

MEDIASPACE

Place, scale and culture in a media age

Edited by
Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy

THE WEBCAM SUBCULTURE AND THE DIGITAL ENCLOSURE

Mark Andrejevic

... it is going to be a VERY interesting day indeed, when
streaming with sound is available to everyone and EVERYONE
has a TV show :) I can't wait!

(From the public diary of webcam celebrity Ana Voog)

Introduction

When Jennifer Ringley first turned an inexpensive digital camera on herself in a college dorm and went live to an audience that would eventually include millions of online fans (and critics), she seemed to demonstrate the revolutionary potential of the Internet. After all, she was but a young woman with paltry resources and no background in media production, and she managed to produce a popular show on a shoestring budget with a production crew of one: herself. Single-handedly she seemed to herald an alternative media model – one that had haunted the imagination of media critics for decades. If the mass media represented the concentration of symbolic power in the hands of a select few, 'Jennicam' demonstrated that an 'ordinary' person could reach millions from the public privacy of her home. Similarly, if the mass media provided a one-way form of broadcasting, Jennicam demonstrated the ability of at least one member of the mass to speak back: not only by putting on her show, but by engaging in ongoing online chats with her audience. Finally, if the networks provided viewers with predigested news and canned entertainment programming, Jennicam promised access to uncultured, uncensored and unmediated reality. Several years ahead of her time, Ringley anticipated the reality-programming trend. Her occasional critiques of the formulaic products of the mass media and her professed ideals of a community-based medium also seemed to anticipate in some distant form the utopian yearnings of Douglas Kellner's claim that new media enable 'ordinary citizens and activists themselves to become political actors and communicators, to reproduce and disseminate information, and to participate in debates and struggles, thus helping to realize Gramsci's dictum that anyone could be a public intellectual' (Kellner 1999: 109).

Of course, Ringley was hailed not as a revolutionary but as a curiosity, and she became a darling of the mass media, which relentlessly featured her in newspaper

articles and news interviews, helping to build her audience around the world and to inspire imitators. In 1999, the *New York Times* estimated that there were approximately a quarter of a million people around the globe 'exposing their lives part-time' and that one million webcams were sold in 1999 alone (Sella 2000: 54). Brian Curj, the founder of Earthcam.com, estimated that there would be some 36 million webcams in operation in North America by 2005, creating an online echo of the boom in reality-based programming (MSNBC Reports 2000). If Jennicam was little more than a curiosity, her followers seemed to have sparked a small movement, which a recent MSNBC documentary dubbed 'The Webcam Explosion' (ibid.). The rhetoric of the information revolution accordingly engulfed the webcam movement, which offered a paradigmatic, if somewhat eccentric, example of the decentralization and democratization of social power promised by techno-utopians like William Wriston and Derrick DeKerckhove (Wriston 1992, Kelly 1996).

As the example of Jennicam suggests, this promise unfolds itself in spatial terms: the development of interactive, networked communication technologies offers to transform sites formerly devoted to passive reception into spaces of production. Digital convergence ostensibly overwhelms the spatial divisions associated with the concentration of power, and with the alienation of consumers and viewers from the production process. Thanks to the new medium, we can all gain access to the means of production by migrating into the undifferentiated, liberating realm of cyberspace.

However, as Robins and Webster (1999) have suggested, such revolutionary rhetoric is misplaced if it is meant to herald a fundamental shift in social relations. On the contrary, interactive media are rapidly being assimilated into an economic framework in which participation has nothing at all to do with power sharing. And yet, media consumption and production are both undoubtedly undergoing dramatic transformations. The networks are gearing up for 'interactive' television and media convergence, or so we are told, while Internet use in the developed nations is increasing at an impressive pace. If these changes are not revolutionary, we have to admit at the very least that they signal dramatic transformations in the way we think about and use the media.

History is rife with examples of dramatic transformations that have fallen far short of being revolutionary in the political sense of the word. Indeed, the notion of revolution itself has been thoroughly de-politicized in such phrases as 'the Industrial Revolution' and 'the Information Revolution'. The problem for media theory, then, is to account for the fact that such dramatic transformations are not revolutionary. In somewhat different terms, the problem is to explain how existing social relations are being reconfigured to absorb and exploit dramatic changes in media technology and practice. The goal of this chapter is to attempt to offer one such explanation based on a discussion of the so-called webcam revolution and its reconfiguration of productive space. The promise of spatial de-differentiation is real: webcam pages really do offer a site of media production radically different from that of the mass media, and they also offer a

way of reaching potential audiences and creating an interactive forum for public discussion. However, far from being subversive, the use of webcam pages for perpetual self-disclosure (personal 'reality TV', as it were) anticipates the emerging surveillance-based rationalization of the online economy. Far from shifting control over the means of production – media or otherwise – the commercial deployment of interactive media allows for the exploitation of the work of being watched. In other words, the de-differentiation of spaces of consumption and production achieved by new media serves as a form of spatial enclosure: a technology for enfolding previously unmonitored activities within the monitoring gaze of marketers. Spaces associated with leisure and domestic activities do become increasingly productive from a commercial point of view, precisely because they can be more thoroughly monitored. Viewed from this perspective, webcam celebrities like Jennifer Ringley and her various imitators presage not the paradigm of the online public intellectual envisioned by Kellner, but that of the 'fully-documented life' described by Bill Gates (1996).

The day in which everyone will be able to have his or her own TV show is neither as far off nor as utopian as the imaginings of Minneapolis-based webcam artist Ana Voog quoted above might suggest. Although they do not put it quite in these terms, the writings of economic futurists (including Mougayar 1998, Gares 1996, Pine 1993) envision a future in which a large number of content producers – the public – will Netcast the rhythm of their day-to-day lives to a small group of viewers. Perhaps the term 'Netcasting' needs to be recast, since the incipient media model is neither the familiar one-to-many nor the one-to-one model, but rather a 'many-to-few' format: consumers will relay the content of their daily lives to a core group of data miners. This latter group will, in turn, sort, package, re-sell and eventually use this information. In other words, everyone (with some minimal level of disposable income) will have his or her own show. That show will be their 'real' lives: the details of their purchases, of their leisure-time choices, of their advertising and programming preferences – of as much of their private life as can be commodified (which is to say, nearly all of it). In this sense, Netcasting might have a bigger future than even its most ardent fans imagine.

Exploring the social transformations that correspond to this potential future requires reformulation of the terms that media critics generally deploy. It should be fairly obvious by now that those terms have been co-opted by the commercial proponents of new media, who are themselves decrying the shortcomings of the mass media and of mass society in general. Consider, for example, the recent advertisement for the digital television service TiVo: two bouncers charge into a TV executive's office and throw him out the window. The message is that viewers are no longer at the mercy of the programming whims of TV execs: they can watch what they want, when they want (and even bleep through the commercials). The form of the promise is explicitly spatial: thanks to the new technology, the inner sanctum of media control, the headquarters of symbolic power, is breached. Once inside, the viewer is able to seize control of the

programming process. The promise of the digital revolution is precisely that it will surpass the shortcomings of mass society: consumers will no longer be faced with homogenized products (media and otherwise) and standardized prices. They will be able to participate in the planning process from which they were excluded, and to purchase customized goods, services and information; to search for the lowest prices, and even to bargain online (consider, for example, the success of online auction sites like E-bay and Priceline.com). Overcoming mass society means overcoming the spatial divisions that constituted and reproduced it, in particular the division between planning, execution and consumption. The promise of a post-mass society thus builds on the thread of pre-mass nostalgia that runs through the mass society critique. Is production too standardized? New information and communication technologies will help customize it. Are the media too one-way, top-down and monopolistic? The Internet will render them decentralized and interactive. Have we become separated and alienated from the production process and from the planners who orchestrate our needs and desires? In cyberspace this alienation can be overcome. Have we lost our sense of community, become disembedded and deterritorialized? We can rediscover community and re-embed ourselves in virtual space.

Since this promise is so pervasive both in descriptions of the online economy and in the mass society critique that it has co-opted, our first task will be to attempt to devise an alternative critical framework and terminology for exploring the deployment of interactive media, which I outline briefly in the discussion of the 'digital enclosure' below. The remainder of the chapter will draw on this framework to explore the transitional or fringe case of webcams. The goal is to suggest a reconsideration of the question of the revolutionary potential of new media technologies. Far from reintroducing political participation into the mediated public sphere, interactivity offers the potential to democratize publicity as celebrity. No longer are we faced with the binary opposition between passive consumption and active (presumably critical) participation, rather with the paradigm of active participation as a form of self-commodification. Kelner's hope for the resurgence of the public intellectual is short-circuited by the false revolution anticipated by Baudillard, in which 'reversibility' – or what might be termed 'interactivity' in the jargon of the technoculture – merely recapitulates the instrumentalization of publicity by 'proposing, as a revolutionary solution, that everyone become a manipulator, in the sense of active operator, producer, etc.' (Baudillard 1981: 82).

Spatial transformations and the digital enclosure

If a crucial element of the promise of new media interactivity is that of spatial de-differentiation – of overcoming the boundaries that concentrated power and control in mass society – then debunking this promise requires an alternative interpretation of the de-differentiation process. Instead of promoting power

sharing, the contemporary deployment of interactivity exploits participation as a form of labor. Consumers generate marketable commodities by submitting to comprehensive monitoring. They are not so much *participating*, in the progressive sense of collective self-determination, as they are *working* by submitting to interactive monitoring. The advent of digital interactivity does not challenge the social relations associated with capitalist rationalization, it reinforces them and expands the scale on which they operate. Historically, we can trace a three-step progression: spaces of work, leisure and domesticity are first differentiated and then, thanks to the creation of a monitored workspace, techniques for the supervision and rationalization of the labor process are developed and intensified. Finally, this rationalization process is extended into the spaces from which it was originally isolated. Thus, the boundary-breaking character of networked interactivity is not revolutionary in a political sense. Rather it bears the character of what Marcuse (1992) described as 'repressive desublimation': an ostensible liberation that reinforces entrenched social relations. Far from democratizing the production process, participation has the potential to vastly enhance its rationalization.

A spatially-inflected critique of interactive media must therefore locate their deployment within the history of monitored space in capitalist production. The advent of capitalism was predicated upon the spatial strategy of enclosure, which, as Giddens (1981) describes, made possible a transformation in the mode of exploitation from one based on the forcible appropriation of surplus product to the contractual accumulation of surplus value. When workers are compensated in the form of wages rather than in the form of a portion of their product, the need for monitoring is obviously intensified – hence the need for a workspace proper that can be separated out from other social spaces and closely monitored. Giddens notes that this spatial differentiation might be seen as the first step in the scientific management of labor: 'The main phenomenon, in fact, that promotes the separation of home and work-place is the recognition of employers that labour discipline is more satisfactorily sustained if workers are under one roof' (Giddens 1981: 10). The rise of industrialization, as both Giddens (1981) and Foucault (1978) suggest, was predicated on the spatial concentration of workers within the factory where their work could be more easily surveyed. As Braverman (1974) observes, the consequent scientific management of production is predicated on a spatial division within the factory: that between the factory floor and the planning department, where information about workers is gathered, analyzed and used to determine ways of rendering the deployment of labor power more efficient.

The characteristic spatial divisions of modernity correspond not just to the division of labor, but to the divisions between labor and non-labor activities. The social relations of production are reinforced by the spatial segregation of sites of production and consumption. As Couldry (2000) notes, this segregation is carried over into the sphere of media practice, where it reinforces the symbolic power of media institutions. Limited access to the site of media

production helps naturalize the way stories are framed and facts presented, precisely because the editing and writing processes whereby media products are constructed remain largely inaccessible to the public.

On its surface, the webcam 'movement' seems to challenge this spatial segregation by allowing a domestic site like a dorm room or household to become a site of production in its own right. However, far from subverting power relations, such a challenge anticipates the reconfigured spatial logic of what Schiller (1999) calls digital capitalism. This reconfiguration is embodied by the double movement of the 'digital enclosure', which can be understood as the process whereby activities formerly carried out beyond the monitoring capacity of the Internet are enfolded into its virtual space. Examples might include the attempt by online booksellers to replace 'bricks and mortar' stores, or the development of digital forms of television delivery. The process is still very much in its early stages, but is being heavily underwritten by capital investment as well as by the enthusiastic and breathless predictions of the mass media.

From an economic perspective, the process of digital enclosure relates to the earlier enclosure movement in so far as it promises to compel entry into a particular social relation – one of surveillance – by pre-empting alternative spaces. A service like TiVo, for example, which promises to empower viewers, serves simultaneously to subject them to an unprecedented level of monitoring. Viewers may be able to choose which shows they watch and when, but in return they supply the details of their viewing habits to TiVo, which can use the information to customize marketing appeals and programming recommendations. The payment for this information is offered in the form of added convenience and customization. To the extent that an interactive digital system becomes the standard for content delivery and not just one more option, as envisioned, for example, by Bill Gates (1996), viewers lose the ability to choose whether or not to submit to comprehensive monitoring. Watching interactive TV, in other words, requires entry into a monitored relationship, which in turn allows for the increasing rationalization of the marketing process. This, of course, is precisely the paradigm of customized marketing envisioned by both proponents and critics of e-commerce (see, for example, Schiller 1999; Gates 1996; Pine 1993).

It is, at the same time, important to note that entry into the digital enclosure promises to undo one of the constituent spatial divisions of capitalist modernity: that between sites of labor and leisure. This undoing represents a form of de-differentiation whereby formerly 'unproductive' spaces are rendered economically productive (the scare quotes are meant to acknowledge the way in which notions of economic productivity tend to overlook unpaid domestic labor). Despite the rhetoric of empowerment, the process of de-differentiation tends to work primarily in one direction: it does not make work more like 'free time', but, rather, tends to commodify free time by transforming it into time that can be monitored, recorded, repackaged and sold. If the land enclosure movement helped separate spaces of labor from those of leisure and domesticity

so that the deployment of labor time could be more efficiently exploited, the digital enclosure stretches out to encompass what was left over.

The anticipated productivity of this mediated digital enclosure is thus predicated on a self-reinforcing spiral of surveillance and self-disclosure. Entry into this enclosure allows consumption to double as a form of production. Downloading a book or programming a digital television set generates information that can be repackaged, sold and eventually incorporated into customized products whose consumption generates ever more specific demographic information. If, within the digital enclosure, surfing the web doubles as a form of self-disclosure, and if this self-disclosure generates commodifiable information, then the more one consumes, the more one specifies who one is (from a marketing perspective), and thus what one wants. Full attainment of desire is predicated on complete disclosure. Personal webcam sites anticipate this process by providing unedited access to the rhythms of the day-to-day life of their protagonists. However, rather than divulging this information to a select group of viewers who stand to profit from its monopolization, webcam sites offer themselves directly to consumers as a form of entertainment that doubles as a means of advertising the advantages, conveniences and, even, the sociability of the digital enclosure. In this respect, webcam celebrities who profit from their activity represent the entrepreneurs of the digital enclosure.

The digital enclosure of DotComGuy

Since Jennicam first went online from Dickinson College in 1996, hundreds of imitators have followed suit, and many of them have attempted to tap into the commercial potential of home webcasting. One of the most recent imitators, a 26-year-old former computer systems manager who changed his name to DotComGuy when he decided to live his life online for a year, served as a round-the-clock advertisement for the ostensible benefits of the de-differentiation of work, leisure and domestic space within the digital enclosure. DotComGuy's stated goal was to prove to the world that he could order everything he needed to survive over the Internet – without leaving home for all of the year 2000. Furthermore, he attempted to earn a living while shopping, budgeting himself a \$98,000 salary based on the revenues he hoped to earn from online sponsorships and advertising. The project got off to a strong start: during the early months, DotComGuy's website boasted an average of one million hits a day (Elledge 2000), and he built up an impressive list of online sponsors. However, his timing was bad. The dot.com crash was in full swing by the time he had spent half a year in the DotComPound, and he left the house at the end of the year with nothing to show for his efforts but a few of the products that had been donated by sponsors. Despite its failure as an entrepreneurial endeavor, the DotComGuy website made explicit the role that surveillance played in transforming domestic and leisure-oriented spaces into spaces of production. One newspaper account put it succinctly, describing DotComGuy

(a.k.a. Mitch Maddox of Dallas, Texas) as 'a guy who sold his own life – whose journals are posted on-line, whose everyday speech is riddled with endorsements, whose movements even in sleep are scrutinized by millions of viewers' (Copeland 2000: C1).

DotComGuy, in short, overcame the spatial divisions of modernity described by Giddens (1981). When he was in the DotCompound (which included a backyard for DotComDog), he was, in some sense, always working. Even when he was sleeping, a viewer who logged onto the site could find an image of him in bed surrounded by the flashing banner ads that helped pay his salary. In addition to turning his life into a series of product endorsements (from online grocery and maid services to software products and even an online athletic trainer), DotComGuy served as a branded advertisement for the promise of the online economy. This promotional function was not a by-product of the project, but its explicit goal, as stated on DotComGuy's website:

It started with an observation: ... E-commerce can provide anything you could ask for, and you'd never have to leave home. ... Most people still think the Internet is an infant. This then, is a unique opportunity to help bring that baby up and help others learn to trust it. ... This project can help take some of the drudgery out of day-to-day purchases, and even help turn people on to a world they might not otherwise embrace. (DotComGuy.com 2000)

In short, DotComGuy's life became a round-the-clock advertisement for a lifestyle that corresponded to a new way of consuming. It was by no means a fluke that this advertisement took the form of perpetual surveillance, for such is the nature of the lifestyle being advertised. Online, we may well all become DotComPeople, under perpetual surveillance, ostensibly for our own convenience and profit. DotComGuy's advertising campaign, then, makes a pitch not just for the convenience of online shopping, but for the advantages of being watched. By agreeing to live his life on camera, DotComGuy enacted the appropriate attitude of the wired consumer: a thoroughly contemporary, almost 'hip', lack of squeamishness toward surveillance.

This is the attitude of the youth celebrities on MTV's *Real World* and of would-be contestants on reality game shows like *Survivor* and *Big Brother*. It is also the characteristic attitude of the webcam celebrity. Jennifer Ringley, for example, equates the retreat into privacy concerns as a form of self-delusion: 'I honestly think the concept of privacy is a mental fabrication. It's a convenient way to imagine we're hiding the things we like least about ourselves, and therefore negates us from responsibility for them. ... Realistically ... we should be able to defend our actions to ourselves, to know why we do what we do and to come to peace with it' (Ringley 2000). Perpetual surveillance, in other words, is nothing to be afraid of – so long as we are honest with ourselves. Comfort with self-disclosure signifies a healthy openness and self-awareness. It is no longer

surveillance that is stigmatized, but the fear of it. This attitude neatly aligns itself with the marketing promise of e-commerce: that willing submission to perpetual self-disclosure should be viewed neither as an intrusion nor as an inconvenience to be tolerated, but as an advantage to consumers. One of the reasons that the mass market felt like a homogenizing force was that our individual natures were shielded in privacy that failed to let marketers discern the idiosyncrasies of our desires. Thus, if we are to counter this tendency, we must open ourselves up to the process of self-commodification as self-expression.

The virtual workspace

DotComGuy's publicity project anticipates not just the rationalization of consumption via surveillance, it also serves as a rudimentary model of the twenty-first-century workplace envisioned by corporate futurists. Pruitt and Barrett (1991), for example, imagine that workers will be able to go to work without leaving home, by entering a 'corporate virtual workspace' – a virtual reality construct that workers log into from home. This workspace conveniently does away with the wasted time of commuting and even of showering and dressing, when the work to be attended to is truly pressing (in the world they describe, it is apparently oppressively so). Indeed, the workspace is never more than a mouse-click away. The absorption of the workspace by the digital enclosure captures the capitalist imagination for two reasons. First, because it promises to facilitate management monitoring, and second, because it contributes to the fantasy of friction-free capitalism by offering to make labor markets fluid and flexible.

Pruitt and Barrett do not shy away from the implications of this new space for workers. The 'unprecedented freedom' they predict for the workforce of the future turns out to be, in significant ways, a negative form of freedom: freedom from benefits and job security: 'If the individual takes full advantage of cyberspace and becomes an independent economic unit, he will need to become more self-reliant. Health care and financial cushions [by which they presumably mean retirement and unemployment benefits] may become the responsibility of the individual' (Pruitt and Barrett 1991: 406). Ongoing job shifting and retrenching would be the norm, and corporations would no longer bear the burden of looking after their employees: 'By releasing workers with no repercussions, a company may find itself rehiring a rejuvenated and enriched worker' (Pruitt and Barrett 1991: 407). Freedom is reconfigured as the natural, Darwinian freedom of the marketplace: the freedom to compete for jobs on an ongoing basis, and it is underwritten by the de-differentiation that transforms the private 'free' space of the home into a workspace.

The fact that DotComGuy's status remains somewhat indeterminate (is he producing or consuming? is his home a workspace, a domestic space, or a public space?) highlights the de-differentiation of space that facilitates the commodification of both consumption and leisure time. Free time in the digital enclosure is not

quite as 'free' from commodification as it was 'on the outside'. Within the enclosure every consumption decision represents a double value: that realized in exchange, and that which can be generated by the information about the transaction.

From the perspective of media production, DotComGuy represents not only the indeterminate space of consumption/production, but the erosion of the division between advertising and content that takes place within such a space. Like the character Truman Burbank in the film *The Truman Show*, DotComGuy is both the site's protagonist and a round-the-clock male model for the products it endorses. He wears the clothes and eats the food he orders over the Internet – and he does so online, providing viewers with links that allow them to do the same. He thereby extends the process of de-differentiation to the boundary between advertising and content – a boundary that has long been contested in the US commercial media, but whose dissolution has become an explicit goal for advertisers in an era when digital VCRs promise to make ad zapping easier than ever before. The reality TV trend has been at the forefront of this de-differentiation process, as evidenced by the integration of sponsors into the content of such successful shows as *Survivor* and *American Idol*. As *Survivor* producer Mark Burnett observed, the show 'is as much a marketing vehicle as it is a television show'. My shows create an interest, and people will look at them, but the endgame here is selling products in stores – a car, deodorant, running shoes. It's the future of television' (Reiter 2002).

Convergence: being watched at work and the work of being watched

DotComGuy, then, stands at the point of convergence of two trends in the online economy: the flexible, interactive workspace, and the monitored space of consumption. It is not the goal of this chapter to conflate these two spaces, but rather to observe the way in which they reflect one another. Interactive, networked media allow both for the development of the spatially 'flexible' workspace and for the increased economic productivity of spaces of leisure and domesticity. These trends represent two forms of spatial transformation: that of the home (or café, or airport, etc.) doubling as an office, and that of non-workplace activities becoming economically productive when they take place within the monitored space of the digital enclosure.

If DotComGuy combines these forms of productivity from the privacy of his home, another webcam site, 'The Nerdman Show' (as in *The Truman Show*), bridges the physical division between work and home with webcams. Nerdman, a.k.a. Vance Kozik, engineers webcams for a living and uses his site to demonstrate his wares, which include twelve webcams in his office and six in his home that send fresh images to the Internet every 60 seconds. Although the site provides very tame Internet fare, displaying mainly office cubicles, furniture and the cat litter box, it nevertheless manages to draw some 1,500 viewers daily (Sella 2000).

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'The Nerdman Show', like the DotCompound, is a commercial venture. As Kozik puts it, 'Product promotion was the original concept behind the site, and it continues to be the most beneficial aspect to me' (Kozik 2000). The ads on the site earn him a small monthly income of about \$120 a month, and his company supplies him with free equipment in exchange for the publicity. Given the modest profitability of the site, Kozik describes it primarily as a novelty that helps draw attention to the webcams. Indeed, his website reads like the testimonial of a sincere convert:

The combination of camera technology and the reach of the Internet makes for a great way to check the weather, watch what's going on at your home/office, and of course see if the cat box needs changing. ... The applications are endless ... security, surveillance, tourism, construction. (<http://nerdman.com/faq.html> 2002)

Kozik claims to have little interest in other people's webcams. Instead, he prefers outdoor webcam sites, which make it possible to import vistas from around the world. The availability of thousands of landscape cameras through sites like Earthcam.com seems a fitting complement to the shut-in character of the DotComGuy lifestyle. The worker who telecommutes to the other side of the globe can watch the sun set over company headquarters without leaving the privacy of home.

Being watched as work: VoyeurDorm and CuteCouple

The economic potential of the commodification of self-disclosure represented by commercial webcam sites became apparent early on when Jemican earned surprisingly high ratings (upwards of several million hits a day) and became the subject of extensive media coverage (Balint 1999). From the privacy of her dorm room, Ringley managed to reach an audience that surpassed the circulation of many small and mid-sized newspapers – a fact that did not escape the attention of advertisers for long. In the wake of the media publicity, Ringley was approached by a soft drink company with an offer of \$10,000 a month to leave bottles of its product around her house within range of the cameras. She turned down the offer to protect the authenticity of the site, explaining that 'it would ... make the site about as real as "The Real World" or any of the other cheesy productions mainstream society produces. Once I start fabricating the content, especially for the sake of money, it's not worth even doing anymore' (Ringley 2000).

If Ringley remained reluctant to exploit the commercial potential of her site, which charges a monthly fee for those who want to receive more frequent photo updates, other webcam producers are more than willing. The CuteCouple.com webcam site, for example, offers paying subscribers an unedited glimpse into the daily (and nightly) life of a college-aged couple in Austin, Texas. The couple,

Chris and Ashley, claim that the site earned about \$20,000 during its first two and a half months online. Which is good money for work they enjoy. 'It sounds funny but we really do LIVE for a living. The only difference between us and anyone else is that we post it on the World Wide Web. It's the best "JOB" in the world! "Here's some money to live your life!" We'll take that any day!' (Chris and Ashley 2000).

The people who are really cashing in, however, are the pioneers of the factory model of webcam production, wherein salaried workers sell their privacy in shifts. The founders of a website called *VoyeurDorm*, which pays college women to live in houses outfitted with a battery of digital cameras, estimated revenues of approximately \$15 million in 2000 (Huettel 2000). The *VoyeurDorm* house in Tampa, Florida, boasts eight 'sexy college girls' and seventy-five live cameras – including at least two in the bathrooms (MSNBC Reports 2000). The *VoyeurDorm* women are paid laborers, and according to one news account, 'receive free tuition, free rent and a modest salary. They work in shifts that include scheduled parties and lingerie shows. No drugs are allowed. They can show as little or as much skin as they like' (Huettel 1999). The scheduled spontaneity and contrived nature of such a site might seem to undermine its claim to authenticity. However, as in the case of reality television programs, this claim is predicated not so much on a freedom from all contrivance as upon the fact that the site is 'unscripted, unedited, and uncensored' (*voyeurdorm.com* 2000).

VoyeurDorm capitalizes on the commodification of self-disclosure not only by advertising itself to consumers as a site for unabashed voyeurism, but by promoting itself to prospective tenants as a great way to launch a show-business career. The introductory tour of the site, for example, includes the gushing testimonial attributed to 21-year-old *VoyeurDorm* resident Alex: 'I love all the attention I have received over the past two years from being a *VoyeurDorm* girl! I have been on dozens of TV shows and magazines. I was recently on VH1 [a cable music show] for my music talent and now I'm working on signing a record contract!' (*voyeurdorm.com* 2000). Like other so-called reality formats, *VoyeurDorm* inverts the relationship between celebrity and surveillance: rather than the latter following upon the former, celebrity becomes the effect of self-disclosure. Therein lies the promise of the democratization of celebrity: the manipulated can become the manipulators.

It is this ostensible penetration into the realm of media production that underwrites the promise of democratization built into the reality genre. Just as access to the means of media production is facilitated by the relatively inexpensive technology of the webcam, the emerging emphasis on unedited 'reality' highlights the perceived diminution of producer 'control' over the show. One of the staples of webcam chatrooms is the attempt by viewers to get webcasters to respond to them in a way that viewers can see by, for example, waving in response to an emailed request. Often the requests – especially those directed toward female web-celebs like Jennifer Ringley – are more salacious, and

webcam entrepreneurs have been quick to capitalize on this perceived demand. A now notorious Maryland couple offers a webcam site that combines the appeal of reality and interactivity by allowing viewers to direct their love-making. The self-invoked appeal of the site – what ostensibly distinguishes it from the myriad of other live-porn sites online – is the fact that the couple are 'real' people – an unemployed funeral home employee and a soccer mom – not porn stars. As the couple's web page puts it, 'REAL PEOPLE, REAL SEX ... that's our motto' (*thewetlands.com* 2000). The couple has since recruited other couples to join their site, which made \$6 million in 1999 (MSNBC Reports 2000). Thanks to the power of the new technology, anyone with access to a server and a modicum of technical know-how can turn the most intimate of spaces into an economically productive one, bypassing the usual avenues of media production.

Conclusion: the transformation of the publicity sphere

The entrepreneurial potential of personal webcams, erotic or otherwise, remains that of a pyramid scheme: those who get in first are likely to capture the profits and the attention. However, a future in which everyone has his or her own show supported by everyone else remains a zero-sum proposition. Webcams can be viewed as an experiment in home-made media production and perhaps one of those experimental uses that crop up in the transitional period surrounding the implementation and deployment of a new medium, before the dominant model is fully in place. Which is not to say that webcam sites will become extinct any more than, for example, Ham radio became extinct. Rather they are likely to continue to remain a fringe use, perhaps the province of hobbyists and amateurs. Despite the revolutionary rhetoric of such webcam producers as Ana Voog and Jennifer Ringley, who envision a sustainable, home-brewed version of media production, the mass media are unlikely to face any serious threat from this quarter. Furthermore, commercial sites like *DotComGuy* remind us that we should be wary of formulations that adopt the binary terms of the mass society critique: active production or passive consumption. What we are likely to see instead is active participation that, far from undermining the social relations of production, facilitates the rationalization of consumption. The webcam 'movement' is suggestive in so far as it thematizes the value of the work of being watched and the spatial de-differentiation that accompanies it. The sites considered above demonstrate some of the ways in which interactive media blur the boundaries between work and recreation, between spaces of leisure and labor, and between advertising and content. Perhaps most importantly they highlight the overlap between interactivity, participation and labor.

Too often, the critique of the mass media is accompanied by an uncritical celebration of the inherently progressive virtues of participation. The *Gemeinschaft*-nostalgia that characterizes much of the writing on media and democracy is particularly prevalent in Habermas-inspired discussions of a pre-mass

media public sphere. Typical of such approaches is James Carey's description of the deterioration of public life that accompanied the rise of a mass commercial press, which 'no longer facilitated or animated a public conversation. ... It informed a passive and privatized group of citizens who participated in politics through the press' (Carey 1993: 189). The notion of public participation is central to Habermas' own account of the re-feudalization of the public sphere: 'Thus a public of citizens that had disintegrated as a public was reduced by publicist means to such a position that it could be claimed for the legitimization of political compromises without participating in effective decisions or being in the least capable of such participation' (Habermas 1996: 221). The fate of the public is manifested by the co-optation of the language of publicity, as Peters points out: 'In writings by theorists such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill ... "publicity" meant openness of discussion and commerce as well as popular access to government. Today publicity only suggests public relations' (Peters 1993: 543).

Peters goes on to argue that this semantic transformation parallels Habermas' description of the transformation from 'critical participation' to 'consumerist manipulation' (Peters 1993: 543). This opposition, which has become a staple of critical media studies, creates an implicit, natural link between participation and critique that helps to underwrite the ostensibly politically progressive character of interactive media. In the era of one-way, top-down media production and delivery, participation and critique seemed naturally allied. With the advent of interactive media, we need to more closely interrogate and clarify the promise of participation, which has been enlisted by the promoters of the online economy. To put it in somewhat different terms, if there is an acknowledged thread of qualified nostalgia for the de-differentiated spaces associated with a romanticized past, this same nostalgia haunts the digital imaginary. Mass-customized society, or so the business literature would have it, will combine the advantages of handicraft society and its associated community with the efficiency of modern technologies and techniques. The promises of the digital economy, of digital community and of interactive media, are inextricably intertwined with the notion of participatory interactivity. The fact that this promise aligns itself with the critique of mass society ought to inspire a certain wariness on the part of media scholars and theorists toward the opposition between consumerist manipulation and participatory critique.

The example of the commercial webcam site suggests a third possibility: the exploitation of participation understood as the labor of self-commodification. The trajectory of the term 'publicity' traced by Peters, in other words, cannot be undone merely by de-differentiating spaces of symbolic production and consumption. Certainly, the potential exists, as Kellner suggests, for the Internet to create a society of public intellectuals. To assume that it will do so, however, is to fail to appreciate the pressures of history and existing social relations. If publicity has evolved into a commercialized, promotional activity, providing access to the means of publicity makes it possible for everyone to actively participate in his or her own self-commodification. This prospect is reflected

in the pessimistic conclusion drawn by Baudrillard in his discussion of reality TV – a discussion that anticipated both the *Big Brother* television franchise and the webcam trend: 'We are exposed to the instantaneous retransmission of all our facts and gestures on whatever channel. We would have experienced this before as police control. Today it is just like an advertising promotion' (Baudrillard 1995: 97).

Webcasters do not necessarily reverse the trajectory of publicity by reclaiming it as a form of open deliberation and access to government (in the sense outlined by Peters above). Instead, they are, paradoxically, democratizing (publicity as) celebrity: access to the means of publicity as a form of self-promotion is made more generally available. As Ana Voog, who notes on her FAQ page that she hates politics, puts it, 'I guess it was my goal for a while, and it still is my goal, to become an icon' (MSNBC Reports 2000). This is the language not of Gramsci, but of Hollywood Boulevard. Similarly, one *VoyeurDorm* resident described her webcam work as her first big break: 'this is just an everyday movie ... I'm in a movie every single day of my life, and that's how I look at it. ... Like, I'm an actress every single day' (MSNBC Reports 2000). Now that they have gained access to the means of symbolic production, the webcasters are not so much revolutionizing it as reproducing it. Their attempt to co-opt the mass media model leads to a familiar preoccupation with ratings. Even the whimsical *Nerdman* has adopted the language of the studio executive: 'I have all this traffic now. ... You can't just stop at this point. If the ratings go up, you don't cancel the show' (Sella 2000: 68). Within the digital enclosure, the option to cancel may become increasingly remote as we find that being watched was never so much work and, at the same time, never easier.

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