3 Manufacturing Celebrity

> Fame used to be a by-product. [Now] it's like 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' 'Famous.' 'What for?' 'It doesn't matter.'
>
> *(Pop diva Kylie Minogue, talking with BBC Radio 1's Jo Whiley, 12 November 2002)*

ORDINARY TALENT

How might one make the production of celebrity a little more predictable? The most recent answer is to attempt to generate celebrity from scratch. While celebrities themselves are increasingly exploring ways of controlling their own representations (Whannel, 2002: 184), some sections of the media production industries have found new and effective strategies for controlling the images *they* produce.

This is not a new idea of course. Historically, the first instincts of the media and entertainment industries have been towards vertical integration – taking control of the whole process of the production, distribution and sale of their products from start to finish. Consequently, the golden years of Hollywood are littered with stories of discovery, where the dental nurse or waitress is snapped up by the talent scout and offered a career in the movies, only to find themselves burned out and abandoned years later. Within such narratives, the star is the victim of a rapacious and careless industry in control of every aspect of their existence. The popular music industry, too, has its own stories which demonstrate that the industry has often valued its performers more for their market appeal than for their musical abilities. The rock'n'roll boom of the 1950s and early 1960s saw numerous young prospects being picked off the sidewalk for their brooding good looks only to reveal in the studio that they couldn't sing a note. Over their histories, the media and entertainment industries have routinely sought to find 'unspoiled' fresh prospects they could 'discover' and groom for stardom. The commercial purpose behind this, of course, is to take control of the individual's career from the beginning and to contract for their services

into the future as a means of limiting the cost and maximising the returns to the original investor of the individual becoming a success. If, in some cases, these individuals turned out to have no particular talents, that was not necessarily a bad thing. What seems to have been more important was their determination to become 'somebody' and to do what was necessary to achieve this outcome. It is not hard to see how dealing with someone who was simply determined to be famous might have been easier than dealing with someone who had more subtle or specific goals and expressed preferences about the means taken to achieve them.

Since the late 1990s, however, there has been a spectacular revival of the media's interest in manufacturing celebrity. Some sections of the media, particularly commercial television, have discovered that rather than being merely the end-user of celebrity, they can produce it themselves. Increasingly, they have done this by using 'ordinary' people, with no special abilities and achievements, as the 'talent' in their programmes (Turner, 2010). Their celebrity is produced out of nothing, bypassing what we might think of as the conventional conditions of entry (specialised training, or a history of performance, for instance). Those who participate do not necessarily want to be singers, or actors, or dancers – they just want to be on television. These days it is clear that such a desire is actually quite widespread, as are the prospects for its satisfaction. Frances Bonner (2003) suggests that it is probably more common for people in the countries she examines (the UK and Australia) to have been on television, either as a participant or contestant or as a member of the live audience, than not. Her focus upon what she calls 'ordinary television' – game shows, infotainment, reality television, the less travelled formats for the television analyst but the quotidian mainstay of the television schedule – leads her to argue that television is omnivorous in its demand for 'ordinary people' to feature in its programming. According to Bonner's estimate, convincingly worked out in some detail, British television would feature close to one quarter of a million 'ordinary people' on screen per year, with over 20,000 having a speaking role (2003: 61–2).

Given the scale of the desire these figures reflect, it is not surprising that many television formats – in particular, reality-based gameshows, talent quests and docu-soaps – have oriented themselves towards satisfying it. In an exceptional number of cases, reality TV formats have been commercially successful. Internationally, *Big Brother* and *Idol* are among the most widely adopted examples of these formats but there is a wealth of reality TV formats that have attracted large audiences, both national and transnational, as well as creating their own stable of personalities and stars: *Survivor*, *Airport*, *Airline*, *Driving School*, *What Not to Wear*, *Jersey Shore*, *The Hills*

and *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* are among them. For the media organisations involved – the producers and the network – the celebrity they manufacture for the contestants/subjects is not their primary objective: their goal is to develop a viable programming initiative to sell to advertisers. Celebrity is a profitable by-product, to be sure, but the producers have only a limited commitment to trading on it once the programme has gone to air. (For instance, the *Big Brother* producers must invest in successive waves of housemates, each replacing the last, in order to promote each series.) They know, however, celebrity's importance in attracting participants in the first place. For the subjects or contestants in reality TV programmes, even where substantial cash prizes or career opportunities are to be won, celebrity is the real prize that is on offer.

It is this phenomenon I want to discuss in the first part of this chapter. In reference to reality TV programmes such as *Big Brother*, I want to argue that these media producers have taken control of the economy of celebrity by turning it into an outcome of a programming strategy. Among the notable effects of this recasting of celebrity has been the producer's capture and containment of some of the core contradictions that structure the relation between the celebrity and the entertainment industries. Most crucially, they have contained the capacity (temporarily, at least) for damaging conflicts of interest to arise. Since the construction of celebrity is thoroughly incorporated into the programming format, any potentially conflicting personal and commercial objectives (that is, those of the celebrities-in-the-making, and those of the producers or networks) are structurally accommodated to each other from the beginning. As a result, these celebrities are especially dependent upon the programme that made them visible in the first place as they have virtually no other platform from which to address their audience.

Again, I realise this is not unprecedented and such patterns have occurred in the film industry at frequent points in its history. But the value and appeal of celebrity today seem to have radically empowered those media formats that produce it. It is understandable, therefore, if commentators express their concern about the long-term prospects of the temporary beneficiaries of this process. Although the 'ordinary person' can use *Big Brother* to take a shot at fame, something that was unlikely to be available to them through any other means, they are still at the mercy of the system that creates them and within which they have a very limited future. I don't think it is easy to be too categoric about this, however, and the examination of specific versions of *Big Brother* can generate quite different accounts of the power relations being played out. To run against the grain of the politics implied by that comment, then, in the second part of this chapter, I discuss what

may appear to be an inversion of the politics of 'reality TV': the construction of a form of DIY celebrity, using personal websites, blogs and social media as a means of constructing fame and trading upon it. This development affects not only the ordinary person wishing to construct a public persona for themselves, but also increasingly the established celebrity wishing to change the means through which they negotiate the construction of their persona with their audience.

'REAL' CELEBRITIES AND REALITY TV

As we have seen, the discourses that construct celebrity are contradictory. According to them, celebrity is deserved or totally arbitrary: the recognition of natural talent or just blind good luck. Audiences place individual celebrities somewhere along a continuum that ranges from seeing them as objects of desire or emulation to regarding them as spectacular freaks worthy of derision. Mostly celebrities will attract one form of response rather than the other (so Sarah Jessica Parker might attract more admiration than, say, Jessica Simpson), but it is possible to attract both from different constituencies – or even from the same constituency. (By this I mean that the desire may incorporate an awareness of the cynicism behind the process of production; for instance, I could see Lady Gaga's followers occupying this sort of knowing but celebratory position.) This discursive contradiction is reflected in the paradoxical relationship between the celebrity and their public. Celebrity is the product of a commercial process but it is worth remembering that the public expression of popular interest can operate, at times, as if it was entirely independent of this commercial process. Sometimes no amount of publicity can generate public interest, while at other times the public will reveal a mind of its own in its reactions to a specific individual, no matter what the publicity machine does. There is a tension between these two forces – the commercial industry and the public will – and celebrity cannot be constructed or maintained without both playing some part. In the first part of this chapter, though, it is the arbitrariness – the constructedness – of celebrity that is most pertinent to the focus on its fabrication 'out of nothing'.

While television is the industry location I want to concentrate on here it is first worth noting the significance of the music industry's activities over the last decade or two, starting with the successful development of the Spice Girls. The Spice Girls seem to have been conceived, from the start, as a brand rather than a band. Developed by producers with very specific objectives in mind, they were the outcome of marketing plans rather than a grassroots fan or performance base. Nevertheless, in my

view, it is possible to explain their level of success in comparison to other pre-fabricated bands of the time precisely because the individual members were able to construct convincing celebrity identities for themselves. Tempting though it is, now, to see them as the popular music industry's most elaborate expression of bad faith, I think a significant component of their appeal to their audiences was both their explicit acknowledgment of their commodification *and* their refusal to allow this to de-legitimise them. The 'cheekiness' that trade-marked their media presence was partly constituted by this combination of discourses of pragmatism and feisty independence, which allowed them to perform, convincingly, a knowing celebration of their own constructedness.

P. David Marshall (2000) makes a similar point in his discussion of The Beatles' success. According to him, The Beatles 'trod the line between something authentically wonderful and significant (*fab*ulous) and something manufactured and created by an industry (*fab*ricated)' (2000: 169). As Marshall had pointed out earlier, in *Celebrity and Power* (1997), the fundamental discursive opposition that structures achievement and celebrity in the music industry pits authenticity against in-authenticity. The 'true' rock star is the romantic artist, their music resisting the temptation to pander to commercial tastes in favour of expressing the self. As I have noted earlier, there is a commercial reason for emphasising the artistic integrity of the musician through discourses of authenticity, of course – it attaches fans to the artist, not just the latest single or music video, and thereby enhances the prospect of long-term careers (Weinstein, 1999). Despite this, and despite the continued currency of anti-commercial discourses that attack the ersatz, the 'sellout' and the demands of the record company, the music industry also has a long history of pre-fabricated bands. The Monkees are the most lurid historical example, possibly because it was widely reported that they did not play on their recording sessions and only one of them had any real credibility as a musician in his later career (Michael Nesmith), but there are plenty of other examples (Milli Vanilli, for instance).[1] With The Beatles, Lennon and McCartney's songwriting abilities and the credibility that came from learning their trade in the red-light districts of Hamburg provided the authenticity. The contrivance of their 'look' (the suits, the haircuts, the stage-managed press conferences, the Svengali-like presence of Brian Epstein) told us that they were being marketed as a product. Marshall argues that The Beatles are the place where we first encounter a distinctively modern take on fame. Their open manipulation of their public image might once have generated a negative connotation, but Marshall suggests instead that – in the case of The Beatles – the commodification of the musician was 'no longer seen as some form of corruption of artistic practice; rather it became *part* of the artistic process' (2000: 170).

Marshall also notices how the members of The Beatles actively sought to differentiate themselves as individuals. He describes their successful transition from being identified with the band to being identified as individual members of the band as a new form of authenticity, a 'democratic celebration of celebrity' (ibid.: 174). Something like this influenced the representation and self-presentation of the Spice Girls. It is possible to argue, although possibly difficult to remember when faced with their subsequent solo careers, that the Spice Girls, individually although in varied ways, gave the lie to the assumption that those who are exploited by the entertainment industries in this way are vacuous victims. Instead, they performed convincingly as examples of how savvy and tough-minded individuals can play the fame game, on the industry's terms, and still win. That, it seems to me, was the specific meaning of their championing of 'Girl Power'. 'Girl Power' was more convincing when performed as a collective manifesto, however; its impact, even its relevance, disappears when we look at the band members' careers as individuals after the band dissolved. In the long term, the Spice Girls' lesson for the industry was not about how to appropriate media power. Rather, it was a one-off demonstration of how we might successfully manufacture celebrity for consumption by a mass audience without attempting to disavow its inauthenticity.

None of the 'brand-bands' that followed the Spice Girls achieved an equivalent status – either in terms of the successful construction of individual identities for their members, or a cultural politics for the band, or in terms of commercial success. Nevertheless, there is some truth in Naomi Klein's (2000) observation that the pre-fab brand-band – typified at that time by N'Sync, All Saints and a whole raft of boy bands – has never been so prominent a phenomenon as it became at the end of the 1990s (although she may have been surprised by how long the boy band has survived – look at the current celebrity of One Direction, for instance). In addition, Klein suggests, 'musicians have never before competed so aggressively with consumer brands' by setting up their own line of merchandise. Sean 'Puffy' Combs, she goes on, 'has leveraged his celebrity as a rapper and record producer into a magazine, several restaurants, a clothing label and a line of foods' (2001: 50). One of the outcomes of this trend – the branding of pop bands – was its relocation to television in the early reality TV talent contest/makeover hybrid, *Popstars*.

The *Popstars* format originated in New Zealand in 1999, before moving to Australia, and then to the UK and the USA over 2000–2001. The programme set out to construct a successful pop music group on television and the strategies it developed towards this end are now highly familiar. Hundreds of contestants were interviewed and their auditions filmed – and

exploited – for a range of effects. Much of it was simply humiliating, with bad performances eliciting caustic 'private' conversations between the judges. Once the band members were chosen, the programme moved into a second phase as it followed the 'popstars' through their grooming and development right up to the release of their first recording. In each of the countries where I followed its course (New Zealand, Australia, the UK, and the USA), the popstars went on to form a band, release a single, and promote it successfully. While the initial success of some of these singles was extraordinary (the first UK and Australian singles, in particular, went to number one immediately), none of the bands were able to repeat that initial success or construct a continuing career. Typically, even those who remained together as a unit[2] found that they couldn't sustain sufficient audience interest in their music once they lost the public visibility generated by appearing weekly on prime-time television.

As that outline of the format will have suggested, *Popstars'* amalgam of television genres exerted quite an influence on the make-up of the formats which followed. The first phase of the format draws on the two competing paradigms of the TV talent quest (that is, those searching for genuine talent and those that set out to humiliate talentless contestants). Contestants are of both kinds (talented and talentless) and provide the pleasures of both formats in relatively equal proportions. (We can see such strategies still currently employed in various ways through contemporary formats such as *Got Talent, Idol,* and *The Voice*.) Since viewers are encouraged to follow the contest and try to pick the likely winners (in some versions they can vote for their preferred contestant), it also works like a game show. A docu-soap style narrative helps to structure this part of the contest, too, using interviews with family members and providing a certain amount of sentimental back-story for the higher profile contestants. The second phase mixes the makeover format with classic fly-on-the-wall reality television of the kind that would be more thoroughly developed by *Big Brother* (which first appeared in the Netherlands in 1999, with the UK version beginning in 2000), offering the appearance of the real and the everyday with the added attraction of being set backstage in a glamorous world that is the epitome of 'cool'. (Indeed, the programme spends much of its time teaching these contestants – and their audience – how to be 'cool'.) In its later iterations, the format has been applied to other industries or domains of celebrity – *Search for a Supermodel* is one example – and to the media's construction of celebrity itself, with *Fame Academy*.

Popstars offered the opportunity of fame and success within a narrow commercial framework: this is a prefab band, after all, so no matter how well you sing you had better not be fat or homely. Furthermore, the band

already had its first single and album chosen for it: no room for 'musical differences' to arise here. Many professionals within the music industry regarded it as an extraordinarily cynical exercise that offended all the principles of artistic integrity and authenticity Marshall described as fundamental to the sector. And although it may well have been to some extent integrated into the economy of opportunity within the music industry, the contractual arrangements it negotiated with its performers were in at least some instances especially exploitative.[3] For the television networks, however, the show was an enormous ratings success. More importantly, it was a 'water cooler' success, generating lots of talk and media interest. It created considerable spin-off promotional opportunities such as shopping mall appearances and television specials, as well as concert performances. For particular sectors of the audience – teenage girls and young women – *Popstars* was must-see TV that vigorously fed into their everyday lives. (Notably, though, the novelty wore off with successive series.) For the celebrity industry, it demonstrated the value of saturation television exposure for short-term impact.

In *Popstars*, though, and for some of its imitators, there was still a connection between talent, winning the contest, and the ensuing celebrity (short-lived though the latter might be). Indeed, there are often indications that many of the contestants were already working in the industry concerned and using the programme as the chance for their 'big break'. *Big Brother*, still regarded as the ultimate pseudo-event, took us one step further away from this connection. Like *Popstars*, *Big Brother* is also an amalgam of a bunch of TV genres: the game-show, the lifestyle programme, the make-over, the talk show, and the reality TV docu-soap. As I am sure readers of this book will know, the format involves a cast of 'ordinary people' who agree to take up residence in a house or apartment for a set period during which every moment of their lives will be captured on camera. Each week, they nominate fellow 'housemates' for eviction so that the viewers may decide who stays and who leaves the house. The last housemate standing wins a cash prize. Since it is usually stripped across the week's schedule in repeated timeslots, each new series is major entertainment news. As a television event, it is big. To date it has been screened in more than 70 countries, and created spin-offs such as *Celebrity Big Brother* as well as many unofficial clones to date. Its aggregated audience would be numbered in the billions. In Italy the first series attracted 69 per cent of the national audience, and even in the US where it took a while to catch on (and the cast threatened to walk out!), it eventually picked up 52 per cent of the audience (Johnson-Woods, 2002: 1–2).[4] The scheduling details vary significantly across markets, so in some countries *Big Brother* is screened

daily, in others three or four times a week. The regular episodes are often supplemented by highlights packages or in some markets an additional late night, 'uncut' or 'adult viewing' package (promising moments of nudity, swearing and sexual activity). In most cases there is a weekly eviction episode performed in front of a live audience. The website attached to the series has become an increasingly important component of the *Big Brother* event because of its interactivity: it has live camera feeds direct from the *Big Brother* location, chat rooms, blogs, social media links, picture galleries, highlights video, news and updates, gossip and merchandise, as well as facilities for on-line voting on evictions and so on. In the Australian version, the *Big Brother* house was in a theme park and the actual physical site has remained a continuing attraction outside the production cycles. Advertising is sold for the entire run of the series (in most cases several months, although the 'Celebrity' versions tend to be much shorter – a week in the UK for example) and is supported by lots of product placement. This varies from delivering Pizza Hut pizzas to the housemates for a treat, to simply providing the mop or the washing-up liquid.

The publicity and promotions potential of the format has proven to be extraordinary: the programme can be promoted as a news event, as a cultural phenomenon, as the launching pad for a raft of new celebrities, as a contest to be played through SMS and social media, and, finally, as high concept or special event television. As each housemate is evicted they generate a fresh news cycle: their eviction may be cited on channel and network news, they will be guests on talk and news magazine programmes, exploited through channel, network, or sponsors' promotions, and some may even turn up as presenters in new programming ventures. When each series is completed, the whole cast is processed through the various network programme formats all over again, with retrospectives, reunions, insider revelations and so on. Cross-promotion across television networks, websites, newspapers, magazines and radio is fundamental. Whenever it is scheduled, *Big Brother* generates a mini-boom in celebrity content because of this increase in material and interconnected promotional outlets, as well as its intrinsically controversial nature as a programming innovation. *Big Brother* creates its own celebrity and thus raises general interest in celebrities and their appeal, while also challenging us to consider why people would volunteer to participate – as well as why people want to watch. The news media have tended to deal with these two impulses in a disingenuous manner: they shamelessly exploit the celebrity gossip that *Big Brother* provides, while also soliciting comment pieces which warn about the programme's deleterious effect on 'television as we know it', or its worrying implications for our society.

Given such a production context, the *Big Brother* housemates are the epitome of the fabricated celebrity. While they are cast for their likely contribution to the overall performance and appeal of the programme, their casting does not reflect the possession of particular professional talents or abilities. Different countries have cast for different internal dynamics (in the USA they cast for conflict, in Australia they have tended to go for community, in Spain for sexuality), but most production companies have attempted to avoid to be seen preferring people whose ultimate aim is to be an entertainer of some kind.[5] These attempts have not been entirely successful, but the trend is for contestants to be 'ordinary' people without professional self-presentation skills or a theatrical or media background. If it were not for the fact that they have agreed to be on camera twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week for several months, they could plausibly stand in for the 'ordinary viewer'. The cash prize offered to the successful candidate is an attraction, but the real prize is the chance to be on television for months. Like those individuals Kylie Minogue refers to in this chapter's epigraph, these people want to be famous but most of them haven't worked out what for. *Big Brother* helps them to defer answering that question while making major steps towards achieving their objective.

Why do the contestants participate? For the most part, they are not looking for any special talents to be recognised: indeed, in many cases, they display none. The answer to this question is actually the obvious one: the contestants want to be on television long enough to be famous. *Big Brother* can almost guarantee that. Perhaps the more difficult question is why these people – having no special abilities to celebrate – should want to pursue fame at all. Braudy's discussion of fame is unusual (certainly for the period in which he wrote it), in that he dwells approvingly on the undeserved character of modern fame. Braudy regards the modern desire for fame as a perfectly reasonable impulse and explains some of its attractions. First, he points out that fame does more than offer us visibility; it offers a particularly flattering kind of visibility in which 'all blemishes are smoothed and all wounds healed'. Fame is the achievement of a magical moment of perfection, the end point of a process that restores 'integrity and wholeness' to the representation of the self. Second, and more importantly, to be famous in the arbitrary manner I am describing is especially validating for the individual: 'To be famous for yourself, for what you are without talent or premeditation, means you have come into your rightful inheritance'. Fame becomes a 'personal justification' (Braudy, 1986: 7).

The desire for such personal validation has a long history. Nick Couldry (2000a) refers to 'the fantasy of being included in some way in major cultural forms such as television or film' as being related to what 'Valerie

Walkerdine summarises in historical terms as the fantasy of "getting on the stage"' (2000a: 55). Popular culture has for many years provided a legitimate setting for that fantasy – from the boxing ring to the music hall and vaudeville to television – especially for members of the working class. Indeed, Couldry argues that among the attractions of this fantasy is its inferred capacity to free the individual from their class placement: specifically, they could escape their identification with the working class without defecting to the middle class. On the other hand, there is the argument that Skeggs and Wood (2012) make, which suggests that while the modes of personal comportment being recommended through such reality TV genres as makeover TV are clearly marked as middle class, the manner in which working-class audiences actually engage with these television texts reveals resistance to the imposition of these values, and even a defiant identification with precisely that mode of performance which does not conform to middle-class norms. There are resonances here with Andrew Ross's (1989) discussion of the function of popular culture which emphasised how many popular cultural forms deliberately provoked respectable society into distaste and condemnation. For the participants themselves, however, there is merit in Couldry's suggestion that the personal validation achieved through appearing on these programmes might provide an opportunity for sidestepping the normatising influence of class. Certainly, and while Bourdieu would have despised the kind of celebrity we are discussing here (imagine Bourdieu on Jade Goody, for instance), reality TV celebrity does seem to constitute a new variety of social distinction, gained without treading any of the conventional pathways. As a spectacular form of symbolic capital, reality TV celebrity opens up an almost instantaneous route to the achievement of a 'social life that will be known and recognised, which will free you from insignificance' (Bourdieu, 1990: 196.)

Couldry (2003) explores similar territory in his discussion of the performance of 'self-disclosure' through the media. He has quite a different take on celebrity here, however, in that he relates it to what he calls the 'myth of the media centre': the commonsense assumption that the media 'speak for' the centre of the social world. Access to the media therefore constitutes access to the social centre and is thus empowering in a more generally social sense than simply generating personal fame. Rather than an excess of narcissism, or an obsession with fame, Couldry describes the motivation behind the ordinary person's preparedness to expose themselves on television as the pursuit of personal access to a 'central' social space (2003: 116). As such, it is an essentially political enfranchisement that is the object. The participation he describes may be about utilising the symbolic power of the media rather than an investment in celebrity itself. This has been an

extremely influential and useful idea, and it seems particularly persuasive in relation to the confessional talk show, the phenomenon Jane Shattuc deals with in *The Talking Cure* (1997) and Joshua Gamson in *Freaks Talk Back* (1998), but perhaps less so in relation to the participants of *Big Brother.*

Most of the early academic discussions of *Big Brother*, perhaps understandably then, do not focus on such issues but instead concentrate first on reality TV's place in the history of television's construction of 'the real' (Roscoe, 2001, for instance, or more substantially, Hill, 2002, and 2007). Jon Dovey (2000) contextualises the historical shift in the relation between the television camera and the real in this way. Once the camera was hidden and determined not to interfere with the reality it depicted, implying the priority of the pro-filmic events, of 'the real' over the representation. Now, however, the camera captures events 'that are *only* happening because the camera is there', implying the priority of the representation over 'the real'. In reality TV, in particular, from make-over programmes to *Popstars*, says Dovey, 'the entire process is only happening because it is going to be on television'; that is, a 'reality' is constructed solely in order to produce a representation. For all concerned, this is the blindingly obvious but nonetheless crucial and often overlooked implication, that 'without the fame-conferring gaze, there would be no event worth filming, no reality' (2000: 11).

Implicit here is the growing importance of the camera as a means of constituting and validating everyday reality. Just as the fans at a sports event cheer when they see their images come up on the big screens in the stadium, celebrating their media presence, the circulation of images of the self via television has become a means of legitimation. No longer consigned to the 'hyperreal' of postmodernity, the media-tised image of the self has come to seem as if it is among the promises of everyday existence. According to Frances Bonner's (2003) argument mentioned earlier, this is becoming an increasingly plausible expectation for sections of the community. Inside the idea of reality TV is the offer to display our everyday identities as a spectacle, as an experiment, as entertainment – and television's insatiable appetite for ordinary people to display their identities ensures that the offer is made to an increasing number of prospective participants. On the other hand, of course, the offer is made in a highly selective manner; the contestants for *Big Brother* are chosen from many thousands of applications and we do not know the criteria that determined the selection process. Nonetheless, the term 'reality TV' sets out to eliminate the distance between television and everyday existence, and the distance does seem to be shrinking. To the many who participate in these programmes, who turn up in the audiences of live programmes, and who race home to see if they made it onto the television coverage of their favourite sporting event, everyday life is at its most valid and real when it is visible on TV.

With *Big Brother*, the celebrities in the making are explicitly disconnected from discourses of the exceptional by the programme's format. What audiences see is the housemates' 'everyday' behaviour, nothing more or less. Of course, it is important to acknowledge that this was in itself a performance (Roscoe, 2001); we still may not know how these people behave every day when there are no cameras around. Nevertheless, among the attractions of the programme was precisely this promise of witnessing 'the everyday'. Even the voyeuristic attractions of watching the housemates shower or have sex – highly important to the promotion of the programme in most markets but not particularly important to the viewers' experience in the end (see Hill, 2002) – are articulated to a narrative that has us observing these people living their lives rather than performing a role. The magical discourses that surround conventional celebrities operate as teasing provocations to the demand for the revelation of the private. With *Big Brother* the reverse is true: private revelations are offered as the opening move in a process that turns these people into celebrities.

On the evidence of *Big Brother*'s consumption, this offer seems to have been widely accepted, and audiences entered into a direct process of narrative investment and identification. Such a process does not necessarily indicate sympathy or that their identification was positive. There are plenty of reasons to believe many viewers watched *Big Brother* from positions that explicitly 'dis-identified' with these people (the comments on the websites and social media would certainly indicate this). Many newspaper commentators also recorded their failure to 'get it' – to understand the appeal of the programme. Further, there seems to be an almost anthropological dimension to the programme's consumption by some sectors of the audience. In Australia, where the housemates were overwhelmingly drawn from the young, a steady growth in the over-55s audience suggests that this was an opportunity to observe a cultural fraction that was something of a mystery to this section of the audience. Little wonder that reality TV's complicated relation to the real has so dominated academic accounts.

The discourses of possibility that fuel the production and consumption of celebrity generally seem to have been thoroughly cashed in through this television format. If celebrity is increasingly possible as a career option; if its achievement is increasingly recognised as a matter of luck; and if television's role in making celebrities visible to us has become a major part of its programming strategies (i.e., through all kinds of programming from news to *Entertainment Tonight* to *Biography* to *Who Do You Think You Are?*); then it is perhaps not surprising that there are many people in the television audience who want to take the option provided by *Big Brother*. If the ideologies that inform celebrity in contemporary culture – the ideologies described by

P. David Marshall as entirely complicit with democratic capitalism – are fulfilling their function, the pursuit of celebrity as an objective rather than as a by-product of personal activity is not surprising either. Public visibility *per se* is offered as an achievement to emulate and desire; little wonder that it is pursued with such tenacity and at some personal risk by a large number of people. What *Big Brother* offers is precisely what such a desire creates: the promise of media validation for just being who you are, every day.

TAKING CONTROL: DIY CELEBRITY IN THE DIGITAL ERA

> 'Why are they doing this, do you think?' Coleridge asked. 'Why do you think? To get famous'. 'Ah, yes, of course,' said Coleridge. 'Fame'. 'Fame', he thought, 'the holy grail of a secular age'. The cruel and demanding deity that had replaced God. The one thing. The only thing, it seemed to Coleridge, that mattered any more. The great obsession, the all-encompassing national focus, which occupied 90 per cent of every newspaper and 100 per cent of every magazine. Not faith, but fame. 'Fame', he murmured once more. 'I hope they enjoy it'. 'They won't', Geraldine replied. (Ben Elton, *Dead Famous*, 2001: 242–3)

In 1996, among the more notorious sites accessible through the internet was Washington DC web designer Jennifer Ringley's 'JenniCam' site, which uploaded new photos of Jenni's bedroom every few minutes. The occasional flashes of nudity helped to attract media attention to her site, and Jenni became something of a celebrity (she eventually appeared as a guest star in the TV series *Diagnosis Murder* – playing a webcam star). In the first edition of this book, which was published in 2004, I spent some time discussing the phenomenon of the many 'cam-girls' who appeared in JenniCam's wake. At that time, these sites featured live or recorded images of the cam-girl host, as well as other material such as comments, poetry, diaries, journals and so on. The cam-girls competed against each other to attract subscribers and fans, and a lively critical subculture built up where the cam-girls and their fans discussed the various tactics employed. Discourses of authenticity, commercialisation, and exploitation – all familiar from other areas of popular culture that are more thoroughly in the capture of commercial industries – framed the debates within this critical culture about what was acceptable behaviour from a cam-girl wishing to attract visitors to her site.

At the time, the cam-girls seemed an extremely clear example of web-based DIY celebrity, both in terms of the potential on offer and the dangers to the individual that came with this potential (their proximity to pornography sites, for instance, was one of the concerns) (Couldry, 2003: 129).

Most notably, this form of celebrity had been established in ways that were, largely, structurally independent of the mainstream media. In comparison to their counterparts in television or popular music, the cam-girls' integration into the mainstream media industries was initially minimal: they created their own sites, they generated their own content, and they designed their own performances of themselves. Surviving outside the industrial structure that produces the television personality or the film star, this was the cyberspace equivalent of a cottage industry. It was enabled by the growth of the personal website as a form of personal expression as well as a means of public self-presentation. For many observers (for example, Cheung, 2000: 47), the personal website as it existed in the late 1990s was an emancipatory medium, liberating the ordinary person from their constrained role as merely the consumer of media products[6]. Hence, there was significant interest in this particular use of the capacities of the online environment at the time.

Today, however, as cam-girl ethnographer Theresa Senft was told by one informant, 'cam girls are *so* 1998' (2008: 11). If we want to examine the potential for DIY celebrity online today, we need to look somewhere else. The passing of the cam-girls had three primary causes: 'the cultural saturation of webcams beyond early adopters', the 'rapid rise of broadband penetration around the world', and the rise of 'social networking services that now easily support text, still images, audio and video' (Senft, ibid.). Simply, the capacities exploited by the cam-girls became more widely available, and the widespread take-up of networked social media made much of what they did so routine as to be unremarkable. (Once you have a camera in every laptop, tablet and mobile phone, the webcam starts to lose its novelty!) Consequently, the opportunities for all kinds of DIY celebrity multiplied and diversified – creating what Senft describes as 'micro-celebrity': a 'new style of online performance that involves people in "amping up" their popularity over the Web using technologies like video, blogs, and social networking sites' (ibid.: 25). In this section of the chapter, then, I want to consider this next model of DIY celebrity, where certain techniques for celebrity production have been appropriated by members of the public, before turning to an examination of how similar capacities are enabling the more traditional media celebrity to gain new kinds of control over the presentation and circulation of their own public persona.

This is territory, I should add, that significantly blurs the distinction between production and consumption which organises this book, and is all the more interesting for that. Indeed, what the micro-celebrity demonstrates, as James Bennett notes, is the fact that not only has the desire to be famous become 'increasingly ordinary', but so have many of 'the tools with

which to become famous' (2011: 179) – the techniques used to publicise the self through personal websites, blogs, and social media such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter. The micro-celebrity engages in a form of self-branding that is prosecuted through the presentation of their persona online: 'micro-celebrity involves viewing friends or followers as a fan base; acknowledging popularity as a goal; managing the fan base by using a variety of affiliative techniques; and constructing an image of self than can be easily consumed by others' (Marwick and boyd, 2011: 141). P. David Marshall argues that this development complicates the production/consumption division in a particular way: rather than merely thinking of celebrity as the product of representation, Marshall describes social media as forms of 'presentational media' where we encounter an expression of the self that differs from those enabled by previous media platforms because it is not 'entirely interpersonal in nature nor is it entirely highly mediated or representational' (2010: 35). This, he suggests, takes us into new territory for studies of the media: it constitutes the partial displacement of a representational media system with what he calls a 'presentational culture' (ibid.: 45) in which the individual not only sees the public presentation of the self as a productive mode of self-fashioning, but also grasps the opportunity of taking personal control of that process.

Typically, the micro-celebrity operates within a relatively limited and localised virtual space, drawing on small numbers of fans such as the followers of a particular subcultural practice. Some, such as the celebrity blogger Perez Hilton, have parlayed their modest DIY beginnings into a major online presence that is of equivalent scale and structure to that of more traditional media celebrities. Such a career trajectory actually ends up compromising any claim one might want to make about ordinary people's capacity to generate an alternative form of celebrity through these strategies; the more their small-scale DIY presence expands, and the more followers it attracts, the more it comes to resemble those conventional forms of fame to which it may once have claimed to provide an alternative (Bennett, 2011: 181).

Nonetheless, the accessibility of the means of publicity and distribution now available online does at least offer the possibility that ordinary people need no longer deal with the traditional media gatekeepers before they are able to attract public attention. Not only does this facilitate the small-scale activities of the micro-celebrities, but it has also laid new pathways to the acquisition of mainstream fame. As a result, the traditional media and cultural intermediaries we discussed in Chapter 2 no longer totally control all the possibilities: there are now some entry points over which both the prospective celebrity and their audience have some control. The music industry, for instance, generates many

examples of artists and bands whose careers were launched through exposure on MySpace (Lilly Allen and the Arctic Monkeys are the usual ones mentioned here), and there is the example of teenage star Justin Bieber, whose career began as a result of the viral success of a video his mum posted on YouTube (Rojek, 2012: 33). Of course, hoping to go viral on YouTube may be just as arbitrary a process for acquiring fame as any that have preceded it, but the power relations are now slightly different: significantly, the role of the consumer has been strengthened. That is, Marwick and boyd have argued, the public's capacity to 'exercise control' over the process of celebritisation has increased (2011: 155).

This, however, takes us into the second area I wanted to explore here – the way in which the techniques of the micro-celebrity, themselves borrowed from the publicity and promotions industries, have in turn been 'borrowed back' by the 'real' celebrities – those who operate within mainstream commercial media structures – in order to increase *their* control over their own celebritisation. Given the comprehensiveness with which the media's management of celebrity controls the construction of a particular celebrity's presentation of their persona and their relation with their audience, it is not surprising that it is now common for celebrities to use social media, and particularly Twitter, not only as a means of communicating with their fans, but also in order to regain some personal control over their relationship with their public. Making use of social media in this way has become essential for anyone working in the media and entertainment industries these days. For some, such as Tom Cruise, the use of a Twitter feed is a relatively seamless extension of an already existing official publicity strategy: he has acknowledged he does not write his own tweets, for instance. As used by others, however, such as Mariah Carey or Ashton Kutcher, Twitter offers something new: a mode of direct, apparently unmediated, access to their fans. Kutcher, in particular, seems to regard Twitter as something of a personal media playground and appears unconcerned about surrendering his privacy, or that of his former wife, Demi Moore (his 2009 posting of a photo of Moore bending over in a white bikini became notorious). As a result, the pre-eminent objective of the fan – to find out what the celebrity is 'really' like – appears to be more categorically achieved through their engagement via Twitter rather than any other platform. Celebrities read and respond to tweets from their fans – sometimes directly, and sometimes simply by re-tweeting. They also converse with each other – celebrity to celebrity—and allow their followers to eavesdrop on that conversation. Of course, the belief that we are reading an authentic comment actually uttered by our favourite celebrity may still be illusory; it may still be written by an employee. That there is no way of knowing this for sure appears to be no disincentive for the followers. Indeed,

evaluating the message for its authenticity and provenance seems to simply add interest to the game of interpreting the performance of celebrity in play. Not only is this about authorship, but also, as Marwick and boyd note, 'it is the inability to tell what is strategic and what is accidental, as well as what is truthful and what is not, that makes Twitter so enjoyable for fans' (2011: 153). Hence the exorbitant numbers of followers collected by some of the more high profile tweeters; these figures will date as soon as I write them, but they give some idea of the scale we are talking about: Lady Gaga has 15 million followers on Twitter and Justin Bieber has 14 million. It is said that the tweets sent by popular British media figure, Stephen Fry, are read by more people than all the 'printed copies of *The Times, The Telegraph, The Financial Times, The Guardian* and *The Independent* combined' (van Krieken, 2012: 134).

The scale of this potential market is one of the reasons why, at the moment, a professional engagement with Twitter is fundamental for virtually anyone interested in managing their public persona. Politicians tweet relentlessly, using the implied directness and authenticity of this communication channel as, among other things, a means of counteracting common conceptions of the politician as remote, inaccessible, and out of touch with the ordinary person; this, in addition to touting policy initiatives and positions. We have also seen the enhanced celebritisation of journalists[7] through their participation on Twitter. This is not necessarily only in order to prosecute their own personal brand, however. Twitter has become core business as most news organisations now require their journalists to maintain a Twitter account as a means of attracting readers, listeners or viewers to their news services. For their part, journalists are finding Twitter a valuable news source, as well as a means of building a public profile for a professional persona that is in some respects independent of their employer. The Twitter-led celebritisation of the journalist constitutes the conclusion of a long-term trend towards the personalisation of news: this trend has taken us from a world in which news stories were more credible without a byline (thus signifying their total objectivity), to a world in which the journalist has become part of the advertising pitch, as well as a form of authorisation, for the story.

Not only does the celebrity use social media to take personal control of their public presentation in the way these examples suggest, but they also use them to take advantage of unmediated communication with their fans. The intention behind this latter objective may be just as strategic as any other mode of image management, of course: some celebrities clearly see Twitter as offering them their own dedicated media channel, through which they can shape what the rest of the media say about them, as well as determining what their fans – most importantly – believe about them. Anthea Taylor

(2013) has discussed 'celebrity feminist' Naomi Wolf's deployment of Twitter as a means of shaping the reception of her most recent, and poorly reviewed, book, *Vagina*. Taylor shows how Wolf has used Twitter to disseminate the positive accounts of her book, while blanking out the negatives, retweeting only the positive feedback she receives (including from other celebrity admirers such as Courtney Love).

Another dimension to this is that, for some celebrities, Twitter seems to offer an opportunity to bypass even their own agents and public relations staff, breaking free of corporate image-management in order to gain the reward of direct communication with their fans, as well as some useful street-cred as a celebrity who has 'bucked the system' and undermined the publicity process by speaking honestly and directly to their fans. A risky tactic, because it implicitly demands that at least some of the content of the tweets should run against the grain of the more corporatised and established persona, and therefore may undermine the legitimacy of that persona. Of course, there would be little point in doing this at all if there was nothing at least slightly surprising about these messages. As a result, there are plenty of instances of tweets or comments on Facebook pages which have embarrassed those charged with managing the celebrity-commodity's fragile public persona – even though, at the same time, they may well have added an interesting new dimension to the celebrity's relationship with their fans. Nonetheless, in celebrity news today, one of the most commonly cited signs of a celebrity caving in to stress or exhibiting signs of mental disturbance is the posting or tweeting of inappropriate or unusually candid comments about their private lives. A recent example of this was the media coverage of Whitney Houston's death.

Such activity inevitably reduces the distance between the celebrity and their audience. In an extremely useful article on celebrity practice and Twitter, upon which I have drawn repeatedly in this section, Marwick and boyd contend that socially networked media has fundamentally changed celebrity culture:

> Gossip websites, fan sites and blogs provide a plethora of new locations for the circulation and creation of celebrity, moving between user-generated content and the mainstream media. The fragmented media landscape has created a shift in traditional understanding of 'celebrity management' from a highly controlled and regulated institutional model to one in which performers and personalities actively address and interact with fans. (2011: 140)

They go on to describe the consequent change as 'structural', in that 'it complicates the locations of power, the avenues of access, and the management of the celebrity-commodity' by the media industries (ibid.: 142).

The aspect that is most affected by these new developments, of course, is the nature of the para-social relation between the fan and the celebrity. Communicating via Twitter or Facebook, fans now can actually engage in a visible and public exchange with their favourite celebrity; they can receive responses to their questions or comments. Fans can also attract some celebrity to themselves with repeated interactions over time. Through this expanded domain of interactivity, there are now substantial elements of this para-social relationship which no longer look like the simulation of a conventionally social relationship at all. This is far from being a categoric shift, of course, and much of the interactivity we have been describing could indeed be regarded as simply the relocation of traditional strategies of marketing and publicity onto another platform of distribution. This is why Marwick and boyd are right to describe the current situation in terms of how 'complicated' the structure of relations has now become. However, it does seem that the capacities for direct interaction that social media generate between the fans and the celebrity are marked by enhanced levels of familiarity, disclosure, responsiveness, and possibly even of sincerity (Marwick and boyd, 2011: 149).

That said, however, Marwick and boyd are quick to point out that while Twitter does to some extent bring famous people and fans "closer" together, … it does not equalize their status' (ibid.: 155); as indeed the fans seem to acknowledge through the manner of their interaction, the power differentials may have shifted, but they have not gone away. Rojek puts it this way:

> The essence of the star is to be out of the reach of ordinary people … For all the inside dope, the tales of chance meetings, the bits and bobs from Web chat rooms that afford fans the secrets and low-down on celebrity culture, the balance of power in information and opinion shaping is overwhelmingly in the hands of the celebrity and the adjoining PR-Media hub. (2001:124)

It is easy to overstate the significance and extent of the increasing power of the consumer/fan, and so it is worth noting how little the overarching patterns of economic, cultural and political power have changed – notwithstanding the possibility that the changes we are witnessing now are indeed structural. Similarly, for those who take up the challenge of constructing their own DIY celebrity online; they are reminded that 'practising celebrity' and 'having celebrity status are different' (Marwick and boyd, 2011: 156). This raises questions about the issue of scale, about whether we need to make very different arguments about the function of a niche presence in a fragmented mediascape than those we would make about a more traditionally mass-mediated presence. I think that there is a genuine question about whether the online celebrity we have talked about as a micro-celebrity is in fact the same, in most important respects, as a mass media celebrity.

This is another area of contemporary media experience where improved access or improved consumer choice has been equated with a process of democratisation, even in relation to such an apparently hierarchical context as the production of celebrity. Notwithstanding a growing body of evidence which challenges such an equation (Hindman, 2009; Turner, 2010), the link so often made between the affordances of new media and the proposal of an intrinsically democratising empowerment is still around, and it is that issue we will address in the following chapter.

NOTES

1 The Monkees were made for television, though, not the music industry. Television was also the medium for another early, but more honest, example of the fabrication of the star. Scottish singer, Sheena Easton, was the subject of a British television documentary that set out to examine if it was possible to manufacture a successful pop star and which ended by launching her on an unexpectedly lengthy career.

2 In the first Australian programme, one of the successful contestants dropped out almost immediately after she was chosen – well before the conclusion of the programme. The producers encouraged the media to canvass rumours that she had stolen from one of her colleagues, but other industry rumours suggested that she was not prepared to sign a contract that would have greatly restricted her earning capacity and autonomy for a number of years.

3 In the Australian example, members of the first *Popstars* band, Bardot, have lent tacit assent to a report that the percentage of their total earnings, which went to the television production company, Screentime, could have been as high as 60 per cent.

4 Toni Johnson-Woods goes through some of the early variations of format around the world (length, voting procedures and so on) in her *Big Bother* (2002). A full list of the series in the various countries to date, as well as access to the official websites is accessible through the Endemol *Big Brother* website at www.big-brother.nl.

5 There are some variations on this. In the UK and Australia, producers were keen to play down any previous media experience their housemates might have had in order to emphasise their ordinariness and thus to make more spectacular their eventual transition to media celebrities. However, in some European versions, in France for instance, there was a deliberate attempt to cast people with experience in the sex industries – dancers, strippers, even prostitutes – in order to ensure a higher likelihood of on-screen sexual activities.

6 There is a similar take on the phenomenon, as 'domestic webcams', in an interesting piece by Andreas Kitzmann from around the same period, 1999.

7 I am indebted to Anthea Taylor for drawing my attention to this point.