

We're All Stars Now: Reality TV, Web 2.0 and Mediated Identities

April 15 2008

A new study of television viewing and communication patterns among young adults by University at Buffalo researchers has found a relationship between reality television viewing and "promiscuous friending" on popular social networking sites such as Facebook.

The researchers link this behavior to ordinary people modeling the behavior of reality TV celebrities. Such people are creating "mediated social selves" that the researchers describe as identities crafted for, presented on and "known" through media.

According to the study, heavy reality television (RTV) viewers not only spend more time on sites like Facebook, they also have larger social networks, share more photos and are more likely to engage in "friendships" with people with whom they have no off-line relationship, a practice known as promiscuous friending.

The study, "We're All Stars Now: Reality Television, Web 2.0 and Mediated Identities," indicates an erosion of the distinction between the everyday world and the celebrity world, in which common people claim intimacy with the completely mediated identities of such celebrities as Britney Spears or Brad Pitt.

It was conducted by Michael A. Stefanone, Ph.D., assistant professor, UB Department of Communication; Derek Lackaff, a doctoral candidate in that department, and Devan Rosen, assistant professor, University of Hawaii at Manoa.

The study is online at www.communication.buffalo.edu/...ypertext2008_000.pdf and will be published in June in the proceedings of the 2008 Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) Conference on Hypertext and Hypermedia.

These heavy RTV viewers also produced a significantly larger number of mediated selves and had a greater intimacy toward, and urge to interact with, the mediated social images of others.

All of these, say the researchers, are commonly considered celebrity behaviors.

"We found robust, systematic and statistically significant differences between viewers and non-viewers of RTV in terms of the behavior indices used here," Stefanone says, noting that other categories of television viewing, like news, fiction and educational programming were not related to users' online behavior.

"This study adds a unique perspective and several valuable insights to our understanding of people's motivation to participate in the social Web," he says.

"Our research is founded on the premise that the confluence of the rising popularity of both RTV and Web 2.0 applications has resulted in a fundamental shift in people's roles as media content consumers and producers," Stefanone says.

The study used social cognitive theory as the theoretical foundation for a survey of 456 young adults, hypothesizing that they would find the positive relationship between RTV consumption and behaviors believed to reflect the systemic processing of messages and behavior modeled within the RTV genre.

The researchers analyzed the amount of time subjects said they spent every day watching RTV, news, fiction and educational programming; the amount of time they were logged in daily, the size of their online networks, the percentage of their friends not met face-to-face and the number of photos they shared online.

Stefanone explains that while many users have articulated social network systems (SNS) that reflect their external social network, other users have SNS friend networks that contain many people who they have not actually met or with whom they have no external relationship.

"Promiscuous frienders may be reproducing the fame-seeking behavior that is modeled by reality TV characters," Stefanone says, adding that these behaviors are believed to reflect the systematic processing of messages and behaviors modeled within the RTV genre.

"Recall that the critical change in people's media diets over the past 15 years lies in a shift from consumption to production," he says.

"Internet users are faced with low time and financial costs as they enthusiastically contribute to the production of mass media."

"As RTV viewing increases, so too does the likelihood that these roles will be adopted en masse as people's interpersonal communication becomes increasingly mediated, which is to say, dependent on an intervening agent like computers."

In fact, as Stefanone points out, many people already see images of celebrities -- heavily crafted and edited social and photographic images -- far more often than they see those of friends and family members.

"People also use communication technologies to "interact" with their idols in many new ways -- such as "sighting" them (even stalking them)

and posting their real time whereabouts on online maps," he says.

There also are chat rooms on celebrity Web sites offering discussion with the celebrity and sites like "StickyMemo," which promises a direct link for members "to communicate with Celebrities and Famous people."(sic)

Stefanone says that this study shows that motivations for using social networking sites can be explained in part by traditional mass media consumption. He notes that many questions remain, however, and that future research should address how the contemporary definition of "friend" is changing.

"Having a large social network on a SNS site can be construed as a sign of popularity (being at the center of a large social network) and conversely, as a sign of superficiality (e.g., "Facebook whore" is a term for blatant SNS status-seekers).

In either case, a large friends list implies a large number of social connections, even if many of those connections have little social value in the traditional sense of friendship. In this scenario, users are actively competing for attention via expansive social networks.

"As the debate about whether Internet-based communication tools are enhancing our social lives or restricting them continues," he says, "additional research is needed to explore people's motivations to connect and ultimately whether these contacts have instrumental utility for users. Perhaps these tools are simply the latest platforms on which people compete for attention."

Source: University at Buffalo

Citation: We're All Stars Now: Reality TV, Web 2.0 and Mediated Identities (2008, April 15)
retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2008-04-stars-reality-tv-web-identities.html>

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