

The Dish on the New Queens of All Media

Posted by *Arielle Schwarz* / May 10, 2011



The face of #winning.

A look into the world of gossip bloggers and their growing influence

By: Arielle Schwarz

On Friday April 8, 2011, the celebrity media caught wind that 89-year-old Betty White had lashed out at Lindsay Lohan and Charlie Sheen, calling them “terribly ungrateful” and “unprofessional” for their repeated public bad behavior. Lohan quickly released a statement criticizing White’s comments. A decade ago this inconsequential Hollywood war of words should have ended at that, perhaps a short Page Six item. Thanks to the Internet platform, however, popular celebrity bloggers jumped into the fray to spew venom at Lohan for her rebuttal.

One such celebrity blogger, Michael K of DListed, wrote: “Why the hell did LiLo [media nickname for Lohan] even waste a breath she could’ve used to puff on a Red? Betty White is right. End of story. Shut those silicone anal glands on your mouth and take it.” Ouch.

The Internet has provided Michael K, and other famous names in the blogosphere, with a platform to assault Hollywood all-stars and give their not-so-humble opinions about celebrity comings and goings. Before the web era, fans hungry for their celebrity fix or to read the latest scandal had to wait until the weekly tabloids hit the stands hear what ‘really’ happened. But these days, the internet has made the transmission of information instantaneous. And celebrity gossip is no exception. It seems people have an insatiable appetite for the hundreds of gossip blogs out there. Two of the top sites, Perez Hilton and TMZ, receive up to 4 million hits per day, and it has been reported that Perez garnered close to 14 million unique visitors the day after the 2009 Academy Awards when his fame was beginning to skyrocket.

Bloggers have become self-appointed cultural commentators, and several have developed a following simply based on their reputations for being nasty. Michael K, one of the nastiest, wasn’t finished with Lohan and Sheen when he added, “Betty White is saying what Charlie’s and LiLo’s family should’ve said a long ass time ago. If only Betty could stick her fist up White Oprah’s [media nickname for Dina Lohan, Lindsay’s mom] ass and do the talking for that delusional crazy from now on.” Okay!

About six or seven years ago when they first started to emerge, it may have been tempting to write these gossip blogs off as virtual garbage, but with growing hordes of readers, their cultural influence becomes harder to deny. Stories such as the Betty White one on DListed garner hundreds of comments, while big news stories, such as the death of Michael Jackson, can elicit thousands. The bloggers themselves become celebrities and tabloid magazines are now behind the curve when it comes to breaking events. What started as a few snarky comments has transformed into a viral subculture.

Celebrity blogs are a platform not just for bloggers but they're the virtual water cooler for anyone with something to say about celebrities and their affairs, says Erin Ann Meyers, who received her Ph.D. at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and wrote her dissertation on the topic. The celeb blog readers are often students and office workers who spend most of their time behind a computer anyway. So surfing the Web to comment on celebs becomes, she says, "A distraction or a fun way to take a break because there's always something new. It's not just reporting, they're putting a spin on it, and people want to know what Perez has to say. Audiences are attracted to what reinforces their own beliefs. Blogs are in conversation."

Another element of blogs, unlike magazines or TV shows like Access Hollywood or Extra, is that the audience becomes the producers of content too. Commenters on sites such as DListed get to know each other and form a community, so much so that when frequent commenters disappear for a few days, other commenters notice. Erin Ann Meyers says blogs "play a really important role in how the media is changing because people engage on those sites with the comment section and linking elsewhere. All three parts are blended, with images and text, the blogger's commentary, and the audience as a layer." Magazines are left to play catch up days after the events.



A Battle Between Blondes

Gossip bloggers make no claim to objectivity, an important fact when considering the scope of their influence. Meyers believes they are not journalists, rather, she says that they are commentators, a central distinction to make. In light of recent suicides in high schools and colleges blamed on bullying, the often hateful commentary on these sites could certainly seem to act as reinforcement that tearing people down is acceptable and even enjoyable. Meyers believes bloggers who like berating celebrities are reinforced by a mean-spirited audience. "Perez is mean and people like that. Bloggers are not creating the [bullying] problem. That is how people interact online. The distance of not being face to face with the person leads people to say things you wouldn't say to their face."

Many people find the commentary crude, even if it refers to public figures. Michael K creates monikers for famous people, including Lady Caca for Lady Gaga, Katherine Hag-el for Katherine Heigl, and Parasite Hilton for Paris Hilton. Perez Hilton was known to draw penises on celebrities' faces and

cocaine dripping from their mouths, as well as for outing famous males he thought were gay. Many people attacked Hilton for being a bad influence after a slew of suicides in high schools and colleges, and he has since cleaned up his act. The nasty drawings have stopped and he has since made amends with many of his former enemies, but the motives behind his change of heart are debatable. Perhaps he was afraid of losing readers, or maybe he really did see the error of his ways. Either way, Hilton is a virtual force to be reckoned with.

Meyers thinks people have always had a cultural obsession with celebrity and their private lives. The Internet makes it easier and more acceptable for readers to gossip and pass judgment on celebrities, such as Britney Spears's mothering skills. "We police their private lives to talk about social issues, such as motherhood or femininity. I would never say my friend is a bad mother because I know her but I won't get in trouble because I don't know Britney and she doesn't know me."

Do the stars deserve that kind of scrutiny? It depends who you ask. Kelli Burns, assistant professor at the University of South Florida and author of "Celeb 2.0: How Social Media Foster Our Fascination with Popular Culture" believes that seeing celebrities in a negative light makes us feel better about our own lives. "We revel in seeing celebrities at their worst—without makeup, looking fat in their bathing suits, or getting mad about something," she says.

On the other hand, she believes many celebrities love the attention, even if they act bothered by it, noting how paparazzi shots are often set up by publicists. Kim Kardashian, Heidi Montag, and Britney Spears are rumored to have arranged "candid" photos of themselves to stir up paparazzi and publicity. However, there is a line that gets crossed, according to Burns, such as recent paparazzi photos of Scarlett Johansson and Sean Penn jogging in which Johansson's belly pooch became the subject of blogger scrutiny. "I do feel that photos of celebrities coming out of Starbucks, leaving the gym, or walking their kids to school are not news," says Burns. "Celebrities should be given some space to live their personal lives. [They] do take a lot of criticism on blogs, and this is sometimes dished out unfairly." Johansson was criticized for what appeared to be early signs of pregnancy, which her reps had to deny after the blogs made it a story.

How do bloggers, such as Michael K and Perez Hilton, get away with the venomous things they say? Victoria Cioppettini, a New Jersey-based attorney, studied the legal questions surrounding gossip bloggers. In "Modern Difficulties in Resolving Old Problems: Does the Actual Malice Standard Apply to Blogs?" published in the Seton Hall Journal of Sports and Entertainment Law, Cioppettini explains that there is a fine line that bloggers have to be careful of crossing. "Bloggers potentially open themselves up to defamation (slander or libel) lawsuits by posting negative comments on the Internet. However, one of the issues that will determine if the blogger will be found liable is whether the information is a pure opinion or factual in nature, which can be a fuzzy line. Pure opinions may be protected as free speech under the First Amendment while the publication of false facts about another may lead to legal liability for defamation."

For example, she cites an incident where California DJ and pseudo-celeb Samantha Ronson (Lindsay Lohan's former gal pal) sued Perez Hilton in 2007 when he claimed Ronson had planted cocaine in

Lohan's vehicle. Hilton defended his free speech rights and won the case. Hilton is often involved in legal entanglements due to controversial and malicious items he reports as fact.

In her study, Cioppettini notes that in newspapers or magazines, stories are either presented as fact or marked 'Op/Ed' and a clear line is drawn. Bloggers often do not draw these lines, reporting stories with a skewed bias or opinion. She writes, "Many times, the forum appears to be a personal journal but also 'reports' on stories as if they are true, when in fact they may be gossip, rumor, hearsay or pure conjecture. Because of this intermingling of fact, opinion and accusation, it is difficult for the reader to distinguish pure opinion from fact and opinion implying false facts. It is in this gray area where problems concerning whether to treat information contained in blogs as defamatory runs into significant legal obstacles."

Why would someone want to blog about celebrities? Experts agree they usually have a strong interest in celebrity culture and want to write about them, and blogging is the easiest and cheapest way to do so. Professor Burns argues that they wanted to work as celebrity journalists and blogging builds writing samples. "Blogging allows for a freedom of expression that would not be tolerated in traditional journalism. You often find that bloggers can get away with being snarkier and somewhat disrespectful to celebrities. Traditional entertainment outlets depend on publicists to provide information about celebrities, but bloggers usually don't need to pander to celebrities and their publicists to get their stories," she says.

The blogs don't reserve their smack downs solely for Lindsay Lohan and other Hollywood train wrecks. Entrepreneur and presidential candidate Donald Trump found that out when he created a media frenzy this spring demanding to see President Obama's long-form birth certificate. Obama showed the goods, and celebrity bloggers took to their laptops to spew their thoughts.

Rebecca M. Leib, one of the head bloggers for Girls Talkin Smack, trumped Trump by saying: "Trump is a dirty piece of sh*t, and should know it. He may not like Affirmative Action, but he's got to accept the fact that it helps ease racism in academia, and supports people like Obama becoming such a gigantic and inspiring influence on the United States. So, you know, go host a reality show, Trump, and stay out of important matters, please. Adults are talking."

Though Girls Talkin Smack doesn't rank to Perez-level popularity, its punchy writing style holds its own, leaving no celebrity stone unturned. Leib, 27, has been blogging at Girls Talkin Smack for almost nine months. She went to grad school at the University of Chicago for art writing and fostered a fierce love of comedy, training at The Second City comedy school in Chicago.

Eventually, Leib ended up in Los Angeles and realized there was high demand for pop culture writing with, as she puts it, "a strong comedic and journalistic voice." She's the perfect fit for Girls Talkin Smack, and says they liked her style of humor and snappy writing. She enjoys blogging because it's "lenient," adding "the pop culture stuff has to have an acidic tone, and they give me the freedom to say what I want."

So what's the typical day in the life of a blogger like? Even being able to work from home in her

pajamas, blogging is a lot of work, she admits, getting up “ridiculously early” to start writing jokes, and expected to be available non-stop.

“I tell people it’s a full-time job plus. I’m always working and I’m never working. I’m home in my pajamas writing jokes, but I’m really writing jokes in my pajamas at home. It’s a strange lifestyle. My parents are both attorneys, they’re both very traditional, professional 9-5 types, and they don’t get it.”

If something big happens in Hollywood, she has an obligation to cover it. She’s in constant correspondence with her editors and publishers via email.

Similar to other ardent celebrity followers, there are people and topics that Leib enjoys covering and those she hates covering. She would prefer to write about more off-beat topics than celebrities, but finds it easy to write jokes about super-exposed celebrities, such as Lindsay Lohan. “It’s easy to do those things, and it is fun because we’re so obsessed with them.” However, she admits she is sick of writing about Charlie Sheen. Duly noted.

Many experts say bloggers feel no responsibility to the poisonous messages they’re sending, but Leib disagrees. She believes there’s “a line you just shouldn’t cross.” For example, she will not write about someone sick with cancer or who has recently had a miscarriage. She says, “Rehab is an interesting case because it’s like ‘oh, another celebrity is going to rehab’ and we tend to forget people actually have serious addiction problems but we don’t feel as bad because they put themselves in these situations.” She says she does self-edit and is conscientious of what she puts out there.

Ronnie Karam, head blogger of TVgasm, a blog dedicated to TV recaps and commentary, says that the bloggers on his site were actually the bullied kids in high school, and does not feel that poking fun of celebrities is a bad thing, provided that it is lighthearted enough. He agrees it is all in good fun.

As for the future of celebrity media, Rebecca Leib believes the tabloids “will keep eroding until they are strictly online” with no print distribution because people now need and expect the instant gratification of a constant feed. Ronnie Karam agrees, adding, “Once you start reading everything on your phone, you don’t go back” and thinks the Internet is a great forum for people to express themselves. “People think writing is going to disappear, but now the entire world is expressing themselves in some way. There’s more being written now, and I think [the shift] is a good thing. The Internet is still very Wild West. There are no rules right now. You never know what will make money.”

Trent Vanegas, founder of Pink is the New Blog, was one of the first players in the blogging game, founding his site in 2004. Like Perez Hilton, Michael K, and TMZ, Vanegas’s followers are fiercely loyal and have helped him secure a top spot in the blogosphere. He says he got into blogging by accident before blogs were common and his love of everything pop culture made it easy for him to become a daily commentator. He credits excellent timing to his success. “I was an early adopter. My blog found an audience when there weren’t many blogs out there. If I were to start my blog now, exactly as it is at this time, I guarantee you it wouldn’t have the same impact that it did when I launched it. I guess it was really a matter of right time, right place.”

Vanegas agrees with Rebecca Leib in that bloggers are not exempt from standards of respect in their commentary. He says, "I think we, as people, have a responsibility to respect one another... bloggers, journalists, celebrities, students, what have you. The rules of common decency do not change because someone can hide behind a blog. I personally try to have fun with celebrity, poking fun in a comedic way."

Like Leib and Karam, Vanegas enjoys working from home but thinks the immediacy and constant nature of blogging is difficult to manage. But all in all, he loves it. "I just love the craziness of celebrity. Celebs are people just like us, they make mistakes, they wear the wrong things sometimes, and they look silly and screw up sometimes. As I said, I try to keep things fun."

As long as Lindsay Lohan has court dates, as long as Charlie Sheen keeps winning, and as long as Britney Spears is, well, Britney Spears, celebrity bloggers will keep criticizing them. Celebrity media may be changing, but celebrities are as crazy as ever, and audiences keep demanding more. It's an old game with new rules and it's not going anywhere anytime soon. Sorry LiLo!