

**THE ILLUSION OF INCREASED DEMOCRACY IN THE DIGITAL AGE OF
FASHION JOURNALISM**

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Introduction

Existing literature and the popular press have lauded the digital revolution as a force that is democratizing traditional forms of journalism and destabilizing media power hierarchies. This paper aims to refute such claims of enhanced democracy through the lens of Fashion Journalism as it responds to the digital age. Questions of democracy have heretofore been debated principally within the context of the political sphere. The current study aims to augment the ongoing dialog on this issue with an examination of an evolving journalism within the fashion realm, an area largely neglected in such discourse. It will conduct an examination of the blogosphere, news websites, and social media tools supplementing and supplanting older forms of fashion media. Ultimately, this work encourages a hesitance in prematurely praising the digital age for its supposed democratizing influence on fashion journalism.

A Brief Literature Review

In *Networked*, Adrienne Russell examines the evolution of media between 1990 and 2010, the time period in which the growing popularity of the web elicited a corresponding decrease in the relevancy of the printed newspaper. Russell describes the new form of journalism in the digital age as “networked journalism,” in which the public has assumed the new role of active news creator rather than passive news consumer. Russell asserts, “...The variety of forms and perspectives that make up news in this environment and the number of connections linking creators to one another have significant influence on the news and have expanded

journalism as a category of information and genre storytelling” (1). Russell compares old and new media models through the lens of coverage from the Gulf War in 1991 and the Iraq War in 2003. Journalism during the Gulf War was “characterized by the qualities of mass media – by the predominance of commercial and professional news product and a one-way communication model to a national community” (3). The media landscape changed during the Iraq War, which coincided with the birth of the internet as a journalistic source. Russell notes, “By 2003, a vibrant field of readily accessible public communication had formed, for example, by academics, bloggers, citizen-sponsored journalists, and...’second-tier news outlets.’ ...The new material augmented and often clashed with material produced by the mainstream media” (15). Journalism has changed, she argues, to become conversation rather than dictation.

Like Russell, a number of other sources have explored the influence of the digital age on journalism by looking at the coverage of political events around the world. In *Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives*, Stuart Allen and Einar Thorsen examined the phenomenon of citizens adopting the role of amateur reporters after being swept up in “extraordinary events” around the world. In *Bloggging America: The New Public Sphere*, Aaron Barlow argues that the one-way, centralized model of journalism has given way to a form in which individual audience members are able to take more creative control and therefore more significantly impact political discussion. He asserts, “The Internet does not limit culture. On the contrary, it expands it by increasing possibilities.” His perspective on transformed modern-day journalism models is an optimistic one.

Digital Media and Democracy: Tactics in Hard Times, by Megan Boler, centers around a discussion on the ways in which the “sociable web” are revolutionizing mainstream journalism and impacting public discourse. Susan Forde echoes this sentiment, asserting, “...The advent of the internet with all its empowering, democratic potential, is a significant moment in the development of alternative journalism” (*Challenging the News*, 2, 2011).

This paper aims to add to the dialog about journalistic transformations in response to the digital age. Whereas much of the current literature centers around examinations of political journalism, the present work hopes to augment the discussion by exploring these questions of democracy and change within the relatively neglected context of fashion journalism. This project challenges assumptions of increased democracy in fashion journalism of the digital age and hopes to illustrate the ways in which power shifts between traditional and new media are more illusory than substantial.

Challenging Suppositions of Heightened Democracy

Agenda-Setting

Professional journalistic institutions still maintain firm control of agenda-setting power. Broadly defined, agenda-setting is the phenomenon in which news producers may not necessarily tell audiences what to think, but rather what to think *about*. The agenda-setting control enjoyed by professional news organizations does not evaporate in the digital world; on the contrary, it simply transmutes into the

online environment. Traditional producers of fashion journalism maintain their influence by using their established brand and relatively rich resources to both selectively amplify and create certain types of voices.

It is true that the blogosphere has allowed for a proliferation of myriad different voices, giving a platform to anyone with a computer and an opinion they want heard. To be sure, this was not possible under the old model of journalism, which involved a one-to-many process of mass communication. In this traditional form, the authorities of the industry – that is, the established fashion journalism sources – disseminated information to a passive public able only to consume the published material. With the introduction of Web 2.0, the public can additionally produce, and has thus assumed a participatory role in news instead of a purely consumptive one.

Yet, ironically, it is precisely because new digital technology has allowed for such a cacophony of diverse voices that the well-established, professional news sources are able to maintain their agenda-setting power. The popular saying, “When everyone has a megaphone, it is impossible for anyone to be heard,” has become a familiar refrain spoken of Web 2.0. Because cognitive capacities are increasingly exhausted by the information overload and boundless choice of the digital world, many individuals look to trusted, knowledgeable entities to separate the wheat from the chaff.

This new phenomenon of lowered barriers to participatory fashion journalism is best illustrated by the blogosphere, with its recent explosion in fashion content created in large part by amateur “citizen journalists.” The independent

fashion bloggers that have sprung up in the present age fit the classic picture of the journalist in varying degrees. Most could not be considered journalists by historically accepted standards of the trade. The vast majority of them operate alone, with limited resources in comparison to an established newsroom. Therefore, they are oftentimes unable to devote time and energy to fact-checking or thorough reporting, and most likely operate without the beat system or network of sources characteristic of professional journalistic positions. However, though these individuals do not completely resemble traditional content producers, they can be considered a new breed of fashion journalist. In publishing information that the public treats seriously as substantial fashion content, bloggers have come to comprise a new kind of journalistic community – albeit one that still lags behind in true agenda-setting power.

The cacophony of the fashion blogosphere must somehow be reduced to a relatively small number of voices that people will resonate with, trust, and visit faithfully for the latest content. But how will this be done, and by whom? This is where the influence of professional establishments plays a critical role. These traditional news sources are still largely responsible for publicizing and popularizing select voices of the blogosphere. In this sense, the usefulness of new media is still at least partially dependent on old models of top-down agenda-setting.

Magazines and professional fashion news websites take the burden of choice off of the public's shoulders by selectively amplifying a small number of fashion blogs. For instance, publications and websites will often set aside copy space for lists, profiles, and web addresses of suggested blogs. For example, the March 2012

issue of *Glamour* featured a full article on Hillary Kerr, founder of [whowhatwear.com](http://www.whowhatwear.com), while *Teen Vogue* profiled Stephanie Mark and Erin Kleinberg of the blog “The Coveteur” in its January 2012 issue. The website for *Marie Claire* devotes an entire section to “Blogs We Love,” providing links to a handful of recommended sites.¹ The increased web traffic that results from such publicity further amplifies the voice of the individual indirectly endorsed by the mainstream media authorities. Of course, it is in the best interest of the media company to throw its support behind bloggers whose views and coverage align harmoniously with its own. Consequently, the viewpoints of big media conglomerates are further strengthened in the public psychology at the same time that the blogosphere is simplistically hailed as a provider of true diversity in opinion.

Other digital media tools, like Facebook and Twitter, are similarly praised as a vehicle through which the public is able to participate in, and influence, fashion journalism. Indeed, through Facebook posts and Tweets, readers of a wide range of fashion publications can, for the first time, engage in an instantaneous, interactive dialog with journalistic authorities. Magazines are increasingly making a point to incorporate readers’ participation in their interactive digital spaces into the distribution of their traditional, one-way printed products. Now, it is common for publications to include internet comments in their printed issues, placing them in front-of-the-book sections or attaching them to articles as engaging supplements. Even *Elle*, a heavy hitter in fashion journalism, scours the internet for reader feedback on their content and publishes select comments in the first pages of the

¹ <http://marieclairvoyant.com/category/hot-topics/bloggers>

magazine. For instance, the May 2012 issue contained two sections devoted to such internet conversation. One section published seven online comments in response to an article on the previous issue's cover girl, Blake Lively, and the other printed five comments regarding an interview with Josh Hutcherson, also in the previous issue.

There is truth, then, to the assertion that digital tools can allow interaction with fashion media producers in ways that were not possible before Web 2.0. Magazines are clearly tuned in to the cyberspace activity of their readerships, and do incorporate the voices of the public into their journalistic product. However, interaction and incorporation are both still mediated by the media authorities, and according to their own interests. Magazines must choose only a few comments out of hundreds to publish. Their choices will not be arbitrary, but carefully calculated and in line with the beliefs and desired image of the company. Or, like *Vogue*, the established sources of the fashion industry could choose not to incorporate the reader feedback at all. Though tools are certainly available now for readers to join the conversation, the larger democratic significance of such public contribution remains at the mercy of the traditional media gatekeepers.

The rise of the blogosphere and other social media platforms illustrate the distinction between the right to speak and the right to be heard. While the advent of such tools gives the average American citizen the means by which his or her perspectives can be freely voiced, traditional fashion empires still largely determine which voices get heard over others. Even in the digital age, or perhaps because of it, professional fashion journalism establishments retain the power to set the public agenda by selectively amplify certain voices.

Shift to Subjectivity

The questionable or nonexistent objectivity of some online sources – particularly the voices of the newly influential blogosphere – diminish the democratic merit of such journalistic forms. Simply by merit of the fact that they are generally understood to represent a single individual, blogs are destined to be subjective from the very beginning. In fact, a high amount of subjectivity in a fashion blog's posts often leads to greater success. In the supersaturated blogosphere, successful blogs with large followings almost always have an extremely distinct point of view and tone that set them apart from the countless others.

In fact, sometimes the leading blogs go so far as to write in a crass style – a far cry from the composed, professional decorum of a traditional fashion journalist. Leandra Medine has built an extremely successful and lucrative blogging career with her site “The Man Repeller.”² Her posts span all the topics a traditional fashion journalist would cover – fashion shows, new collections, designer collaborations, product reviews, and more – but it is her writing style that distinguishes her from one. Medine's posts are overflowing with curse words and sexual references that would be considered wildly inappropriate in the pages of a fashion magazine. This kind of freedom and self-expression allowed by the fashion blogosphere is a double-edged sword. While the free reign could be considered a victory for the average fashion enthusiast, it could also have the effect of debasing the noble image traditional fashion journalists have historically worked tirelessly to build.

² <http://www.manrepeller.com/>

But the greater cause for concern, with a more direct impact on the democratic nature of fashion journalism, is the emergence of a new blog economy powered by corporate sponsorship. As many of their target demographics become increasingly responsive to these digital forms of fashion journalism, major commercial companies have started to adapt their own traditional models of publicity to the online marketplace. Formidable retail giants like Net-A-Porter, as well as fashion brands ranging from Free People to Bulgari, have staked their claim in the digital world by paying for advertisements on the most popular blogs that target their desired audiences.³ Additionally, numerous companies have teamed up with bloggers in artistic and promotional collaborations. The 14-year-old blogging sensation Tavi Gevinson recently teamed with MAC Cosmetics, for example, taking photos for their “MacZine.” Similarly, Leandra Medine was asked to style a Christian Louboutin capsule collection in the window of the famed department store Bergdorf Goodman.⁴ The companies not only benefit from the perceived authenticity of working with a popular blogger toward the creation of a product, but also enjoy widespread publicity when the bloggers post about their enjoyable experience.⁵ Such corporate backing is compelling support for the idea that bloggers have become a formidable force in the fashion industry.

However, these developments also mean that the major blogs are now as much tied into a commercial system as are traditional forms of media like fashion magazines. The fact that writing a successful fashion blog has now become lucrative

³ As seen on the blogs Grazia.it and coolgirlstyle.com, accessed June 2012.

⁴ <http://www.manrepeller.com/2012/03/hi-friends.html>

⁵ As seen on thestylerookie.com, accessed June 2012.

largely dooms the democratic potential of this new form of journalism. The financial resources provided by advertisements, the fame offered by collaborations, and the material goods sent by public relations departments influence many bloggers and the content they produce. It is true that the delicate balance between journalistic responsibility and the maintenance of relationships with financial supporters is nothing new in fashion journalism. Independent bloggers are simply much more vulnerable to the influence of corporate support. Because they operate with scarce financial resources in comparison to larger media companies, and lack the collective social influence of a newsroom committed to objectivity, bloggers are at a greater risk of being swayed by the rewards commercial giants offer them. As a result of this corporate colonization, the blogosphere has become significantly less objective and “grass roots” than many perceive it to be.

The most disturbing form of corporate influence is the now-common practice of trading a desirable product or experience for the blogger’s public endorsement, either direct or indirect. Fashion brands have started gifting popular bloggers with their products in hopes the gesture will yield positive reviews by the influential individual. On many occasions, Tavi Gevinson has posted pictures of herself enjoying clothing sent to her by a wide variety of fashion brands. A post on December 1, 2009, for instance, depicts her wearing a gifted scarf. She wrote, “I received this scarf from Suz & Rich from Weardrobe a few days ago and I really love it. It’s the American Apparel circle scarf in grey, and it is so fun to drape. The material is really soft and warm.”⁶ Gevinson responsibly discloses the fact that the

⁶ <http://www.thestylerookie.com/2009/01/write-letter-to-eden-moonlight-please.html>

item was a gift, but there are likely bloggers who endorse without full acknowledgment of the circumstances under which they are endorsing a given product.

Commercial interests even offer still more irresistible rewards in the form of glamorous all-expenses-paid trips to high-profile events and desirable destinations around the world. American Express arranged for Jessica Quirk of “What I Wore” to attend the exclusive New York Fashion Week. In exchange, she posted positively about her experience and publicized the generosity of American Express for making her live coverage possible. In her final post of the series, she writes, “Although I’ve been a guest at shows in the past, this week was extra special and I think it’s because I really harnessed my gratitude for the opportunity.”⁷ It is precisely this feeling of gratitude and indebtedness that render it difficult for bloggers to resist reciprocating with glowing endorsements, even when he or she may not personally use the brand. Some attempt to maintain integrity by accepting offers only from those brands they have historically endorsed. But, then, there is the question of those who do not set these guidelines for themselves. Furthermore, one can imagine how this rule of thumb might easily fall by the wayside when given a special opportunity or free gift.

As another example, Rumi Neely, the blogger behind the successful blog “FashionToast,” recently posted about her glamorous trip to Cannes Film Festival in France, courtesy of L’Oréal. Nestled in her narrative is a thinly-veiled promotional paragraph that smacks heavily of a television commercial:

⁷ <http://whatiwore.tumblr.com/tagged/nyfw>

L'Oréal did my makeup and hair throughout my stay, which meant beachy waves for amFAR created with the help of plenty of Elnett and their currently unreleased but very perfect "Elseve" hair oil. This stuff is going to attain cult status about an hour after it hits shelves, it moisturizes and gives ends that light slip at the ends and nothing more. Totally worth how evil I feel for talking about things that aren't available yet. The makeup was focused heavily on the eyes with their Infallible Eye Shadow in Sultry Smoke smudged about with just enough precision, Infallible Never Fail Lacquer Liner on the waterline, and a good amount of Voluminous Power Volume Mascara (top and bottom cause that's what I do).⁸

The paragraph breaks noticeably from her usual narrative voice, and is written in an unnatural and forced tone. This post a particularly jarring example of the sacrifice of authentic self-expression for canned, corporate-controlled speech.

The fashion blogosphere is rife with content influenced by commercial interests. Ironically, in capitalizing on the current perception of bloggers' authenticity, major brands are simultaneously endangering it. It may be that in the near future, the public will be as skeptical of information on blogs as they have become toward older forms of journalism and advertising. Commercial colonization of the blogosphere presents serious concerns about ethics and accountability. Additionally, by exchanging money for speech, rewarding subjectivity, and potentially lessening the credibility of published information, commercialization prevents blogs from becoming truly democratic platforms for fashion journalism.

Reinforcement of the Status Quo

Though an opportunity now exists for the public to formulate and voice their own original ideas, the vast majority of content creators simply reinforce the status quo set by professional media sources and traditional power hierarchies. The

⁸ <http://www.fashiontoast.com/2012/06/cannes-2012-via-instagram.html>

majority of fashion blogs that have reached notoriety mainly feature expensive clothing from elite brands, which are easily out of the average reader's financial reach. "The Man Repeller" frequently raves about designer jewelry from top dogs Dannijo and Fenton, and has recently shared her excitement about the release of nine shoes produced by such elite labels as Dolce and Gabbana, Oscar de la Renta, and Gucci.⁹ Such fashion news provides only entertainment, and not informative, value for many readers, as they will not be able to profit from the "sales" she has scoped out on such exclusive luxury brands. "FashionToast" revolves around photographs of blogger Rumi Neely's outfits, most of which are comprised of costly brands like Céline, Isabel Marant, and Pierre Balmain.¹⁰ Browsing through the blog's photos consequently becomes little different than flipping through the editorial pages of a high-society magazine like *Vogue* or *Elle*. "The Coveteur" reinforces traditional industry power hierarchies by featuring the closets, belongings, and homes of elite tastemakers with great wealth and klout at their disposal. Recent subjects have included Tommy Hilfiger, king of American fashion, and Marina Larroudé, Market Director of the internet fashion news giant Style.com.¹¹ The blog thus uses its own platform to further amplify the booming voices of those at the helm of the fashion industry, further strengthening their powerful influence and excluding quieter voices from the public conversation.

This content bias reinforces the status quo for exorbitant luxury set by the leading industry sources, *Vogue*, *Elle*, and *Bazaar*. The blogosphere gives the broad

⁹ <http://www.manrepeller.com/2012/06/shoesday-sale-fun.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.fashiontoast.com/2012/06/may-nyc-outfits.html>

¹¹ http://thecoveteur.com/Marina_Larroude

fashion readership a chance to challenge the norm that to be truly fashionable is to wear expensive brands and lead a glamorous lifestyle. The public is now free to collectively formulate new rules that are attainable and that offset the messages disseminated by the top magazines. Unfortunately, most of the voices that rise above the cacophony are the ones that reinforce the status quo of unabashed luxury.

In a similar fashion, the most famous blogging personalities are largely biased toward intelligent, well-educated individuals who come from wealthy families. Such individuals are usually most able to produce captivating content that readers are motivated to continuously seek out. Readers, too, play into the status quo, generally choosing to read blogs endorsed by major publications, or that are produced by bloggers with the resources needed to generate quality material reminiscent of most magazine content. The voices that are most often heard continue journalistic bias toward wealthy writers and audiences, a phenomenon that obstructs the attainment of true democratic representation through the blog community.

The commercial colonization of the blogosphere discussed earlier further encourages this bias toward the elite. Bloggers who attract wealthy demographics will become more attractive in the eyes of big-spending advertisers from high-end clothing companies. If marketing departments at luxury fashion brands wish to single out readers with deep pockets, they will naturally find fertile ground in blogs who publish content biased toward high expense. Bloggers then have little incentive to cater to the much broader audience of readers unable to purchase luxury brands,

as big labels reward them with free gifts and attractive opportunities for doing just the opposite.

A relatively new trend in fashion coverage, by amateur and professional fashion journalists alike, is the growing emphasis on “Street Style.” Street Style coverage is exactly what it sounds like; it consists simply of photographing outfits seen out on the streets. This emergent form of fashion journalism has shifted the tides to a more pictorial, rather than textual, emphasis in modern news coverage. The new category was likely spawned by the increasing popularity of social networking sites, like Facebook, which seem to have given birth to an age of unashamed voyeurism. Now used to clicking through pictures of their friends on sites like Facebook, readers may be subconsciously seeking the same compulsive experience from blogs and traditional news outlets.

Street Style content has become a new fixture of reporting at Fashion Weeks around the world. Photographers, both independent and employed by magazines, park themselves outside of the venues where the designers show their fashion collections for the season. When the show concludes and the crowd trickles out, the photographers begin snapping hundreds of pictures of famous figures and stylish show-goers. Then, select photos are posted online, either on the photographer’s own site or at the online home of an established fashion journalism source. Street Style coverage has become just as anticipated by readers as the coverage of the new fashion collections themselves, if not more so.

Many see this phenomenon as a sign that the public now exists on the same level of importance as fashion designers in terms of the “weight” they’re given in

fashion coverage. Traditionally, a top-down system has reigned supreme, with fashion journalism authorities relaying the seasonal trends from Fashion Weeks to a passive and unquestioning public unable to attend the shows. Now, the voyeurism and technology of the digital age have presumably allowed for a more bottom-up process, in which the public has a chance to be included in professional fashion coverage alongside industry elites.

While there is some truth to this belief, the public should be cautioned to not overestimate the magnitude of this shift. As discussed earlier, professional journalists are still the principal gate-keepers of what is published, which means the photographs released for public viewing are mostly chosen at the discretion of traditional editors. These editors are likely to be motivated by a desire to maintain perceptions of the company's elite image, and are consequently likely to selectively publish pictures of outfits that reinforce the status quo. Indeed, the vast majority of the Street Style images on Vogue.com and Elle.com depict individuals wearing elite fashion labels more or less head-to-toe. As discussed earlier, this bias caters especially to the wealthy readers, and reinforces the underlying idea of elite publications that to be fashionable is to accumulate and parade big-name labels with costly price tags. Furthermore, the photos selected tend to reinforce trends previously or currently dictated by these same elite publications. For instance, Vogue's Street Style coverage of the Spring 2012 Fashion Weeks emphasized images in line with the trends previously communicated by the publication in the months prior. The description of one Street Style slideshow also explicitly reiterates the key themes of the season, reporting, "From the tried-and-true veterans of fashion week

like Céline handbags and Starburst-colored suiting to the season's new favorites like Dries Van Noten's verdant prints and athletic-chic baseball caps and jackets, these are our street-style gold medalists."¹² The photographs of the slideshow are chosen to reflect these "tried-and-true" trends and the "season's new favorites" as determined by Vogue. Vogue selects only the "street-style gold medalists" to publish for online readers and, in doing so, maintains its top-down power to selectively highlight what it wants readers to see.

Therefore, while the digital age may seemingly allow for a greater originality and diversity in ideas, the reality is that there is often only a perpetuation of the styles and trends promoted by the mainstream fashion media. With a few exceptions, bloggers simply reproduce content pre-packaged and disseminated by the fashion industry and its traditional media mill. Whether this is done consciously or unconsciously, the resulting entrenchment of the industry-determined status quo obstructs the presentation of numerous different viewpoints characteristic of truly democratic journalism.

Selective Exposure

The diversification characteristic of online news lends itself to selective exposure, thereby endangering democracy. The digital age makes readily available a wide range of perspectives for the public to view as it desires. Superficially, such a breadth of opinion may lead to the conclusion that fashion journalism in the digital space has become more democratic because people can be exposed to so many

¹² <http://www.vogue.com/fashion/street-style/article/fashion-week-street-style-the-best-photos-from-new-york-to-paris/>

different viewpoints. Upon closer examination, however, the hidden dangers of such a spread become apparent. Readers often not sufficiently motivated to expend the cognitive energy needed to jump between a number of sources in hopes of attaining the most complete knowledge or formulating the most informed opinions possible.

Instead, individuals tend to seek out the sources that most closely match their own voice, perspective, and interests. Often, they do this to the exclusion of other sources that may be dissimilar. The highly diversified and individualized digital media environment gives rise to this phenomenon of selective exposure.¹³ Theoretically, more choices should improve the democratic nature of online news, as people have the opportunity to access a wide range of opinion. Ironically, though, the endless choice of fashion news sources now available in the digital sphere actually has the effect of endangering democracy. When individuals are given the choice to read only the sources that align with their own preferences, they often lose the exposure to opinions and voices that differ from their own. The resulting disintegration of group-based society and shared knowledge is beginning to present a serious challenge to American democracy.

Accessibility Issues

Any benefits of journalism in the digital sphere extend only as far as the demographics that have access to it, maintaining a socioeconomic gap and thus running counter to true democratic journalism. While digital tools have provided new, powerful journalistic tools for many citizens, others with limited access to technology suffer. Many citizens throughout the country and around the world are

¹³ <http://pcl.stanford.edu/research/2008/bennett-minimaleffects.pdf>

not able to access a computer or appropriately utilize newly available digital tools. As Alexander Bard and Jan Soderqvist caution, “those without the ability to use this new interactive media technology to their advantage will form the lower classes of the digital age....Those who can harness global networks of information and master new forms of communication will control finance and legislation, forming the new business and government elites” (*Netocracy*, 2002). The digital age is beginning to further expand the chasm between the haves and the have-nots, increasing social inequality and leaving those without digital access or literacy in the dust. Until such a disparity is remedied, online journalism will fail to promote true democracy.

Endangerment of Full News Coverage

The market effects of the changing landscape in fashion journalism practices may ironically diminish the amount and richness of fashion news available to the public, thus constraining democracy at the same time. With photographs and reviews of runway collections now so instantaneously and readily available to the public, some fashion designers are beginning to fear the effects of “fatigue.” That is, they believe that the digital pervasiveness of photos and news coverage of their collections will cause consumers to tire more quickly of their products, before they are even released to retail stores. In response to this fear, some designers – like Tom Ford and Azzedine Alaïa, for instance – are now beginning to harshly limit digital coverage of their collections. In such cases, professional fashion journalists are deprived of any digital device, like a cell phone or camera, that could allow him or her to distribute the content on the web. Paradoxically, then, the glut of fashion

coverage now available through digital means may now begin having the opposite effect of *limiting* information. If this trend continues in the fashion community, the digital age may actually lead to a less democratic fashion journalism that again more closely resembles traditional one-way models.

Conclusion

The idea that the digital age is fundamentally shifting fashion journalism to a more democratic version of itself is more romantic than it is realistic. While a number of communication scholars and members of the public generally praise new technology as an equalizer in the realm of fashion journalism, its impact is in fact overestimated. The digital age is believed to upset traditional power balances between fashion elites and the previously-voiceless public; in fact, it ultimately maintains them in new forms of agenda-setting and reversion to the status quo. A proliferation of fashion news in the digital sphere presumably leads to a more well-informed populace; in fact, the sheer abundance of sources in the modern-day media environment has endangered the democratic nature of fashion journalism through selective exposure, limited accessibility, and some constriction of news coverage. To be sure, the landscape of fashion journalism is significantly and rapidly transforming. Americans simply need to be watchful of the turns that journalism is taking in this digital age, look out for possible pitfalls along the road, and steer policy, technology, and cultural beliefs in the direction of a truly better, more democratic future.

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