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Web sites that hang celebrities out to dry

As Mel Gibson learned, a lot of people are checking them out.

By Felicia Cousart Matlosz / The Fresno Bee

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By Bob Campbell / The Fresno Bee

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Soon after actor Mel Gibson was arrested for suspicion of drunken driving, tipsters told TMZ.com about the disturbing circumstances of the Malibu traffic stop.

The celebrity Web site, launched in November 2005, dug for the story and published four pages from the Los Angeles County sheriff's deputy's original handwritten report. It detailed the Oscar-winner's hateful comments about Jews, his threats against the deputy and his attempt to get away.

TMZ.com put itself on the map with that story. Regular media outlets played catch-up. And Gibson's life never will be the same.

Celebrity Web sites have mushroomed, fueling the public's seemingly insatiable need to know about the rich and the famous, and often to poke fun at their foibles.

A site such as TMZ — which stands for "thirty mile zone," an entertainment industry term for the immediate area around Los Angeles where filming can take place without added out-of-town costs — operates like a daily news organization, running down tips and hunting for scoops.

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Other types of celebrity sites, such as Defamer.com, take the celebrity news of the day, and sometimes the gossip, and zing away with catty comments.

Their forerunners are the glossy celebrity magazines and supermarket tabloids. But now the Internet breed is forcing those publications, such as People and Us Weekly, to break "exclusives" on their own Web sites because they can't wait a week until their next editions land at newsstands and supermarket checkout lines.

"We're now in this kind of the Wild West period of the Internet," says Robert Thompson, a professor of popular culture at Syracuse University.

Is there a saturation point? People only have so much time, which may mean they eventually focus on sites that provide the fastest celebrity news or the snappiest commentary. Sites such as Defamer and PerezHilton.com are current favorites, so popular that they've become the subject of regular media coverage.

"Whether we're going to be able to support all this conversation, literally uncountable number of snarky blogs," Thompson says, "I just don't know how much attention we'll continue to pay to them."

Until then, people can't seem to get enough of them.

Elayne Rapping, professor of American Studies at the University of Buffalo, says, "All of the people who are celebrity addicts and read all these magazines must go onto these celebrity Web sites the way some people play video games for hours on end."

For Harvey Levin and his 25-member staff at TMZ in Glendale, the aim is to distinguish themselves through reporting. Yes, they put up the usual fodder, such as tracking starlet Lindsay Lohan and writing about the mysterious Tom Cruise/Katie Holmes baby (TMZ was the first to publish the birth certificate).

But Levin, the managing editor, also is an attorney who's been an investigative reporter for a Los Angeles TV station and created and executive-produced the syndicated series "Celebrity Justice." He says they run TMZ just like a news organization, with stories fact-checked and, when needed, scrutinized by lawyers.

Levin says they present "unvarnished" coverage of the industry.

"It's not even so much the celebrity scene. We're covering the world of entertainment," he says. "We're finding angles, we're breaking stories. We're finding the videos that people typically haven't had an opportunity to see."

"We're trying to make this a really rich experience," he says, "not just frivolous news."

Levin talked to The Bee on Wednesday, a day TMZ was trying to obtain cell-phone video taken of Gibson at a restaurant two hours before the

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arrest. As TMZ works to stay ahead of the Gibson saga, Levin squeezes in interviews with dozens of media outlets that want to know more — not just about the story, but TMZ as well.

Once it's nailed down, TMZ isn't restricted by traditional network TV news or newspaper cycles.

"From the time I got the phone call that [the video] existed to the time I got it on the Web site, that was 35 minutes," Levin says. "It makes us extremely competitive, that we're this nimble."

Thesmokinggun.com is another Web site that includes celebrity news, but it's more of an investigative operation. It publishes stories backed by legal documents, such as hundreds of sealed court documents pertaining to the Michael Jackson child molestation case.

It also discovered the embellishments and fabrications in author James Frey's best-selling memoir "A Million Little Pieces" about addiction and crime. Oprah Winfrey had picked it for her book club, propelling it to huge sales. After the disclosure, Winfrey initially supported Frey but reversed herself, lambasting him when she interviewed him on her TV show.

Other celebrity Web sites feature photos and news about famous people accompanied by sarcastic opinions.

Thesuperficial.com, for example, recently wrote this after Island Records recently dropped Lohan because she allegedly wouldn't promote her single or album: "Even if she had shown up the single still would've flopped. They could've spent \$3 billion and hired some dancing elephants but that still wouldn't have saved it. Bad music is bad music, and Lindsay Lohan's bad music is about as bad as bad music can get."

Thompson, the Syracuse professor, says readers of celebrity Web sites need to be savvy about what they see. In fact, he believes courses should be required in high school, if not sooner, to educate people about the media.

For example, who owns what? How is information gathered? How do you differentiate between sites that are recognized sources of news and use traditional journalistic practices — such as bylined stories, sourcing and fact-checking — versus anonymous items on a Web site that may just be unsubstantiated gossip?

Rapping, who teaches a class on the culture of celebrity, says interest in celebrities goes back years and stems from what surrounds us. During the Depression, for example, people sought out lighthearted movies such as Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers musicals.

Today, Rapping says, "I really think this country has become addicted to celebrity. In my opinion, in many ways, it's a way of avoiding the real news. I can't remember a time in my life when things here or globally were so terrifying."

For Ashley Shirley, 21, of Fresno, the celebrity Web sites are a source of

amusement and entertainment. The Fresno City College student visits them at least twice a day to see what's up. She checks a few sites, most regularly one on LiveJournal.com called "Oh No They Didn't!!"

She likes being in the know before regular media outlets get the stories. But she's also wary enough to recognize when an item may not be true — when there is no cited source — "so I don't take everything seriously."

And why does she read these sites?

"Because it's a break," Shirley says. "Reading about other people's lives to me is interesting. ... I like it a lot, and I always know the new stuff, so usually I am one of the people that my friends or my family would say to, 'Have you heard this?'"

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