Lukeford.com: Public Sex, Celebrity and the Internet

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> *"I like sex. I like looking at naked women. I like beauty. I am confused about myself and my own sexuality and by studying porn, I get to know myself better. I gain clarity. I see clearly that the porn lifestyle does not work, and that calms my wild desires."*
> —Luke Ford, porn blogger, in a 1999 interview with a French online news source

> *"For many years… we have been living… under the spell of an immense curiosity about sex, bent on questioning it, with an insatiable desire to hear it speak and be spoken about, quick to invent all sorts of magical rings that might force it to abandon its discretion."*
> –Michel Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality*

> *"If Foucault was alive today, I'd like to kill him because of what he did in those (San Francisco) bath houses in knowingly transmitting a deadly disease. You can quote that if you like. I loathe the man… Anyway, Foucault's nonchalance about infecting others with HIV reminded me of Marc Wallice's attitude. Just Foucault had more jargon."*
> —Luke Ford, in an online interview, May 1, 2004

This is the story of Luke Ford and his website, *lukeford.com*, a gossip column about pornography and religion. I use this site to explore three phenomenon of contemporary public culture in the United States: 1) a moral panic and ambivalence over public displays of sexuality, 2) celebrity culture, and 3) the advent of the internet. Ford attained celebrity status at the intersection of these phenomena.

The writings of Rosemary Coombe, Graeme Turner, Richard Schickel, Chris Rojek and others will help to illustrate the scenario of an American public primed to identify intimately with celebrity figures. Works by Max Weber, Michel Foucault, Angela McRobbie, Stuart Hall, Linda Williams, Susan Harding and Brian McNair will contribute to the discussion of the confessional nature of discourse on sex in American public culture and a moral panic surrounding the issue of public displays of sexuality.

Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, Mikhail Bakhtin and Sigmund Freud will inform a discussion on the effects of censorship on sex-talk in the contemporary United States. Finally, Ellen Kampinsky, Jim Hall, and researchers at Xerox PARC will contribute to a discussion of the unique properties of new media, and specifically the medium of web blogs. Collectively these theoretical interlocutors allow me to explore the ways the internet can potentially shift the meanings of celebrity and social capital and change the ways that they are cultivated in the context of new media. I will also explore the ways that audience members may form new subjectivities in contact with celebrity figures through the medium of the internet.

Americans have learned, over the course of the last century, to integrate thoughts of celebrities into their everyday lives and subjectivities. Ford's internet web blog, lukeford.com, shared much in common with two mainstream American media forms: televangelist TV and the TV talk show. Jerry Falwell and Oprah Winfrey are two charismatic celebrity personalities who have captured moments of moral quandary and celebrity culture, and used them to influence the subjectivities of millions of people. Luke Ford has taken advantage of a similar moment. Existing cultural narratives about sex and morality have worked to bring him notoriety, and have given him a position of authority where none existed before. The internet allowed him to attain this authority without traditional social capital: no prior notoriety, no "name recognition," nor even a college degree.

Luke Ford has created two extremely popular blogs since 1997.[1] Lukeford.com was started as a gossip column about the United States pornography industry based in Los Angeles. Ford, who was raised as an Evangelical Christian and converted to

Orthodox Judaism as a young adult, also used the site as a pulpit for his thoughts and observations on the Talmud, religion and morality. Due to the popularity of lukeford.com, Ford became a well-known expert on the pornography industry and has been quoted in various prominent mainstream media sources.[2] In 2001, after being evicted from his second synagogue because of his writings on pornography, Ford sold lukeford.com for $25,000. He then started a second blog called lukeford.net which focuses on mainstream Hollywood gossip, Jewish life, and world news.

Part of Luke Ford's appeal through lukeford.com was that he was in the unique position of representing—indeed embodying—for his audience a moral quandary regarding public displays of sexuality. Here in the U.S. mainstream media inundate us with a steady flow of sexual imagery, using orgasms to sell shampoo and seductive glances to sell potato chips.[3] We struggle between these media and the long and complex Puritan past with strict moral prohibitions against public sex (and, sometimes, just against sex).

Incidents like Janet Jackson's exposed nipple, broadcast on live television during halftime at the 2004 Super Bowl, and the ensuing public outcry against sex in the media, aptly demonstrate the dilemma. The fact that that incident provoked such outrage *and* was understood as an act that may have been intentional illustrates just how confused Americans are on the issue of sexuality. During the years that Ford wrote Lukeford.com, he embodied this state of moral confusion in his own online persona. His readers recognized that and were drawn to it. He was somebody who clearly enjoyed pornography and hated himself for it. He was a complex and charismatic amalgam of

desire and censorship, accessible to a broad audience through the permeable medium of the internet.

Those who read Ford's websites probably identify with his story on some level, as anyone living in the United States could. Amidst the reality television shows and mainstream films like *Boogie Nights* and *The Girl Next Door*, one can hardly turn on the television without being inundated with pornography or stories about or against pornography, whether or not one wants to see it. Like reality TV and pornography, the seediness of Ford's most embarrassing and controversial moments (and the earnestness with which he fought both the porn industry and his internal self), are enticing. Ford is part of the confessional American culture that Foucault described in *The History of Sexuality*. Ford is at once hard to read and hard to ignore, in large part because the poignancy of his pain in his moral struggle is familiar.

Today Ford, who is still regarded by the mainstream media as an expert on the U.S. pornography industry, is vehemently anti-porn and works against pornography through is current website, *lukeford.net*, and through his quotes in mainstream media outlets such as the television show *60 Minutes*. Ford was part of the process that taught mainstream journalists about metajournalistic sources on pornography, and in a sense the current negative publicity on the porn industry owes something to Ford. He considers part of his legacy to be the public attention towards the current AIDS crisis in the U.S. pornography industry, with governmental regulating bodies taking an interest and the film-makers putting themselves on hold in an act of litigious self-preservation. Many news stories such as these are first published on the internet by metajournalists like Ford.

The Story of Luke Ford

In the mid-1990s, Luke Ford, a Los Angeles based journalist, started doing research for a book on the history of pornography in the United States. As research for this book, Ford conducted interviews in California's Los Angeles County, home to the majority of production companies that are part of the small (under 2000 employees) but prolific U.S. porn industry (Richard 1998; lukeford.net). While doing research, Ford noticed a dearth of gossip-columns on the pornography industry. Ford's book, *A History of X*, was initially sold on computer diskettes by Ford himself, who met scholars interested in studying pornography and pornography fans on an internet newsgroup called RAME. According to Ford he sold about a dozen copies of the book in this manner. In 1999, after lukeford.com became a popular website, *A History of X* was published by Prometheus Books.

Ford was prompted by numerous acquaintances whom he met in the real world and on RAME to start a blog about news he learned of through his pornography industry contacts. He began publishing a blog at the internet address lukeford.com in late 1997. Within the first six months of starting lukeford.com, Ford broke stories revealing that several major adult film starts had tested positive for HIV and that the source of this outbreak was famed porn star Marc Wallice (Richard 1998). Soon after the story was posted to lukeford.com, the blog was attracting hits from approximately 5000 unique IP addresses (5000 unique computers) each day. Over the four years that Ford wrote lukeford.com, this level of popularity persisted and Ford earned approximately $45,000 in advertising revenue per year from the website (Richard 1998; conversation with Luke Ford).

Since starting lukeford.com, Ford has made numerous television appearances as an expert on the adult entertainment industry in America, most recently appearing on *60 Minutes* (lukeford.net; 60 Minutes, Nov. 23, 2003). He has been written about and quoted in publications as diverse and as prominent as *The New York Times*, *Rolling Stone Magazine* and *Wired Magazine* (New York Times, May 20, 2001; Rolling Stone, August 8, 1999; Wired 2000, 2001).

Prior to starting lukeford.com, Ford had had little professional experience in journalism. As an undergraduate at the University of California, Los Angeles, he had worked for several small newspapers and for KAHI/KHYL radio in Sacramento (Richard 1998; lukeford.net 2003). He never graduated from college and, to this day, he has never worked in the pornography industry. Nonetheless, through his self-published website he has shared his voice with thousands of people and has became a nationally recognized expert on pornography.

The Problem with Structural/Functional Explanations

From a purely functional perspective, one might surmise that lukeford.com became a popular website merely because it filled an existing structural hole in a system comprised of pornography industry people, pornography fans, and mainstream journalists writing about pornography. Lukeford.com was a strategic site where information could be exchanged among the three groups that formed Ford's online audience.[4] Ford has been compared by several journalists to the popular metajournalist/blogger Matt Drudge of *drudgereport.com* (Richard 1998; Schactman 1999). Theorists have used similarly functional approaches to explain Drudge's rise to prominence (Hall 2001).

However, this purely structural/functional approach cannot explain why Ford maintained his position as the single most popular online source of information on the field of pornography even after numerous competing sites arose.[5] This approach also fails to explain why Ford's current blog, *lukeford.net*, continues to attract approximately 20% of the audience that lukeford.com had (conversation with Luke Ford). It cannot explain why Ford was recently approached by a producer from the Showtime Cable Network who is interested in turning his life story into a television movie. Finally, it fails to demonstrate why no other *porn-blogger* has been solicited as an interpreter of the pornography industry for the mainstream media.

Celebrity Culture

American public culture is celebrity culture.

Ford's audience members were primed by a culture trained to assume seemingly intimate engagement with celebrities. His audience members were interested in gaining access to intimate knowledge of the private lives of their favorite pornstars, and would have easily accepted the closeness with Ford available through lukeford.com (the specific nature of the interactions between Ford and his audience through lukeford.com will be further explored later in this paper).

Coombe, Schickel, Rojek, Turner and others have noted the breadth and depth of celebrity culture in modern life. According to Schickel, for the media-viewing public, there is a vast "dream scheme" that has evolved out of this century's "countless billions of fantastical encounters between the celebrity elite and the anonymous mass" (Schickel

2000: 255). This dream scheme affects the quality and nature of public life and affects each person's sense of themself (Schickel 2000: 255).

Rojek suggests that through the growth of unified markets and a pervasive system of mass communication, culture has become more mediagenic. Everyday social and cultural exchanges utilize the "styles, points of view, conversational prompts and steering agendas" supplied by the media (Rojek 2001: 16). Rojek attributes the celebrification of society to "the rise of public society, a society that cultivates personal style as the antidote to formal democratic equality" (Rojek 2001: 9). Essential to Rojek is the notion that celebrities are *cultural fabrications*. Their involvement with the public may appear to be intimate, while in fact they are carefully mediated. Ford is no exception. For instance, he will not allow his audience members to post comments directly to his website; everything on the website is carefully vetted through him. Celebrity status presumes a split between a private and a public self.

According to Turner et al., our everyday lives can be indelibly marked by celebrity events: deaths, births, marriages, disasters, accidents. With this in mind, celebrities have a great deal of power in influencing the subjectivities of the public (Turner et al. 2000). According to Turner et al.:

> "(Celebrities) may act as exemplary citizens, endorsing political parties, advising on constitutional referenda, exhorting governments to adopt new foreign policy positions or to change laws on environmental issues. They are used to promote health awareness and the benefits of multiculturalism… They perform, in some cases in spite of themselves, the public roles which have in the past been filled by other categories of eminent person… the cultural attraction of the celebrity figure, and the importance of the celebrity industry, mean that a celebrity spokesperson can be a very powerful political device" (Turner et al. 2000: 165).

Schickel goes so far as to say that celebrity is a "principle source of motive power in putting across ideas of every kind – social, political, aesthetic, moral" (Schickel 2000:

20). Ford's audience members, raised and conditioned in this environment, were primed to accept his voice in shaping their own subjectivities.

Ford belongs to the growing cannon of individuals who have attained fame through the internet, and who have eventually moved from new media to mainstream media. By mediating and carefully crafting his own persona, Ford cultivated a following. Rojek introduces the concept of the 'celebrification process' to "encapsulate the ubiquitous character of celebrity in everyday life" (Rojek 2001). When Ford began to appear in mainstream print and television media as well as new media, he reached a complete celebrity status.

The Moral Panic

Americans are in a state of moral panic which Ford embodied for his audience.

In Striptease Culture: Sex, media and the democratization of desire, Brian McNair eloquently theorizes on how the internet has contributed to easing attitudes toward pornography, particularly in the United States. McNair describes how a media "revolution in the means of communication has fanned the growth of a less regulated, more commercialized, and more pluralistic sexual culture" in terms of the variety of sexualities which it can accommodate (McNair 2002). McNair calls this process the *democratization of desire*, which involves "expanded popular access to all means of sexual expression"—the availability of hard core porn to anyone with access to the internet is one example. This is coupled with "the emergence of a more diverse and pluralistic sexual culture than has traditionally been accommodated within patriarchal capitalism," as illustrated by the proliferation of 'niche market' television targeted at

diverse sexual communities (McNair 2002). According to McNair, video, DVD and the internet have had the effect of allowing people to evade potential negative psychological consequences associated with the acquisition and use of porn (McNair 2002). These technologies have brought porn out of the "furtive, socially sanctioned world" of peep shows and adult book stores (McNair 2002).

This generally increasing access to public displays of sexual behavior is, however, counterbalanced by a reactionary trend towards sexual conservativism, as made evident most recently by the public backlash against incidents such as Janet Jackson's exposed breast at the 2004 Superbowl and the 2004 AIDS cases which shut down the U.S. porn industry.

In 1997 an AIDS outbreak hit the pornography industry; this prompted Luke Ford to start his first website. From the first posting to lukeford.com, Ford was beset with violent criticism and threats from people in the pornography industry (Schactman 1998; lukeford.com). As part of the research for this paper, I interviewed Luke Ford via telephone and communicated with him via instant messenger and email several times over a period of four weeks. In early April of 2004, I asked Ford why the pornography industry had been so threatened by lukeford.com. His opinion was that the porn industry is more precarious than it is generally perceived as being, and that any media attention drawn to a health scandal could lead to increased surveillance from the government and suspension of movie production (conversation with Luke Ford, May 2004).

The week after my interview with Ford, news of two AIDS cases in the U.S. porn industry broke in the mainstream national and international news, provoking the Center on Disease Control to consider an investigation and voluntary cessation of filming by the

porn industry for a period of two months. This incident is ample evidence that when Ford began writing lukeford.com in 1997 he presented a real danger to an industry with a tenuous legal position and a tenuous hold on its audience. Ford embodied this tenuousness and confusion in his writings.

Luke Ford's rise to prominence took place in the context of a society primed by metanarratives of sexual morality.[6] In *Mediated Sex: Pornography and Postmodern Culture*, McNair summarizes a socio-sexual history of the late twentieth century in which themes such as postwar sexual liberalization, the advent of the birth control pill, and the "swinging sixties" are counterbalanced by continuous outcry from moralistic and religiously conservative groups. In the 1980s "the sexual revolution of the 1970s was forestalled by the burgeoning AIDS crisis" (McNair 1996: 10-21). Religious fundamentalist organizations such as the Moral Majority further drove an "explosion of sexual discourse" in the United States, and moral lobbies made sex a political issue and increased media visibility. This included prominent coverage of President Reagan's 1985 commission on pornography led by Attorney-General Edwin Meese, a "voluminous guide to everything ever written or photographed in all aspects of the sex business" (McNair 1996: 20).

The public tension between enjoying and rejecting displays of sexuality can be better understood through the term *moral panic*, as used by McRobbie, Hall and others (McRobbie 1994; Hall 1978). *Moral panic* may be loosely defined as a state of generalized public anxiety brought about principally by the news media to focus public attention on a moral dilemma or a "state of emergency".[7] Hall has found that, "in one crucial sense the moral panic is the supreme practice of consensual governmentality"

(Hall 1978). The notion of a moral panic is inextricably connected with conservatism and marks a point of connection between the media and social control (McRobbie 1994: 198).

According to McRobbie, since the term was coined in 1972, the nature of the moral panic has changed, as a massively expanded mass media makes it impossible to rely on traditional sociological models of stages and cycles of the panic. The moral panic is "the right's campaigning arm," but the principled right has increasingly had to contend with pressure from groups campaigning in opposition to it, and "no sooner does a moral panic emerge than it is angrily disputed," (McRobbie 1994: 199).

In a discussion of sexual moral panics, McRobbie notes that since the 1980s even the mainstream press have expressed (and exploited) an ambivalence over the appropriateness of different types of sexual behavior (McRobbie 1994: 207). I suggest that there has been a generalized state of moral panic and moral ambivalence over the issue of public displays of sexuality in America since the 1980s and that Luke Ford resonated with readers who felt this sexual moral panic acutely. In specific, his person online embodied this panic.

Ford had a moral message.

The notion of celebrity, Rojek argues, stems from, among other things, the decline in organized religion (Rojek 2001). Like televangelists and talk-show hosts, with their messages of morality, self-help and confession, Ford filled the space of both the purveyor of intimate information on celebrities and the moral leader, working through his perception of the moral panic from a religious perspective.

Ford had a moral and religious mission for both his research project into pornography and for lukeford.com. As he told me in email and instant messenger

conversations, he began his research into the porn industry with ambivalence. However, according to Ford, "The more I learned of the porn industry, the more I grew to despise it" (conversation with Luke Ford, April 25, 2004). Ford cultivated a personal vendetta against the pornography industry and although he did not explicitly call upon his readers to take up arms against the pornography industry, his mission, based in religious belief, was to reveal the evils of the pornography industry to his audience members.

In *The Book of Jerry Falwell*, Susan Harding notes that the term *fundamentalism* has, in the last decade, been expanded from its original reference to Evangelical Christians to reference the extreme conservative arms of any organized religion, including Islam and Judaism (Harding 2000). As an Orthodox Jew, Ford can be placed in the same category of *fundamentalist* as the Evangelical Christians whom Harding studied. In addition, Ford's father, whom he sites as a major influence, was a famous Evangelical leader in Australia for many years. Ford has clearly borrowed from Evangelical strategies of discourse on his blogs, which are replete with long diatribes and sermons about religion and morality.

On lukeford.com, Ford continuously expressed and highlighted his internal conflict over his interest in sex and pornography and his moral beliefs. Ford expressed this position eloquently in a 1999 interview (lukeford.com, February 2, 1999):

> Q: Why are you interested in the medium of porn ?
> A: I like sex. I like looking at naked women. I like beauty. I am confused about myself and my own sexuality, and by studying porn, I get to know myself better. I gain clarity. I see clearly that the porn lifestyle does not work, and that calms my wild desires.
> […]
> Q: Are these media stars far too complaisant towards the different powers? Are they corrupt?
> A: Fame corrupts. Power corrupts. Money corrupts. The human being, and

> consequently journalists, corrupts easily unless he is grounded to eternal values of truth, ethics, decency and God (lukeford.com 1999)

Towards the end of his tenure at lukeford.com, Ford moved in a highly morally conservative direction, eventually deciding that he despised the pornography industry and would do whatever he could to convince the American public that it was evil. For instance, when asked by *60 Minutes* to appear as an expert on the pornography industry, he took the cameras to one of the seediest pornography film sets that he could find [60 Minutes, Nov. 23, 2003]. His intent was to expose the industry as base and vile. Ford was quoted in a recent documentary on pornography as saying "Pornography reduces the performers and the makers and the consumers of the product to the absolute lowest level. Its social redeeming value is (long pause) ejaculation" (in the documentary film *Fluffy Cumsalot: Pornstar*).

The clarity of Ford's current moral leanings can easily be seen in a remark he made to me, via instant messenger, about Michel Foucault:

> "If Foucault was alive today, I'd like to kill him because of what he did in those (San Francisco) bath houses in knowingly transmitting (AIDS,) a deadly disease. You can quote that if you like. I loathe the man…. Anyway, Foucault's nonchalance about infecting others with HIV reminded me of Wallice's attitude. Just Foucault had more jargon" (conversation with Luke Ford, May 1, 2004).

Ford used his moral position to shape the subjectivities of audience members.

Weber, Freud, Lacan and others have noted that in times of political and moral upheaval people are particularly susceptible to incorporating the voices of charismatic individuals into their conceptions of self (Stallybrass and White 1986; Eisenstadt 1968). One interpretation of the way Weber's charismatic leader caused ideological shifting in followers stresses the "general abnormality of the predisposition to the charismatic" (Eisenstadt 1968: xxii). Weber suggests that charisma "may involve a subjective or

internal reorientation" born out of conflict and that this may take place "in times of psychic, physical, economic, ethical religious, political distress" (Weber 1997: 333). Ford's audience existed in this state of moral panic and therefore would have been particularly susceptible to formations of self shaped through his website.

Ford self-consciously embodied in his person a key moral panic during a time when pornography was rising in popularity in the United States. His self-flagellation and conflict about the morality and pleasure of pornography reflected a generalized state of moral panic among his viewers: a conflagration of pleasure, panic, desire and self-censorship.

In *Oprah, Celebrity and Formations of Self* Sheryl Wilson suggests:

> "Oprah offers a construction of selfhood that is both recognizable to its audience, reflecting the fragmentation and dislocation characteristic of contemporary culture… repeatedly it is Winfrey's self on display as she offers confession and testimony for public gaze and consumption, practices that are then mirrored by her guests or members of the studio audience as they recount their individual stories" (Wilson 2003).

I propose that the same process took place on lukeford.com as his "self" became a mirror for other guilty yet compulsive porn-watchers.

A large proportion of the information on lukeford.com was contributed by Ford's readers. According to Ford, he has often been accused of being "one of the world's fastest cutters and pasters" and lukeford.com has been called a "self-writing site" (conversation with Luke Ford, April 15, 2004). Ford remarks that much of the material on lukeford.com came from a "team" he acquired through the blog. Ford has six male best friends whom he met when they wrote emails to him after reading lukeford.com.

A passage from Ford's website clearly articulates the way in which Ford's personal response to, and embodiment of, the generalized moral panic was adopted by

one of his "team" members. Ford was on a vacation in Israel in autumn of 2001 and did not have time to write his website. One of his team members sent him the following quote via email, which Ford cut and pasted into the site as though it was his own voice:

> "Dear Diary, I find myself 10,000 miles away from the Porn Valley and yet still I am haunted by my morally wretched profession. Even in the peaceful serenity and spiritual solitude of the Israeli desert where Moses once walked I find myself continually reminded of the vulgarity and filth that comprises my pornographic world. When will this torture cease? God, I wish I had my gun"(lukeford.com, Jul.1, 2000).

The hyperlink (underlined) in this passage leads to a photograph of a cactus with a protruding branch that resembles an erection. The statement above was obviously intended to be ironic. However, it betrays the underlying dilemma that Ford and his audience members inevitably find themselves in. They are stuck in the conflict between their interest in pornographic material and their higher moral calling.

Lukeford.com was a place where readers could engage in this type of confessional talk first by reading Ford's words and secondly by writing to him via email and then seeing their own words appear on lukeford.com. According to Ford, while writing lukeford.com he received approximately ten to fifteen "thoughtful and well-written" emails from audience members each day (not including personal acquaintances and team members) (conversation with Luke Ford, April 15, 2004).

At the intersection of sex and dialogue lies confession.

Stories by Ford's "team" and other guest writers and contributors to lukeford.com, as well as interviews and profiles of his friends and pornstars (which appeared together in the same section of lukeford.com), all take on a highly confessional nature. *Striptease culture* is the label that McNair gives to the current broad cultural sexualization and the media of sexual confession and self-revelation. Striptease culture,

according to McNair, frequently involves ordinary people talking about sex and their own sexualities, revealing intimate details of their feelings and their bodies in the public sphere. It is "all those forms and contexts in which people outside the starry world of celebrity claim or are given space in the media to engage in sex talk" (McNair 2000: 88). McNair's striptease culture includes confessional talk and debate shows, documentaries and docu-soaps in print media and on the internet, any place where people exchange ideas about or reveal aspects of sexual identity. In the 1990s, according to McNair, these forms of 'sex talk' proliferated across the western media[8] (McNair 1996: 15). Lukeford.com was just such a site. On lukeford.com, Ford was continuously exercising this confessional practice himself and encouraged his audience members to do the same.

In *The History of Sexuality* Michel Foucault points out that there is a long tradition of confessional practice regarding sexuality, especially in the United States: According to Foucault:

> "From the Christian penance to the present day, sex was a privileged theme of confession…The confession was, and still remains, the general standard governing the production of the "true" discourse on sex… It is no longer a question simply of saying what was done—the sexual act—and how it was done; but of reconstructing, in and around the act, the thoughts that recapitulated it, the obsessions that accompanied it, the images, desires, modulations, and quality of the pleasure that animated it" (Foucault 1978).

Drawing on Foucauldian readings, Wilson shows that the Oprah Winfrey show may be seen as a technology for the production of subject positions (Wilson 2004: 4). Lukeford.com may also be seen as a site for the production of subjectivities. Wilson invokes Foucault's formulation of confessional practice in order to explain and describe the paradigm of power relations that is observable within television talk shows, particularly the Oprah Winfrey show, and in the subject positions that are formed through

these. For Wilson, Foucault offers a tool for thinking about the process of confession and "the spread of the confessional mode from the church and its employment in a series of relationships: children and parents, students and educators, patients and psychiatrists" (Wilson 2003). Foucault shows that the technique of confession has been appropriated by psychological models in which sexual 'truths' are seen as central to the 'truth' of the self (Wilson 2003: 4). This then posits an essential or natural self that is discoverable through self-disclosure. In this sense, through lukeford.com, Ford and his readers were, together, in search for a "truth" about themselves and about the innate nature of an interest in observing sexual acts.

As Ford clearly stated himself, his interest in pornography was a matter of learning and self-discovery. He even wore his yarmulke to early interviews with people in the porn industry because he "wanted to bring his religion with (him)" into the research (conversation with Luke Ford, May 10, 2004). Wilson borrows from Foucault to assert that therapeutic discourse as cultural practice appears both in academic writing and as a device in popular culture for the articulation of certain kinds of selfhood. Lukeford.com was a long exercise in exactly this type of practice for both Ford and his readers.

It is important to note that for Foucault, the discourse of sex always unfolds within a power relationship, "for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes… intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile" (Foucault 1978: 61). In Foucault's model, sexual discourse always takes place within the context of judgment and the discourse has the effect of shaping subjectivities.

For Ford and the lukeford.com audience, the context of judgment was alternately the panicked, conservative side of the moral ambivalence, as outlined above, and Ford himself.

Through the dialogue between Ford and his readers, sexual and moral subjectivities were mutually reshaped. According to Linda Williams, Foucault offers a way of conceptualizing power and pleasure within the history of discourses of sexuality (Williams 1989). He argues that power must be conceptualized for what it constructs in discourse and through knowledge. For example, if we speak incessantly about and against sex in various modes, including pornography, this means that a machinery of power has encroached on bodies and their pleasures. "Through the osmosis of a pleasure feeding into power and a power feeding into pleasure, an 'implantation of perversions' takes place, with sexualities rigidifying into identities that are then further institutionalized by discourses of medicine, psychiatry, prostitution" pornography and other means (Williams 1989: 3).

One might ask what are the implications of a site like lukeford.com for changing standard tropes on sexual behavior. In speaking of the implantation of perversions, the notion that when perversions enter discourse they grow and change sexual practice. Foucault is pessimistic about increasing discourses on sexual behavior. His position in History of Sexuality is that a net increase in the deployment of discourses about sexuality is representative of an increase in repressive control over bodies and pleasures. Williams, however, takes the opposite position, that particularly from a feminist perspective, more discourses on sexuality there are, "the more the hierarchies governing such oppositions as male/female, sadist/masochist, active/passive, and subject/object tend to break down"

(Williams 1989: 273). Her position is that the discourse on sexuality has shifted to one of a "consumerist mentality of unending pleasures, shifting gender relations, and a desire for self-abandon," including the pleasure of censorship, righteous indignation and self-flagellation. This mentality, while caught up in an implantation of perversions, is nonetheless more democratic in its inclusion of women. Women are, therefore, more able to explore a diversity of sexualities, differences and a spread of perversions that may amount to a substantial increase in freedoms. Lukeford.com was, generally, not a site of exploration of diverse sexualities. It was a place where familiar gendered sexual tropes of the woman as the object of desire were reenacted. The main question in the context of the blog was the morality of watching and producing heteronormative pornography. However, through detailed interviews with female pornstars on lukeford.com, Ford did give these women the opportunity to express themselves. Whether or not these women spoke from an empowered position varies from interview to interview. In addition, it is noteworthy they were always forced to speak through Ford, the writer.

Why the sex-talk on lukeford.com took on a tone of irony, sarcasm and vulgarity.

Foucault and Williams, read together with Stallybras and Bakhtin, give us clues as to why so much of the discourse on sexuality in lukeford.com took on humorous, ironic, sarcastic and vulgar tones. The key to answering this question lies in the forbidden nature of sex-talk in the United States. There are few socially open or appropriate places for people to discuss or indulge their sexual thoughts and interests and therefore two things happen: first of all, the internet provides a socially intimate yet potentially anonymous

environment where these issues can be frankly discussed and secondly, in the wake of censorship, the tone of conversation takes on a cross between irony and self-hate.

Foucault's notion that pleasures of the body are subject to historically changing social constructions is particularly helpful, especially the notion that pleasures of the body "do not exist in immutable opposition to a controlling and repressive power but instead are produced within configurations of power that put pleasures to a particular use (Williams 1989: 3). Through lukeford.com, Ford and his contributors conspire to work out whether there is a place for public sexuality in moral life, and what the proper nature and place for sexuality should be.

According to Williams, all histories of pornography have turned into histories of legal battles fought in the wake of laws against obscenity, and modern pornography is intimately tied up with legal and moral attempts at censorship. Williams notes that crusades against pornography are just as instrumental in making discussion of sexuality public as are purveyors of pornography. As Williams aptly puts it, as soon as relations of power appear in discourse, resistance also immerges, creating a dialectical relationship between those would discuss (or publicly *have*) sex and those who believe it should not be discussed (or practice in public) (Williams 1989: 86).

Stallybrass and White's analyses of the carnival and Freud's Studies on Hysteria proves useful here in understanding the tradition of confession and the bizarre of which lukeford.com and pornography are both part (Stallybrass and White 1986). For Sigmund Freud's patients, many of the images and symbols, which were at one time the focus of various pleasures in the European carnival, become transformed into the "morbid assumptions of private terror" (Stallybrass and White 1986: 174). Freud's patients "suffer

from acute disgust, and yet at the same time the patients seem to be reaching out… towards a repertoire of carnival material as both expression and support… they attempt to mediate their terrors by enacting private, made-up carnivals. In the absence of social forms they attempt to produce their own by pastiche and parody in an effort to embody semiotically their distress" (Stallybrass and White 1986: 174).

Freud goes on to talk about the distortion which carnivalesque imagery undergoes as a result of censorship of the carnival. Freud's patients can be seen as enacting "desperate ritual fragments salvaged from a festive tradition, the self-exclusion from which had been one of the identifying features of their social class" (Stallybrass and White 1986: 176). In reaction to the carnival, in Europe, "a fundamental ritual order of western culture came under attack—its feasting, violence, drinking, processions, fairs, wakes, rowdy spectacle and outrageous clamour were subject to surveillance and repressive control" (Stallybrass and White 1986: 176). Nonetheless, Bakhtin and others have found elements of the carnivalesque everywhere in modern culture and in literature (Morris 1994: 200-215; Stallybrass and White 1986: 176).

This reaction to censorship may be seen as a corollary to the public reaction to censorship of pornography and sex-talk in the modern day. On lukeford.com in particular, pornography and sex are at once the subjects of gravely serious discussion and detailed analysis, and the objects of irony, mockery and ridicule. The visual appearance of the lukeford.com web page is evidence of this.

Ford's image appears on the site. He is dressed in a grey suit, and over his face is a bulls-eye which resembles the laser-site of a sniper rifle (similar to those seen in *action* genre movies). His image calls to mind James Bond, with Ford as a man with a high-

minded mission in mortal danger. Ford is a secret agent or action hero, endangering himself in order to reveal the evil truths of pornography. However, Ford's image appears among numerous banner advertisements for online pornographic web pages. Ford, the hero, is bizarrely surrounded by animated images of naked breasts and genitals, flashing and moving about his body. Ford's image becomes the focal point in a carnival of sex acts.

Unique properties of internet media

Online, the barriers to entry in terms of producing media were lower for both Ford and for his audience members.

The advent of the internet contributed to Ford's success because the barriers to publication of information were lowered for both Ford and his audience members. Ford did not need a printing press or a radio broadcast tower to spread his voice on the internet. All he needed was a web-connection and a computer. In fact, his initial postings to lukeford.com were made from a friend's computer.

Because web pages on the internet can be accessed at any time, from any other computer connected to the net, Ford automatically had a wider potential audience than any radio program, television program or print newspaper. In addition, his audience members could communicate with him via email and at any moment in time. Likewise, they could access his direct responses to them via email or his responses through the text of his blog at any moment in time.

Many authors have cited that one of most significantly unique attributes of websites is the *productive* and *interactive* nature of new media (Kampinsky et al. 2003; Hall 2001).[9] For online users, access and production are essentially linked. While it is

possible to access the Internet without producing any material, anyone who has posted a comment to a chat room or online discussion, written an Amazon.com book review or created their own homepage has contributed to the production and transmission of information on the Web.

Coombe borrows from Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* and suggests that systems of mass production have changed modes of human perception and evaluation, fundamentally altering our aesthetic responses. These changes are integrally related to the cultural value of the celebrity image in contemporary social life. Coombe follows Benjamin's argument that, "by substituting a plurality of copies for a unique existence, the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction enables the consumer to position the reproduction in his own lifeworld without any necessary awareness of an original" (Coombe 1992). If an original work of art's aura derives from its unique, embodied or tangible presence in time and space, then, according to Coombe, the aura of the celebrity person cannot be denied as well. No matter how often a celebrity's likeness is reproduced, there remains a social knowledge of the celebrity as an individual human being with an unapproachable or distant existence elsewhere.

Following Coombe's reasoning, any immediate contact between a celebrity and an audience member would have a highly potent effect on the audience member's subjectivities. In this manner, audience members who could reach Ford directly through his blog, because of the permeability of the internet, would have been highly susceptible to his influence over their subjectivities. The Internet twists Coombe's reading of the distant celebrity much in the way that talk show hosts and televangelists do. The talk

show hosts and televangelists are present in reality for the members of their studio audience. They are not in mechanical copies and thus have a powerful aura. They appear in direct discourse with their studio audiences. On the internet Ford could be in contact with his *entire* audience at any moment in time, and any audience member could reach out to Ford through email and receive his direct response through email or through his blog.

Ford was able to reach out to people through his blogs in an intimate way because of the uniquely permeable nature of internet interaction and also because of the *malleable* nature of the net. By the term *malleable* I a referring to *hypertext*, which allows the reader to expand and contract text on a website according to his personal tastes. These two elements add up to interaction with an audience that is much more similar to a face-to-face interaction than it is to a traditional print media form.

Zellweger et. Al. have coined the notion of *fluid fiction* (Zellwegger et al 2001). "Fluid Documents use animated typographical changes to provide a novel and appealing user experience for hypertext browsing and for viewing document annotations in context" (Zellweger et al. 2001). Readers can explore the content of multiple paths and alternative routes within a text through hypertext links. They use hypertext, the ability to click on a highlighted word in an HTML page, and either expand the information on the page or, more commonly, jump to another page. This capacity enables the reader to expand and contract text according to his or her own interest in the subject matter. This strategy was used by researchers at Xerox PARC to emulate a key strategy used by live storytellers: the ability to react to audiences by adjusting the length and speed of the story being told. Fluid fiction highlights the fact that through hypertext, audiences engage with text in a

way that is similar to that of an audience member reacting to a live individual. When Luke Ford wrote his website he frequently linked outside his site, to other news sources, blogs, and to other locations within his won site.

Schickel is one of many observers to note that the decreased barrier to access online provides an opening for new formations of celebrity and public discourse. The internet provides a place where any person can "hawk ideas and opinions without delay for reflection" and it can "grant anyone who chooses to make use of this capacity the illusion of celebrity… It is an outlet for opinion, grievance, rumor, and spite that can make you—at the very least—a legend in your own mind" (Schickel 2000: 306). Schickel also acknowledges that the potential for gaining something like real fame via the Internet exists. Ford has done exactly this. He has used the internet to attain authority both online and in mainstream media although he had no preexisting social capital (as Bourdieu meant it) as an expert before starting lukeford.com.

The internet has played a role in bringing pornography into the mainstream home and in giving voice to those like Ford who would be unable to write exactly as they wished in any institutionalized setting. It has even been suggested to me, by Genevieve Bell, an anthropologist who studies networking technology, that blogs are a site where the marginalized in contemporary society finally have a place to voice their ideas. Bourdieu's notion of social capital might also be invoked, as in the modern day, through media, notions of "hip-ness" or style are blurred, high-style often finds inspiration in popular culture, and definitions of social capital are measured in the sheer amount of attention that any single person can draw.

Ford immerged as an authority on pornography nearly spontaneously. He did no market research and used no publicity when he started lukeford.com. All he did was mention his blog on RAME, a newsgroup about the porn industry, and to several friends from the newsgroup and from daily life. He felt compelled to write the site because people he encountered, upon hearing about his book, continuously requested that he write it, and because he wanted to influence the way his audience thought about the porn industry. Ford cultivated his authority outside established social institutions like the government and mainstream media. According to Ford:

> "I don't play nicely with others. I need independence and I need to control my own show. That's why I don't even like comments to go straight up on my website…The internet allowed me to approach a broad audience without the fortress of the mainstream media…The internet allowed me to express myself unmediated by influences that would otherwise literally take what's unique about what I do away. I would go on on a story for 20 pages on lukeford.com. No editor would have allowed me to do that. I would get 900 words or 2000 words. If I wanted to write about Judaism in the midst of an article on gang bangs I could do it, so I think the internet was really the key" (conversation with Luke Ford, April 16, 2004).

The internet allowed Ford to escape the constraints of mainstream media and to cultivate a level of popularity that led him to be accepted and used by the mainstream media even without preexisting social capital.

Without jumping to the extreme conclusion, as Ford has, Ford could not have expressed his particular set of opinions without the advent of the internet, one may still say that the internet played a major role in his attainment of fame by significantly diminishing his barrier to entry into public life. The internet gave him a cheap and easy way to share information and opinions with a wide audience and provided a medium through which his audience could contact him.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to explore a Luke Ford's rise to celebrity status through his blog, lukeford.com, which took place at the intersection of three cultural moments: 1) a widespread moral panic in American culture, 2) celebrity culture, and 3) the advent of the internet. In conclusion, let us imagine what might have happened if any of these three components had been missing from this story.

If the moral panic existed in tandem with the internet, but without celebrity culture, we probably would have seen something more like an online chat room, where groups of people could share equally in voicing their opinions about sex and pornography. Here we see that the celebrity culture is what allowed Ford to have a unique voice on his website, to lead the discussion, to design the assumptions that were being made, and to shape his audience members' subjectivities. Celebrity culture empowered Ford in ways he could not have attained without it.

If celebrity culture had existed in tandem with the internet, but without the moral panic, we might have seen one of two scenarios. We would either have seen extremely morally conservative voices, or extremely sexual online personas, such as the pornstars themselves. A morally ambivalent figure like Ford would never have appeared online, and his embodiment of the moral panic certainly would not have been the key to distinguishing him from other online personas.

If celebrity culture and the moral ambivelance existed together without the advent of the internet, it is hard to say that there would have been *no* place for a public persona

to voice the moral ambivalence and moral panic. However, it *can* be said that the internet significantly reduced the barriers to entry into public life for Luke Ford, and allowed him to cultivate social capital where he had none. It gave him a degree of freedom in speaking out to the public that he would likely not have had through prior media forms such as newspaper, radio and television. In addition, radio talk-show host would still have been able to be in discourse directly with his audience, but the audience would not have had 24-hour access to the celebrity figure. Also, the geographic and numeric scope of the audience would not have been nearly as broad. Through lukeford.com, Ford had access of an entire world of interested porn-watchers experiencing the state of moral ambivalence.

On a final note, I have spoken a great deal about the "public" and Ford's "audience". I want to acknowledge here that the notion of an "audience" is merely a discursive category. In this paper I have taken liberties in assuming some reactions by Ford's audience members based on the work of other scholars, some statistics about the number and nature of the people who read lukeford.com, Ford's comments, and on what I have observed of audience comments on lukeford.com itself. I have not spoken directly to members of Ford's audience. In this respect this study is limited. Conversations directly with members of Ford's audience may be a topic for future research.

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[1] (Blogs are online diaries that are updated daily by a single person called the *blogger*. The content of the blog is of the blogger's choosing, but usually has some timely component. Audiences may interact directly with the blogger via email, instant message, or if the blogger allows, posting directly to the blog itself. Some of the emailed interactions are made public through the blog, reshaping the voice that it projected from the blog. Interactions between bloggers and their audience members take place in the *virtual world* rather than the *real world*.)

[2] *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *60 Minutes* and *Wired Magazine*, to name a few.

[3] *Salon Selectives* shampoo and *Pringles* potato chips, respectively.

[4] In *Linked*, physicist Albert-Laszlo Barabasi presents a new theory of networks, based on an empirical study of links on the internet. Major principles of Barabasi's theory include the existence of *hubs*, the principle of *preferential attachment*, and the quality of *fitness*.

Networks, including and explicitly the World Wide Web, contain very few, highly connected nodes, which Barabasi calls *hubs*. These are select websites that have a high volume of traffic and are reachable from almost any other website in a few clicks (Barabasi 2003: 27-69). Lukeford.com became a *hub* within months of launching. The site drew approximately 50,000 hits per day and was linked-to by major news sites, search engines, porn industry websites, and other blogs (Wired.com, AVN.com, Google.com, mikesouth.com, lukeford.net).

According to Barabasi's theory, networks that grow one node at a time, like the internet, are governed by the principle of *preferential attachment*. This principle states that each new node connects to the existing nodes, and the probability that it will choose a given node is proportional to the number of links the chosen node has already. New nodes tend to connect to well-connected nodes (Barabasi 2003: 86). The expansion of the network means that early nodes have more time than the latecomers to acquire links. As stated above, Ford started lukeford.net in 1997, four years after the launch of the first point and click browser. This was hardly the early stages of the internet. Therefore, the success of lukeford.com must be understood in the context of Barabasi's theory of *fitness*.

According to Barabasi, not all nodes are created equal, and the principal of *fitness* serves to increase the chance that a node will become a *hub* (Barabasi 2003: 95). Examples of fitness include the ability to make friends quickly, or a company's competence in luring and keeping consumers compared to other companies. Barabasi's classic example of *fitness* leading to overnight *hub*-dom online is the swift rise to prominence of google.com, despite its late introduction to the internet in 1997 (Barabasi 2003: 94). Ronald Burt's theory of *structural holes* will help demonstrate some of the unique properties of *fitness* that lukeford.com took on in the context of digital media, based on factors of *publishing speed*, *low cost publishing*, *broad audience*, and *permeability*. On the broadest level, it may be said, based on Burt's theory, that lukeford.com filled existing *structural holes* between the porn industry and his three audiences, thereby making the website incredibly *fit*.

[5] Including, but not exhaustively: *geneross.com, generossextreme.com, stunningcurves.com, mikesouth.com*.

[6] Francois Lyotard uses the term metanarrative or grand narrative to describe the "grand" or encompassing cultural stories (Benjamin 1989).

[7] Much of what McRobbie describes in the United Kingdom is also relevant to the United States.

[8] Mark Simpson refers to the 'sexconfessional imperatives of the late twentieth century'" (Simpson 1996: 15)

[9] In Amazoning The News, Ellen Kampinsky, Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis describe the novel ways in which users can access information through digital media, and the ways that the new types of access shape news websites. However, they also highlight the ways that access to *production of information* by users

shapes news websites. Kampinsky and her co-authors describe *5 basic goals that users come to the web for* (Kampinsky et al. 2003). Based on their *5 basic goals* Kampinsky and her colleagues define *5 Rules Of Net Engagement* (Kampinsky et. Al. 2003).

In Online Journalism: A Critical Primer, Jim Hall demonstrates ways in which *access* and *production* are both changing the nature of journalism. In a chapter entitled Too Fresh to be True, Hall discusses Judge Kenneth Starr's publication of his federal grand jury report on President Clinton's "Zippergate" investigation. Hall sees this as a moment that defined a shift in the way that news is made. Users could read the report on the internet without the intervention of television or print media reporting. Indeed, reporters on CNN read the Starr Report aloud, directly from computer screens (Hall 2001: 129). This type of publication of information, according to Hall, changed the nature of news in two distinct ways. Firstly, internet users had instant *access* to a government document in an *unmediated* environment. Hall notes that the traditional relationship between news producers and audiences has been one in which journalists interpret information through a lens that viewers can anticipate and understand. Anticipated bias in reporting, and interpretation of information by journalists, is something that audiences have come to depend on (Hall 2001: 141).