

## Proceedings of the New York State Communication Association

---

Volume 2011 *Proceedings of the 69th New York State  
Communication Association*

Article 3

---

10-18-2012

# Digital Death: The Failures, Struggles and Discourses of the Social Media Spectacle

Maxwell Foxman

New York University, [mhf223@nyu.edu](mailto:mhf223@nyu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.rwu.edu/nyscaproceedings>

 Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Foxman, Maxwell (2012) "Digital Death: The Failures, Struggles and Discourses of the Social Media Spectacle," *Proceedings of the New York State Communication Association*: Vol. 2011, Article 3.

Available at: <http://docs.rwu.edu/nyscaproceedings/vol2011/iss1/3>

This Conference Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DOCS@RWU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Proceedings of the New York State Communication Association by an authorized administrator of DOCS@RWU. For more information, please contact [mwu@rwu.edu](mailto:mwu@rwu.edu).

# Digital Death: The Failures, Struggles and Discourses of the Social Media Spectacle

Maxwell Foxman  
New York University

---

Celebrities have always capitalized upon various media to give voice and substance to their own mute causes. From Live Aid to PBS fundraisers, they have used their public personae to support the downtrodden, sick and underprivileged. However, in December of 2010, when Alicia Keys and over a dozen other celebrities banded together to raise money for World AIDS Day by eradicating their Twitter and other social media profiles, their much-hyped campaign to raise one million dollars fell short of its goal by nearly half. This paper explores the discourses surrounding the Digital Death "Pseudo-Event," and the effects of the disjuncture between the real and digital self when the Celebrity Spectacle is moved from traditional media to the social sphere. Consumer awareness of that gulf ultimately precluded the Digital Death campaign's ability to succeed, not only as a fundraiser, but also as a media spectacle. Ultimately, such revelations point to the inherent natures of social media to promote a certain type of celebrity spectacle that does not conform uniformly to the celebrity of traditional media.

---

## Introducing Digital Death

No one returns from the dead. However, in December 2010, a number of celebrities, including Alicia Keys, Lady Gaga and Elijah Wood, did just that. On World AIDS Day, these celebrities, along with 16 others, eradicated not their physical selves, but their virtual selves, ceasing to post on Twitter, Facebook and similar social networks until their fans donated one million dollars to Keys' charity of choice, "Keep a Child Alive." This media spectacle, called the "Digital Death" campaign, had an honorable goal. The virtual death of these celebrities was supposed to garner a quick million dollars for a good cause. The celebrities expected within a few days to be resurrected via the combined power of their fans' altruism and their own celebrity cachet.

The event was discussed and publicized by both traditional and social media outlets months in advance, creating hype around the cause, highlighted by an advertising campaign depicting each celebrity in a casket. However, almost a week into their endeavor, they had raised under half of their goal's funds and eventually were revived only when a generous philanthropist gave a \$500,000 donation to the cause. The popular "failure" of this media spectacle, which employed a cast of celebrities, a reputable marketing firm, and extensive media

coverage, reveals a fundamental misunderstanding regarding the impact of social media when used to amplify celebrity and Celebrity Culture.

In this case, as in general, Celebrity Spectacle may perpetuate itself through illusion and fantasy. The systems and structures of social media allow for that fantasy to become more personalized and individualized on both the celebrity and audience level. Through websites such as Twitter, audiences can interact and converse with celebrities, or at least their electronic avatars, in the same way that they engage with their friends. However, social media also can expose the rift between reality and fantasy that the spectacle creates, provoking an acute awareness of the superficiality of Celebrity Spectacle and negative responses to campaigns like Digital Death. Ultimately, this “mimetic gulf” takes on special meaning in the world of social media, where each user attempts to foster his own version of Celebrity Spectacle among his cohorts and the World Wide Web at large.

### **Celebrity and the Spectacle**

That media spectacle and celebrity are connected to fantasy is well established. Daniel J. Boorstin in his definition of “Celebrity” poses luminaries as the embodiment of his media spectacle, the “Pseudo-Event.” Boorstin (1992) explains, as Pseudo-Events are merely created to make news, the celebrity's “chief claim to fame is their fame itself” (p. 60). This fame, like the Pseudo-Event, is completely “manufactured” (Boorstin, 1992, p. 47). The celebrity became a type of myth, supplanting the Carlylian hero, conceived by Pseudo-Events and perpetuated by them as well. However, in Boorstin's view, the power of the celebrity was ultimately defined partially by his relationship to the common man. Thomas Carlyle's hero possessed powers far beyond those of a regular man. They were able to, as Nicholas Mirzoeff (2006) wrote in “On Visuality,” see a “clear picture of history” that “could not be seen by the minor actors of history themselves” (p. 57). By contrast, Boorstin's (1992) celebrity was to be admired because of his “popular virtues. We admire them... because they reveal and elevate ourselves” (p. 50). This shift was due in part to the relationship between the celebrity's ordinary life and that of the audience. Boorstin points to the interest of the reader not in the great achievements of the celebrity, but in the actions of his everyday life (Boorstin, 1992, p. 59). The celebrity was a mythical figure, but his myth was born out of mundane events and constant news updates (Boorstin, 1992, p. 36).

However, it was this normality that produced the very fantasies that make the celebrity so appealing. Chris Hedges (2010) emphasizes the “humble backgrounds” (p. 29) of Celebrity Culture in *Empire of Illusion*. Like Boorstin, Hedges sees the popularity of the celebrity coming from his connection to the common man, but for Hedges (2010), it is this very identification, which creates a

sense of “illusion” (p. 20) in the consumer. The consumer, who identifies with the humble origins of the celebrity, innately believes that he is unique, even that he could have the potential of becoming a celebrity himself.

As Hedges (2010) states, the motives are selfish: “We can triumph. We can, one day, get back at the world that has belittled and abused us” (p. 37). It is this desire, which for Hedges is ultimately ideological, that drew people to social networking sites in general. Citing William Deresiewicz, he asserts that it is the illusion of being unique and the opportunity to engineer and publicize that individuality through social media profiles and related activities that “validates us, this is how we become real to ourselves – by being seen by others” (Deresiewicz, 2009). This notion, according to Deresiewicz (2009), came from a response to the “isolation” and “boredom” of suburban life. The Internet has provided, in the digital age, an escape, empowering users to connect easily with others. The result, for Deresiewicz (2009), “is simply to become known, to turn oneself into a sort of miniature celebrity,” a sentiment echoed by Hedges (2010) when he proclaims that “Celebrity culture has taught us to generate, almost unconsciously, interior personal screenplays in the mold of Hollywood, television and even commercials” (p. 16), aided by advances in technology, which “have enhanced its power to deceive” (p. 52).

### **Celebrity and Myth**

Hedges and Deresiewicz both see Celebrity Culture, assisted by technological advances, as being detrimental to its consumer. For Hedges (2010), the fantasy of possibly becoming unique was causing “a cult of distraction” (p. 38), and an illusion of “escapism and quick sensual gratification” (p. 48). The increase in technological aids would cause only further problems in deluding the consumer by providing a mere aura of truth (Hedges, 2010, p. 49), rather than the reality of actual situations. The consumer becomes incapable of distinguishing between the actual life of the celebrity, and now themselves, from the fantasy created by the amalgamation of digital media and Celebrity Culture. What the viewer of popular culture sees is not real, but becomes of utmost importance. As Deresiewicz (2009) states, “Visibility secures our self-esteem, becoming a substitute, twice removed, for genuine connection.” According to this view, the masses are ultimately subjugated by this cult of distraction, which only serves to expand the influence and allure of Celebrity Cultures.

However, the cultural fantasy promoted by the media spectacle and Celebrity Culture need not be cast as purely detrimental. Instead, it can be read as a set of specific signs and symbols, all of which can be used for both beneficial as well as deleterious ends. Roland Barthes’ connection between cultural symbols becomes a telling way of seeing the power, if not the grammar of the media spectacle and celebrity. For Barthes (1972), the myths of popular culture, including those of

celebrities, were created through sets of symbols and signs that could be deployed, read and repeated within a particular context (p. 120). In his seminal essay, "Myth Today," Barthes argues that a mythologist is able to decipher a myth through reading various repeated signifiers. However, this mythologist would necessarily be subjective in his reading, influenced by his own myths and prejudices. As a consequence, as Mikita Brottman (2005) put it, "literature and social life are regarded as 'no more than' languages, to be studied, not in their content, but in their structure, as pure relational systems" (loc. 717). Such symbols and signifiers are present in Celebrity Culture and spectacles. Hedges and Boorstin are acutely aware of the connection between myth and celebrity. Just as Barthes saw society replete with symbols and meaning, Hedges and Boorstin implicitly read the symbols of myth into the celebrity. Hedges (2010), when referring specifically to professional wrestling, declares, "They do what we cannot. They rise up from humble origins into a supernatural world..." (p. 6), or as Douglas Kellner (2003) states in his essay "Media Culture and the Triumph of the Spectacle," "Celebrities are the icons of media culture, the gods and goddesses of everyday life" (p. 4).

Mikita Brottman in *High Theory/Low Culture* takes Barthes' concepts and applies them directly to fantasy, Celebrity Culture and spectacle. Spectacles such as those in Celebrity Culture are formed in Barthes' "Theater of Language" according to Brottman. The power of these symbols is omnipresent; even communication is "prisoner of the form through which it has to be manifested, codes that become gestures, spectacles..." (Brottman, 2005, loc. 776). Some symbols, including the newspaper itself, have the ability to ratify news and in other cases affirm social class.

Myth and celebrity therefore can be seen as a set of systems as well: "Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them..." (Barthes, 1972, p. 143). Ultimately, these symbols are merely just that, symbols that have the power to be both detrimental and beneficial, or as Umberto Eco states, according to Brottman (2005), "a series of pure connotative signs..." (loc. 1090).

Not only are these symbols omnipresent, but also, especially in the context of social media, they are internalized and personalized, such as in the function of "liking" something on Facebook. As Brottman states, "we can never step outside discourse and adopt a position invulnerable to a subsequent interrogative. All discourses... are equally 'fictive'" (Brottman, 2005, loc. 720). So if signs, myth and fantasy, are intimately connected with the celebrity and spectacle, then those symbols, through digital media can be unique and have individual power as they are deployed by the average person.

## Myth in the Digital Landscape

Now participants are able to produce those images individually and truly enact their own celebrity experiences. Just as Deresiewicz suggests, the individual is able to become a local celebrity with his friends. In addition, that individual can employ social media to participate more heavily with those around him, approaching or even mimicking the impact of a celebrity participation in a Pseudo-Event in the context of more traditional media outlets. As is suggested in Jean Burgess and Joshua Green's introduction to *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, the very nature of participatory culture found among social media users can be linked to the deployment and awareness of the self as a set of semiotic celebrity symbols, in which social networks' "vernacular creativity" (Burgess & Green, 2009, p. 13) merges with the very businesses that, according to Hedges' model, would attempt to distract common and folk culture through celebrity and spectacle. "In the light of the convergence between commercial popular culture and community participation," Burgess and Green (2009) suggest digital media, and particularly YouTube, are "experienced... via a hybrid model of... part amateur production, part creative consumption" (p. 14). Social media networks have increasingly taken on similar roles, being used partially as promotional tools for citizens and companies alike, as well as aggregating both personal and professional information. Thus social media's various tools allow its consumers a personal engagement and cultural literacy on par with celebrities and their professional handlers. An avid YouTube user, or savvy social media user, must employ the same tactics and tools as a celebrity counterpart in order to successfully engage in the world of social media.

Because of this engagement, the same cultural tools used by traditional media outlets and celebrities have the potential to become tools that consumer-citizens can manipulate both in the world of social media as well as in reality, rather than an all-consuming distraction. Social media, in essence allows the savvy user to become highly self-aware of both his and other users' presence in the social media landscape. Brottman (2005) refers to this by connecting the media spectacle with that of Bakhtin's theory of the carnival, which she defines as "a permanently ephemeral, playful, self-referential, self-parodying component of popular culture" (loc. 388). Those participating in the carnival know their role in that carnival and that, on some level, it is a spectacle in and of itself. This level of self-awareness informs the larger question of identity that belies Celebrity Culture, media spectacle and digital media. While the symbols of Celebrity Culture through social media can be deployed, this fantasy can be used for both positive and negative reasons based on some level of self-awareness of the user.

## **The Mimetic Gulf**

However, Hedges' and Boorstin's fears do reveal an important aspect of Celebrity Culture and spectacle in that there is a distinction between the reality of the individual and the fictive world of the celebrity and spectacle. Clearly, there is a gulf between what is portrayed by celebrities and spectacles, Bakhtin's carnival of escapades, marketing campaigns and reporting the lives of celebrities, and the lives of everyday people. Hedges (2010) refers to this gulf when he raises the fear that celebrity worship both distorts and "banishes reality" (p. 22). However, while this gulf has been fairly obvious in the days prior to social media and networking, it becomes significantly complicated with their onset. The gulf narrows as celebrities and their audience can interact even more intimately and, at the same time, the fantasy that they propagate becomes more intimate.

Celebrities now are able to interact in the same structures and symbols as their audience and embed themselves into their "humble origins" by revealing their "intimate" thoughts and off-the-cuff remarks through social media outlets, most notably Twitter and Facebook accounts. However, even these more humble interactions invoke an overarching cloak of fantasy, like all the aspects of the Celebrity Spectacle. In fact, these social media-based interactions are perhaps even more illusory than the press conferences and magazine interviews of traditional media, because their pretensions to the mundane are amplified and justified by the structures of social media itself.

These same structures also exaggerate the belief that the individual consumer is unique. He is able to turn himself into Deresiewicz's mini-celebrity with ease. This ease contributes not only to the fantasy described by Hedges of one day becoming a celebrity, but also actualizes that fantasy, as the consumer creates and operates his own mini-celebrity through his profile, for example. Thus the gulf between reality and fantasy that separates an ordinary social media user and his celebrity counterpart is mirrored in the gulf between the consumer-citizen and his own avatar on the social network.

The virtual self is not exactly the real self, but rather another kind of fantasy, as termed *mimesis* by Andreas Huyssen. Using the theories first espoused by Theodor Adorno, Huyssen (2003) sees mimesis as the "project of mimetically approximating historical and personal trauma..." (p. 127). These mimetic selves are not quite carbon copies, but are in fact so close to the original that they often can be mistaken for it. Huyssen (2003) notes, "It rather requires us to think identity and nonidentity together as nonidentical similitude and in unresolvable tension with each other" (p. 127). Barthes (1972) refers to this gulf implicitly as well. In addressing myth he says that it "*harmonizes* with the world, not as it is, but as it wants to create itself" (p. 156). For Barthes there is a gulf between what the symbols of celebrity might mean and what they truly are. These are essentially

his signifiers and signified. However, with the widespread use of social media by consumer-citizens, this mimetic gulf now extends beyond celebrities to the general population and how it represents itself in social networking.

### **The Design of Digital Death**

The illusory nature of the social network as well as the mimetic gulf remains subverted and taboo, as exposed through the Digital Death campaign's failure. However, it becomes important to recognize that the gulf itself is not necessarily deleterious, but rather a presence built from signs within the social network itself and an affirmation of a type of illusion and fantasy.

Certainly efforts such as the Digital Death campaign, with its goal of raising money for the downtrodden, can be viewed as Celebrity Culture mobilized for the greater good rather than the perpetuation of a cult of distraction or for a celebrity's individual gain. Keys' attempt to raise one million dollars for charity was laudable and a fantastic attempt to use the reach and impact of Celebrity Culture, emphasizing, by Twitter and Facebook's very nature, humble origins, average conversation, and the intimate relationship between social media and the Pseudo-Event.

Indeed, the Digital Death campaign was an altruistic Pseudo-Event. Beginning on World AIDS Day, itself a Pseudo-Event explicitly created in support of AIDS outreach, the discourses surrounding the Digital Death campaign placed it in the highest echelons of Pseudo-Event significance. Traditional media, such as the *New York Times*, along with social media outlets, like *The Huffington Post* and the "Twittersphere," inflated the Pseudo-Event and its potential power.

It was reported that the high-powered agency TBWA\Chiat\Day was planning the marketing campaign (Aditham, 2010), and that a provocative celebrity photographer had been selected to photograph the celebrities (Ahearn, 2011). TBWA\Chiat\Day had conceived of the campaign, hoping to reinvigorate interest in Keep a Child Alive, which had seen a steady decrease in donations. Celebrity Spectacle was employed to appeal to extensive consumer bases, as luminaries from all fields of Celebrity Culture, including sports star Serena Williams, musician Usher, and television personality Ryan Seacrest, were pledged to "kill" their digital selves. These celebrities eagerly posted their support for the cause, via YouTube "Last Tweet and Testaments," along with those social media tools they would soon cease using. Celebrities publicly supported the spectacle of the campaign itself, as typified by Daphne Guinness who was reported to comment on her own participation: "This campaign is so striking and draws attention not only to the AIDS disaster in Africa but also to how we have lost our way in what we care about... I am sacrificing my digital life tonight and will be shouting from the rooftops everywhere I can that AIDS can be stopped, with our devotion to



helping” (Davis, 2010). And of course, the entire event was centered on the use of social media, whose basic structures of “frequency... threshold... meaningfulness... consonance... continuity...” etc. are criteria that make “ordinary events... newsworthy” (Brottman, 2005, loc. 803).

With the extravagance of Celebrity Spectacle and media coverage, this should have been a Pseudo-Event triumph. Even after the campaign began, fans hungry for social media interaction with the stars involved were expected to end this drought quickly, and awareness of the campaign would be supported by press coverage from traditional media. TBWA\Chiat\Day would win a design award for capitalizing on such a concept, working without a budget to create a successful guerilla campaign, comprised mostly of social media marketing, traditional media coverage and postering, that drove up to 1/3 of AIDs coverage that year (Effie Worldwide, 2012). However, after the 19 celebrities silenced their accounts on World AIDS Day, with much fanfare, their Pseudo-Event couldn't perpetuate itself. Coverage of the event lasted only a few days at its previous fever pitch, and the campaign soon lost its newsworthiness in favor of other headlines. Subsequently, news coverage primarily relayed the failure of the campaign and how the celebrities had unsuccessfully aggregated enough fundraising dollars to achieve the campaign's goal. Shortly after this narrative surfaced in media coverage, one of the 19 celebrities revived his virtual self prematurely. Almost one week into the campaign, seemingly more than enough time to raise one million dollars and with participating celebrities, such as Kim Kardashian, losing personal revenue for not posting to their Twitter accounts, only \$500,000.00 had been raised. At this point, philanthropist Stewart Rahr donated an additional \$500,000.00 to match the funds already pledged, and the Digital Death campaign came to a close (Adams et al, 2010). Thus, as a philanthropic act, the Digital Death campaign was technically a success, but as a spectacle and Pseudo-Event, it was an utter failure.

### **The Discourses of the Digital Death Spectacle**

The failure of Digital Death can be attributed to a number of factors. Certainly, the inherent democratizing structures in Twitter and Facebook that create uniform pages and posts for all people would allow the absence of the celebrity selves to go almost unnoticed. Recession economics were key. Very public celebrities raised money for causes, including comedian Stephen Colbert who obtained \$500,000.00 for DonorsChoose (Aditham, 2010), and Lady Gaga for Dosomething.org. Even more practical economic concerns could be cited for the failure of the general public to contribute. One criticism maintained that the supposed minimum contribution of \$10 per person (Farah, 2010) seemed a large amount for an average donation. Another popular criticism of the campaign complained that these wealthy celebrities were not committing their own funds to

the cause. Some detractors even recoiled at the proposed incentive for the campaign, with one commentator reporting, “They’ve got it backwards. They should continue updating their social network accounts until they reach one million in donations. Once they hit that goal, as a reward to the world, they should stop posting for a year. Even I would donate to that cause” (Aditham, 2010). According to these critics, the celebrities involved in the Digital Death campaign were committing an act of hubris, not charity. Rather than contributing their own funds or efforts to a worthwhile cause, these celebrities deemed their virtual selves so important that their virtual “death” would generate feelings of loss. From this perspective, the idea of Digital Death was silly at best.

Further discourses at the time provided contradictory messages about the importance of the Digital Death campaign. The spectacle of the media campaign, which consisted of the celebrities in coffins, often with their smart phone, now dark from lack of use, was mocked for taking itself too seriously (Farah, 2010). Even the phrase “Digital Death” can be criticized. Months earlier, the term had begun to refer to not only the campaign and the concept of killing a virtual self, but also had taken on other meanings, such as the death of a company. More poignantly, this phrase had begun to refer to actual deaths and their consequences for the digital avatars of the deceased, most notably Facebook profiles, that remained to outlive their owners (Gallaga, 2009). These celebrities’ proposed virtual death seemed insignificant and even crass when compared to its other definitions. The word choice of the campaign, “Digital Death” as opposed to “Digital Silence,” could be read as an immediate cue that the campaign itself seemed to flout cultural norms, with the implication that celebrity virtual deaths would have a more public and, perhaps more important, value than real death.

The value of celebrities and their own sense of self-importance seems to contradict the very alarming nature of Celebrity Culture about which Hedges warns. The public reaction of the campaign can be viewed as evidence that these consumers were highly aware of the nature of Celebrity Culture, of these celebrities’ wealth and their distinctly media-driven existence. Rather than reacting mindlessly to the campaign, users were immediately skeptical, with Tweets at the conclusion of the campaign revolving around its failure. One member, Pseudopseudo, wrote, “The ‘Digital Death’ celebs get bailed out by a millionaire. Figures. In the end, no one has learned anything” (Hereen, 2010). Fans revealed themselves to be aware of the illusory nature of social media. They had, essentially, crossed the gulf between reality and fantasy and their reactions seemed justified. Rather than being allured and obsessed with the celebrities, their interest was fleeting.

Once they had bridged the gulf between the fantasy of the celebrity and the actual celebrity cause, the public seemed disinterested. Soon the celebrities themselves

began to break from the Pseudo-Event. Usher reanimated his account six days after the campaign started, while other celebrities posted to their Twitter accounts to just promote the campaign (Stableford, 2010a). Kim Kardashian, who at the time was reported to make \$10,000.00 per Tweet (Adams et al, 2010), pressured the campaign to come to an end. The celebrities ostensibly could not remove their virtual selves for too long, for those virtual selves possessed too much value to the actual person behind the avatar.

In fact, the very act of the campaign, while attempting to create a bona fide Pseudo-Event, did almost the exact opposite, cutting off the means of perpetuating distraction—the celebrities' virtual selves on Twitter and Facebook. By publicizing the banality of this communication, the celebrities highlighted their own insignificance. Additionally, the social media's architecture, particularly the uniformity of profiles, worked against the celebrities. Twitter does not allow anyone to provide more than 140 characters of information, larger pictures of any particular user, or the posting of a celebrity's message to the top of personal pages or feeds. There is no hierarchy of information, only a democracy of data. These signs and uniform symbols, while they can create an illusion that any ordinary person can be a celebrity, can just as easily eliminate celebrity status from the user.

### **Conclusions on Digital Death**

The democratizing power of social media is not a new idea. Burgess and Green (2009) address both the “disruptive and uncomfortable” as well as “liberating” aspects of participatory culture in YouTube culture (p.10), where, similar to Twitter and Facebook, the medium places homemade and amateur videos alongside professionally made and distributed videos. Their acknowledgment that the hierarchy between these two types of videos has broken down is strikingly similar to the breakdown between Twitter and Facebook's miniature celebrities and actual celebrities who exist side by side on the website.

Most importantly, the Digital Death campaign underscored the true nature of the consumer of Celebrity Culture. Users were immune to Celebrity Spectacle and media coverage in which they themselves were participating. Brottman refers to this awareness as “the spirit of carnival,” which rails against convention. For Brottman (2005), the result in the postmodern era was “dynamic authenticity” (loc. 405). The ties between Brottman's theories and those in social media are clear. By intellectually and emotionally crossing the mimetic gulf, and thereby dispelling the illusions of celebrity virtual selves, the general audience of this spectacle was keenly literate of the structures of social media, celebrity identity and Celebrity Spectacle at large. The audience was able to discern what was authentic and inauthentic, as well as what was fantastical or diverting.

The apparent public apathy to the campaign goes against Hedges' assertions of a lack of cultural literacy. While Hedges (2010) asserts that such spectacles provide an "endless, mindless diversion... in a society that prizes entertainment above substance" and that "Intellectual or philosophical ideas require too much effort and work to absorb," (p. 43) it seems that technology, and its easy accessibility by the general public, made those who used it acutely aware of the value of both their own virtual identities and the virtual identities of the celebrities involved in the campaign. Those in the "blogosphere," both citizen and paid journalists, emphasized that the celebrities had made a mistake by conflating celebrity identity with a cause (Burke, 2010a), with many also criticizing the use of Twitter as a medium. As Shonali Burke (2010b) stated on her blog, "You have to really, *really* be paying attention to notice if someone hasn't tweeted in a while, unless you talk to them every day." In both cases, Ms. Burke's comments reveal a literacy with the medium, its functions and the relationship between it and Celebrity Spectacle. Rather than being illiterate to the complexities of the campaign, writers and readers like Burke were keenly aware of both their identity and celebrity identity, as well as the functions of both virtual reality and the public sphere in general.

This was not the first time that the power of spectacle has been called into question. Kellner (2003) claims that analysis of the spectacle should be "interpretive and interrogatory" (p. 11) because the relationship of the spectacle to the audience and its awareness of it is constantly shifting. Kellner (2003) insists, as a consequence, that "the spectacle is always contradictory, ambiguous... so that... celebrities can never be sure if they will be beneficiaries or victims of the vagaries of spectacle politics" (p. 16). Thus, rather than denying the audience's individuality, social media also has the ability to assert a kind of mobility and action that can supersede the media spectacle. Rather than being a slave to events, general antipathy shows the influence of what Dwight Macdonald (2005) might call "Folk Art" in his essay *A Theory of Mass Culture*. Macdonald saw Folk Art growing "from below. It was the spontaneous, autochthonous expression of the people, shaped by themselves" (p. 40). Of course, Burgess and Green (2009) disagree with this assertion. For them, that digital media's "peer-produced culture represents a renaissance of folk culture reproduces too simplistic a divide between the culture of the people and the culture of the mass media industries" (p. 14). However, the assertion of a virtual self, be it personal, public, or a commoditized celebrity persona, might inform, or be a tool similar to Macdonald's assertions about Folk Art. The power of the virtual self, like that of Folk Art, comes inherently from an individual sense of self and a subconscious awareness that consumers are creating their own spectacle. This awareness of the spectacle and the mimetic gulf is always present and real in the lives of those who employ social media as a tool. Hence, the virtual self becomes an "inflexion" (Barthes, 1972, p. 129) of our actual lives.

The failure of the Digital Death campaign demonstrates how social media can be used as a tool in the real world, rather than existing as a supplementary or illusory world in its own right. The consequences of creating a virtual self are merely a byproduct of this tool, where a plurality can interact with an online avatar while never recognizing the actual account owner. While the misgivings about the use of social media—irrevocably altering social interaction, instigating cultural illiteracy, time-consuming and wasting—seem prevalent, this tool can also mobilize, organize and assert the authentic world, not just the purported fantasy of media spectacle. This suggests that the spectacle itself is a kind of instrument, one too often co-opted by the elite. Now, with the power of social media and the awareness of the mimetic gulf, users of social media can capitalize on the spectacle itself, using it not only to generate consumption or assert virtual selves, but also to provoke change, enact personal business and, ultimately, break from the hegemonic patterns that Boorstin outlined nearly a half century ago. It is easy to assume that any spectacle is a distraction from reality. However, as the failures of Digital Death illustrate, literate users of social media can easily bridge the gulf between reality and fantasy, and through the lens of social media, identify and manipulate spectacle to their own ends.

## References

- Adams, C., Smith, E., Smith, S., & Palmeri, T. (2010, December 7). Frustrated celebs get back on Twitter thanks to donation from Stewart Rahr. *New York Post*, p. 6. New York, from [http://www.nypost.com/p/pagesix/frustrated\\_celebs\\_get\\_back\\_stewart\\_I2xWuZnQF3XLXVWMXcRxTM](http://www.nypost.com/p/pagesix/frustrated_celebs_get_back_stewart_I2xWuZnQF3XLXVWMXcRxTM)
- Aditham, K. (2010, December 2). “Digital Death” Campaign = Bomb? - AgencySpy. *Mediabistro*. News, Retrieved March 23, 2011, from [http://www.mediabistro.com/agencyspy/digital-death-campaign-bomb\\_b10989](http://www.mediabistro.com/agencyspy/digital-death-campaign-bomb_b10989)
- Ahearn, V. (2011, January 14). Celebs were nervous posing in coffins for Digital Death campaign, says photog - 1310News. *1310 NEWS*. Retrieved November 22, 2011, from <http://www.1310news.com/entertainment/article/169677--celebs-were-nervous-posing-in-coffins-for-digital-death-campaign-says-photog>
- Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies* (First.). New York: Hill and Wang.
- Boorstin, D. J. (1992). *The image: A guide to pseudo-events in America*. New York: Vintage Books. Pg. 11 – 60.
- Brottman, M. (2005). *High theory/low theory*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan. Kindle. Loc. 388 – 1090.

- Burgess, J., & Green, J. (2009). *YouTube: Online video and participatory culture*. Digital Media and Society Series (3rd ed.). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Polity Press. Pg. 10 – 14.
- Burke, S. (2010a, December 4). Snapping at synapses: Why Digital Death sucks | Waxing UnLyrical. *Waxing UnLyrical*. Blog. Retrieved March 23, 2011, a from <http://www.waxingunlyrical.com/2010/12/04/snapping-at-synapses-why-digital-death-sucks/>
- Burke, S. (2010b, December 6). Digital Death: The wrong way to launch a celebrity PR campaign | BNET. *BNet*. Business News. Retrieved March 23, 2011, b from <http://www.bnet.com/blog/startup-pr/digital-death-the-wrong-way-to-launch-a-celebrity-pr-campaign/312>
- Davis, D. (2010, November 30). Kim Kardashian gives up Twitter for world AIDS Day charity. *Harper's BAZAAR*. News. Retrieved July 23, 2012, from [http://www.harpersbazaar.com/bazaar-blog/kim-kardashian-keep-a-child-alive-113010?src=soc\\_fcbk](http://www.harpersbazaar.com/bazaar-blog/kim-kardashian-keep-a-child-alive-113010?src=soc_fcbk)
- Deresiewicz, W. (2009). The end of solitude. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/The-End-of-Solitude/3708>
- Effie Worldwide, Inc. (2012). *Keep A Child Alive – Digital Death Campaign* (Case Study). Effie Award (p. 5). New York. Retrieved from [http://s3.amazonaws.com/effie\\_assets/2012/6542/2012\\_6542\\_pdf\\_1.pdf](http://s3.amazonaws.com/effie_assets/2012/6542/2012_6542_pdf_1.pdf)
- Farah, A. (2010, December 6). Celebrity Digital Death: Why hasn't it been more successful? *The Huffington Post*. News. Retrieved March 23, 2011, from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/amanda-farah/celebrity-digital-death-w\\_b\\_792881.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/amanda-farah/celebrity-digital-death-w_b_792881.html)
- Foxman, M. (2010, December 1). Spiegelman, the cartoon | Media Memory History. *Media Memory History*. Blog. Retrieved March 23, 2011, from <http://mediamemoryhistory.wordpress.com/2010/12/01/spiegelman-the-cartoon/>
- Gallaga, O. (2009, May 11). Your digital life after death: All tech considered: NPR. *NPR*. News. Retrieved March 23, 2011, from [http://www.npr.org/blogs/alltechconsidered/2009/05/your\\_digital\\_life\\_after\\_death.html](http://www.npr.org/blogs/alltechconsidered/2009/05/your_digital_life_after_death.html)
- Hedges, C. (2010). *Empire of illusion: The end of literacy and the triumph of the spectacle*. Nation Books. Pg. 6 – 52.
- Hereen, J. (2010, December 7). Twitter / Justin Heeren: The “Digital Death” celebs ... *Twitter*. Personal. Retrieved March 23, 2011, from <http://twitter.com/pseudopseudo/status/12268748572463104>

- Huysen, A. (2000). Of mice and mimesis: Reading Spiegelman with Adorno. *New German Critique*, (81), Pg. 65-82.
- Kellner, D. (2003). Media culture and the triumph of the spectacle. *Psychology Press*. Retrieved from <http://gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/essays/mediaculturetriumphspectacle.pdf>. Pg. 4 - 11.
- Macdonald, D. (2005). A theory of mass culture. In D. R. A. Guins & O. Z. Cruz (Eds.), *Popular Culture: A Reader* (First Edition., p. 560 Pages). Sage Publications LTD. Pg. 40.
- Mirzoeff, N. (2006). On visibility. *Journal of Visual Culture*, 5(1), Pg. 53-79.
- Stableford, D. (2010a, December 6). 'Digital Death' campaign raises \$1M; Celebs allowed back on Twitter | The Wrap Media. *The Wrap*. Retrieved July 23, 2012, from <http://www.thewrap.com/media/column-post/hollywood-digital-death-campaign-raises-1m-celebrities-allowed-back-twitter-23048>
- Stableford, D. (2010b, December 10). Hollywood's "Digital Death" campaign DOA | The Wrap Media. *The Wrap*. Retrieved March 23, 2011, from <http://www.thewrap.com/media/column-post/hollywood-digital-death-aids-campaign-dead-on-arrival-22946>