

Our stalker culture: The celebrity craze

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We're all stalkers now. We are virtual stalkers, for we can obsessively track the joys and mishaps of celebrities via the 24/7 news cycle.

Fascination with celebrity has been around for a long time, of course. But the advent of movies and television significantly changed the dynamics of fame. Television brought the famous into our homes. We began to develop a sense of intimacy with the people who appeared regularly on screen. It was a faux intimacy and a bogus proximity to the stars, but it was compelling nonetheless. It satisfied the stalker's need to be close to the object of his or her fascination.

Even after the establishment of television, however, the media kept some distinction between the private lives of the famous and their public lives. Think, for instance, of how President Kennedy's sexual adventurism was well known among the politicians and journalists of his day but was not mentioned in the news coverage. Compare the treatment of JFK to the media's relentless interest in President Clinton's extramarital activities three decades later.

What's changed since Kennedy's day? The effects of history never unfold due to only one cause, but a case can be made that a key moment occurred in 1980 when CNN, the first 24/7 news network, premiered on cable television. A bevy of imitators followed. Today multiple media outlets try to attract viewers, and they must come up with programming for all hours and days of the week. Media's maw has grown fantastically, and its appetite for the sensational and the spectacular is insatiable. And famous people, especially when discovered in titillating situations, attract more interest than the most bizarre activities of noncelebrities. So news coverage aims to appeal to the stalker in all of us.

Previously, news organizations operated on a news cycle that pivoted around a morning and an evening newscast. That cycle allowed journalists and producers a few moments to catch their breath. They had some time to think twice and to stay

mindful of their civic and professional responsibilities before rushing a piece of gossip or glamorous gore onto the air. The need for programming 24 hours a day intensified the pressure to lead with the gut, to run immediately with the sensational—even if it is unverified and only rumored.

What little inhibition remained evaporated with the rise of the Internet in the mid-1990s. In 1994 the Web browser Netscape was introduced. In 1995 Yahoo, the first Web search engine, debuted. In 1997 the term *Weblog* was coined and the Drudge Report, the first massively popular Web site, was launched. Since then the details of celebrity lives have been open to constant inspection. The Internet distribution of sex tapes and nude photos grants everyone with a computer access to the bedrooms of the famous. Twitter now invites us into hour-by-hour accounts of the celebrity's daily life: moods, meals, shopping, pet peeves, locations, lusts, bowel movements. Twitter users are known as "followers." Might they just as accurately be called stalkers?

I know, I know—I speak in broad and gross terms. There remains a distinction between following someone in the real world and doing it in the virtual world. But I am haunted by a passage in St. Augustine's *Confessions*. In book six Augustine tells of Alypius, a friend and former student whom he had introduced to the Christian life. Growing in the practice of his faith, Alypius struggles to stifle a longtime love of the bloody spectacles viewed at the gladiatorial games. Friends lacking Alypius's convictions urge him to return with them to the arena. Finally they prevail, and Alypius joins them out of a sense of companionship.

He tags along with a demurral: "Even if you drag my body into this place, can you fasten my mind and eyes on such shows? I will be absent, though present, and thus I will overcome both you and them." In short, Alypius concocts a plan to join his friends but be only virtually and not really present.

Alas, he hears the combat and senses the excitement of the crowd, and he succumbs to the lure. He opens his eyes and is swept up in the spectacle. In doing so, Augustine comments, Alypius "was wounded more deeply in his soul" than the maimed gladiator was in his body.

Judging by its effects on the psyche, is there any real difference between doing something in virtual reality and doing it in actual reality? Virtual stalking may not land us in jail, but it may grievously wound our souls. What would Augustine think?