

THE FABULOUS LIVES OF MICRO-CELEBRITIES

At South by Southwest (SXSW), virtually every high-status member of the technology community convenes on Austin for a long weekend. The conference sessions are packed, but busier by far are massive parties sponsored by companies like Foursquare and Twitter. In 2009, the biggest SXSW party was the “Bigg Digg Shindigg” thrown by the social news site Digg. Held at Stubbs, a barbecue restaurant and music venue, indie bands Barcelona and Republic Tigers played as more than two thousand attendees streamed in and out and crowded around the enormous stage. Queuing up for a drink, I met a group of college kids who were dedicated fans of *DiggNation*, the online show starring Digg’s founder, Kevin Rose. The students wore homemade shirts that spelled out Digg, and happily posed for pictures with a girl who had hand-painted a tank top to read “I ♥ Kevin.” They badly wanted to meet Rose. Later in the party, Rose appeared in front of a step-and-repeat (a logo-covered backdrop for

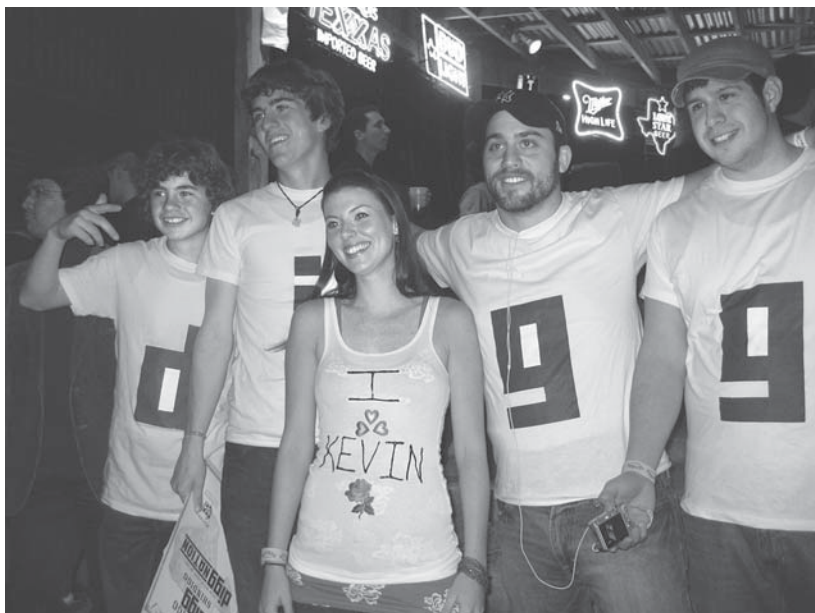


Figure 1: Digg Fans at SXSW 2009. Photo: Alice Marwick

photos) and was swarmed by fans asking for autographs and snapping digital photos.

Although Rose appeared on the cover of *BusinessWeek* in 2006 under the headline “How This Kid Made \$60 Million in 18 Months” (for which he was mercilessly mocked by his colleagues), he had no name recognition outside of the tech scene and his college-aged fan base. But within the scene, Rose was a superstar. Fans stopped him on the street and mobbed him at tech parties; interviewees frequently dropped his name; and admirers attempted to follow in his footsteps. As an entrepreneur of a successful social product that techies used and liked, Rose had the highest status one could have. Naturally a low-key, thoughtful person, Rose was taken by surprise by this rise in status. At the same time, he did not shy away from attention. He appeared weekly on *DiggNation*, was an avid tweeter with 88,000 followers in 2009, dated internet personalities like Shira Lazar and Julia Allison, and hobnobbed with Ashton Kutcher and Tim Ferriss.¹

Rose exemplifies a type of internet-enabled visibility, the “micro-celebrity.” Micro-celebrity is a state of being famous to a niche group of people, but it is also a behavior: the presentation of oneself as a celebrity regardless of who is paying attention. There are two ways of achieving internet fame—by consciously arranging the self to achieve recognition, or by being ascribed fame by others due to one’s accomplishments. Kevin was well-known for his entrepreneurial success, for which the scene ascribed him celebrity status. At the same time, he actively courted attention and treated his rabid followers as a fan base to achieve micro-celebrity. Within the scene, both types of micro-celebrities are subject to scrutiny; pursuing attention and visibility for its own sake without commensurate achievement risks having one’s personas and activities policed and judged by others.

Becoming a micro-celebrity requires creating a persona, producing content, and strategically appealing to online fans by being “authentic.” Authenticity in this context is a quality that takes many forms, from direct interaction with admirers to the public discussion of deeply personal information, and it is tenuous at best.² Although micro-celebrity takes the principles of celebrity culture and applies them to online interactions, online celebrities are not traditional celebrities, they do not have teams of agents and managers to protect them from the public, and they lack vast sums of money. Moreover, they are working within a different milieu, that of the internet, which idealizes transparency and thus expects a certain amount of exhibitionism. We may think of movie and rock stars as exhibitionists, but in reality the media business is more guarded, and quite protective of its lucrative properties. Micro-celebrities, by contrast, are generally viewed as fair game for the same vicious criticism that bloggers and audiences give movie stars or musicians, but are expected to be more available and more “real” than stars of the screen or stage. The rewards of achieving micro-celebrity may seem considerable, but the cost is often high.

What Is Micro-Celebrity?

An Internet celebrity is an unemployed person, often a student, who is widely known among the members of an e-subculture or clique. The term itself is a misnomer because people who use the internet are not popular IRL [in real life]. Most Internet celebrities have more friends on their LiveJournal friends list than anyone else, and it is to these vaunted heights of e-fame that all self-respecting attention or comment whores aspire.

—*The Encyclopedia Dramatica*

Fameballs: individuals whose fame snowballs because journalists cover what they think other people want them to cover.

—Jakob Lodwick, founder of CollegeHumor.com

Terri Senft, in her book *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks*, defines micro-celebrity as “a new style of online performance in which people employ webcams, video, audio, blogs, and social networking sites to ‘amp up’ their popularity among readers, viewers, and those to whom they are linked online.”³ Celebrity has traditionally been viewed as something someone is, based on how well known he or she is; micro-celebrity, by contrast, is something someone does.⁴ Regardless of one’s actual audience, micro-celebrity is a way of thinking of oneself as a celebrity, and treating others accordingly. Micro-celebrity practitioners, be they professional video gamers, wannabe pop stars, YouTube beauty bloggers, or political activists, strategically construct their presentation to appeal to others. The people they interact with online are thought of as fans, rather than friends or strangers, and these relationships are carefully maintained to sustain popularity. The mindset and practices of micro-celebrity are made possible by social media technologies, which enable average people to gain the audiences of traditional celebrities.

The technology community is well aware of celebrity’s influence. People with highly visible online personas are dubbed “internet

famous” (Ben Brown, founder of the short-lived geek dating site Consummating, christened himself the “internet rockstar” in 2000, and defined it as “all the fun with none of the pesky pressure to produce another top selling CD or make anybody rich or famous. Except you, Mr. Number One.”).⁵ *Wired* magazine put Julia Allison on the cover with the headline “Get Internet famous! Even if you’re nobody.” Like Kevin Rose, many are swamped with attention at conferences: At South by Southwest, I witnessed “mommy blogger” Dooce, a.k.a. Heather Armstrong, backed against a wall by fans. Micro-celebrities are name-dropped on Facebook and Twitter (“At the Rev3 Holiday party with @veronica lamenting that @ryanblock & @kevinrose are nerdily playing chess”). People brag about meeting, hanging out with, and attending parties with the micro-famous; their technologies or accomplishments are followed closely; and their content is read, re-tweeted, and discussed. To many, the distinction between those famous for doing something and those famous for simply being famous is unimportant. What matters is the fame.

But micro-celebrity exists on a continuum, from ascribed to achieved. Micro-celebrity can be *ascribed* to people well-known in certain subcultures, often through the production of celebrity media about them. For example, a tech blog published paparazzi photos of the late Steve Jobs and Google CEO Eric Schmidt drinking coffee in Palo Alto; similar candid shots from Mark Zuckerberg’s honeymoon ended up in *Us Weekly*. A paparazzi photo of someone marks them as a celebrity, or at least someone to pay attention to. While micro-celebrity is ascribed to people who are recognizable from on-line memes, such as the costumed super-fan “Tron Guy” or internet karaoke star “Numa Numa kid,” high-status micro-celebrities in the tech scene are those with significant business or technological accomplishments, such as Gary Vaynerchuk and Kevin Rose.⁶ An ascribed micro-celebrity is not just someone popular, but someone treated with the celebrity-fan relationship of distance and aggrandizement. In other words, the ascribed micro-celebrity is treated almost as a mainstream celebrity and assigned a high level of status, depending on the source of his or her fame and the community in

question. Some ascribed micro-celebrities shun the spotlight, while others use micro-celebrity practices to manage their audience once they reach a certain level of online fame.

Achieved micro-celebrity, by contrast, is a self-presentation strategy that includes creating a persona, sharing personal information about oneself, constructing intimate connections to create the illusion of friendship or closeness, acknowledging an audience and identifying them as fans, and strategically revealing information to increase or maintain this audience. Social media technologies are an intrinsic part of this process; for my informants, these activities primarily took place on Twitter, with its stark metrics of follower numbers that invite comparison and competition. Other technologies, particularly blogs, digital photos, and videos, are used to establish an online presence and live a public life. Significantly, micro-celebrity practice uses mediated self-presentation techniques drawn from “traditional” celebrity culture in day-to-day interactions with other people. Thus relationships between individuals become similar to relationships between celebrities and their audiences.⁷

Creating the Celebrity Self

Becoming a micro-celebrity requires a degree of self-commodification to create a “publicizable personality”; as Ernest Sternberg writes, “performers now intentionally compose their persona for the market, and do so through methods learned from the celebrity world.”⁸ The micro-celebrity self, like that of celebrities more generally, is carefully constructed and performed to attract attention and publicity. Laura Fitton, a social media marketer who rose to fame as her persona, Pistachio, describes writing her Twitter account as “kind of like being a newspaper columnist”: “I get that that’s not a hundred percent me . . . But I do think of Pistachio as kind of a separate entity. It doesn’t have followers. It has readers. It’s a thing.” Fitton distinguishes herself from her online persona, which she admits is filtered to show her in a positive way. She thinks of Pistachio as a “thing” that has an audience. Virtually everyone I interviewed was strategic

about using social media to reveal or conceal certain aspects of themselves. Owen Thomas, a former *Valleywag* editor, explained, “With social media, we have a sense of the tools to craft those identities. It’s almost like when previous programmers had to write in assembly language. And now we got Visual Basic for constructing identities.” Profile pictures, likes and dislikes, and subjects chosen to tweet or blog about are calculated to give off a certain impression.⁹

Interacting with Fans

Micro-celebrity involves closeness and accountability. Micro-celebrity practitioners view their online connections as an audience or fan base, and use communication technologies like Twitter, instant messaging (IM), and e-mail to respond to them. Many people I talked to felt that in order to boost their popularity they were obligated to continue this interaction, which broke down the traditional barriers between audience and performer, spectator and spectacle. The micro-celebrity has direct interaction with fans, while traditional celebrities only give the illusion of interaction and access. As Gabe Benevise, founder of the music site SonicLiving, explained, “There [have] always been Brad Pitt fan clubs or musicians who have fan clubs.” He noted that even mainstream celebrities have traditionally incorporated elements of personal interaction, such as responses to fan letters or public appearances, into their personas, but now all that’s required is an @reply message on Twitter. In his view, personal interaction is “not a new phenomenon . . . there’s just a much lower barrier to entry.” This interaction is crucial to maintaining the micro-celebrity’s fame or notoriety. Veronica Belmont, herself a famous video blogger, explains:

I’m actually super, super lucky with my fans because there’s definitely a feeling of a conversation going on, as opposed to me just broadcasting things. On my blog, I respond to comments. I respond to all my email. On Twitter, I reply, not publicly always, but I will always direct message someone if

they have a specific question or comment. I just want to keep the lines of communication open because I feel once you lose that, you lose that relatability, and you lose that ability to converse with your audience. Then, suddenly, you're on this pedestal, and it's just not as fun, and it's not as watchable.

Regularly viewing the cast of a television show in your living room every week creates a feeling of intimacy and familiarity that communication scholars Horton and Wohl have called “para-social interaction.”¹⁰ These para-social relationships can be emotionally gratifying, to the point where people tune in to particular programs to check in with their “friends.” Micro-celebrity extends this idea to networked webs of direct interaction. As *Wired* founding editor Kevin Kelly told me, “The Tom Hanks or whoever in the world are never going to respond to you really. But even a small percentage of them, if they actually are responding, this is extremely powerful. And it doesn't take very much, a percent of your time, to actually respond to fans, where just seeing this celebrity respond to that fan, you're going to say could it be me? So the fact that it could be me is almost as good.” While keeping up these connections is time-consuming, interacting with fans is considered a necessary part of acquiring and maintaining followers.

Chasing the Authentic

Audiences often expect micro-celebrities to be more “authentic” than traditional celebrities, presumably because they are not subject to the processes of the star-making system.¹¹ Advice about successful online interaction aimed at brands and marketers frequently emphasizes authenticity. Tara Hunt's book *The Whuffie Factor* (“whuffie” is a synonym for social capital) explores this idea.¹² Hunt writes, “Do not do anything that will destroy your whuffie account. It's really dead simple, if you ask me. It is the most natural thing in the world. It just requires you to build, keep and maintain *authentic* relationships. Customers and potential customers will tune you out

if you are not authentic.”¹³ Despite this constant call for authenticity, authenticity is not an absolute quality, but a social judgment that is always made in distinction to something else.¹⁴ Because authenticity takes many forms, there is not a universal understanding of what makes something “authentic.” Rather, authenticity is judged over time, in that people’s authenticity is determined by comparing their current actions against their past for consistency. Tristan Walker, the former director of business development for Foursquare and now an entrepreneur-in-residence at Andresson Horowitz, says,

I think it’s very much being unwavering in your understanding of who you are . . . So for me, sure, I’ll curse sometimes in public—but if I didn’t, folks would think that there’s just something wrong with me. Or I might buy these shoes and tweet about them, and they’re kind of ridiculous . . . Tristan is Tristan on Twitter, on Facebook, in real life and elsewhere, and I think to me that’s authenticity.

To Walker, “authenticity” is not so much about revealing deeply personal information as it is about consistency: “Tristan equals Tristan no matter where you go.” He imagines readers judging his authenticity across times and mediums, and coming up with a reliable uniformity of self-presentation. Being “authentic” is a very tenuous definitional frame that can be broken by nearly anything, even something inconsequential. Walker emphasizes a performance of authenticity based on producing and circulating knowledge about himself, which is then measured via informal attributes like “consistency.”

In *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Lionel Trilling distinguishes authenticity from sincerity. He conceptualizes authenticity as a display of the hidden inner life, complete with passions and anguish, while sincerity is the opposite of hypocrisy—honesty without pretense.¹⁵ Both senses are used by technology insiders when explaining what authenticity means to them. But it is often this “display of the hidden inner life,” the act of revealing intimate information, that creates a bond between micro-celebrity practitioners and their audi-

ences. Proto-mommy-blogger Heather Armstrong, who was fired for her blog *Dooce*, has built a career on speaking frankly about postpartum depression and her marital struggles. And Thor Muller, the founder of customer service site Get Satisfaction, says:

I'm not an open book all the time . . . I guess I'm sensitive to unforeseen consequences to the stuff I put out there. But [if] I'm out doing something fun with my kid, I'll tweet that. Or if I do something which I feel stupid about, I'll just tweet that. But not constantly. But then again this is me. I do believe that there's something that [philosopher] Xunwu Chen calls the authenticity in our lives. But personally one of the most important things a person could choose is we're aware, we're driven not by business models but by principles within our hearts.

The well-read Muller chooses not to reveal deeply personal things, but believes strongly in the ideal that “principles within our hearts,” personal integrity, should dictate one’s actions, rather than marketing principles. Both Muller and Walker talk about authenticity in an almost moral sense, adhering to consistency as a driving ethic. This sense of authenticity suggests that it is not about how much one reveals or conceals, but about being measured against an ideal of honesty, in that the information that is revealed has a constancy.

Authenticity is negotiated symbolically; information disclosure is used to determine its presence or absence, but is an incomplete measure at best. Authenticity’s slipperiness is part of what makes it useful: it can satisfy many objectives, and can be interpreted widely. Despite this ambiguity, its importance remains strong, not only among members of the tech scene, but to American culture in general.¹⁶

Aspirational Production

Micro-celebrity also employs a twist on aspirational consumption, a marketing strategy used by luxury brands like Louis Vuitton and

Chanel. These companies, known for expensive products purchased by the global rich, target middle-class consumers with lower-priced lines of sunglasses and perfumes—the “entry-luxury” consumer base.¹⁷ This lower-level consumer is vitally important: these companies make the bulk of their profits selling \$250 sunglasses rather than \$10,000 dresses.¹⁸ In social media, “aspirational producers” portray themselves in a high-status light, whether as a beautiful fashionista, a celebrity with thousands of fans, or a cutting-edge comedian. Adam Jackson’s thousands of tweets about technology reflect his wish to be a wealthy entrepreneur, just as Julia Allison’s glamour shots demonstrate her desire to be the next Carrie Bradshaw. Blogger Rex Sorgatz, himself a skilled self-promoter, called this technique “faux-parazzi” in a *New York Magazine* story on the micro-famous: “taking photos of non-famous people staged to look famous, the gifted microfamer borrows from the paparazzo’s handbook by choreographing photos that look accidental but are actually snapped from the perfect angle and with the perfect company.”¹⁹

Aspirational production employs both the types of attention given to celebrities, and celebrities’ point of view. Although the micro-celebrity may not be able to get an interview with *Vanity Fair*, she might wrangle an interview by another blogger. If there is no literal paparazzo to follow the Web 2.0 personality around, he can stage a fauxparazzi shoot, have his picture taken by a photoblogger at a party, or pose in front of a “step-and-repeat” (a background covered with logos propped at the entrance to exclusive parties). Caroline McCarthy describes the rise of New York City photobloggers, who used the location-based software Dodgeball to find out where technology workers were gathering:

Nick McGlynn started this photo site . . . If a bunch of people Dodgeball[ed] into a bar, sometimes he would show up with his camera and take pictures, that sort of thing . . . He, I think, was extremely formative in this crafting of a geek social scene . . . the girl who runs the blog did like a social media yearbook thing. [She] said that I would be the

head cheerleader, which made me a little bit uncomfortable knowing what I thought of cheerleaders when I actually was in high school.

When someone is photographed by a nightlife blogger, they become eligible for possible (ascribed) micro-celebrity status. Although these pictures are published on blogs and sites like Tumblr rather than *Us Weekly*, there is no significant difference in an era where most people scrutinize Oscar outfits on fashion blogs rather than in printed magazines. While social media perhaps enables authentic material “better” than traditional media, aspirational content shared on social media often appears *less* authentic, perhaps because it demonstrates a clear striving toward mainstream celebrity that is somewhat antithetical to the values of the tech community.

Micro-celebrities enable technology workers to see themselves as the types of people who know celebrities. VIP sections, velvet ropes, bouncers, gift bags, and step-and-repeats—all of which mimic the glamorous Hollywood life—are increasingly visible at San Francisco and New York City tech parties. People in the tech scene are interpellated as the audience, dusting the industry with a sheen of glamour. Emulating mainstream celebrity industry creates value: since celebrities represent the top of the status system, ascribing celebrity to high-status people in subcultures allows members of the scene to draw parallels between the highest-status people and the technology world.²⁰ Clearly, then, people will engage in micro-celebrity practice to gain status—and some, like Adam Jackson, throw themselves into it completely.

Micro-Celebrity in Practice: Adam Jackson

Scott Beale, founder of the site *Laughing Squid*, referred me to Adam Jackson, telling me that “he embraces every aspect of social media to the 10th degree.” Jackson was a self-described young Web 2.0 fanboy from Jacksonville, Florida, who moved to San Francisco

after avidly following the latest technological developments on blogs like *TechCrunch* and *Mashable*.²¹ I interviewed Jackson eight months after his move, at a coffee shop near the Tenderloin that was almost entirely full of young people with Apple laptops. He wore a t-shirt advertising No Starch Press, which publishes geek and technology books, and a Gary Vaynerchuk terrycloth wristband. While I was impressed with his drive and work ethic, Jackson was very sincere about things like web celebrity and number of Twitter followers, which most of my informants openly mocked (albeit taking them seriously in private). Because Jackson had lived in San Francisco for only a short while, he was still becoming acculturated to the technology scene. Beale related to me that Jackson had arrived in San Francisco wearing a head-mounted webcam attached to a laptop carried in a backpack. Called a “Justin.tv rig,” the setup streams live footage to the internet. The site Justin.tv had originated the term “lifestreaming”; by the time Jackson had arrived in San Francisco, however, its founder, Justin Kan, had hung up his camera-equipped baseball hat. “We were like, ‘People don’t do that anymore,’” Beale said. He continued that Jackson wanted to be associated with the “cool kids” such as Kevin Rose.

When I interviewed Jackson in 2008, he was transforming from someone impressed by micro-celebrities to an insider working at a hot company and gradually attaining micro-celebrity status himself. His attitudes toward micro-celebrity, and the way he viewed himself and his audience, exemplify how engagement with micro-celebrity practice can boost one’s status.

Jackson is goal-oriented and a hard worker. At the time of our first interview, he was working full-time at a company called Yoono doing community evangelism; writing a book about Twitter; maintaining a social calendar site, two blogs, and ten Twitter accounts; and finishing up “Adam’s Block,” which he described as “a project that involved a webcam in the city that documented crime and various activities on my street corner [which] became national news.”²² One of Jackson’s main activities was attending tech events;

I frequently saw him out and about at meetups, conferences, and parties. Jackson described his typical schedule: he wakes up at eight, works for two hours, goes to the Yoono office from 10 to 4, attends one or two tech parties, returns home at 11, and works from home until 3 A.M. He saw this as a means to an end:

I really moved here to really bust butt and make a million dollars by the time I'm 30. That's what my goal is. And I'm 22 now. So I think it's possible. At this rate too, I mean I'm working a lot of hours. I don't sleep two nights a week. And I do tons of work. I'm really focused on my goals. And my goals aren't to complete a specific project. My goals are to do something that inspires someone else.

Jackson believes that when he finally comes up with a winning idea, having a large number of Twitter followers and community connections will make it easier for him to find funding. He explained that networking in the San Francisco scene and becoming known to the community are key to his potential success:

I just tell people be there. Be at events. Be at places where those things are good. Be at a café where you know a lot of Web 2.0 people hang out. Hang out in these circles and then you might get lucky if you have a good idea. But you've got to do both, you gotta have a great idea. I'm not just going to link to you just cause you asked me to. So people really need to work hard, really bust their ass and then also put some time into the community, so that the community knows they're there for them.

Besides in-person networking, Jackson was obsessive about Twitter (he told me "It's really changed the way I live. I think that everyone should deserve to have that chance to use Twitter and really use it to change their lives too"). He used Twitter for everything

from weather and traffic reports to finding sponsors for his events. Jackson spent a lot of time perfecting his Twitter technique to keep his audience interested and grow his follower numbers:

There is a reason why I can post 150 times a day and still have 2,000 followers. People seem really interested in what I am saying. I get more replies than most of the tech experts, because my things . . . make you want to stick to them and reply. I happen to have a knack for it I guess. I spent a year and a half changing the way I tweet, on a monthly basis, to find that algorithm of success.

Jackson tweeted on a variety of subjects:

Any album that makes me inspired to blog and write and share is an ace in my book. Very few albums hold that title.

Hello @Starbucks. Thank you for the wonderful Ethiopia Clover Brew that's in stores. Wow.

I took last week off at the gym and just focused on at home cross fit and cardio. I'm back today going to work upper body. Inhaling Creatine

My latest post on @TheAppleBlog is up: "The Future of Apple's Retina Display" <http://bit.ly/bzOMRB>

Jackson saw his Twitter followers and blog readers as an audience, and was very focused on maintaining high follower numbers and producing content to interest and inspire his fans. The persona he presented to the world was carefully crafted to fit his career goals. Many of his actions and choices, like going to tech parties, blogging prolifically, mentoring younger entrepreneurs, inventing hashtags, and sponsoring events, were modeled after people whom he admired, such as gadget blogger Ryan Block, Scott Beale, technology journalist Larry Chiang, microformats pioneer Tantek Çelik, blog-

ger Michael Arrington, and entrepreneur Jason Calacanis. Jackson expressed admiration for their work ethic, community involvement, intelligence, honesty, and initiative, and believed in demonstrating these qualities in his own day-to-day life.

Jackson took micro-celebrity very seriously. He explained the importance of connecting with well-known tech people:

I went on social networks to find those author's profile pages and connect with them that way . . . When I figured out that most of the guys that are writing about tech live in San Francisco or New York, or most people that are podcasters go to this conference every year, I wouldn't have found that out unless I had been looking at their personal stuff. I don't usually follow Engadget to read Ryan Block's stuff. I follow RyanBlock.com and what he's doing. I use his day to day actions to kind of sculpt my life and that's just one example. So, I associate with the people that these guys are friends with and you'll kind of get in the scene. I could be an expert at certain technology, I could be an expert at memory and ram, and write about it every day but I would never ever catch the eye of the important people unless I was, you know, flocking with those that were already in the know.

He saw little point in socializing without networking; he told me that he was disappointed in a recent social media wine-tasting trip to Napa because the attendees were taking it as an opportunity to unwind and relax.

This enthusiasm made him a figure of fun to some of the more seasoned members of the community. One informant dismissed him as someone "who believes the hype." She told me about a group of high-status people who had invented a social media site called PheltUp, "The Social Site for Thought Leaders," which they were promoting on Twitter as if it were real. (This was clearly meant to poke fun at bombastic "social media gurus" who were considered ego-driven braggarts.) One night, people began to tweet about a

fictitious PheltUp party, first saying it was at a popular venue, and then that it had been moved to a secret location. Jackson fell for the joke, and began asking people on Twitter where the party was. My informant clearly thought that Jackson, while not a self-proclaimed “guru,” was at least naïve and gullible. But primarily he was a newbie to the community. He openly expressed feelings about the social media scene that marked him as lower status than those who claimed to dismiss the appeal of micro-celebrity culture: in particular, he kept close watch on the constant hype and noise of the blogosphere, which are purportedly ignored by many long-time Silicon Valley residents who have been through multiple boom-and-bust cycles. He represented a young person striving for micro-celebrity status as a way to become successful in a community that he deeply respected.

Jackson demonstrates how micro-celebrity is a learned status-seeking practice that both reflects the values of the technology scene and is intimately integrated with social media tools. He constructed his own Twitter and blog personas based on traits he admired in high-status people like bloggers, venture capitalists, and entrepreneurs—traits that included access to a network, visibility to an audience, work ethic, and community involvement. Jackson used Twitter to strategically seek and inculcate an audience, altering his content production based on what he thought would “inspire” his followers. This reflects both the status structure of the technology community, which prioritizes personal products that illustrate passion and insight, and how social media is used to communicate these values. Jackson also incorporated networking into his personal goals and presentation, viewing it as essential to success in the scene. Notably, this networking took place both in person and using social media tools, indicating the intertwined nature of “online” and “offline” interaction. Micro-celebrity intrinsically reflects the importance to successful self-promotion of access, attention, visibility, and entrepreneurial persistence—all values deeply influenced by Silicon Valley’s history of venture-backed capitalism.

In early 2010, Jackson made big changes in his life: he moved to a quieter San Francisco neighborhood, stopped sharing as much

personal information online, broke up with his girlfriend, and began working at the mobile startup Brightkite. On his blog, he wrote about Roger Ebert's response to critics: "Resentment is allowing someone to live rent-free in a room in your head."

I call it "micro-celebrity" . . . because I've been called that a few times. I consider it being famous for not really doing anything. I don't think I've done enough to have 3,000+ Twitter Followers or 30K people reading this blog every month but I do and that comes with some responsibility and, yes, some stalkers. Celebrities have it rough and without a support system, it's easy to let things get to you . . . What wisdom [is] inherited in this quote that truly excites me about one day being able to say this out loud and truly believe it and live it.²³

By 2012, Jackson had moved to a small town in New Hampshire to work for TomTom, a mapping company. He keeps chickens, ducks, and pigs, brews his own beer, and gardens. In the years since I first interviewed him, Jackson has experienced many of the negative aspects of micro-celebrity and although he still is wholly committed to technology work, he is no longer naïve about the realities of being a micro-celebrity. He e-mailed,

I miss the instant feedback . . . Call me crazy but there's static and then you tweet, "good morning" and a few dozen people tweet it back to you within seconds. It's addictive and very damaging when it stops happening. . . . It was difficult moving to New Hampshire and losing that almost instantly. The move forced me to make real friends.

Despite the radical shift in his lifestyle, Jackson has grown to love his quiet life in a town of twelve thousand people. He told me, "My chickens are here, I have my river, my best friend and a GF [girlfriend] who is great and now my life doesn't weigh on the positive and negative criticisms of strangers." His story illustrates the tensions

intrinsic in adopting micro-celebrity as a status-seeking practice. Jackson got to meet many of his heroes, enjoyed getting immediate responses on his internet musings, and ended up working for a well-known internet company (although not making his million). But he also dealt with public criticism, mockery, and epithets like “asshole” and “fat” in his Twitter stream. Jackson struggled between wanting to participate in a community he loved and realizing that the personal attacks, which often come hand-in-hand with the micro-celebrity persona, were hurting him emotionally. Eventually he decided that the benefits of public living did not outweigh this psychic damage and he drew back, to the point of physically relocating away from the Bay Area.

Insiders and Outsiders

Jackson's early excitement about the tech scene and its celebrities marked him as an outsider. He attempted to gain insider status by producing content that aspired to the success of his role models, but his very acknowledgment of the importance of micro-celebrity betrayed him as a newcomer. Indeed, the degree to which someone in the tech scene will admit to being impressed by micro-celebrity is a status marker. Many interviewees described moving to San Francisco and being awestruck by “famous” people, only to disclaim quickly that they no longer felt that way. Jackson, who had only been in San Francisco for eight months when I interviewed him, explained:

I always found tech parties as a way for me to gauge how I'm doing on my projects. I read my Twitter posts from last year. I was meeting people for the first time I'd never met before. I MET KEVIN ROSE—all caps. That kind of crap. And I look back to this year, it's so much different. Everyone that I talk to knows who I am . . . It's a totally different landscape. So that's how I judge how I'm doing. In Web 2.0 not everyone that's successful makes money.

Jackson signals the stages of his improved status by stating not only that he has met Kevin Rose, but that he has moved past the stage where this impresses him. He then gets to the point where he himself is recognized as a micro-celebrity. Derek Overby co-founded the *100 Interviews Project*, which taped and posted quick interviews with “some of the biggest names in social media and technology.” I asked him, “What did you learn about the social media community from this project?” He responded:

They are much more approachable than I thought possible. At the end of the day, they’re just average—they may be a little bit smarter, they may be a little bit more connected, but they’re still just human beings. I don’t think a lot of them take their “celebrity” too seriously. You can really just have fun doing what they’re doing.

Overby was moving from outsider to insider, which required familiarity with the tech community’s who’s who. In a scene obsessed with networking, information, and connections, I got funny looks when I failed to recognize podcaster Leo Laporte or blogger Merlin Mann.²⁴ The ability to keep up with the projects, relationships, and internet content of important people was a part of participating in the community’s public life.

Beyond simply correctly identifying micro-celebrities, an insider must transition from viewing them with awe, to feeling neutrally about them, and, for those with the highest status, to seeing them as peers and friends. Marianne Masculino works directly with WordPress founder Matt Mullenweg, who is well regarded and highly followed. She describes returning home to Texas for a meetup, a company-sponsored event where people using WordPress blogging software are invited to hang out with WordPress employees. “People were lining up to take pictures with him and I was like—it’s just Matt!” she said. When she saw her hometown friends reacting to Mullenweg, whom she now viewed as simply a co-worker, Masculino realized that her own status had changed since moving

to San Francisco. Yet her purported apathy, which is typical of insiders, is belied by the fact that this closeness to those of high status in the tech scene is also often signaled publicly through Twitter or Facebook.

The outsiders, people deeply impressed by micro-celebrities, are members of what Jackson described as “Web 2.0 fanboys,” a global community of people who follow the ins and outs of the San Francisco technology industry without participating directly. Some are involved in their local technology communities, while others hope to gain larger recognition for their online projects. Twitter and blogs like *TechCrunch*, *Mashable*, and *Silicon Valley Insider* enable fanboys outside of San Francisco to vicariously follow the latest developments in startups and technologies. Scott Beale describes:

A guy who I met with at dinner in SOMA, I ended up taking him over to some drinkup someone was having. I forget, but it was like, people from Flickr and Digg and all these . . . And he’s like, “Holy crap! You just took me to ground zero.” Like, “I did?” That was just like any party that we do. This guy lives in Hong Kong and he doesn’t see this stuff but he sees these names online. Twitter . . . you see these names repeated and at-replied and, you know, they wanna meet this person. They don’t even know who they are or why they want to. I bet all these people were like, who’s Robert Scoble and that kind of stuff. But they see his name and they’re like, “I should meet him.” And if they meet him, they’re like, “Oh! I met this person.”

The online visibility and name recognition of social media celebrities mark them as people of value or importance, especially to outsiders. And a few of their fans will—like Jackson, Culver, and Rose did—eventually move to San Francisco to pursue their dreams. I had lunch in South Park with a young tech worker who described meeting College Humor co-founder Jakob Lodwick as “one of the

highlights of my year—I'm such a tech fanboy." As Charles Kurzman and his colleagues describe in a discussion of celebrities and status, "When a celebrity deigns to interact with ordinary people, we consider ourselves honored . . . celebrity status may rub off in a small way on the inferior party."²⁵ This is true both for mainstream celebrities and the micro-famous.

It is not illogical to pay attention to status given that some fans parlay their knowledge of the tech scene into success. Megan McCarthy, editor at the *New York Observer* and former *Valleywag* writer, began her tech journalism career by reading the personal websites of people mentioned on technology blogs. Tristan Walker, too, told me how he got into tech:

When I got out here, I realized there are like 22-year-olds making millions of dollars. Like "I have some semblance of competence. I can figure this out" . . . And there were 10 blogs that I said I'm going to read every single day for 90 days and become an expert on this stuff . . . *TechCrunch*, *Mashable*, Scoble's blog, *ReadWriteWeb*, the standard tech stuff. And I literally hunkered down, read them for three months and hustled.

Fitton (Pistachio) said, "I was already kind of oriented around marketing bloggers and startup bloggers right from the get-go, and so I very quickly became aware of Om Malik and Arrington and Tara Hunt and all these people. The 'Alice in Wonderland' sensation of my life has just been them all showing up in my life pretty quickly after I heard about them." It is not uncommon to start in the tech scene this way; Walker and Fitton became insiders at least partially due to their consumption of popular media about the scene. Thor Muller describes this process: "I see this most obviously in people who move here. And, they've been watching it from afar, Twitter or whatever, blogs. They know some of the personalities; they know what it's like to have that kind of influence, to be able to have your laptop sponsored, for instance. That's appealing."

Seeing the names of micro-celebrities repeated on blogs and Twitter reinforces the desirability of visibility and motivates outsiders to seek it for themselves. Clearly micro-celebrity is a widely recognized phenomenon in the tech scene that is intimately integrated with status practices. Regardless of how many people claim to dislike micro-celebrity, the existence of tech celebrities is significant, and their importance is reinforced both in person and online.

Achieved versus Ascribed Micro-Celebrity

The distinction between achieved and ascribed micro-celebrity becomes salient when considering how many people in the tech scene dislike micro-celebrity practitioners. Jeremy Stoppelman, the CEO of Yelp, told me:

The people that spend more time promoting themselves generally spend less time doing. And so, if you actually look at who are the people that are building the great companies for the next 10 to 20 years, it's probably not people that are spending a lot of time on the conference circuit or spending a lot of time with their millions of followers. Zuckerberg isn't Tweeting much. I'm not sure Steve Jobs has ever Tweeted.

Those who are ascribed micro-celebrity are rewarded in this way for their accomplishments, not their practices. Moreover, there is an assumption that those who are aggressively pursuing internet fame for its own sake have nothing to back it up; the practice is dismissively referred to as "famewhoring" or "fameballing," terms that are usually applied to people without any particular skill or accomplishment that might earn their fame. The very highest status is still reserved for those who are well known for their achievements rather than for just their name recognition. For example, Jakob Lodwick, the co-founder of College Humor, posts deeply personal information and peculiar homemade videos online, but his seeming drive to court attention is forgiven because of his significant accomplishments

(and wealth). By contrast, Nick Starr, an out gay man and Apple fanboy who posts constant updates on his sex life and weight loss (even tweeting his liposuction), is considered by many to be desperate for attention. There is a distinction made between “celebrity,” or fame for fame’s sake, versus fame based on high-status business practice. This distaste means that a successful micro-celebrity practitioner must walk an extremely thin line between maintaining high status in the community through achievements and self-promotion, and going overboard to the point where he or she is mocked or ridiculed. Ascribed and achieved are thus intertwined to the point where achievement that is considered sufficient to rightfully inhabit the micro-celebrity subject position is highly variable and context dependent.

Some people see micro-celebrity as a natural consequence of any social group, particularly one made up largely of former nerds. Derek Overby, a social media strategist for the real estate site Roost.com, mused, “I think geeks have always wanted to be at the center of attention . . . It was always the jocks versus the nerds. But mostly I think there’s been a level of respect for being able to sit down and program PHP or whatever, that people are envious they can’t do that. So it’s just been elevated into a celebrity or at least a fondness for what they’ve accomplished.” Hillary Hartley, who works in Gov 2.0, argued that the need for celebrities is cultural, saying, “I don’t think it’s any wonder that a specific niche group, like geeky people, techies, need that same sort of celebrity.” To Overby and Hartley, micro-celebrity is the logical outgrowth of a scene that values technology workers. While every social group has high-status people, the fact that social media, which encourages broadcasting information about yourself, is the focus of the tech scene means that information about tech celebs travels further than, say, the media of well-known automobile engineers.

But for the most part, internet celebrity was met by those I talked to with ambivalence at best and contemptuousness at worst. Glenda Bautista told me that she was struck by the people “fetishizing geekdom” when she moved to the Bay Area in 2003. “Why are

all the nerds like your rock stars?” she asked. Twitter founder Ev Williams’s response to someone “young and capable” attempting to achieve internet fame was “A) that’s probably not going to work, and B) what a waste of time.” When asked about internet celebrity, Annalee Newitz, editor of the *Gawker* science fiction blog *io9*, thought it was “completely repulsive.” Newitz perceives people who become famous for something they’ve done—she referred to popular blogs *I Can Has Cheezburger* and *Cute Overload*—as deserving of their visibility: “You know, sometimes people become popular just because they’re doing something cool. And, you know, that’s not really their fault.” Meanwhile, she perceived people “who pursue [fame] purely just to manipulate the network and manipulate people’s responses” as “deeply scary.”

Just as mainstream celebrity media treats celebrities as characters to be written into often fabricated plotlines, gossip blogs of the day, like *Valleywag*, fit micro-celebrity personas into preexisting narratives and character arcs that reflected both long-standing tropes about celebrity and the meritocratic mythology of the technology scene. *Valleywag* is one example of how celebrity was ascribed to individuals and how the behavior of people within the tech scene was publicly policed by and judged against the values of Silicon Valley.

Ascribing Micro-Celebrity: *Valleywag*

Valleywag, part of the Gawker Media blog company, ran from 2006 to 2008; in November 2008, it was discontinued, and editor Owen Thomas was given a column on the popular media blog *Gawker* (Gawker Media announced in early 2013 that it is reviving the blog).²⁶ *Valleywag* alternated stories about company acquisitions and technological developments with dating gossip, affairs, leaked personal e-mails and videos, and sharp take-downs of people like Leah Culver and Kevin Rose. It drew from tropes like the cocky self-made man or the woman sleeping her way to the top to create characters and narratives from the actions of technology workers. Like

tabloids, to generate its gossip *Valleywag* depended heavily on unsubstantiated rumors, overheard snippets of conversation, and insider connections.²⁷ *Valleywag* reporters monitored content created by micro-celebrities, such as tweets, videos, social network site profiles, blog entries, and digital photos, highlighting items they found controversial or noteworthy. The blog served to police the actions of micro-celebrities: anyone who violated the standards for normative conduct that had developed was liable to become a target. Posts had titles such as “Kevin Rose, Julia Allison to Date” (2007); “Leah and Brad’s Breakup Leaves Gossip Blog Despondent” (2007); “Ariel Waldman, Twitter, and the ‘Whore’ Algorithm” (2008); “Filthy Rich Matt Mullenweg Calls Rival ‘Dirty’” (2008); and “Chris Messina and Tara Hunt: It’s Still a Breakup Even if No One Blogs It” (2008).

Valleywag reporters lived in San Francisco, went to technology parties and events, and were often friends with the people they covered. I interviewed former editors Owen Thomas and Nick Douglas, and two former reporters, Melissa Gira Grant and Megan McCarthy, to learn why *Valleywag* existed, what it tried to cover, and how the staff justified running some of the nastier stories.

Nick Douglas is a slight, redheaded aspiring comedian who was handpicked by *Gawker* publisher Nick Denton to work for *Valleywag*. He dropped out a semester before finishing college to move to San Francisco at the age of twenty-one. “When I came out here for a couple of months, I was just blown away,” Douglas told me when I interviewed him in 2007. “Goggle-eyed. I was a little star-struck by all these people. Because I had been reading blogs for ages . . . so I was meeting a bunch of people who[m] I’d written about and really built into micro-celebrity status in my mind.”

Denton claimed that he chose Douglas precisely for this reason: new to the scene, he would blog about subjects that more seasoned journalists might consider off-limits.²⁸ Like many San Francisco transplants, Douglas went through a period of enculturation that required him to both recognize and (eventually) feign a blasé attitude toward the well-known members of the tech community. He

was an incredible source of information about people, and I often interrogated him at parties, where he was an omnipresent figure, to ask him who someone was, or why a certain company was poorly regarded. While Douglas was always friendly and nice to me—to the point of disingenuousness—many people regarded him with, at best, suspicion, viewing him as a hypocrite who curried favor with the Web 2.0 elite while writing poisonous prose about them.

Valleywag identified important characters in the tech scene and wrote about them again and again. Its writers aimed to find a chink in the armor or a personal foible of someone with micro-celebrity status, particularly someone whose background and experiences made for good storytelling. Nick Denton, the founder of the blog and head of Gawker Media, emphasized the creation and development of characters that readers could recognize. The coverage of these characters was often tailored to fit archetypes, rather than reality. I talked to a former editor of Gawker.com who said the site only wanted “plot point” stories; they would only write about an event if it fit a character’s arc, or plot, which had been predetermined by Gawker. Douglas explained:

Denton definitely cares about narratives. So there are a few things, constant things, he was always telling the editors about at Gawker, like more contexts . . . So we always try to have [larger] metanarratives and archetypes and we try to find people to fit that. There is the archetype of the young software founder and there is a whole usual story line. Founder finds investor, founder turns down buyout offer, founder gets cocky, and then founder ruins his business.

Thus many people were ascribed micro-celebrity because they were wealthy or interesting enough to fit into a particular narrative that *Valleywag* had assigned them. For example, Leah Culver, the founder of Pownce, was an attractive software developer who was characterized by *Valleywag* as a woman “sleeping her way to the top,” and so any story about her dating or sex life was fair game.

Douglas was fired in late 2006 for allegedly covering people whom Denton did not believe were of general interest. In a memo leaked to the *New York Times*, Denton wrote, “Anytime a writer settles in too closely with the subjects he/she’s writing about, there comes the inevitable tradeoffs: favor trading, and an elevated sense of one’s own importance to the field at hand. Both, to some degree, ended up being the case here.”²⁹ Marketer Tara Hunt and technologist Chris Messina, for example, were well-known in San Francisco but virtually unknown outside of the scene; Douglas covered their breakup on *Valleywag*. Former reporter Megan McCarthy, who worked both for Douglas and Denton, explained:

The problem was—I think this was why Nick Douglas got let go—the actual billionaires don’t really want the press . . . They don’t want people to talk about them in stories and stuff that they’re not approving. It becomes easier, then, to write about people that want to be in there . . . if you look at the end of Nick’s tenure, he was writing about a lot of Web 2.0 people, who didn’t matter . . . They have like, a blog. And they’ve never made any money. They’re never going to make any money. They just want to be famous for fame’s sake. And it really wasn’t interesting to people outside of the scene.

McCarthy highlights a problem with *Valleywag*’s coverage. Legitimate entrepreneurs like Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg shunned the spotlight and rarely went to parties. So although *Valleywag* attempted to dig up dirt on Zuckerberg, say, or the Google founders, it was easier to write about people like Julia Allison or Tara Hunt, who broadcasted their life online. McCarthy displayed a certain disdain toward these “Web 2.0” people, whom she viewed as meritless attention seekers. After all, there are limitations to micro-celebrity. While some micro-celebrity practitioners are able to translate their fame into a better job or a book deal, very few achieve the financial success or legitimacy given to mainstream celebrities. For

the most part, micro-celebrities need further legitimization to reap the benefits of real fame.

While typical celebrity gossip columns write about the traditionally feminine concerns of sex, relationships, parenthood, and fashion, very little of those topics could be found in *Valleywag*.³⁰ *Valleywag* had to balance stories of interest to tech workers with those of interest to the larger population; in addition, the majority of readers were not San Francisco insiders, but Web 2.0 fanboys. McCarthy explained that *Valleywag* was looking for stories about “sex or money,” but mostly money: “There’s a hierarchy of stories that we wanted. Yeah, sex and money. Those are the two things. And money was way higher . . . And you always want to know how much . . . A lot of people around here are engineers, they’re not very good with subtleties and cues and the numbers are easy.” The idea of comparable metrics is an important one in Silicon Valley. Sex is difficult to compare, as are looks; as McCarthy explained, “Everyone is like, ‘we’re not really good looking out here’ so you can’t even run pictures of really good looking people, you can’t be interested in that.” But Owen Thomas saw reporting on sex scandals as a way to bring humanity back into these stories:

So, I think, you know, the fact that everyone tries to basically pretend that they’re disembodied brains and that they’re changing the world—I guess that they’re not being taken by sex or money. But really, if you look at every social network around, it’s about getting laid. Mark Zuckerberg was basically building a system so that he could rate Harvard girls. MySpace Tom was actually running an Asian porn site on the side.³¹

Such over-the-top language, generalizations, and strong moral judgments are typical of *Valleywag*’s approach to gossip.

Valleywag also turned its reporters into micro-celebrities. Douglas, Gira, and McCarthy agreed that writing for *Valleywag* had made their personal brand more visible, even as it had encouraged

sycophantic behavior from others. McCarthy scoffed, “But, the people who are like, ‘Oh, my god. I met someone from *Valleywag*,’ I instantly knew that they were kind of naive . . . you could tell they were very, sort of new to the system.” People I encountered who were truly high status were not impressed by *Valleywag* or its reporters; instead, they claimed they did not read *Valleywag* or rolled their eyes when it was mentioned. But because *Valleywag* was a blog rather than a newspaper, and did not adhere to any sort of objective standard of journalism, the writers were encouraged to put themselves into the stories. As a result, their opinions and beliefs became part of the story and the brand. Since most of the *Valleywag* staff were freelance writers, they too engaged in micro-celebrity practices such as frequent twittering, maintaining personal blogs, talking to fans, and so on.

Many of the *Valleywag* staff developed a jaded, even contemptuous attitude toward their subjects, which was reflected in their writing. As former reporter Melissa Gira Grant, a long-term feminist activist, told me, “I became really cynical after writing there for like a month. I understand how that happens to people who work for Gawker. People with all this experience, who know what they’re doing. Once you are inside of it, you should see the stuff that never makes it. You should see all the conversations that never make it to the public. You should see all the things that we pass on, that are like really crazy.” This cynical attitude toward the technology industry helped staffers justify the blog’s existence and their own writing.

My interviewees defended *Valleywag* in several ways, claiming variously that the blog revealed hypocrisy; provided investigative journalism on an industry that celebrated its own existence; covered legitimate celebrities with significant influence; and wrote about people who had opened themselves to scrutiny by posting personal information online. Owen Thomas is surprisingly genial and friendly despite his sharp online presence, and I enjoyed talking to him. A big proponent of exposing hypocrisy, he told me: “The fundamentals of hypocrisy in Silicon Valley [are] that everyone says they want to

change the world. And that's true. They want to change the world from one in which they're poor into one in which they're rich."

The first two stories posted on *Valleywag* exposed a romantic relationship between Google founder Larry Page and executive Marissa Mayer, and revealed that Google CEO Eric Schmidt was in an open marriage with a mistress. This information was widely known in Silicon Valley, but other technology blogs had avoided writing about it in order to maintain access to Google insiders.³² Thomas thought that the rest of the business press was toothless and had failed to report on important stories; unlike them, *Valleywag* was not afraid of losing access to high-status tech people. *Valleywag* often poked holes in press releases and puff pieces. Thomas, for example, loathed Elon Musk, the lauded founder of Tesla Motors. He told me Musk had blatantly lied about his last two companies and that in both instances he had been fired by venture capitalists before the companies were sold. Thomas viewed Musk as an egregious liar with a history of founding companies and running them into the ground, and he saw *Valleywag*'s reporting as a check on Musk's hubris.³³ He explained that it was *Valleywag*'s responsibility to point out when high-status individuals were being outright hypocritical: "Does it matter that Digg was almost out of money and they managed to raise \$20 million in the very last minute after the sale [to] Google fell through? I mean in the end, I guess not, because they have the money, you know, and it will last them some years. But, is it important to know that . . . their CEO was looking people in the eye and saying everything's fine and we've got plenty of money and, we're not going to sell the company, even as they're trying to sell? I think you have to know that in order to judge people's character."

Another justification for *Valleywag*'s approach was that it critiqued people who were already living public lives. As Kara Swisher told me, "It's just gossip." She pointed out that the New York media scene was covered in-depth by the *New York Post* and *Page Six*. She compared *Valleywag* to *Us Weekly*. "None of that stuff is true about those celebrities. And [people] go, 'Well, they don't know. They sign up for that.' I'm like, 'So do you, kind of, by appearing on all of

those magazine covers. Aren't you fabulous? Maybe you need to be taken down.'" Because micro-celebrities like Kevin Rose and Leah Culver courted publicity in certain ways, she argued, they deserved the gossip as well. Owen Thomas similarly saw the people he covered as legitimately famous and so deserving of as much critical press as traditional celebrities received. In his view, people who lived life in public were fair game in a world saturated with celebrity culture:

This whole argument [is] that these people haven't chosen to live a life of public exposure, that they're just geeks. This is what I hear over and over again and it's kind of tiresome. Of course they're trying to parlay their personality, their intellect, their presence as a thought leader in the industry, into a bigger career to get more success for their business. I mean, they're trying to be . . . public. The thing is they've got this excuse, "Oh! I'm just a geek. I just write code and, therefore, I am somehow off-limits." When you dig into it with just a teaspoon, it falls apart as an artifice.

The attention economy, which treats visibility as status, makes it important for anyone who hopes to succeed in the technology industry to live at least somewhat in the public eye. But by doing this, they open themselves to the type of scrutiny that only entertainment celebrities have traditionally been subject to. Further, while mainstream celebrities are expected to protect their privacy, micro-celebrities cannot or they'll lose this attention. Melissa Gira Grant explained:

That's really the thing: The more the big deal, I think, that people position themselves as, the more fun it is to watch them fall. I feel like inside people really ask for it themselves. It's a horrible thing to say, but if you do want to be a big player or a scenester, this is part of what comes with that . . . [You] wrap your own personal sense of success up in how much people are talking about you, and you can't control that.

The lack of privacy and ongoing criticism that mainstream celebrities face trickles down to micro-celebrities. While Thomas, and indeed all the writers, seemed sincere in their belief that they were taking down hypocrisy, *Valleywag*'s predilection for reporting on things that have nothing to do with company valuations, shareholders, or anything similar—breakups and the like—makes it difficult to justify the blog's existence from this perspective.

For the most part, *Valleywag* was vilified among people in the tech community. Michael Arrington posted a story on *TechCrunch*, "When will we have our first Valleywag suicide?" and wrote:

Celebrities have had to live with this kind of nonsense for decades, which explains why some of them pull out of society entirely and become completely anti-social. Perhaps, some argue, they bring it on themselves by seeking fame. But for people in Silicon Valley, who are not celebrities and who have no desire other than to build a great startup, a post on *Valleywag* comes as a huge shock. Seeing [their] marriage woes, DUI or employment termination up on a popular public website (permanently indexed by search engines) is simply more than they can handle. They have not had the ramp up time to build resistance to the attacks.³⁴

More mainstream blogs refused to link to *Valleywag* stories, and Nick Douglas was banned from several events, including Arrington's *TechCrunch* parties. (As mentioned earlier, because I often skulked in the corner at parties writing in a notebook, I was mistaken for a *Valleywag* reporter several times, not always in a friendly way.) While many people claimed that they never read it, it was clear by the way stories were discussed and passed around that it had a significant effect on the community.³⁵ This manifested itself in extreme ambivalence; some hated *Valleywag*, while others enjoyed being covered by it, or even courted coverage. (I was delighted when my SXSW panel discussion on micro-celebrity warranted a paragraph on *Valleywag*.)

Grant told me that it was difficult to get people to submit gossip to *Valleywag* because tech workers didn't want to be disloyal. The Valley is so dependent on networking and flexible labor, and on building and maintaining the relationships that support these practices, that burning bridges is unthinkable. Grant said: "It's harder to get that kind of . . . editorial assistance, sniping, backroom gossip that Gawker gets, because in the Valley, even the lowliest worker thinks that someday they might be a founder . . . But as much as we value outspokenness and transparency, there's a lot more self-censorship and a lot more self-restraint going on here."

Valleywag helped to create an audience that sees through the eyes of the self-as-entrepreneur. The view that every tech worker is a potential Mark Zuckerberg propels the rest of the industry, with its long hours, hard work, no unions, no overtime, and no job security. The potential for great wealth makes such sacrifices seem like a reasonable tradeoff, not exploitation. *Valleywag's* endless promotion of the entrepreneurial narrative feeds this perception. As a result, the negative consequences of participating in social media are usually blamed on naïveté and ignorance. The thought is that people who get fired for something they put online, known as being "dooced" after *Dooce* blogger Heather Armstrong, are responsible; they should have known better. Similarly, cruel gossip is partially justified by public status, although almost everyone puts some sort of content online.

Valleywag magnified the "celebrity" part of micro-celebrity practice. Highly read gossip columns covering the lives, loves, outfits, and scandals of tech industry players would inflate the profiles of the people it covered; *Gawker*, for instance, was almost wholly responsible for Julia Allison's rise to fame, and Allison was well aware of this. It, like *Valleywag*, mapped the values of celebrity culture onto the technology scene by publicizing gossip and rumors. *Valleywag* also demonstrated the process by which people were transformed into characters, as it ascribed public personas to regular people and created interconnected, well-worn plots around them. People who had been ascribed micro-celebrity by *Valleywag* were also taken up and

written about by other news sources, further inflating their visibility. Kevin Rose was on the cover of *Inc* and *BusinessWeek*; Leah Culver made the cover of *Technology Review*; and Julia Allison was on the cover of *Wired*, while blogs like *Get Off My Internets* analyzed the tweets and personal blogs of many of the *Valleywag* players.

Most importantly, *Valleywag* policed acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Micro-celebrities were held to standards created and maintained by the editors and reporters, standards that reflected the larger values of Silicon Valley culture. These standards were fairly conservative and included monogamy, or at least not promiscuity; a lack of visible “famewhoring”; spending money wisely rather than buying sports cars, mansions, or elaborate vacations; negligible political leanings; and, above all, no hypocrisy (a value that harkens back to the theme of authenticity as consistency). These mores were applied unevenly, particularly in regard to gender; while Thomas painted Leah Culver as promiscuous, he reported on but rarely judged Kevin Rose for his steady flow of attractive girlfriends. *Valleywag* perpetuated the mythology of Silicon Valley, which claims that financial success goes hand-in-hand with intelligence and hard work, and it enforced the anti-conspicuous ethos of consumption that prioritized gadgets and travel over designer clothes or fancy cars. It was okay if people were visible or extremely rich, as long as this was backed up by entrepreneurship, intelligence, hard work, and creativity. Excessive displays of wealth or publicly courting attention undermined the meritocratic myth of Silicon Valley by suggesting that success was not necessarily based on intrinsic personal characteristics.

Valleywag’s aggressively negative judgments on those who supposedly violated these unwritten rules served as a reminder of shared social norms. The “Cyprus 20,” a group of young New York City tech workers and founders who made a video of themselves lip-synching to “Don’t Stop Believing” while on vacation in Cyprus, was called out on *Valleywag* for epitomizing boom-time excess while many companies were conducting highly publicized layoffs. Grant explained:

So they did a lipdub, a private lipdub, to “Don’t Stop Believing.” And the girls were all in matching bikinis, and the guys were all drinking beer. And they were like in bed together and in the swimming pool frolicking around. At this really expensive house, and it was just when all of these major layoffs had been announced and the stock market was tanking, and it had been leaked from their private Blip account. And Gawker got a copy of it, and it was on *Valleywag* . . . I think this was a great video to be like, that this is that ridiculous level of excess and out-to-lunch mentality. It’s really just kids wanting to have a good time, to celebrate the fact that they have a stupid amount of money they don’t even know what to do with. But it felt so heartless, considering the state of the economy. I think Sequoia Capital just had a meeting where they said “The fun is over.” So, it was really bad timing. It was really, really bad timing.

And then the facetiousness on Owen’s part—he knows that people are doing this all the time. He knows there are way more decadent things going on every night of the week, but it seemed that these people were just a good target because of the hubris of making it—and it was a lipdub, and it was perfectly done. It was like one long shot. Nobody screwed up. It was so perfect.

This video was presumably made for personal use, posted on a private social media account, and leaked to *Valleywag*; it was not public (though it is now easily accessible on YouTube). None of the Cyprus 20 was responsible for layoffs, and the lifestyle of wealth and leisure that is shown in the video motivates many young entrepreneurs. *Valleywag* (and *TechCrunch*, which picked up the story), claimed that the participants were “ostentatious” and “tasteless,” but that seems a weak justification for repeated public castigation.

Indeed, unlike more traditional celebrities, the people covered in *Valleywag* were mostly technology workers without managers,

publicists, agents, or experience dealing with the press. Many found the coverage to be difficult at times, and some found it emotionally devastating. The *Valleywag* editors justified using celebrity gossip, paparazzi, and tabloids to analyze the technology scene by claiming that doing so restrained Silicon Valley hypocrisy. But while it was true that some of the people involved were appearing on the covers of *Wired* and *BusinessWeek* and courting attention, others were not. Ultimately, the idea of using the tools of celebrity culture to analyze the lives of regular people is problematic because the protections available to mainstream celebrities do not exist for micro-celebrities. Further, micro-celebrities depend on attention and visibility to maintain their elevated status, but because most young people put content online, it opens the door for such scrutiny to be applied to almost anyone. And this scrutiny can be very harsh.

Micro-Celebrity as Experience

She isn't mentally stable enough to handle all the bullshit
that comes along with a full-disclosure internet presence.

—Commenter on *Oh No They Didn't* gossip blog,
talking about Lindsay Lohan

While there has been a great deal of analysis of celebrity culture from the perspective of fans and celebrity watchers, there has been little attention to how fame is experienced by celebrities, presumably because celebrities are difficult to access. Those celebrities who speak openly about their negative experiences with fame are considered ungrateful if they complain about the consequences of something they presumably wanted to achieve. Here I will describe the experience of micro-celebrity, what it is like for its practitioners, and its positive and negative effects. While we cannot know if this perspective can be extrapolated to the views of mainstream celebrities, we can presume that at least some of these experiences may apply to many other people who live their lives in public.

Most of the micro-celebrity aspirants I interviewed were candid about the strategic nature of their self-promotion. Although some micro-celebrities will claim that they are sharing information for some sort of nebulous social good, marketer and author Tara Hunt questions those people who claim to be “altruistic”:

I mean, if I just wanted to record the moments of my life, I would write a private diary or keep my twitter private or keep my blog totally private . . . you start to write these things because you want people to read them. And why do you want people to read them? Well, maybe sometimes you want your mom to read them and maybe sometimes you want your friends that you’ve been out of touch with to read this stuff, but . . . mostly you want people to read them because you want people to know who you are and get discovered.

Hunt characterizes those using the tools of micro-celebrity as “external validation junkies” who want attention from a larger audience than just friends and family. This echoes the idea of the social web as an exhibitionist culture where personal blogging and self-portraits encourage an inward focus.³⁶ The view of oneself as public and of readers as an audience or a fan base is calculated and deliberate. Leah Culver agrees: “I could disappear, I could just quit. Someone else could take my place. So anytime you can quit. That’s a nice thing about Internet stuff, though, too, right? You don’t have to worry about the paparazzi stalking you.” Culver’s first experience with internet fame was selling advertisements to be laser-etched on the casing of her laptop for fifty dollars a square inch. She successfully paid for the laptop, the final product made the front page of Digg, and the project became an example of cheap, effective, viral advertising. After that experience, Culver decided that she could handle a greater level of attention, and went on to found her own website, Pownce.

While Culver distinguishes ephemeral internet fame from the permanence of mainstream fame, many informants found micro-celebrity to be a difficult experience. Several micro-celebrities

described the hard time they had trusting people and how they wondered whether others were mostly concerned with their public persona. Kevin Rose told me, “I don’t know how to handle new people [who] approach me that want to become friends . . . It’s a really different experience than it was a few years ago, to go to a party and meet people. Because you have to figure out what their intentions are.” Tara Hunt said, “Being a public figure is different . . . I have to always sort of be a little bit more careful about who I date and how I date, and all that sort of stuff.”

Micro-celebrity requires the internet famous to police their image and to be watchful of what appears in the public eye, especially with gossip blog minions combing through user-created content. The persistence and searchability of social content like blog entries, photographs, and tweets means that relationships and personas are augmented by a rich context of digital information. For example, Glenda Bautista describes her careful monitoring of digital photography: “I dated someone who’s pretty notorious in the community and one day, you know, [his] hand is positioned around the waist, not over the shoulder and I’m like, ‘Oh God, that’s going to be taken out of context,’ you know what I mean? And then pretty soon everybody has commentary on it.” Bautista was angry that people’s perceptions of her were shaped by local blogs. She described using various tactics to regain control over her image: blogging under an alternate identity, reining in her tendency to comment on personal matters, and shoring up her personal brand. She said, frustrated, “Everyone’s perceptions of you are built upon the way in which people have documented you that you really honestly have no control over.” Author and business writer Sarah Lacy told me, “I mean everyone, everyone in the scene has had to give up their privacy . . . Even just people covering this scene . . . And so that makes you pull back.” While the internet appears to give people control over their self-presentation, this perception is countered by the very real loss of control that happens virtually instantly once information has been released into the ether.³⁷ While the people I interviewed often talked about this in terms of privacy, what they were really

reacting to was the loss of control over their own persona and over their ability to limit the flow of information.

While some of these complaints may serve to enforce the micro-celebrity's own sense of status, it is true that practitioners often quit after a short period due to the scrutiny of public living. Like Adam Jackson, Tara Hunt, whose very public breakup was covered by *Valleywag* and *San Francisco* magazine (sample quote: "In a world not known for its epic romances, Chris and Tara used to be Web 2.0's version of Brangelina"), has pulled back from extreme public disclosure, as has Culver, who sold her microblogging startup and retreated into her true passion, software development.³⁸

Many people I talked to spoke of the downsides to micro-celebrity life; namely, that there was constant "drama." Living a public life can be stressful and comes with a lot of gossip and intrigue, partly due to the scrutiny of blogs like *Valleywag*. Lacy explained: "The part that's not fun is . . . the exploitive part . . . people know that if they write certain things about me it'll drive a certain amount of traffic so people will write nasty things." Bautista said, "No one really knew what to do until they had that one instance where too much is like, OK, crossed the line. And you can't tell the difference between the way that the media has spun something versus when what you really honestly know to be true." Micro-celebrities often found that both their online and offline actions were publicized and discussed via social media, creating a fishbowl-like effect that normalized personal scrutiny. The experiences of media personality Julia Allison epitomize this type of scrutiny and illustrate the negative effects it can have on micro-celebrity practitioners.

Julia Allison

No one knows the object better than the fan.

—Constance Penley, *NASA/Trek*

In 2005, Jonathan Gray coined the term "anti-fan" to describe "those who strongly dislike a given text or genre, consider it inane,

stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel.”³⁹ Instead of avoiding what they dislike, sometimes anti-fans fervently consume the media they “love to hate,” in order to discuss it with other like-minded anti-fans.⁴⁰ That is certainly the case with a group of anti-fans who are devoted to hating internet celebrity Julia Allison.

Allison is a writer-turned-reality star whose beat is celebrity and relationships. During the mid to late 2000s, she took advantage of the new crop of New York media blogs like *Gawker* and the rise of the New York City technorati to launch herself to prominence. Allison wrote a relationship column, first for the free *Metro* weekly, then for *Time Out New York*; she appeared as a “talking head” for *Star* magazine on various cable news shows; and she wrote intimately about her dalliances with semi-famous men, her love for pretty dresses, and her fluffy white dog. With three of her attractive friends, she founded a “lifecasting” startup called Non-Society that consisted primarily of each woman blogging about her life; the same women starred on a video show called *TMI Weekly*. She wrote a syndicated column about social media for the *Chicago Tribune* that was discontinued after a year. And throughout all of this, she used Tumblr, Twitter, and Facebook to post dozens of self-portraits, muse about what she considered the important things in life, and discuss dates, parties, and Burning Man.

Allison would seem to be a fairly inconsequential figure. The content she writes is not considered very good, but neither is the content of many famous people. She is shameless at courting the press, but she isn’t bad at it; again, in her heyday, she made the cover of *Wired* magazine, and her Bravo reality show *Miss Advised* aired in 2012. Certainly, famous-for-being-famous celebrities like Heidi Montag and Spencer Pratt, who have appeared on a series of MTV reality shows and written a book called *How to Be Famous*, are just as brazen. While evidence of Allison’s indiscretions, dalliances, and falsehoods abound on the internet, they tend to be fairly lightweight compared to famous celebrity scandals like those of Britney Spears or Charlie Sheen. Moreover, Allison does not get an enormous amount of attention compared to other internet celebrities; she has

115,000 Twitter followers, compared to Kevin Rose's 1.3 million and Ev Williams's 1.5 million, and far fewer mentions on *Gawker* or other blogs than she used to.⁴¹ In fact, by far the outlet giving her the most attention is a "hater blog" called *Reblogging Donk*. What is it about Julia that invites such hatred?

Reblogging Donk (RBD), founded as *Reblogging Julia Allison* in January 2009, has three primary bloggers and a lively community that responds almost daily to every piece of content Julia posts.⁴² It refers to her as "Donkey," and describes her as an "annoying piece of internet trash" and "another dumb trashy gold digger with a Tumblr."⁴³ In addition to RBD, *Radar* magazine named Allison the third "most hated person on the Internet," and *Gawker* wrote a vitriolic "Field Guide to Julia Allison" that poked fun at her popularity and sex life. The hatred shown toward Allison seems so out of proportion to her actual activities that *Gawker*, which had spearheaded much of her rise and fall, eventually wrote a series of articles questioning the motives of the individuals behind the *Reblogging* site.⁴⁴ Maureen Henderson, after profiling Allison for *Forbes*, found the many negative comments on her story similarly inexplicable: "The idea that someone folks are calling a 'fraud' and an 'awful person' still merits a website focused on bashing her even as readers reiterate that she lacks substance or career success is just so damn weird in a Web 2.0 way."⁴⁵

The vitriol for Allison extends to virtually everything she comes into contact with. My dissertation, for example, included a case study of Allison that included interview quotes. When I proudly made the dissertation available online, *Reblogging Donk* found it and posted the section about Allison. The RBD community wrote more than three hundred comments about my stupidity, poor writing, and lack of doctoral qualifications. The community was incensed by the idea that I had believed Allison's "lies" and had failed to uncover the "truth" about her. Only a very stupid person would be taken in by Allison, commenters wrote, and such a person was undeserving of a higher degree.⁴⁶

Reblogging Donk is run by three pseudonymous individuals who go by "Juliaspublicist," "Jacy Russiangirl," and "Professor Camping."

The three closely guard their pseudonyms and do not give out personal information.⁴⁷ Jacy agreed to be interviewed via e-mail, and wrote lengthy and articulate responses to my queries. She explained, “Our only objective is to point and laugh, like any other audience members of a compelling reality show.” To criticize Allison, the rebloggers conduct close readings of the texts she produces. They screenshot tweets, chat logs, and Facebook pages. They pull up Google caches of old blog posts and deleted items. They track down the real names of her boyfriends and post pictures of them on the blog. *Re-blogging Donk* features not only a lengthy glossary of Allison-related terms, but also an elaborate timeline that chronicles her life over the last few years that is downloadable in PDF format and titled “The Internet Never Forgets.”

The primary driver of the anti-fans is a moral and ethical anger against Allison. Their objections seem similar to those found by Gray in his investigation of anti-fans of the *Apprentice* contestant Omerosa—anti-fans who, in his view, sported a “veneer of moral objection.”⁴⁸ Omerosa’s haters disliked the attention that she got, which they saw as unfairly rewarding talentless, unethical, and immoral behavior. Similarly, the rebloggers’ gripes against Allison are summarized by Jacy:

You see, everyone, she has simply been completely misunderstood! All that psychotic behavior towards exes and their new partners, all the throwing of her friends under the bus to deflect suspicion of criminal harassment, all the years she’s spent violating people’s privacy, including close family members, all the times she’s tried to secretly leak information about her personal life to blogs and websites she claims to despise, all the lying, the boasting, the lunacy—it’s all been just a giant misunderstanding!⁴⁹

The rebloggers seem to feel that they are “righting a wrong” or “bringing justice to the world” by revealing what they perceive as a series of lies and unethical behavior by Allison.⁵⁰ Jacy wrote, “It’s

hard to tell you what the truth is about JA [Julia Allison], because she is so inherently dishonest with her friends, public and with herself.” Juliaspublicist and Jacy, too, both claimed that Julia had lied to me in our interview when she told me that she had lost sponsorships after potential clients found *RBD*. Jacy maintained that this was impossible: Allison lost sponsorships with Sony and other clients due to her own actions, and Bravo had cast her for *Miss Advised* at least partially due to the drama around her online fan base, so “you could argue we helped her get the biggest career opportunity of her life.” (This response, however, does not answer Allison’s point that *RBD* prevented her from getting other sponsorships.)

A thorough perusal of the comments reveals that the rebloggers define themselves in opposition to Allison. Allison is stupid; they are intelligent. She produces bad content; they produce good content. She is conceited; they are modest. She is insane; they are rational. (Jacy described the *RBD* commenters as “attractive professionals with successful careers and love in their lives.”) I was surprised by the vehement objections to my usage of the term “high status markers” to describe Allison’s invitations to New York Fashion Week and her (former) friendship with Randi Zuckerberg. It seemed obvious to me that these are indicators of importance to a certain set of people; not everyone can attend a New York Fashion Week show, even a minor one, and Allison has covered this event for ten seasons. Many of the rebloggers, however, claimed that they would never value being on television and being friends with famous people. Instead, they prioritized their friends and family. By suggesting that Allison had high-status accomplishments, I had unknowingly gone against a shared belief system whereby Allison’s values were out of whack, and those of the *RBD* bloggers and followers were moral and right.

In her study of *Twilight* anti-fans, Jacqueline M. Pinkowitz remarks that the anti-fans are quick to dismiss their interest. They are not *really* interested in *Twilight*; their hobby does not take much time, and they do not really care. But as Pinkowitz points out, anti-fans “devote the same amount of time and energy to being anti-fans

as fans do to being fans.”⁵¹ Jacy claimed that she spent “no more than an hour a week, if that” on the site. The commenters maintained that posting about Allison does not mean that they are actually interested or invested in her. But clearly despite all their disavowals, they are as interested in Allison as a text, just as fans would be. The difference is that their engagement is expressed through hatred and contempt rather than admiration or enjoyment.

When I interviewed Allison in April 2010, she gave me more time than any other informant, and we spent three hours discussing her experiences as a micro-celebrity (*RBD* commenters claimed that this showed Allison was desperate to make a good impression). Dressed in a velour sweatsuit and minimal makeup, Allison was extraordinarily open and candid, and I was surprised to find her intelligent and interesting. She told me this is common when she meets someone for the first time, joking that people say, “‘You’re not a total ditzzy retard-slash-asshole.’ Um, Yay?” When I asked Allison how she deals with her detractors, she responded, “Hysterical tears, usually. It’s not been good for me. And one of my girlfriends who just got her degree . . . said that I reminded her of an abused woman.” She elaborated that the negative attention has “crush[ed] me a little bit” and is “beating me down.” She said, “It’s not even that many people, it’s just the relentless nature, and the sense that you’re constantly judged . . . It can be literally debilitating, and it’s very depressing.” Allison told me that she has been dealing with online “haters” since she launched her first website in college, and has never really come to terms with the negative consequences of public living.

Allison gave me a list of protective techniques she said she employs to deal with negative feedback. These included turning off Google Alerts (“the first thing I did”), blocking all “negative people” on Tumblr and Twitter, and deliberately avoiding what is written about her online (“I told my friends, if you see something, don’t tell me about it, don’t mention it, don’t send me a link, do not read it . . . I’ve asked friends and family, don’t read the negative press. I’ve asked them not to Google”). Allison summarized: “It doesn’t

always work—but that’s the only way I’ve managed to salvage some semblance of sanity—but even then, people get through with the negative e-mails, it just depends on how I’m feeling at any given time.” Allison told me that she had just returned from Los Angeles where she had lunched with *American Pie* actress Shannon Elizabeth, who professed to using identical techniques to manage her own bad publicity.

If Allison has actual fans, they are by no means as active or engaged as the haters. Her tweets are typically answered by *RBD* commenters rather than admirers. She infrequently blogs these days, but when she does, there are only a few comments on each page. Whitney Phillips is an academic who studies trolls. She coined the term “pageview principle” to describe the phenomenon where negative comments are more common than positive comments online, and told me, “People are more likely to take the time to respond if they feel REALLY strongly, either positive or negative. It just so happens that online, negative emotions are often easier to generate.”⁵² The proprietors of *RBD* claim that Julia has e-mailed them “anonymous” tips about her dating life and other personal information, while simultaneously trying to have the hater sites shut down. If this is true, Allison is engaging with her community (of anti-fans) to increase traffic and interest even as she publicly decries the hate sites. Phillips cites several people who create outrageous online claims and personalities precisely to get attention: to these personas, even negative attention is better than no attention at all. This approach would be similar to the tactics employed by Paris Hilton, who staged a variety of absurd, over-the-top, and tasteless events in order to get press coverage.⁵³

Social media celebrities are supposed to be authentic and responsive; popular rhetoric paints internet fame as “democratic” in that everyday people can become famous by virtue of their unique skills and talents.⁵⁴ Allison’s persona does not fit this mold. She courts the attention of the traditionally famous; she is not modest; and she emphasizes her appearance. An article on the website of social media consultant Brian Solis listed the ways that Allison is

doing micro-celebrity “wrong.” She gave up her core competency of writing, she does not chat with her fans, and she has not built a strong community around her. In other words, Allison violates the norms of how a micro-celebrity is supposed to act, which are remarkably similar to the guidelines of self-branding that I discuss in Chapter 4. That is, even our newest social media tools arrive with signs of wear, full of social norms that can seem baffling (think of the pressure that Web 2.0 users feel to make a “useful” blog or “interesting” Twitter feed) until we trace them back to their point of origin, the Northern California technology scene.

Allison seems to crave the trappings of traditional celebrity like fashion shows, celebrity friends, and television appearances, but her use of the internet makes it difficult to achieve them because the norms of each type of celebrity are different. For instance, while starlets can get away with a certain degree of artifice, Allison feels that she cannot: “I’m honest, I can’t get away with anything—I can’t get away with anything! . . . If I get—like, I have [hair] extensions, I have to say it. Otherwise I get called out for it. . . . Every negative point I have, I have to be honest about. And it’s brutal . . . on the other hand, ostensibly I’m doing what I love for a living.” She straddles the exhibitionist world of the internet, which values transparency and openness, and the traditional media business, which is far more guarded. She pointed out to me in our interview that she cannot tweet about industry meetings or sponsorship opportunities without violating professional agreements, but is then criticized online for purportedly fabricating job opportunities. Because as a micro-celebrity Allison is supposed to be open, she is repeatedly attacked on *RBD* for withholding information while she struggles to gain a foothold in the mainstream media world. We often think of the traditional media business as wildly open, but in reality it is governed by contracts, publicists who carefully regulate access to their clients, and collectively generated artifice, such as the unspoken agreements within the entertainment industry not to “out” gay celebrities. Allison’s inability to navigate these two sets of norms illuminates both how information is regulated within mainstream

celebrity culture and how deep the ideal of “transparency” in Web 2.0 culture runs. She reveals far more personal information than many mainstream celebrities, but this does not satisfy her detractors; instead it opens her up for detailed scrutiny and criticism.

Jacy maintains that the dislike of Allison is a reaction to the saturation of celebrity culture and the attention economy of social media:

I believe the reaction is a cultural backlash of some sort. We have been inundated with these types of “fame junkies” for what, a decade now? I think people are tired of it. This generation gets their entertainment online, and JA has courted attention on the Internet, solicited fans and followers, desperately tried to get people to pay attention to her antics, tried for years to get a reality show so she could achieve broader fame. She’s been successful in getting online fame, to be sure. But it isn’t the kind of fame she wanted.

Similarly, Wendy Atterberry wrote on the popular women’s blog *The Frisky*, “Julia represents so much of what is icky about blogging and social networking. She is shamelessly narcissistic and vain, having posted thousands of photos of herself over the years and staging incredible, over-the-top ‘photo shoots’ simply to post on her blog . . . She’s utterly obnoxious.” Perhaps Allison represents the apotheosis of self-focused participatory content, but she has faced intense hatred for not “deserving” her fame. Owen Thomas described how he sees Allison:

Julia is arguing the Julia Allison point. She is arguing the case for herself. And she doesn’t have to actually believe it. She is arguing that she is a good editor, which she’s not. She is arguing that she is a successful businesswoman, which she’s not. She’s arguing that she’s a caring individual, which she’s not. But, you know, it doesn’t matter that all these things aren’t true and that she may not actually believe them herself because she can argue the point. And that’s all

that matters to her—arguing the point . . . And then you start defending the image rather than the authentic self. And . . . that is especially important when there is no authentic self.

Thomas is deeply critical of Julia's lack of authenticity and suggests that her online image is all artifice. To Thomas, and much of the tech sector, fame is something a person is just supposed to have, rather than something to which people should directly aspire.

Whether or not Allison is a good person is beside the point, as is whether her statements to me were "truthful" or not. If she were a movie star, she would not be expected to reveal an authentic self to her public, and she would have layers of handlers hiding her faults and protecting her artifice from the public. Although Allison receives the same type of online scrutiny as a "real" celebrity, she lacks the protections available to an actress or model. She does not have a bodyguard, a press agent, or a stylist. She summarized: "I can't react like celebrities do—but I have the same problems." As more and more people put more and more of their lives online, we might ask whether it is moral and appropriate to besiege them with negative attention because they do not fit our mold of how a celebrity should look or act.

Given the negative consequences, it is worth asking why people seek micro-celebrity. I gave a talk on the subject at SXSW 2010. My first question was from a young girl wearing punk clothes with a shaved head, her stubble dyed purple. She asked, "Why do people do this if they're not making money?" For her, becoming internet famous was a means to an end: a way to achieve traditional celebrity (and, presumably, wealth). But many of my informants found that their notoriety did not translate into more money; there was no equivalence between micro-celebrity status and income. For others, micro-celebrity was a way to advance their careers. The cultural logic of celebrity has infiltrated so many occupations that blatant self-promotion is now stock in trade not only for up-and-coming rap

stars and actresses, but also for software developers, journalists, and academics. Creating a public presence has become a required part of securing and maintaining a job. Sarah Lacy described this as work: “When people are buying your book and the base of fans is making you a brand, I think there’s your responsibility to give back to that . . . it’s very draining, but that’s kind of the fun part of it.” Similarly, some social media firms will not hire people without blogs or Facebook profiles, which become signs of cultural participation.

But “micro-celebrity” and “high status” do not necessarily go hand in hand. Although Julia Allison and Nick Starr are both well-known in their respective communities, neither is well-regarded. Perhaps this is because they are both up-front about their desire for attention. In the San Francisco tech community, where people often claimed that status was based on an accomplishment like building a successful company or inventing a useful technology, “famewhoring” was considered distasteful and gauche. But in other communities, like the teen-targeted entertainment site Buzznet, the relentless self-promotion of self-styled models like Audrey Kitching and Raquel Reed was a normal and acceptable practice. The boundaries of micro-celebrity practice are very much contextualized by the scene that the person originates from, and can easily backfire. Moreover, there are plenty of high-status individuals, such as Mark Zuckerberg or Chris Messina, who no longer seek the spotlight. It is also worth keeping in mind that even if Allison is poorly regarded among technologists, she does reap the benefits of high status in other communities: she attends New York Fashion Week, wears designer clothes, and was hired by Sony to serve as a web spokesperson for the brand due to her network and influence.

Several informants described the changes that micro-celebrity brought about in people. An ex-girlfriend of an internet entrepreneur spoke wonderingly of his newfound predilection for expensive clothes and trendy restaurants, saying that she could no longer recognize in him the person she dated. Melissa Gira Grant described such men as “bubble hotties”: entrepreneurs who had gotten rich without developing the necessary social skills to handle it. Indeed,

the attention and admiration that many micro-celebrities receive can be both validating and transformative. In *Fame: The Psychology of Stardom*, Andrew Evans and Glenn Wilson describe the difficulties of adjusting to newfound fame and how frequent positive feedback can lead to self-absorption, narcissism, and grandiosity, as well as a resentment of public scrutiny.⁵⁵ While micro-celebrity exists on a much smaller scale than, say, film stardom, it is possible that the increased attention has similar effects. But mainstream celebrities have access to systems of attention brokerage, such as bodyguards, drivers, PR specialists, agents, and managers, while micro-celebrities rarely do. The nearly constant negative attention given to many micro-celebrities, particularly the critiques of appearance and sexuality targeted at women, requires a very thick skin.

This brings us back to the question: if being a micro-celebrity is so draining and uncomfortable, why would anyone attempt to become one? The primary motivator for pursuing micro-celebrity seems to be attention and status. While Adam Jackson wanted to increase his access and influence within the tech scene, Julia Allison wanted to attain a more conventional type of celebrity. Whatever the social context, celebrity culture is considered high status, and so will probably always draw those interested in improving their status within their particular communities.