Grace Helbig: New Media Rockstar
by Macy Muirhead

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As society has progressed, people have watched as means of creative expression and consumption have evolved. Print preceded radio, and television and film soon stemmed from that medium. Cultural platforms have been changing for the last century, but the concept of celebrity has basically remained the same. Some of the earliest celebrities were artists who gained fame from their mastery in literature, art, or work on the stage; today’s celebrities usually earn their places in the spotlight because of their artistry in modern media such as film, television, and recorded music (Ward 58). Until today, a celebrity has been defined as someone who has gained recognition in the mass media, but this notion is changing with creation of new media that are molding a new kind of “niche celebrity.” A large portion of these celebrities that appeal to a small section of society hail from the social network Youtube where users can easily share video clips and creators can interact directly with their fans through comments and video content (Brainstorm Media). Youtube is part of the concept of Web 2.0, which is “a new way of using the Internet for collaboration and sharing of data among individual users” (Straubhaar 256). This new interactive element of the celebrity-fan relationship is spurring a change in the concept of celebrity. Grace Helbig is one of these original content-creators, and she has become a superstar of sorts on the platform. To most, Helbig seems obscure, but to her millions of channel subscribers, she is the ultimate celebrity (Helbig).

Through her use of new media, Helbig is changing the definition of celebrity and quickly becoming a pioneer of the next technology that will alter the way media is consumed.

If you had asked Grace Helbig what she had wanted to be in college, she probably couldn’t have given you a straight answer. At Ramapo College in her home state of New Jersey, Helbig created her own degree with a combination of editing, writing, digital filmmaking, and general media courses (Carrie). While interning at the N (now known as TeenNick), Helbig read scripts for the show Degrassi and decided she should try writing after reading a handful of bad drafts (Carrie). She enrolled in her first sketch writing class at the Peoples Improv Theater while interning in New York where she discovered she had a knack for making people laugh (Grace Helbig). With her newfound love of and talent at writing and performing, Helbig decided to move to New York to pursue comedy after graduation (Lanning). Before moving to Brooklyn, Helbig took a job housesitting in New Jersey. During this time, she began posting daily vlogs of her house-sitting adventures (“Grace Helbig Talks…”). Helbig continued to make videos when she moved to Brooklyn with her friend Michelle Vargas (Lanning). While working as a performer at the Peoples Improv Theater, Helbig booked an acting job with the website My Damn Channel – an opportunity she did not realize would turn her seemingly trivial hobby into a full-fledged career (“Grace Helbig Talks…”).

Helbig narrated the web series Bedtime Stories on My Damn Channel, in which she parodied classic fairytales with adult language and humor (Hoffberger). After linking her vlogs in her performer biography on the website, she soon garnered the attention of My Damn Channel CEO Rob Barnett, who offered her the opportunity to create a daily vlog for the site. The first of these videos
premiered under the name DailyGrace, but the show soon moved to YouTube because, as Helbig herself put it, “it’s insanely difficult to ask an audience to go somewhere other than YouTube to watch videos” (Carrie). Helbig’s Internet home for the last five years grew to well over two million subscribers (Kavner), until her contract with My Damn Channel expired on December 31, 2013 (Thank You Grace!). Helbig quickly moved on to her next venture without a network, when she debuted her new channel It’s Grace on January 6th, 2014 (Kavner). Within a few weeks the channel had already amassed nearly 1,500,000 subscribers (Helbig, It’s Grace). Through her journey working both for a network and for herself, Helbig has managed to retain creative control of her content, even though her intellectual property may not have always legally belonged to her (Johnson). Today, Helbig is better referred to as an Internet personality than a vlogger, but her original intentions to entertain people are still there. She is still the same fresh-faced, irreverent college graduate from her early housesitting vlogs, but she has overcome some of the unknowns of the new media field while simultaneously demonstrating that it has potential to be the next big shift in media consumption.

YouTube is almost synonymous with online videos today. It is the third largest website (behind Facebook and Google), and over 800,000,000 people visit it in a month (Brainstorm Media). With numbers like that, it is easy to see that online video content is quickly becoming one of the main avenues for entertainment. Mark Thompson, director general of the BBC, calls this generation of dual-purpose users “the Active Audience” because these users have the opportunity to be both consumers and creators of online content (Rosen). People are no longer solely on the receiving end of media, and they make more decisions about their media consumption habits than ever before. On YouTube in particular, users can create their own content while simultaneously being interactive fans of others creators. Without interactive viewers, content-creators cannot survive on the medium. YouTubers are not usually major companies with large budgets or big names. The majority of them are everyday people who decided to pick up a camera and talk about their day or make cheap, creative clips, and then suddenly woke up one day to find themselves with an audience who was demanding more. Without this audience, these channels would die. Unlike traditional fans of fame, viewers who create the niche celebrities are not just idle consumers. They are an essential part of the YouTube community and the lifeblood of its successful users. This interaction is a defining difference between the celebrity cultures of traditional media and new media.

This recent pull toward online content has naturally created celebrities of a sort within the medium. These creators go against the “typical” celebrity, who has historically gained fame from conventional media like movies, television, or recorded music. “The work is almost an excuse for the celebrity…Celebrity, then, is the real narrative – the real achievement,” writes Neal Gabler (Ward 65). According to Gabler, a celebrity is someone who exists only to be acknowledged for their calculated image in mass media and not so much for their work (Ward 58). His description tends to be the definition that most people associate with the word “celebrity”; however, with the successes of online platforms like YouTube, it is becoming more obvious that public image is not the only way to gain recognition. There are numerous creators like Helbig that have weekly shows and dedicated fan bases, but their personalities within their work are more responsible for their fame. Viewers gravitate toward the personality and not so much the quality or content of the video. Helbig’s recent transition to It’s Grace exemplifies this. She quickly regained an audience despite losing all of her Daily Grace catchphrases and familiarity to legal obligations with My Damn Channel. Her audience was enamored with her specific personality rather than the content she was obligated to make. New media celebrities like Helbig are created more by their unique, imper-
fect personalities than the carefully planned public images of traditional celebrities. The appeal of traditional celebrities is the narrative that is their life, but the appeal of this new type of celebrity is their authenticity (Ward 67).

YouTube's feeling of authenticity draws in the everyday people who watch online videos. They see themselves in their favorite YouTubers, so it is normal that they may fantasize about living life as one. The evolving nature of celebrity because of new media has made fame of some sort accessible to virtually everyone. On YouTube, the playing field is basically even. There is an equal opportunity for anyone with video recording capabilities to upload content – though not everything is necessarily equal in value. Like fame from traditional media, the “best” still tends to outshine the rest. This greater accessibility to public recognition has made people increasingly obsessed with attaining their own taste of fame. One of the co-founders of YouTube, Chad Hurley, once said: “Everyone, in the back of his mind, wants to be a star” (Chaudhry 19). From recent poll conclusions, it is easy to deduce that this is true in modern culture. An Interprise poll in 2000 claimed that 50 percent of children under 12 “believe that becoming famous is part of the American Dream”; another poll in 2004 showed that the average college freshman dreams of having a career in the entertainment business (Chaudhry 20). The most stunning conclusion comes from a Harris poll conducted in 2000 that states that 44 percent of people between the ages of 18 and 24 and six in ten people in their late twenties believe they will be famous for at least a short amount of time (Chaudhry 21).

Besides demonstrating the importance of celebrity to modern culture, these numbers also show how much the accessibility of new media has caused people to want to be noticed. Fame is no longer reserved for a select group of people, because there are endless niches that glorify particular people within those unique interest groups. This may be a major reason people flock to YouTube at all. Along with the social and psychological benefits that come from interacting with others in the community, there is a previously unheard of accessibility to potential stardom. A person is capable of making their own spot in culture by either creating or consuming media and then being recognized by a particular audience that would not be able to do so otherwise. A major defining difference between fame in traditional media and fame in new media is that with the social aspect and the sheer size of new media, the pursuit of recognition on some platform is now not such a farfetched desire. One day, the “niche celebrity” may rule the game of fame. As it becomes easier for the majority of society to attain at least a taste of fame in some circle, the concept of fame may become watered down and not mean as much as it currently does or has in the past.

The mutual relationship of need between consumers and creators of new media feeds into the younger generation’s growing desire to feel appreciated and its obsession with fame (Chaudhry 19). The creator needs the consumer to take in their content and to interact with them so that they stay relevant in the medium. The consumer also needs the creator, but for a different reason. These “niche celebrities” tend to be closer to their fans than mass media celebrities, and this relationship can feel very real to their viewers. YouTube channels like to Helbig’s have a main demographic referred to as “Generation C”. This group is made up mostly of teenagers and young adults. Typically, this is a time period in a person’s life in which they are seeking to find their own significance. Viewers of this age have made the most popular channels famous, mostly because these creators are relatable in comparison to other types of celebrities (Laporte). “Thirteen-year-olds don’t want a glossy celebrity to look up to; they want a warts-and-all friend who acknowledges them on video and in comment threads” (Laporte). This sense of relatability explains why major celebrities’ efforts to join the
Internet train, including Amy Poehler’s channel *Smart Girls at the Party* and Sarah Silverman and Michael Cera’s *Jash* channel, have not succeeded in crossing over to YouTube like those of grassroots YouTubers such as Helbig (Laporte). Sparkly celebrities that do not necessarily understand the celebrity culture of new media have difficulty creating the feeling of a personal relationship which is a main reason that new media audiences are much more devoted to their particular stars.

Helbig’s followers are an overwhelmingly significant aspect of her success on YouTube. Her show revolves around interaction with her fans. Without it, Helbig would not have a show every day or such a loyal audience. “It’s a great way for the blog to feel more interactive,” she says, “and for my audience to think that they’re creating this beast along with me” (Hoffberger). Helbig often refers to herself as her viewers’ “awkward older sister” (Brainstorm Media). The nature of YouTube allows her fan base - which is mostly young adult females - to feel like they have a personal relationship with her (Hoffberger). This dependency and connection between Helbig and her fans is what has made her a pioneer of this new type of celebrity.

Because Helbig’s channel started as an amateur venture and still largely continues to be one, she has a more intimate relationship with her fans than more of typical celebrities do. The homemade aspect of her creative process is an attractive quality for her viewers. She does everything, from shooting and editing to promotion, for her videos (Brainstorm Media). Helbig said it best in the documentary *Please Subscribe*: “There are times when I post videos that have severe editing errors in them and there are times that I post videos where I say wrong information about things...at the end of the day, I’m really not that different of a person than the people that are watching the videos. I just sat at home and started making them myself, so I think people resonate with that” (Brainstorm Media). This aspect of Helbig fits into the amateur nature of YouTube, which is essentially an industry built on mistakes; however, this is changing. There is a growing professional side to YouTube that large YouTubers like Helbig are beginning to discover - and sometimes pay the price for. Creators who signed onto networks in the early days of YouTube are now dealing with the consequences of their naivety and amateurism as contracts expire and they are faced with the fact that they do not necessarily own all aspects of their original content (Johnson). Without daring pioneers like Helbig, however, the medium might not have grown into what it is today. Their early mistakes are leading to the next change in consumption. Major media executives are now getting involved in YouTube and its many benefits economically, and they are becoming more concerned with content-creators such as Helbig, as opposed to only seeking out talent (Laporte). Successful YouTubers are not as big of a risk for these big companies to delve into because not only do they come with the talent they have historically sought out, but they also have with the ability to create content, possess stronger economic backgrounds, and, most importantly, boast devoted fan bases that will carry through into whatever endeavor they jump into.

Despite this growing professional side, online video content is still ephemeral, and people forget about duds quickly. Unlike in traditional fame, online celebrity flaws are not harped on repeatedly in the media. If they miss a day or say something wrong, their careers are not tarnished, because the Internet culture has a way of repairing its own errors. Helbig often acknowledges when she posts a bad video through self-deprecating jokes within her content. Her system of creating and posting a daily video allows her breathing room. If today’s installment of *It’s Grace* was not good, her viewers will quickly forget about that three to five minute clip because tomorrow there will be a new opportunity for success. There is no one judging her content except for her and her viewers, and she ultimately has the final say on what gets posted. For a more traditional celebrity,
this luxury of control is not present. There are a myriad of people contributing to the work, image, and success of a world-renowned pop star or the latest Oscar winner. Because Grace Helbig is responsible for every aspect of her content, including her successes and defeats, she seems to audiences as genuine and relatable. This is why she has such a dedicated fan base. Her young fans can connect better with her because there is a feeling of authenticity to everything about her. While Helbig’s work ethic and personality are crucial to her rise to popularity, her adorers are largely responsible for solidifying her place as a pioneer of the niche celebrity.

Helbig’s fan base is demographically similar to that of many typical mass media celebrities, but her admirers appreciate her for a different reason. There may not be a better example of a “relatable” mass media celebrity than pop sensation Taylor Swift. People love Swift because she seems like an everyday girl. Helbig’s fans love her for the same reason, but her relatability feels more genuine. Swift has a team that is responsible for making sure she maintains her particular public image, but for the most part, Helbig is responsible for herself and herself alone. When there is a veil of glamour over someone who is supposed to seem “normal”, their ordinariness appears less legitimate. Helbig, a celebrity of sorts herself, has even commented on this in various videos where she caricatures Swift’s fabricated realness and over-exaggerated naivety. Because of Swift’s lack of control of her image, she appears a lot less authentic than Helbig.

Helbig has avoided losing control of her authenticity through the interactive nature of her online fame and her much smaller but more dedicated fan base. Swift’s large-scale fame prevents her from seeming approachable like Helbig and other niche celebrities. Her fame has made her into the image of perfection. This keeps a distinct barrier between Swift and her fan base, a barrier that is not necessarily present for Helbig. The niche nature of her fame allows her fans to interact with her and influence her work directly.

The control Helbig has over her public image also makes her into a much “realer” version of a relatable young woman than Swift and other similar celebrities, because she is a lot less polished for the public eye. In her videos, she often burps, cusses, gets drunk, or talks about subjects that society likes to pretend girls avoid. Sometimes she shoots a video with no makeup on and with her hair thrown messily on top of her head. She is not as concerned with her appearance or her image as a whole, because she doesn’t have to be. This new breed of celebrity has free rein with their image and work. Helbig created her Internet empire from the bottom up, as opposed to mass media celebrities, such as Swift, who usually have a publicist that deals with keeping up their reputations and public profiles. Because of this, Helbig gets to enjoy the best of both worlds. Helbig has a normal private life that parallels her online celebrity. Because Helbig has a small fan base in comparison to those of typical celebrities, she is capable of living a relatively normal life for a young woman her age – a luxury Swift has given up: “I walk around every day and I don’t get recognized. It happens, maybe, once a month or every two months, and it’s usually when I go to a Forever 21…it hardly happens, and that’s a really cool thing about it” (Zaino). As a niche celebrity, Helbig gets to experience the perks of normality and fame simultaneously; because of this, she seems more genuine than typical celebrities whose sense of authenticity gets masked by their images.

While YouTube is changing celebrity, it is also creating avenues for entrance into more traditional media. YouTube has become a “recruitment tool” for music labels, talent agencies, and production companies to find new talent that has already amassed massive audiences (Brownstein). Soon, Grace Helbig may be one of these talents currently being fostered on YouTube. After all, before discovering online fame, she was working
towards becoming a comedy writer and actress in traditional media. She did not start on YouTube with the intention of getting her name out. She was simply having fun vlogging about her experiences in the awkward transition into adulthood. In fact, she felt somewhat violated when her real life and her Internet life began to merge. One of the first instances of this was when Helbig was performing at the Peoples Improv Theater and noticed a fan wearing a shirt with a *Daily Grace* catchphrase on it. “I was like, ‘oh no, my private world!’ But it wasn’t private. It was online for everyone to see – and it was catching on” she said (Kavner). That freaked out, clueless twenty-something may now be the future of the next new media. “I’d love to be one of the pioneers trying to figure out what’s next,” she said (Lanning). Following Web 2.0, “what’s next” will more than likely follow the interactive trend - a field of entertainment that Helbig has become an expert in. Helbig commented on the future medium in her typical crassly comedic fashion: “A lot of questions I get are, what’s the future of TV and Internet? Will they fight to the death or will they have sex with each other? And I think that they need to have sex with each other because neither one is going to go away entirely, but the idea of collaboration and supplemental content on another platform I think is a smart way to bring new life to old media” (Lanning). She may soon be the innovator of that next new media.

Without knowing it, Helbig recently gave the industry an insight into the future of the interactive phenomena when she booked a traditional media job with Lowe’s. She is currently starring in a series of commercials for the hardware store, and after they went on air, the Internet community exploded with delight over its beloved Helbig being on television (“Grace Helbig”). Lowe’s was equally ecstatic with the attention it was getting because of Helbig’s Internet stardom. Though she did not get the job strictly because of her Internet fame (in fact, according to Lanning, she almost *didn’t* get the job because of some racier videos from a job with G4’s *Attack of the Show*), the reaction to her being on a traditional medium indicates that a mixture between the two generations of media is almost inevitable.

Helbig is already putting her own twist on traditional media through opportunities that have arisen from her work and fan base on *YouTube*. Helbig and her two best friends, Mamrie Hart of *You Deserve a Drink* and Hannah Hart of *My Drunk Kitchen*, were united through *YouTube* (Zaino). Together the three women (who are referred to as The Holy Trinity by their online followings) have collaborated on numerous humorous videos (Gutelle), toured the country with an “Internet variety show” called #NoFilter that ran off of audience participation via social media (Zaino), and filmed and produced the movie *Camp Takota* which they promoted while still filming. Along with these major accomplishments, Helbig is currently working on other self-made projects including a book of essays and advice and a pilot with the *E!* network that will “ideally ‘bring the Internet to TV’” (Kavner). Without the Internet and her position as a “niche celebrity,” Helbig probably would not have received these unique opportunities, nor would she be paving the way for future media consumption.

“I’m an adult and I sit at home by myself and talk to a camera. It’s so cool!” Helbig says, “it might not be other people’s definition of cool, but it’s sure as hell mine” (Brainstorm Media). Back when Grace Helbig was sitting in her tiny Brooklyn apartment talking to a webcam, she probably never imagined that one day she would have well over two million people watching her videos. She probably never imagined that she would win two IAWTV Awards and two Streamys – honors that didn’t even exist at the time (“Grace Helbig”). She probably never imagined that she would become a new kind of celebrity that is altering what it means to be famous, and she probably never imagined that one day she would be one of the few people walking the increasingly blurred line between traditional media.
and new media. The girl who looked up to great female comedians including Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, Lisa Kudrow, and Kristen Wiig now represents a similar figure to so many young people (Lanning). Through her use of YouTube and other types of new media, Grace Helbig has changed the definition of a celebrity and will continue to make waves in the future of media as she leads the way to its next identity. “The future is the present!” Helbig emphatically exclaims in the documentary Please Subscribe. She is right, but she is the future.

Works Cited


Muirhead, “Grace Helbig: New Media Rockstar”