happily and quickly call you out on your bullshit if you continue with the superficial shitty comments. For those who don't like this, well, we can think of some other sites that would be happy to indulge you (Holmes, January 2, 2008).
By clearly defining a social rule, Anna attempts to better align commenter participation on the comments section with the overall social goals of the site.

Apparently, this was not sufficient, as on February 29, 2008, Anna announced that the problem continued to persist and action would be taken in the form of removing offenders from the site by revoking their commenting privileges, effectively “executing” these individuals within the virtual community. In keeping with the sense of shared responsibility for the Jezebel community, these “commenter executions” were not simply performed by the blogger behind the scenes, as on other blogs where those who are banned are simply removed without public comment. Instead, readers, as members of this community, were asked to nominate candidates for execution. Anna writes:

instead of simply announcing who we think the offenders are, we're going to let you weigh in too. If there's a commenter who is becoming a problem, send the screen name and reason to tips@jezebel.com. See you soon at the guillotine (Holmes, February 29, 2008).

The response in the comments section was largely supportive of the idea of removing routine offenders in order to keep the social goals of the community intact and most commenters were particularly pleased with the opportunity to be a part of a process that helped define their community.

On March 7, 2008, the list of those who were executed and an example of their offense was posted. For example, “Brainstorm” was banned with a comment on actress Sarah Jessica Parker, “I don’t live in NY and think she is fugly and styleless” serving as one representative offense (Stewart, March 7, 2008). It is important to recognize that commenters were not banned for simply disagreeing with the blogger and/or the dominant perspective on the blog. Jezebel is open to a wide range of perspectives and the best comments sections center on the respectful debate and dialogue between users, not
just an echo chamber of “me toos.” These commenters were banned for routinely breaking the social rules of the community. Unlike a blog like PerezHilton, Jezebel bloggers and commenters recognize that meanings made through gossip within this virtual space have real consequences for how audiences understand identity and culture in everyday life. In the end, only five commenters were executed (two of which were the result of the nominated commenter asking to be removed), but the overall effect of these removals helped clarify the social goals of the group.

However, there were also five commenters who were put on watch “due to numerous e-mailed nominations and complaints, including cliquishness, rudeness, mean-girls behavior, ganging up on those with different opinions and general ‘Queen Bee’ attitudes” (ibid). This included several regular commenters who had achieved some popularity amongst others in the community. This move, while clearly prompted by community member nominations not simply the blogger’s view, caused a great deal of uproar amongst community members. On one hand, the executions and warnings offered commenters a way to actively define what they wanted from their community and the types of comments they believe support that goal. But some commenters were dismayed at some of the names on the warning list, suggesting these frequent commenters were not crossing the boundaries of acceptable behavior and their participation met the goal of making the comments sections more entertaining and/or thoughtful. This discussion of the standards of the community led directly to the creation of more explicit rules about acceptable commenting practices and the installation of Hortense as a moderator. This sort of direct engagement between bloggers and commenters around the question of community was not seen on any other the other blogs in my sample.
As the community grew in size, most commenters wanted to maintain the social goals of the site and recognized that some level of technical moderation would give more weight to the social rules of participation. They still self-moderate, but know that those who do not respond to social pressure have to face other consequences. At the same time, it also prompted some members (how many is unknown, as it is certainly not restricted to those who regularly comment) to participate less or leave the community entirely. As previously discussed, several Jezebel commenters banded together to create their own blog, Buttercup Punch, in response to their displeasure at the new social policing and the specific individuals who were included on the watch list. Buttercup Punch is not a direct copy of Jezebel, as it is much less focused on celebrity content, but does retain the feminist approach to popular culture and politics that is characteristic of Jezebel but with a much more open commenting structure. But its audience is also much smaller and easier to manage. These disagreements and ongoing debates actually help make the Jezebel community one of the strongest in my sample. This blog consciously integrates the technological protocols into the social goals and explicitly involves community members in the definition and enforcement of these rules, all of which speak to an intense and shared commitment to community-building.

A Flexible Definition of Community

My flexible definition of community recognizes a range of practices and gossip orientations as spaces of community on celebrity gossip blogs. The flexible notion of community as a process also recognizes that community is constantly evolving within the virtual world. The above discussions are merely a snapshot of these blogs from a particular moment in time, and all of them have adapted new technological features
and/or social policies of participation. Yet even these new developments illustrate how the social and technological features work together to promote a particular type and strength of community on the blog. For example, in order to write a comment on PerezHilton, a user must now register a username and email address with the “Perez Posse,” as an attempt to limit the community of commenters through technological features. My casual observation of the site indicates this has not particularly impacted the overall number or tone of the comments, as the social protocols remain the same and there are no official rules governing acceptable comments or clear consequences for violating those standards. In contrast, PITNB reinstated its comments section with very loose technological but stricter social controls. Like the earlier incarnation of PerezHilton’s comments sections, PITNB commenter are asked each time they comment for a name and email rather than going through a registration process. However, the tone of the comments reflects the positive tone of the blog because the comments are not only moderated by Trent, he often participates in them himself to maintain the social goals of his blog.

Though all the blogs in my sample have updated technological spaces of engagement, the most radical expansion is on Pop Sugar. Registered users are now responsible for a great deal of content on the site. They create and join groups within the site where the readers, not bloggers, are responsible for posting content, have personal profiles, can privately message other users through the site, and use member points to give virtual gifts to each other, among other features. Users are offered a myriad of technological spaces to create content and connect with each other, and this engagement is supported by social protocols including content guidelines, moderation by Sugar staff,
and most importantly, self-policing by the users. The technological evolutions across the blogs in my sample point to blog audiences’ increasing demand to participate as part of their engagements with celebrity gossip blogs, thus strengthening my claim that community does exist on gossip blogs. Jenkins (2006a), drawing on the work of cultural anthropologist and industry consultant Grant McCracken, says “media producers must accommodate consumer demands to participate or they will run the risk of losing the most active and passionate consumers to some other media interest that is more tolerant” (p. 133). The existing dimensions of community, particularly the community amongst readers/commenters/users, will likely continue to evolve as a result of technological features, but how users engage these protocols will remain tied to the overall tone, perspective, and sociability of the specific blog.
CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION:
RETHINKING CELEBRITY CULTURE IN THE NEW MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

Gossip media play an important role in the circuit of celebrity production by offering audiences access to discourses of the private and ordinary celebrity in contrast to the glamorous and extraordinary public performer. Using gossip as a mode of social meaning making, these sources highlight the celebrity image as a useful ideological symbol through which to navigate contemporary conceptions of race, class, gender and sexuality. Celebrity gossip blogs combined historical forms of gossip media texts with the technological and social features of new media to create a new space of gossip-oriented engagement with celebrity culture. But, unlike print media, these new media forms much more explicitly offer audiences space to build interpretive communities based on the shared negotiation and judgment of celebrity images. Through the emphasis on the private and gossip talk, celebrity gossip blogs have had a profound effect on the production, circulation, and consumption of celebrity culture.

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the technological and textual shifts engendered by new media on the use of gossip as a form of everyday cultural production. Broadly, I investigated the historical role of gossip media texts in celebrity culture and explored how new media forms of these texts, specifically gossip blogs, have reconfigured audience engagements with celebrity culture. Following Gamson’s (1994) approach to celebrity as a cultural phenomenon, this study separated celebrity gossip blogs into three elements—texts, producers, and audiences—and examined the interplay between these elements. In this chapter, I will summarize and synthesize my analyses of each of these elements and use this analysis to develop a
theory of new media engagements with celebrity culture and the role of gossip in building community on celebrity gossip blogs. I will also explore the possible limitations of this study and will conclude with suggestions for future research.

**Summary of Analyses**

In order to investigate online media and reading practices in the space in which they occur, I employed ethnographic research methodologies adapted to the new media setting, or what Ward (1999) calls “cyber-ethnography.” This approach retains the qualitative and interpretive modes of traditional ethnographic approaches but rethinks the implementation of these methods within unique online settings. My goal was to define the textual and technological characteristics of gossip blogs as new media sources of celebrity gossip and investigate how audiences engage with these characteristics as spaces of cultural production and community-building through gossip talk. Following Rettberg’s (2008) claim that “the best way of figuring out what a blog is simply to look at some examples,” I focused my analysis on six heavily-trafficked, commercially-supported, American –based celebrity gossip blogs: Perez Hilton (PerezHilton), Pink is the New Blog (PITNB), Pop Sugar (PopSugar), Jezebel, What Would Tyler Durden Do? (WWTDD), and The Young, Black and Fabulous (YBF) (p. 4).

After defining key terms and frameworks for studying celebrity culture and new media in chapters two and three, I located the celebrity gossip blog within the larger category of celebrity gossip media in chapter four. I began by connecting these new media forms of celebrity gossip to their print predecessors in order to foreground the social, as well as the technological, context of these media forms. Most existing scholarly work on gossip media focuses on the so-called “tabloid” magazine, and my
study sought to broaden the understanding of the gossip media genre by including an examination of classic Hollywood era gossip columnists Walter Winchell and Louella Parsons. In my textual analysis of a representative sample of their columns from February 1935, I argued that gossip blogs engage the more gossip-oriented conversational style pioneered by Winchell and Parsons. This includes an emphasis on a singular, first-person voice and use of “slanguage” and other colloquial forms of speech rather than the distanced objectivity of traditional journalism. Though Winchell and Parsons considered themselves journalists, I argued gossip bloggers reject this label in order to more fully engage the interpretive codes of gossip talk and distance themselves from the “legitimate” celebrity media industry, including their tabloid contemporaries. But I found that gossip blogs are also indebted to the print tabloids’ prodigious use of visual images, particularly in the form of paparazzi photographs, as anchors and catalysts for gossip talk. Additionally, as I argued in chapter five, gossip blogs rely heavily on current print and online tabloids as sources for their gossip commentary. Celebrity gossip blogs remain tied to their print predecessors through their combination of the vivid and intimate writing style typical of the gossip columnists with the tabloid magazines’ characteristic emphasis on the visual impact of photographs.

Despite these similarities, I also investigated what makes gossip blogs new and unique forms of celebrity media. My investigation of these blogs as gossip media texts continued with an analysis of what is being said about celebrity on gossip blogs in chapter five. This investigation was supported by my five-week online fieldwork observation of the six blogs in my sample. I first outlined the general technological characteristics of gossip blogs, namely their emphasis on immediacy and interactivity,
and analyzed how both the production and consumption of celebrity on each blog is shaped by these technological characteristics. This examination of the technological features was supplemented by an investigation of the ideological frameworks that defined each blog in order to address the specific modes of cultural production that emerged on each gossip blog.

My analysis centered on how the visual image of the celebrity, typically a paparazzi photo of the celebrity in an unguarded private moment combined with the blogger’s interpretation of that image, acts as the central site of cultural production for both bloggers and audiences. Bloggers are not journalists who break celebrity stories. Instead, blogs are reactive sources focusing on commentary and judgment typical of gossip talk within the ideological framework of their blogs. Though the technological features of blogs, specifically the interactive spaces like the comments sections, explicitly invite audiences to participate in the gossip talk and cultural production on blogs, I argued in chapter five that the blogger, as the primary author of the site, retains authority as the primary cultural producer. In order to address this elevated role as a cultural producer, I also included discussion of my oral interviews with the bloggers. These interviews invited the blogger to directly address issues related to the process of blogging, the role of the blogger in celebrity culture, and the relationship between the blogger and the audience in his or her own words.

Using the textual analysis and oral interviews, I argued in chapters five and six that each blogger’s unique gossip style is central to drawing audiences to his or her blog. The approach to gossip and celebrity culture on gossip blogs falls into two broad categories, drawn from Hermes’ (1995) study of gossip magazine readers. Some sites,
like PopSugar or PITNB, are more “serious,” in that they identify with celebrities as “real” people, finding pleasure in the pursuit of the authentic individual beneath the constructed surface of fame. These sites still mock celebrity culture, a hallmark of all the blogs in my sample, but do so in a gentle and less mean-spirited way. Other sites, like PerezHilton or WWTDD, are more interested in camp or ironic engagements with celebrity culture that center on the deconstruction of the image and take a stance of dis-identification in which the social ideologies embodied by the celebrity are mocked and rejected. These sites use the private celebrity to point out the constructedness of celebrity culture in a harsh and mean-spirited way. Most blogs fluctuate between serious and ironic readings, foregrounding humor, mockery and the pursuit of the private self as the primary ways to engage with celebrity culture.

The cultural production of meaning through gossip talk occurs outside of the traditional circuit of celebrity production and positions gossip blogs as a space of hegemonic struggle. Blogs offer moments of both resistance and recuperation of dominant social ideologies forwarded by celebrity culture. For example, I described in chapters five and six how YBF and Jezebel both explicitly position themselves as alternatives to mainstream celebrity gossip. YBF offers positive coverage of black celebrity culture as a means to challenge the normativity of whiteness in celebrity culture and Jezebel positions itself as a feminist intervention that both celebrates the pleasures of celebrity gossip and uses that gossip to challenge the oppressive ideologies of celebrity culture. On the other hand, I found that other gossip blogs, like PerezHilton and WWTDD, foreground a mean-spirited and malicious tone that objectifies, denigrates and, particularly in the case of WWTDD, sexualizes the female celebrity. These blogs use
gossip about celebrities to reinforce hegemonic norms about femininity under the guise of pleasurable engagements with popular culture. Finally, I argued that while some blogs clearly define their ideological standpoints, most ideological frameworks available on gossip blogs tend to be much less explicitly stated. This reflects the ways in which ideology functions as a “commonsense” understanding of the world and the continued power of the traditional producers of celebrity culture to define the meanings of celebrity images.

Though I argued bloggers retain authority as the primary cultural producer on the each blog, the interactivity of new media means that audiences also play a central role in the production of meaning on gossip blogs. In order to address this role, the final component of my dissertation focused on the reading practices of celebrity gossip blog audiences as sites of social meaning-making and community-building. Using a flexible definition of community as process, I investigated how readers used their engagements with celebrity gossip blogs to build connections with others. My brief analysis of reader comments in chapter five provided only a partial view of the audiences of celebrity gossip blogs. The mere presence of interactive features, as Jenkins (2006a) argues, does not explain the complex ways readers actually use these features or recognize the other ways they may engage with the site. Not every reader becomes a commenter, and in chapter seven I addressed other forms of active reader engagements with celebrity culture on gossip blogs.

In order to address a wider range of reading practices, I conducted an online survey of gossip blog readers. Over 250 readers completed this qualitative survey, providing a rich data source for my investigation of blog audiences’ reading practices and
everyday use of gossip as a way to understand their social worlds both online and off. In chapter seven, I argued that readers are drawn to blogs for both their technological features, particularly the ease of access and speed of updates, as well as the interactive comments sections, and their textual content and specific approach to celebrity gossip. Furthermore, I found that the comments sections were not the only place where readers used gossip to create a sense of community. They also used their reading practices as a means to create community with the blogger. This was most evident on PITNB, which did not include comments sections during my fieldwork. Readers indicated the conversational and personal style used by Trent in writing his blog made them feel like they were connected to him. Many readers also recognized some sort of connection, mainly in terms of an imagined community of like-minded readers was fostered by the particular perspective of the blog. Finally, I found that readers also used their online reading to connect with others in their offline lives. Like gossip magazine readers, blog readers used the information gathered on blogs to feed everyday gossip talk and connect with others through the shared negotiation of meaning. For most, however, a conscious building of community was not the primary reason why they read celebrity gossip blogs.

My analysis of the comments sections in chapter eight centered on those readers who more actively engage the interactive features of the blog and revealed that interpretive gossip-based communities do emerge on gossip blogs. The strength of these communities and the overall civility of the discourse that emerged between members are related to the social and technological protocols that shape each individual blog. Blogs with loose technological controls structuring the comments sections had less dialogue and more malicious comments directed at celebrities, the blogger, and other commenters.
This was most evident on PerezHilton which lacked any registration process for users or moderation of comment content. In contrast, Jezebel’s strict rules regarding the interactive spaces and the enforcement of those rules by the editors and site moderator Hortense supported the emergence of a stronger community based on dialogue and civil and supportive discourse. However, I argued that analysis of the technological protocols offers only a partial understanding of the gossip communities on these blogs.

I argued in chapter eight that understanding the social protocols of commenting as well as the overall tone of the blog are important to defining the online interpretive communities on these blogs. PerezHilton’s blog features mean-spirited and snarky gossip, and the comments sections are generally extensions of that approach. The fact that this site includes few technological controls worked with this social standpoint to create the environment for a large, loosely connected, and uncivil community. Similarly, though the community was controlled by some technological protocols, the commenters on WWTDD forged connections based on a shared ironic perspective on celebrity culture. Interestingly, though the site reinforced hegemonic ideologies about race, gender, and sexuality under the guise of ironic humor, the commenters went far beyond blogger Brendon’s initial framing to more openly and less ironically embrace these perspectives as a means to build a strong online community. In contrast, Jezebel commenters built a strong community based on challenging, rather than reinforcing, these hegemonic norms within celebrity culture. Jezebel’s explicitly feminist stance encouraged commenters to voice thoughtful and engaged opinions that did not devolve into “body snarking” or other gossip that reinforced oppressive ideologies about women. The technological controls imposed by the site supported this, as comments that did not
uphold these standards would be removed. On both WWTDD and Jezebel, however, the
commenters themselves also policed the boundaries of acceptable participation, thus
defining the community in their own terms.

Interpretation of Findings

Grounded in historical forms of gossip media that offer audiences purportedly
uncontrolled access to the private and authentic celebrity, gossip blogs challenge industry
control over the production, circulation, and consumption of celebrity images in
contemporary culture. The technological features of blogs, particularly the emphasis on
immediacy and interactivity/participation, offer new points of entry into celebrity culture
that foreground audiences’ meaning making practices. More importantly, these
technological features enable the social functions of gossip, namely as a means to build
community with others through the construction of shared meaning, to take center stage.
Thus, as Turner (2004) points out, gossip about celebrities is “an important social process
through which relationships, identity, and social and cultural norms are debated,
evaluated, modified and shared,” and connects gossips in an interpretive community (p.
24). In my analysis of celebrity gossip blogs through their texts, producers, and
audiences, I have discovered that while each blog offers a unique insight into celebrity
gossip and community-building, there are several shared characteristics that speak to the
impact of these new media forms on celebrity culture.

Celebrity Gossip Blogs as Technological Interventions

Broadly, celebrity gossip blogs demonstrate the necessary relationship between
technological and social approaches in understanding the cultural impact of new media.
In one sense, gossip blogs are completely tied to new media technologies. Bloggers rely
heavily on the internet in order to create these texts. They surf the web for existing content, use Photoshop and other programs to manipulate images, and are able to quickly and easily update their sites because of the technological capabilities of new media. The widespread availability of these technologies and the ease of their use also allow the blogger to enter into the circuit of celebrity production in unprecedented ways. They are not journalists nor do they work for any established celebrity media outlet. In fact, most of the bloggers I interviewed had little or no previous media industry experience prior to starting their blogs. Instead, they simply utilized existing blog software to start writing about celebrities and celebrity culture. The availability of this technology opened the category of celebrity media to allow individuals who began as fans to participate in the public construction and circulation of celebrity images. Furthermore, since bloggers cull their content from existing online sources rather than doing journalistic investigations themselves, they are not beholden to any industry controls or journalistic standards. They approach celebrity culture from the position of a fan, but by using technology to create a blog, they have created a new category of media based not on traditional access to celebrities but on gossip-oriented commentary.

Internet technologies also enable audiences to quickly and easily engage with the latest celebrity gossip in ways simply not possible in earlier print forms. Rather than wait for a weekly tabloid to be published, readers can read the latest developments in celebrity culture at the click of a mouse. Blogs’ prodigious use of links also enables readers to define their own engagement with a story. They can simply read what is posted by the blogger or they can follow as many links as they want in order to put a story in context, read background information, or simply look at more photos of a particular celebrity.
Furthermore, the technological features of gossip blogs foreground audience participation as a part of the content, a move simply not possible in print gossip media. Whereas reading a gossip magazine is a solitary practice that may encourage a sense of imagined community with other readers, the technological spaces of the gossip blog reveal the presence of other readers and more explicitly connect the once solitary practice of reading to cultural production and community participation. That is, the technology helps readers become producers as part of their reading practices and to use that cultural production to easily connect with others. As evident across the blogs in my sample, the technological controls imposed on the interactive features of the blog also help shape and define the various audience communities. By implementing technological controls, such as requiring user registration in order to comment, bloggers define the boundaries of the community on their blogs. In short, new media technologies are central to understanding the ways celebrity gossip blogs have reconfigured celebrity culture.

The celebrity gossip blog and its technological features have important implications for the production, circulation, and consumption of celebrity images. The rise of digital technologies has “enabled stars and celebrities to be endlessly circulated, replayed, downloaded, and copied” (Holmes and Redmond, 2006c, p. 4). Furthermore, these technologies prioritize the pursuit of the real individual behind the mask of stardom through constant surveillance of the celebrity in her unguarded and uncontrolled moments. The primacy of the paparazzi photograph to the content of celebrity gossip blogs is part of a larger project of deconstruction in which bloggers and audiences tear down the manufactured and controlled surface of the celebrity image to reveal the real person beneath. Though this pursuit of who a star really is has historically been central to
the production, circulation, and consumption of celebrity images, new media technologies have intensified this search to the point where the private, not the public performance, has become the primary marker of contemporary celebrity. As I argued in my case study of Ashlee Simpson’s baby bump watch, the celebrity body is constantly surveilled and policed through new media technologies as the primary point of access to the real. The digital and virtual media technologies that define blogs as online texts are thus important to their ability to challenge industry controlled celebrity images and also offer important sites of rupture the ideological meanings of those images.

**Celebrity Gossip Blogs as Social Spaces**

To reduce blogs only to their technological features ignores the complexity of these texts and the various ways audiences engage with them. Technological features define the format of the text, but the varied forms of content and unique approach to celebrity culture across these blogs illustrates the critical role of the social in defining this media genre. Gossip is an inherently social mode of communication, and these texts reflect that in their content. As I have argued, each blog in my sample defines itself in terms of its particular gossip-oriented approach to celebrity culture. This entails a particular ideological reading of celebrity culture, emphasizing the celebrity’s role as a social symbol and gossip about that celebrity as a means of (re)producing larger ideologies about identity and culture. This can be an important space of intervention, as gossip allows bloggers and readers to deconstruct the celebrity image and challenge the power of the media industry to define celebrity culture. As Gamson (1994) suggests, “it does not matter for gossip how celebrities got there, or even how they manage to stay there, but how they behave once they’re there” (p. 175). The pursuit of the private
celebrity central to gossip blogs unmoors the celebrity from her public, talent-based performances and grounds the meaning of her image in the public performance of the private self.

Gossip talk on celebrity gossip blogs also plays an important role in the construction of social meaning through the celebrity image. The particular approach to celebrity culture evident on each blog shapes the types of social meanings made through celebrity images. In this way, blogs can disrupt dominant social meanings associated with celebrity culture. Blogs like Jezebel and YBF have explicitly defined ideological stances that refuse the negative and oppressive norms forwarded by celebrity culture. YBF refuses the mainstream reification of whiteness as a marker of success and value. Jezebel routinely calls into question the oppressive standards of beauty and physicality forwarded by celebrity culture by refusing to participate in body snarking or other overtly judgmental forms of gossip talk.

At the same time, blogs can also reinforce dominant ideologies under the guise of humor and pleasure. The fun of gossip and celebrity culture can often mask more troubling readings of celebrities as markers of race, class, gender, and sexuality. PerezHilton adopts a stance of dis-identification which takes pleasure in the deconstruction of the celebrity façade, yet often uses this stance to point out that the real celebrity falls short of expected norms. The discussion of Lindsay Lohan’s nude photos on this blog provides a clear example of how deconstructing the celebrity façade simultaneously reinforces hegemonic norms about female beauty and sexuality. Similarly, the use of taboo and ironic humor on WWTDD to mock celebrity culture gives
the appearance of an oppositional reading but is actually based on the reification of racist, sexist, and homophobic norms.

**Gossip and Community on Celebrity Gossip Blogs**

The ideological framing of gossip blogs has important implications for the emergence of community within these virtual spaces, thus highlighting the ways in which the social takes over from the technological in defining online community. Jenkins’ (2006a) distinction between interactivity and participation suggests that while technological features may offer audiences a virtual space in which to interact, there is no guarantee that all audiences will actually use them or will use them in the same way. This supports my claim that the range of communities on celebrity gossip blogs are not captured by a purely technological analysis, and also supports my use of a flexible notion of community when studying these online sites.

The particular framing of the gossip blog draws a like-minded audience of readers who may or may not be interested in creating community as part of their engagements with celebrity gossip on the blog. My analysis indicates that readers are overwhelmingly drawn to a specific blogger’s commentary and approach to celebrity culture more than any of the interactive features. This is similar to Hermes’ (1995) work on the imagined communities that emerge amongst print gossip magazine readers, and suggests that while the technological features do play a role in how readers engage with blogs, the sense of imagined community remains tied to the assumption of shared social meanings. Similarly, readers also use their consumption of blogs to engage with others in their offline lives, again in ways that are similar to print magazine reading. The technological
features are a part of the practice of reading, but the gossip talk that connects readers in the imagined community works on a social level.

My analysis of the comments sections on each blog illustrates the blogger, as the primary cultural producer, retains the authority to set the social boundaries of community on the blog. As a result, the participation in the comments section usually reinforces the blogger’s preferred reading of celebrity culture. This is not to say that dialogue and dissent never occurs between commenters (or more rarely, between blogger and commenter), but such dialogue usually works to recuperate the meaning back to the preferred one or shun the wayward commenter. The technological features structure the community on the blogs, but the true character of the community is defined by the ways in which commenters engage with the blog and each other in these interactive spaces. In a strong community, the commenters participate in gossip talk that supports the ideological framework of the blog and actively police the boundaries of acceptable behavior in order to define their community. But these communities are always in process, negotiating the terms of engagement and using gossip about celebrities to create larger social meanings. Furthermore, the voluntary nature of the participation in the comments sections illustrates that the technological features of a blog cannot predict or confine the types of communities that emerge.

Celebrity Gossip Blogs and Women’s Cultural Production

Understanding the social role of gossip in the production, circulation, and consumption of celebrity images on celebrity gossip blogs reveals the ways women, as the predominant audience of and participants on gossip blogs, may be implicated in the normative ideologies forwarded by the celebrity media. Even as gossip blogs offer
female audiences a way to deconstruct the industry-controlled celebrity image as part of their reading practices, this deconstruction does not necessarily imply resistance to the oppressive social ideologies that circulate within celebrity culture. That is, celebrity gossip blogs often use gossip about the private and authentic celebrity to police acceptable standards of feminine behavior, values, and appearances. For example, though Pop Sugar takes a positive and serious approach to celebrity culture in its gossip, it often reinforces the regime of slenderness as the standard by which female celebrities are judged. This reading is reflected in the community of commenters, who often chastise female celebrities who do not uphold dominant norms of femininity, sexuality and/or motherhood.

This is not to suggest that female audiences are nothing but dupes being seduced into their own oppression by the pleasures of gossip blogs. Gossip blogs are but one cultural source where these gendered discourses are circulated, and some audiences seem to seek out blogs that uphold already held ideals. At the same time, there is ample evidence that gossip about celebrities can be a site of resistance, and blogs that forward this sort of engagement with celebrity culture build communities of women who actively critique and demand more from celebrity culture. The outsider status of blogs opens, but does not guarantee, the possibility that oppositional readings may occur.

**Limitations of the Study**

There are several limitations to this study. First, only six celebrity gossip blogs were used as data for a general argument about the textual characteristics of blogs and audience participation on them. Indeed, thousands of internet sites would fit the broad definition of celebrity gossip blog laid out in chapter three. However, I chose these
particular blogs as representative examples not simply because their audience traffic-tracking data indicated they were popular with large audiences. Each blog was also chosen to demonstrate the range of perspectives that exist within the category of celebrity gossip blogs. I attempted to include gossip blogs that offered unique perspectives rather than multiple examples of one particular perspective. Though I do not suggest that every possible perspective is covered by these six blogs, they do demonstrate that a range of approaches to celebrity exist and are capable of drawing large audiences. Furthermore, the commonalities that do exist, particularly in terms of the commentary-based gossip content and the inclusion of various interactive features, indicate that these blogs do reveal something about the genre as a whole.

Relatedly, since my audience survey was not posted on all the blogs in my sample, a second limitation is that my audience data did not accurately reflect the reading practices and perspectives of the audiences from all the blogs in my sample, let alone general gossip blog audiences. This limitation is a result of my lack of full access to the readers of each blog. All the bloggers verbally agreed to post a link to my online survey during our oral interviews during the summer of 2008. I made every possible effort to follow up on that agreement when my survey was ready in November 2009. I emailed each blogger directly several times and included a copy of my survey so they could see it before posting the link. As Perez did not agree to an interview, I did not contact him about posting the survey on his site. Molly from PopSugar, and Brendon from WWTDD simply never returned my emails. Anna from Jezebel initially responded and seemed amenable to posting the survey, pending approval from her boss since the link was “not a typical news item” (Holmes, personal communication, November 30, 2009). However,
she never replied to any subsequent emails regarding the status of that decision. Finally, Natasha from YBF looked at the survey, but decided not to post it because of “privacy concerns” for readers and concerns about reactions from advertisers to the content of the survey (Eubanks, personal communication, January 13, 2009).

I could have just posted a link myself in the comments sections of each blog, but chose not to for several reasons. First, having the link only on one particularly post would limit the number of audience members who would see the link. Posting the link across several posts would not only break the social and technological protocols of commenting, but would likely irritate the very readers I wanted to complete my survey. More importantly, I did not want to violate the trust of the bloggers who had already consented to interviews and were aware that I was studying their blogs. However, this did not result in a lack of audience data. As I discussed in chapter seven, the survey was posted on PINTB and Buttercup Punch, a site created by a group of active commenters from Jezebel, and I was able to collect over 250 usable surveys from just these two sites. Furthermore, as my survey data indicated, gossip blog readers frequently read more than one blog and, more importantly, are certainly aware of many other gossip blogs, including ones that were and were not in my sample. Thus, though I was unable to access each specific audience, this does not negate the overall validity of my general arguments about the range of reading practices on celebrity gossip blogs.

Another limitation of my study is the ephemeral nature of online media and the challenge of studying something that, due to the characteristics of interactivity and immediacy, is constantly shifting. What is visible one day may be gone, or at least changed, the next. New commentary from the blogger may be added without any
indication the post has been updated. New reader comments may be added (or in some cases, deleted) after I have archived the post. In fact, all of the blogs in my sample have undergone more major changes, whether it is in terms of changing the physical design and layout, the creation of new technological protocols structuring the use of comments sections, or expanding the range of interactive features available to readers. Visiting those sites now, even at the specific posts I cite, would not necessarily reproduce my experience of looking at them during the time of my fieldwork. Though all the blogs keep archives of past content, the completeness of those archives varies from site to site, and some, such as the archives on Jezebel and PopSugar, reflect the site’s design changes rather than show the posts as they first appeared. I made every effort to keep diligent field notes and created my own archive of blog posts in their original form, but I argue the fact that such changes have occurred does not undercut my argument.

First, I clearly established that my analysis is a snapshot of a particular moment in celebrity culture and in the existence of these particular gossip blogs. This locates my analysis in a particular historical moment that usefully limits my object of study. Though their layouts or interactive features may have changed, the celebrity gossip content, emphasis on the blogger’s voice, and the particular ideological lens through which celebrity culture is viewed remains the same. Secondly, as my emphasis is on the social over the technological uses of celebrity gossip blogs, a technological change like a site redesign does not completely change the social practices of reading and writing gossip.

34 This seems to be uncommon, as most bloggers either show redacted text (i.e. “celebrity X is reportedly pregnant” has confirmed her pregnancy, as per Us Weekly”) or explicitly include the word “update” before including new content. I have no way of knowing if content was changed if I did not see the original, but it seems that gossip bloggers are upfront about the fact that they make changes to their content based on new information.
blogs. It may enable new types of practices to more easily emerge, such as when PITNB reinstituted its comments sections after a long hiatus, but the way those features are actually used by audiences remains tied to the social practices of participation on that particular blog.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

The results of this study, as well as its limitations, open several avenues for future research on new media and celebrity gossip. First, the limitations of the audience survey suggest that further research on gossip audiences is a logical avenue for future study. Collecting data on audiences of specific blogs for comparison to my current audience sample may reveal additional reading practices and approaches to celebrity culture. In particular, as I had few respondents who were active readers of WWTDD, it would be interesting to compare those audiences to the Jezebel audiences because these two blogs are in direct conflict in terms of the type of gossip talk and readings of celebrity culture available on each site. Relatedly, as my survey reflected very low numbers readers who identified as people of color or as gay, future research might specifically target these audiences in order to draw comparisons to the larger segment of white female readers.

I also advocate for future research into a wider range of new media platforms and their role in celebrity culture. More specifically, I have argued in this study that celebrity gossip blogs reconfigure the circuit of celebrity production, giving audiences unprecedented power to shape the public meaning of the celebrity image. A range of new media platforms, such as digital photography and video, reality television, and social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, are also a part of this contemporary destabilization of the coherent celebrity image. These platforms offer immediate and
interactive engagements with celebrity culture that not only originate outside of industry control but specifically encourage the audience to see the industry manipulation and create alternate sites of meaning. One future project would be to see how these other new media platforms work to disrupt the controlled celebrity image and foreground audiences’ role in cultural production.

Yet these same technologies have also been harnessed by industry producers to re-exert control over the meaning of the celebrity image under the guise of authenticity and unmediated disclosure. A related project would explore how new media technologies have also been deployed by celebrity producers as a means to recuperate control over the celebrity image. For audiences, reading a celebrity’s Twitter feed or watching a reality television show strengthens the illusion of intimacy that historically shapes the celebrity-audience relationship, but also opens a new space for producers to re-exert control over the meaning of the image under the guise of offering unrestricted access to the private and real person behind the celebrity façade. Future research would examine these new media platforms as spaces of controlled self-presentation that allow celebrity producers to counter the uncontrolled construction of the celebrity image with attention to audience acceptance of the authentic celebrity.
APPENDIX A

DISCUSSION OF METHODS

Self-reflexivity and Qualitative Research

I began this project not simply as a researcher, but also as a reader of celebrity gossip blogs. I have long been a “fan” of celebrity culture and gossip media, but prior to this research, typically read only print magazines or watched gossip news programs on television. In fact, I had never even encountered a celebrity gossip blog until a participant in a focus group I conducted in spring of 2006 mentioned blogs in general, and Pink Is The New Blog specifically, as her preferred way to read the latest celebrity news. Her enthusiasm for the type of gossip offered on PITNB and its heavy coverage of Britney Spears, who is my favorite celebrity, prompted me to visit the site. I have been a regular reader of gossip blogs ever since and, like many of my survey respondents, hardly ever read gossip magazines anymore. At the time I conceived this project, I was a regular reader of PITNB. As a result of this research, I am now also a regular reader of (and occasional commenter on) Jezebel. I discovered each blog included in my sample either through my own reading of blogs, primarily through links from those I already read, or, more commonly, through recommendations from friends. From family holidays to academic conferences, I am continually astonished at the number of people who, upon hearing my dissertation topic, readily offer up not only a wealth of information about celebrities but cite favorite blogs as sources of this information. This has not only helped me sift through the massive number of existing gossip blogs, but has also offered a sort of validation of my interest in these media and their readers.
I am particularly surprised by these positive responses given that public interest in celebrity culture is frequently derided by the so-called “serious” media (often at the same time they are reporting, in some cases begrudgingly, the latest details about the celebrity scandal du jour) and other public intellectuals as a form of mass distraction from the news they deem “important.” I often assume that my academic interest in celebrity culture will be taken as equally frivolous by scholars and the public alike, but have not found this to be the case. While on a trip to London to present some of my work, I was riding a crowded bus and avidly chatting about celebrity culture with two friends. The distinguished-looking older man sitting near us was, I thought, shaking his head in disapproval. Yet by the end of the ride, he had not only joined in our conversation, but gave us his copy of the popular London tabloid, *The Sun*, which he told us he had bought specifically for the front page coverage of real life romance of two British reality television stars. This moment vividly illustrated to me the ways in which celebrity gossip works to connect people in shared negotiation of meaning.

My intent in this project is not to argue that knowing the latest about Britney Spears or any other celebrity is as important as knowing about the latest developments in the Iraq war or health care reform. Instead, I want to emphasize the cultural currency of celebrity gossip, and blog gossip in particular, as a way to connect with other people and to value that form of social connectedness. Chayko (2002) maintains social researchers should not refrain from investigating the forms of human sociation deemed “embarrassing” or framed as “guilty pleasures.” She argues:

> when we fail to acknowledge (and study) a form of human sociation, we devalue that sociation—and with it, a large portion of existence, a big chunk of everyday life. We devalue our own experiences and emotions. Unwittingly, but inevitably, we end up diminishing important and legitimate parts of ourselves (p. 4).
To claim celebrity gossip is irrelevant or merely a distraction devalues and ignores the complex ways people use it in their everyday lives. My project puts this everyday use at the center of analysis in order to understand its role in our social lives. But I also recognize that readers’ consumption of and participation in celebrity gossip is likely only a small part of their everyday lives. People can, and do, consume a variety of media that help them make sense of their social worlds. Celebrity gossip media is an important part of that process, and is therefore worth studying.

**Cyber-ethnography**

In order to study celebrity gossip blog reading as a part of everyday life, I necessarily must study the texts and their readers in their “natural habitat,” the internet. The internet is both the object of my study and a tool for conducting my research; thus my dissertation necessarily reconfigures traditional qualitative and ethnographic methodologies within new and unique spaces of inquiry. Traditionally employing participant observation and informal interviews, classical ethnographies are accounts of intensive and long-term observation of social actors in their own social contexts. These qualitative and interpretive methods are used to provide a “holistic” view of that culture that “tries to describe all (or at least most) relevant aspects of a culture’s material existence and meaning systems” through “thick” description of the “contextual significance of actions for their performers” (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002, p. 16). Following Press (1996), I suggest my investigation of gossip blogs and their audiences moves away from the classical and anthropological sense of ethnography while retaining the naturalistic and interpretive elements of this qualitative approach. More specifically, I engage an approach to methods described by Ward’s (1999) “cyber-ethnography.” She
argues that the cyber-ethnographer “observes the interaction on a particular website in order to gain a fuller understanding of internet culture” by foregrounding the “meanings the participants place on the social system” (p. 100). I observe the participants in their online environments and foreground their “voices” in order to contextualize the significance of their engagements with blogs, just as a traditional ethnography would. But the fact that this observation and analysis takes place online also requires some different approaches.

First, the notion of choosing a research site is a challenge in an online environment in which hundreds of thousands of potential research sites exist. Hine (2000) suggests the researcher must strategically identify and incorporate as many relevant sites “as practicable while retaining a coherent but explicitly partial ethnographic project” (p. 63). This study is a “partial ethnographic project” because I do not assume that I can discuss every site where celebrity gossip occurs online. Instead, I strategically select examples that help build a larger argument about celebrity gossip blogs as one of these sites.

Furthermore, I do not suggest that the meanings made within these online contexts are limited to them. Readers bring their “offline” lives and experiences to their online interactions, and vice versa. I also recognize that any study of internet culture recognizes only one facet of the participants’ overall cultural life, and potentially one they place little importance on in terms of defining their identities and worldviews. That said, I believe that the cultural production that occurs on gossip blogs, even if users see it as inconsequential and “just entertainment,” offers insight into some of the ways in which people interpret the world and organize their lives. Employing qualitative methods that
foreground the interpretive practices of the participants themselves is, I argue, the best way to, as Lindlof and Taylor (2002) suggest, “describe[ing] and interpret[ing] observed relationships between social practices and the systems of meaning in a particular cultural milieu” (p. 16). Following Hine (2000), I believe doing ethnography in online settings is important to establishing that the internet functions as a context in which culturally interesting and sociologically relevant interactions occur.

In conducting online research, the researcher must recognize that while online contexts are connected to offline contexts, they are not exactly the same. A successful cyber-ethnography, like traditional ethnography, should be built upon clearly defined research questions, often grounded in existing scholarship on similar offline phenomena. But there must also be a sense of adaptability when it comes to answering those questions. For example though I draw on research on celebrity gossip magazine readers, I necessarily adapted my investigation to address the role of new media technologies on gossip blog reading practices. This adaptability is particularly important in studying online communities from an ethnographic perspective. Ward (1999) argues one of the primary problems encountered when applying traditional ethnographic approaches to the virtual setting is

they have the effect to place a normative framework on to the concept of virtual community. Traditional ethnography assumes the existence of a community and attempts to unfold, describe and analyse the social processes that constitute the aggregation (pp. 99-100).

In other words, researchers have the tendency to force preconceived ideas about community, typically grounded in definitions of offline or “real life” communities, onto the online group they study unless they modify their ethnographic approach.
I previously addressed the long standing debate over the existence of virtual community, and engaging this debate as a part of one’s research is central to Ward’s conception of cyber-ethnography. She argues that while the researcher necessarily observes the activity and interactions on a particular website, “cyber-ethnographic method allows the virtual aggregation to ‘speak of itself,’ in the sense that, if the participants perceive their virtual aggregation to be a community, then they have the power to define it as such” (p. 103). This includes debate and disagreement amongst users, and the task of the research is to foreground these debates and definitions as part of the ethnographic project rather than forcing all users into the same category.

By entering this study with a relational and flexible sense of community, I believe my research opened space for participants to define their interactions in ways that did not necessarily match with my own initial assumptions. Indeed, I expected to find a much stronger sense of online community amongst readers, and was surprised by the large number of survey respondents who suggested they felt little to no connection with others as part of their reading practices, particularly since I assumed this young audience who grew up with the internet would be more accustomed to using it as a relational tool. However, as I started from Ward’s suggestion that “interpretation [in cyber-ethnography] remains open to constant renegotiation by both the researcher and the researched,” I was better able to place this finding in the context of my flexible definition of community and recognize how these readers still see themselves as active participants, even if not explicitly engaged in community-building as part of their engagements with celebrity gossip blogs (p. 100).
Some Challenges of Collecting Online Data

Both traditional and cyber-ethnography, as interpretive methods, insist on the inclusion of the meanings placed on social activities by the participants themselves. Thus, interviews, focus groups, and/or other qualitative means to collect the participants’ perspectives in their own words are important components of this sort of research. However, as a research site, the internet presents a certain challenge to the cyber-ethnographer that is not dealt with in literature on traditional ethnography, namely the influence of the medium on the ability to conduct research. On one hand, it seems like the internet would make this sort of data collection very easy, since it overcomes temporal, physical, and financial boundaries that can impede face-to-face qualitative data collection. Yet the reality is that internet researchers are faced with challenges unique to exploring the connections between technology and culture.

One major difference from traditional ethnography is that my online observation is not explicitly defined as participant observation. I engaged with these blogs as any reader might—clicking between posts, reading comments in the comments section, following links to sources. This meant that while I did look at every celebrity-related post on each blog, I did not click every link within a post or necessarily closely read every single comment. For posts that I archived or that were used for my case study, I did pay closer attention to the comments sections, returning to archive more comments if they arose in order to provide a more complete data set for this particular analysis. As with offline or more traditional forms of ethnography, I let my observation grow organically, paying closer attention to things that were interesting or seemed more relevant to my study and less attention to those that were not as relevant.
Furthermore, doing my observation online meant that my presence as a research was invisible to the rest of the users. I did not explicitly reveal myself as a researcher to the audiences at the time of my online fieldwork. The bloggers were aware of my research at the time of our interviews, but did not reveal my presence to their audiences. Even when Trent from PITNB posted my survey, he did not specifically mention that I had been observing his blog as an academic researcher. On one hand, this invisibility means that participants did not change their behaviors because they knew they were being studied. On the other hand, a more traditional ethnographer might claim this sort of engagement relies too heavily on my interpretation of their online engagements rather than allowing audiences to describe it themselves. I contend that my interest in blogs as texts means I must first analyze what is written on the blogs without additional contextualization from the authors. This analysis was supplemented by the blogger interviews and the online survey of readers which allowed these groups to describe their roles as producers and consumers in their own words.

Secondly, online data can be collected at any time and place, allowing me the freedom to come and go from blogs throughout the day without really “missing” anything. In fact, allowing time for discussion in a comments section to develop actually provided a richer data source for analysis. This time-shifting also worked to my advantage in my analysis of The Young, Black and Fabulous. In my original conception of this project, I did not include this blog in my research sample. However, during my fieldwork, it became clear that questions of race were rarely addressed on the blogs in my sample because the celebrities covered were overwhelmingly white. In order to address this gap, I decided to go back and include a black celebrity culture blog in May 2008.
Fortunately, YBF has a comprehensive archive that included all the posts published during my original fieldwork time frame. Not all blogs archive to this degree, pointing to the challenge of attempting to study content that may disappear from the site. I chose to include YBF in part because of the availability of archived posts from the same time period as my original fieldwork. I was thus able to recreate the experience of reading YBF “live.” A traditional ethnography of offline groups would not be able to recreate their research sites in this way.

Since the gossip blogs were constantly changing and updating during my fieldwork, I also faced the challenge of trying to find a logical place to “stop” my observations. The centrality of interactive features to the format and content of blogs means that the cultural production of meaning could continue as long as readers want to post new comments. While the number of new comments on a post does decrease as time goes on, it is entirely possible, though somewhat unlikely, that even now someone may decide to add a comment to one of the posts in my sample. Nevertheless, as this study aims to engage the social contexts of and meanings made through online engagements with celebrity gossip blogs, I argue it is not necessary to include every single comment in order to understand the dominant ways of reading a celebrity image. I made every effort to observe as many comments as possible, and did check back to see if any new ideas had been expressed. But at a certain point, the readers tend to move on and further analysis of a particular post is no longer warranted. Cyber-ethnography assumes that by setting out clearly defined research questions, the fact that online environments are constantly changing does not take away from the validity overall social argument.
In order to study this online environment, I also conducted an online survey. Drawn from traditional ethnographic approaches, this method clearly illustrates how cyber-ethnography approaches the internet as an object of analysis and a tool for data collection. Through my survey, I asked about online engagements through an online medium, allowing audiences to participate in my survey in ways similar to how they (may) participate on gossip blogs. Furthermore, I argue my use of an online survey usefully broadens my sample to include the reading and community-building practices of those audience members who choose not to engage with the interactive features of the gossip blog. As cyber-ethnography seeks to incorporate the perspectives of all online users, my online survey accessed the voices of those who choose to remain silent on the gossip blogs. This population would have been missed if I drew my sample only from those who are visible and active on the blog itself. The internet is not a perfect research tool, and doing my survey online presented unanticipated challenges.

First, as previously discussed, though all the bloggers I interviewed initially agreed to post a link to my survey, only one actually did so. I had no direct access to the readers of these blogs without the blogger acting as a gatekeeper. The internet may allow us to quickly and easily communicate with others, but it also allows us to easily ignore them with few social consequences. My persistent emails went unanswered, likely because the bloggers were simply too busy writing their blogs to spend time dealing with my requests. But it may also be the case that they changed their minds about posting the survey, for whatever reason, and could use the anonymity and distance inherent to internet communication to avoid actually refusing my request. Though I was able to find
access in other ways, as discussed in chapter seven, the inability to speak to the bloggers face-to-face may have impeded my access to their audiences.

At the same time, I suggest the anonymity and interactivity of the internet also worked in my favor in terms of encouraging respondents to take the survey. Readers did not have to identify themselves in order to take the survey, though they could include a username if they wished. Gossip blog lurkers who do not usually post on the comments sections may have chosen to take the survey because they could continue to remain anonymous, as the survey responses were not publicly visible to others. The online survey mirrored the types of engagements available on gossip blogs (e.g. clicking a button on my survey is like clicking a button on a blog poll and writing qualitative responses to questions is like posting a comment on a blog). Thus, readers were not asked to perform actions that were markedly different from their regular online experiences. In other words, they did not have to speak directly to me, or even directly email me, in order to participate.

**The Ethics of Online Research**

In addition to presenting challenges to the process of collecting and analyzing data, using the internet as the object of study and a tool for conducting research raises some distinct ethical issues. In particular, questions of public versus private communication and issues of risk to the participant are often less clear cut when considered in online environments. Though I did receive IRB approval for all components of this research, I here offer a brief explanation of the ethical decisions that informed my methods of data collection and analysis.
All of the blogs in my sample are publicly accessible websites intended for public consumption. The fact that they are all third-party advertiser supported indicates the bloggers’ recognize their blogs as public and profit oriented acts of communication. Though some feature personal details about the blogger’s private self and life, I argue the blogger posts them with the full knowledge of and desire for public consumption. None of the blogs in my sample include any statement prohibiting academic inquiry into their sites. Thus, I find no ethical issues relating to my analysis of the visual and textual elements of the blog without explicit consent from the blogger, the owner of the site (if different from the blogger), or the audience members who participate on the blog. I believe I can analyze the blogs as public texts in much the same way I would analyze any other publicly accessible media form, such as print magazines or television programs. Furthermore, as I conducted oral interviews with all the bloggers (except Perez), they were also aware that I was studying their blogs for this project. I did not ask for their permission, but argue that by consenting to the interview, they also gave tacit approval for my use of their blogs as research sites.

I further claim that blog users who choose to write comments do so under the assumption that their communication is a part of the public text. Though some blogs do require users to register or “audition” in order to post comments, there are no restrictions or requirements for reading the comments sections on any of the blogs in my sample. A user, registered or not, simply clicks the appropriate link in order to view all existing

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35 This assumption pertains only to the comments sections on each blog, which are the object of my inquiry. Some blogs feature forums or other interactive features that are explicitly labeled as “private” and accessible only by registered users. As these are outside of the scope of my inquiry, the ethical issues of the privacy of these forums are not relevant.
comments. Blogs that require user registration typically allow the registered user to include personal information (e.g. by listing attributes like gender, sexual preference, favorite celebrities as well as the ability to upload a photo or other image that will be associated with their username either in posts or as “friends” to other users), but all of this information is voluntary and, along with the user’s “real” name and email address, is not revealed when a reader posts a comment. Blogs that do not need registration may still require a username, but it can be different with every post. In short, though there may be some disclosure of some level of personal information by the blog user, I argue their comments are intended as part of the public text of the blog and commenters are already protected by the anonymity of their usernames.

Relatedly, as Elm (2009) points out, it is quite difficult to even attempt to obtain informed consent within certain internet environments. The overwhelming number of participants combined with the anonymity afforded them by the use of usernames means it may not be possible to even identify an individual in order to contact them. She argues, “if researchers take the time to write and send private messages to all new participants [in an online environment] there will be very little time left for them to actually observe online interactions” (p. 72). Similarly, constantly sending new messages to the group to alert them to the presence of the researchers is not only impractical given that each post has its own comments section, but “users would probably classify the researchers as spammers, get annoyed, and treat them the way spammers are generally treated—by filtering them out or harassing them to make them leave” (ibid). I argue that informed consent is not necessary to study what is being said on gossip blogs, whether written by a
blog or by an audience member. This text is public and the users are aware of this when they choose to participate.

Finally, given the subject under discussion is celebrity gossip, which itself is publicly available and traded information, I argue there is little to no risk for user’s whose comments are included in any academic writing. Just as it would be difficult for me to find the users for informed consent, it would be equally difficult for someone to attach a particular comment in my analysis to a “real life” individual. In a different environment, such as an online support group for victims of domestic violence, these considerations would certainly change. I did secure informed consent from survey respondents, as the nature of the survey questions were more personal and could potentially be connected to the user.

Conclusion

Online research in general, and my use of cyber-ethnography in particular, requires adaptability in theoretical and methodological approaches based on the online environment. The qualitative and interpretive nature of traditional ethnographic methods provide a useful starting point, but must necessarily be reconfigured to best address the online culture being studied. Instead of creating prescriptive recommendations for online research, I argue the individual researcher must recognize the specific needs of her research questions and the technological and social nature of the online environment she is studying in order to make an assessment of how to best design her research methods.
APPENDIX B

SURVEY OF CELEBRITY GOSSIP BLOG READERS

The following is a reproduction of the online survey I conducted from November 2008-February 2009. In addition to all of the questions that appeared on this survey, this reproduction also includes all instructions given to respondents and indicates when readers would skip certain questions based on their answers. At no time did respondents see all the questions, as the skip logic designed into the survey web site moved individual readers through the survey based on their individual answers. During the time this survey was available on Survey Monkey (http://www.surveymonkey.com), respondents were able to click on buttons to indicate a response and were given text boxes below each qualitative question to write responses.
Gossip Blog Survey

Do you like to read celebrity gossip blogs? If so, I invite you to participate in this short survey about your reading and participation on American-based celebrity gossip blogs. I am a graduate student in Communication at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst and am researching gossip blogs and their readers in order to understand the role of celebrity culture and the internet in our daily lives. Your participation in my project is completely voluntary. The survey should take just 10-15 minutes of your time and you may write as much or as little as you like for each question. You may withdraw your participation at any time without prejudice by either exiting the survey or contacting the researcher via email.

By clicking the "I accept" button below, you voluntarily agree to complete this survey, and acknowledge that any responses you give may be used by me (the researcher) for the purposes of publication or teaching. This is an anonymous survey. You do not need to provide your real name or username, and the personal information section is simply for statistical purposes. However, if you are willing to be contacted at a later date with further questions, if necessary, you may provide a name and email address at the end. All responses are collected on a secure channel and automatically secured by Verisign. Electronic documents derived from this information (data files) will be maintained on a secure networked computer and password-protected. The data will be retained for a period of ten years.

Please contact me, Erin Meyers, at erin.a.meyers@gmail.com should you have any questions or concerns. For further information on me and my research, please visit my profile on the UMass Communication Graduate Students web page:

http://commgrad.wikidot.com/people

1. By clicking "I accept," I understand the conditions described above and voluntarily agree to participate in this project.

I accept (skip to question 2)
I do not wish to participate (skips to thank you page)

2. How often do you read print gossip magazines (the actual magazine not their online counterparts)?

Never
Rarely
1-2 times per month
3-6 times per month
more than 6 times per month
Other (please specify)
3. Do you think celebrity gossip blogs are different from print celebrity gossip magazines? Why or why not?

4. Have you heard of the following gossip blogs? Please check all that you have heard of, even if you do not regularly read that blog.

Jezebel
Perez Hilton
Pink Is The New Blog
Pop Sugar
What Would Tyler Durden Do
The Young, Black and Fabulous
I have not heard of any of these blogs

5. What celebrity gossip blogs do you typically read? More than one answer is okay.

Jezebel
Perez Hilton
Pink Is The New Blog
Pop Sugar
What Would Tyler Durden Do
The Young, Black and Fabulous
Other (please specify)

6. Where do you typically read celebrity gossip blogs? More than one answer is okay.

At home
At work
At school
Other (please specify)

7. How much time, on average, do you spend reading celebrity gossip blog on a given day?

If less than one hour, please estimate time in minutes
If one hour or more, please estimate time in hours
8. Which statement best describes when you read celebrity gossip blogs? Please add any additional information describing when you read in the "other" category if necessary.

I read at the same time every day (for example, during my lunch break)
I read only when I have free time
I read when I am bored
I read constantly, always checking back for updates
Other (please specify)

9. Are there specific celebrities you like to read about on gossip blogs?

Yes (if answer yes, skip to question 11)
No

10. Since you don't read for one particular celebrity, what draws you to celebrity gossip blogs? (skip to question 14)

11. Which celebrity or celebrities do you most like to read about on celebrity gossip blogs?

12. Why do you like to read blog posts about that celebrity?

13. Do you only read stories about your favorite celebrity/celebrities or about anyone covered?

I only read stories about my favorite celebrity/celebrities
I read any celebrity story that interests me
I read nearly every post on the blog
Other (please specify)

14. Do you think celebrity gossip blogs accurately report the details about celebrities' lives?

Yes
No
Sometimes
Not sure

15. Do celebrity gossip blogs have to be accurate/truthful in reporting the details of celebrities' lives in order for you to enjoy reading them?

Yes, I like the stories to be accurate
No, it does not matter to me if stories are accurate (skip to question 17)
Not sure (skip to question 17)
16. Why is truth/accuracy about celebrity stories less important to your enjoyment of celebrity gossip blogs?

17. Why is truth/accuracy important for your enjoyment of celebrity gossip blogs?

18. On a scale of 1 to 7, do you feel any sense of connection with others, including other readers, posters or the blogger, when you read celebrity gossip blogs?

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
No
Some
5
6
Very strong
Connection
Connection
Connection

19. How does reading celebrity gossip blogs contribute (or not) to a feeling of being connected to others?

20. Do you post comments on any celebrity gossip blogs?

Yes, frequently
Yes, sometimes
No, never (skip to question 24)

21. Which blogs do you comment on? If you have a username you typically use when you write comments, would you please share it with me here?

22. On a scale of 1 to 7, do you feel any sense of connection with others, including other readers, posters or the blogger, when you post on celebrity gossip blogs?

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
No
Some
Very strong
Connection
Connection
Connection

23. How does posting comments celebrity gossip blogs contribute (or not) to a feeling of being connected to others?

24. Why do you choose not to post on celebrity gossip blogs that have interactive features?

25. What do you like most about celebrity gossip blogs?

26. Are there things you do not like about celebrity gossip blogs?

27. Anything else you’d like me to tell me about your reading of celebrity gossip blogs?
28. Are you willing to be contacted via email by the researcher for additional questioning? Your email will remain confidential and only be used by the researcher should the need for further questioning arise. If so, please provide your name (a username is fine, if you prefer) and email below. If not, please continue to the next page.

Information provided here will be protected under guidelines described on consent form and is for the purposes of investigation only. Your responses are voluntary and you may omit any question you do not feel comfortable answering.

29. Where did you find out about this survey?

30. Age

under 18
18-24
25-30
31-35
36-40
over 40

31. What describes your current level of education?

Current High School Student
Some High School, but no longer attending
High School Diploma or Equivalent
Current College Student
Some College, but no longer attending
College Degree
Current Graduate Student
Some Graduate School, but no longer attending
Advanced or Professional Degree

32. What is your current occupation? Students please indicate if you are in high school, college, graduate school, etc.

33. Race/Ethnicity

Black
Asian
Latino/Latina
White
Other (please specify)

34. Please provide the city, state and country where you currently live
35. Gender

Male
Female
Transgendered

36. Sexual Orientation

Gay
Lesbian
Straight
Bisexual
Undecided
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