Web celebs consider their role

Internet 'geeks' gain niche in mainstream culture

By Carolyn Y. Johnson
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CAMBRIDGE - A coterie of A-list geeks, known not by face or name but by
nom de blog and Web address, descended on the Massachusetts Institute of
Technology campus this weekend for the Woodstock of the Web, a festival of
cyberculture called ROFL-CON.

The convention was steeped in online culture, from the name itself - cobbled
together from the instant message abbreviation for Rolling on the Floor
Laughing and CON, for convention - to name tags that were modeled after a
software log-in screen.

"This conference was an idea waiting to happen," said David Weinberger, a
fellow at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School.
He kicked off the confab with a keynote speech examining the Web's new brand
of celebrity, where popularity frequently bubbles up through truly populist
channels, such as word of mouth or e-mail recommendations, rather than by
paparazzi.

That sort of celebrity dominated the conference - an ever-expanding cast of
people who look ordinary - even nerdy - but were welcomed by adoring fans for
creating Internet "memes," cultural building blocks that are the equivalent of
genes.

"We are Internet-famous. You will never recognize us. We don't have the
charisma of a rock star," said Ben Huh, who runs I Can Has Cheezburger?, a
website for pictures of cute cats with humorous, grammatically twisted
captions. Even so, several hundred people gathered for a weekend that included
a panel about his website.

Sanjay Sabnani, who runs social network site Crowdgather.com, traveled from
Los Angeles for the chance to meet and mingle with Internet royalty.

"Until I launched my company in January, I always kept this part of my life -
Internet, humor, in the closet," Sabnani said. "I had no real purpose except to
meet kindred spirits."

Though they occupy a decided niche, the Web celebrities that headed the
weekend's panels have an inspired following that increasingly reflects back on
mainstream culture in an age where going online no longer has the stigma of
being a geek's hobby.

Kyle MacDonald, for instance, better known as "the one red paper clip guy,"

http://www.boston.com/business/technology/articles/2008/04/28/web_celebs_consider_their_role/
attracted widespread attention when in 2006 he traded a paper clip for a house in rural Saskatchewan in Canada and later wrote a book. Andy Ochiltree, referred to as the "jibjab guy" during a panel session, is known because his website launched "This Land," a parody of George W. Bush and John Kerry during the 2004 election that appeared on "The Tonight Show." TRON guy, a middle-aged computer consultant from Minnesota, was the elder statesman of the group - a man who rose to fame in 2004 when he began appearing on "Jimmy Kimmel Live" clad in a form-fitting unitard embellished with luminescent wires.

The niche culture that thrives on the Internet is nothing new, but the Internet now forms the base platform for everything from communication to looking up recipes, making it a powerful cultural force that is creating microcelebrities.

Even mainstream media and major corporations view the techniques that dominate online as potentially powerful ways to create buzz.

"The culture is the same, but technology has changed and allows people to network faster and a lot more widely and globally and that's why this meme culture aspect of this is so prominent now," said Christopher Kelty, assistant professor of anthropology at Rice University who chaired a panel examining the role of Internet cult leaders. "Instead of a subcultural phenomenon that a few people engage in, it's something that can spread globally in 72 hours."

For instance, I Can Has Cheezburger’s montage of cat photos and nonsensical captions hardly seems a viable business or a cultural touchstone. But it now receives more than 7,000 submissions of photos of animals saying weird things each day, and Huh is hiring his 10th employee.

In a way, the Web has given birth to a kind of cottage industry of individuality - people who build a brand around a personality or a passion. They ask for donations to support their blogs and sell merchandise allowing them to turn hobbies into careers.

These sites can become businesses in part because of a shift in society’s view of what’s cool. "For my dissertation project, I'm specifically looking at how concepts like geek and nerd went from being straight-out insults to actual badges of pride and terms used to market products," said Jason Tocci, a graduate student at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

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