

Celebrities Everywhere? How Influencers Are Changing the World

By

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Abstract:

Are you a celebrity yet? As Andy Warhol predicted decades ago, anybody can be famous for at least *15 minutes*. Today you can become famous in *15 seconds* via TikTok. Celebrities have always existed, in all walks of life, just not in the large numbers, individual meanings and social functions that they have today. Only today you do not need a title of nobility or a starring role in a Hollywood movie. Often, all it takes is an Instagram channel that is regularly updated with selfies, photos, and stories. Modern society is a battle for the scarce commodity of attention. Therefore, our central question is what functions do celebrities and influencers actually serve? Are prominent figures like profane gods who provide orientation?

Key Words: Prominent figures, celebrities, influencer, opinion leader, attention, mediatization, individualized society.

Introduction

As the American pop-artist Andy Warhol (1928-1987) predicted decades ago, anyone can be famous for at least 15 minutes. Were Warhol alive today and familiar with TikTok, he would change the time frame for being famous to 15 seconds. In our book (Strasser & Duckwitz 2021), we focus on the role that celebrities and influencers play in society.¹ Our objective is to answer the following five questions. First, what are celebrities or influencers? Second, why are they increasing in importance? Third, what constitutes an influencer economy? Fourth, are prominent figures profane gods who provide guidance? Finally, fifth, what did we learn from our research on celebrities and influencers and what are our conclusions? This essay, based on our book, offers readers a point of view on the role that celebrities and influencers play in modern society.

¹The book on which this Point of View Essay is based appeared recently as the third volume in the new series "Edition *soziologie heute*" in German. The series is part of the activities of the journal *soziologie heute* (sociology today) which is published in Linz, Austria. The German title of this series is *Promis im Wandel: Von den Celebritys zu den Influencern* (Prominence in Transition: From Celebrities to Influencers). Publisher: Amazon /Kindle Direct Publishing, 2021. Paperback: 176 pp. Also available as Kindle e-book.

The Tradition and Perception of Celebrity Is Changing

Celebrities and prominent figures have always existed, although not in this large number and in regard to the individual meanings and social functions that they have today. The differentiation of a star system began with the increasing spread of audiovisual mass media that transmitted images and information to a "dispersed audience" (Maletzke 1963: 30) and provided a connecting topic of conversation.

Nowadays, one does not have to have a title of nobility, a starring role in a Hollywood movie, or a leading position in the corporate world, although those things help one to achieve prominent status. An Instagram channel regularly updated with selfies, stories, and statements can make anyone a prominent figure. There does not have to be any earth-shaking experience or point behind it. A properly staged body is enough, as you can see with Kim Kardashian. At the core of traditional prominence are the celebrities, "those who are celebrated", and the prominent figures, the famous, because they stand out, as the Latin word *prominere* suggests.

A prominent figure is recognized by far more people than he or she knows. They stand out because they

have something to say about everything and everyone, as former President Trump demonstrated on Twitter before his account was suspended. The prominent figure tries to underpin his or her status with a social posture in order to meet the expectations of the public (cf. Schneider 2004: 24; Peters 1996: 16). Before the emergence of industrial society, tradition, and lineage were crucial for belonging to the elite, derived from the Latin word, *eligere* "to select". In contrast, in modern societies it is primarily one's social functions as reflected in acquired positions and fulfilled role expectations.

The contrast between the elite and the masses still seems unbridgeable. Nevertheless, a relationship of dependency has developed between prominence and the rest of the population, decisively mediated by the media. The media's penetration of all areas of life is known as "mediatization" (Krotz 2001), as other subsystems of society (e.g., politics, business, science and sports) are oriented to the selection criteria of the media. Nowadays, prominence results primarily from acclaim, the assignment of prominent status through publicity (cf. Gabler 2001: 195).

Attention: The New Currency

Prominent status comes about not through what a person can do, but how he or she sells himself or herself, i.e., makes an appearance. This also has to do with the fact that we live in a multiple society, in an individualized, globalized, and media communication society at the same time.

The individualizing society is characterized by more education, income and mobility and thus more outward orientation of people. The traditional institutions of family, school, church and social class have lost their power of orientation. The search for meaning is therefore not becoming obsolete; on the contrary, it is all the more important. People have to rely more on their ability to communicate appropriately in the media. This is also proven by the 16-year-old Charli D'Amelio, who has achieved over 100 million followers on TikTok in no time with her dance videos. Today we have to communicate more than ever before. Even members of the English royal family, William and Kate, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, ensure their public approval via carefully staged family pictures via Instagram, on which Queen Elizabeth II should, of course, not be missing.

The search for meaning takes place in networks, among friends and colleagues, in short-term communities of interest. As society becomes more globalized and

networked, complexity increases and boundaries disappear. We have to adapt to new situations more and more often. In the media society, a social battle has broken out for the scarce commodity of attention. Especially in social networks, attention has become a badge of importance (cf. Pörksen/Krischke 2010). Already in the 1990s, the urban planner Georg Franck (1998) spoke of attention as the "most irresistible of all drugs", more valuable than any income.

The influence of social networks and the media attention machine has increased social control in a new way. We literally live in a contradictory society in which social networks provide ratings, media provide attention, and progressive digitization provides mobility in all walks of life. However, the rapid pace of change is hardly creating meaning anymore. But meaning takes time, even though uncertainty is quite human, since it has shaped evolution and fed humans with energy as resourceful adaptors (cf. Butollo 2015).

Even if the public sphere is divided between media, virtual internet presence and analog communication centers, the common feature remains: attention. Web 2.0 ultimately enables anyone to reach a public audience with their self-created content without prior technical knowledge and without a media organization in the background. In addition, everyone can immediately see from the number of followers and likes what resonance this content meets.

For media creators, it has become the main task to infect celebrity portraits with feelings and motives in order to turn thin stories into tangible stories, thus generating emotions and gaining attention. No wonder that the divorce between Melinda and Bill Gates is more interesting than their global public health engagement or Microsoft. What is decisive is not who actually takes part in a (sports) competition or who wins. What is decisive is the presence in and of the media. Even the content of talk shows is emotionalized, different opinions are staged as a duel between protagonists and not infrequently play into the hands of political populism.

The Influencer Economy: Authenticity as Staging

We are part of a communication revolution in which everyone can be a receiver and a sender. Media produce topics that would not be topics at all without them. Through publicity, events are given meaning, which is followed by renewed attention. New worlds of meaning continue to emerge at an ever-increasing rate. With the increase in information, however, the call for orientation

aids and standards of evaluation grows louder. Even if culture and communication determine the boundaries of our social reality, the hyperreality of the media offers orientation, personalized by prominent figures. These are evaluated on the basis of their authenticity, which has long since become a staging. Both social networks and analog celebrations and events often show people not who they are, but above all who they would like to be.

And so the influencer has also come into the world through the measurability and visibility of attention via social media. The term "influencer" comes up early in opinion leader research (Lazarsfeld et al. 1949; Rogers/Shoemaker 1971: 199), but it has only become established in the new phenomenon of "digital opinion leaders" (Schach/Lommatzsch 2018). Through the network effects of social media, opinion leadership is gaining momentum. Everyone has the easy opportunity to communicate his or her own content to a public audience. Two-way communication enables direct and equally public feedback, which in turn, supported by algorithms, can contribute to viral spread.

Finally, this dynamic is also related to the formation of virtual fan communities, as known from mass media communication. The boundaries between (mass) media celebrities and influencers are becoming increasingly blurred. It is often no longer clear whether the person has become known to a more or less large public through his or her involvement in social media or outside these media. Meanwhile, opinion leadership itself has been professionalized. Being an influencer has become a profession that can be used as a main source of income. Kylie Jenner, the half-sister of Kim Kardashian and "famous for being famous", is already being praised as a self-made billionaire, also because she promotes her own products and earns the most money from it. She is considered a master of self-staging and self-marketing. Just recently, by selling shares of her Kylie Cosmetics brand to Coty she has become \$ 600 million richer.

Some parents even give up their jobs and live on the digital marketing of their children, as we show with some examples in the book. With mini-influencers, as the channel "Ryan Toys Review" of the 8-year-old American Ryan Kaji demonstrates, advertisers are finding access to new target groups. And more and more children are assessing influencer as a career aspiration.

In the influencer economy, we are dealing with a new culture of self-promotion according to the motto "The content is me" (Pfeifer 2018). Paradoxically, this leads to successful self-staging being copied en masse. In order to survive successfully in this complex world, today's

externally-oriented person is especially dependent on impression management (cf. Strasser 2020: Ch. 4). He is not only concerned with being good and better than others, but also with giving the impression that he is good and better.

So What? Conclusions and Implications

Repetition transforms the advertising message of influencers into apparent truthfulness. The self-image of the digitally controlled consumer is increasingly shaped by the perception of an unmanageable community. Their influence becomes possible because celebrities serve as "projection surfaces" for the identification needs that are as diverse as they are ambivalent – needs driven by media channels and by commerce.

And so it is not surprising that some celebrities, who represent an ideal identification figure for various target groups, are idolized. Their prominent status depends crucially on the interaction among the prominent figure, the media, and the public. Idolization is part of modern society's search for meaning. Nowadays, search for meaning is accompanied by felt belonging in scenes, networks, and events – that is, in self-selected communities where celebrities are present. These short-term communities correspond to the quest for expressive, emotional and aestheticized experience of community in an individualized society. Smartphones capture all the scenes in real time and allow the world to participate.

It always takes a brilliant person as well as a public curiosity, an audience, to learn more about this person. For this reason we also focused on two questions in our book: first, what celebrities can do with the media and, second, what the media can do to us, in general, and to celebrities, in particular. The individualized person lives from difference and exists in communities of choice. He or she no longer draws his or her identity from the internalized unity of individual and society. Rather, the individual must constantly identify himself anew, not to say invent herself according to the pattern: He or she who does not distinguish himself or herself perishes, that is, loses his or her identity.

In this coalition of prominence, the media, and the public, prominent figures play the role of a modern god who provides people with an orientation. Through the new currency of attention, prominence also provides the people who are in contact with prominent figures with the potential for upward social mobility *and* provides the media with a business model that ensures their survival. Therefore, the meritocracy is not doing

away with itself; rather, the meritocracy is becoming a different kind of society, a society that idolizes success. In other words, the means of human actions have changed, *not* their goals.

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