Notes on Hype[1]

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This article provides a series of notes that define, describe, and theorize the concept of hype as a pertinent one for the field of media and communication studies. I argue that hype helps to explain a common and powerful dynamic of cultural circulation that is, increasingly, a feature of our contemporary, digitized, promotional culture. Hype also well expresses the cynicism and backlash that are indigenous to this communication environment, and its consideration is a necessary step toward explaining and contending with this environment. I draw examples of hype primarily from the world of entertainment and popular culture, with specific attention to popular music.

1.

In *Another Country*—James Baldwin's 1962 novel that, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, pivoted "hype" toward the connotation it currently enjoys—the term is slang used by Ida, a spitfire who is one of the book's more hotheaded characters. "What you people don't know," she barks at Cass, a queenly though somewhat naïve white character, "is that life is a *bitch* baby. It's the biggest hype around" (Baldwin, 1962, p. 350). Like much of Baldwin's fiction, *Another Country* explores the complexities of race in his contemporary America, focusing in this instance on ambition, stardom, and the pursuit of one's artistic aspirations. Though the word only appears twice in the novel, "hype" conveys one of its key themes: the sense of betrayal a person feels in the face of broken dreams. Life itself, Ida proclaims, offers up myriad promises it cannot possibly keep. That this message comes from Ida to Cass— from hardened realist to heady dreamer, from black to white woman—suggests that, though the disappointments might arrive sooner to those with fewer opportunities, no one is entirely spared. To the contrary, there are benefits to be reaped and heartbreaks to be avoided from learning life's tribulations early.

If the declarations from numberless cultural corners are to be believed, Ida was right: Life is just one big hype. We live in a world where cultural critics caution us against believing the hype; where Silicon Valley marketers and Wall Street brokers bemoan the impact it has on their balance sheets; where public

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[1] The title and structure of this article is a reference to Susan Sontag's 1964 essay, "Notes on Camp."

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Date submitted: 2011-10-18

anticipation about all kinds of things is labeled hype almost reflexively. Take, for example, the summer 2011 U.S. release of Web-based music service Spotify, which led one technology reporter to remark that the service "lives up to the hype in its early stages, if only for a jaw-dropping, 15-million-song library" (Barton, 2011). Breathless exaltations for cloud computing, on the other hand—a development that includes services such as Spotify—compelled another to counter that "Hype is hype, and there will always be those who make excessive claims about whatever the new hot thing is" (Wittman, 2010). The annual report from the technology research firm Gartner, Inc. concurred: Cloud platforms were deservedly experiencing a massive backlash after months of inflated hype, a fate that would soon befall Internet TV and tablet computers, which both were on the precipice of being overhyped. (Fear not: Three dimensional printing and social analytics still had a way to go; (Smalley, 2011)). And then, of course, there's Google, which, over the course of a few months during 2011, introduced to much fanfare its social network Google+ and purchased Motorola Mobility, suddenly making the company a much bigger player in the mobile phone market. "The possibilities are endless. The hype is madness," mused *Technorati* blogger Chad Douglas. "Great minds think alike so, between Google and Motorola, the greatest minds have come together and will spawn something of epic proportions" (Douglas, 2011).

Hype is an adaptable creature, though; technology is not its only habitat. It can thrive among fad diets and product launches, it feeds off business start-ups or real estate, and it is as natural among sports stars as it is among political candidates. Not to mention the myriad examples from the arts and entertainment, where hype is, to all appearances, a requisite externality of existence. Musicians big and small depend on its power—from Lady Gaga, who has been deemed a maestro of hype, yet whose recordings, for some, fail to live up to the expectations she generates by force of persona (Jones, 2011; Daly, 2011); to Lana Del Rey, the indie songstress who became such an Internet phenomenon in early 2012 that she "suffered a backlash, a counter-backlash and a counter-counter-backlash all before she [had] even had the chance to release her major-label debut" (Farber, 2012). Movies, too: Peter Rainer of the *Christian Science Monitor* lamented that, "[d]espite all the advance hype" anticipating the release of *Captain America,* the film proved to be "yet another 3-D Marvel Comics concoction" with "with little reason to exist except as a marketing machine" (2011, para. 2). Not so of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2*, though, which erased any worries about hype when it became the first film in the Potter family to gross more than a billion dollars worldwide (Ryan, 2011). Even the tonier arts are not immune. The *London Telegraph*'s theater critic Charles Spencer explained that it's possible to "kill with excessive kindness," that theatergoers may be "misled" if critics "hype a show with more praise than it deserves" (2011). Michael Kimmelman, an art columnist for *The New York Times,* revealed a similar attitude in a commentary about the SoHo art scene:

> It's easy to overromanticize a grimy, long-lost era, but reacquainting myself with works like Matta-Clark's silent color film of himself in black tights and white gloves, a hippie Harold Lloyd shaving and showering with a garden hose while teetering beside the clock face atop the Clocktower Building in Lower Manhattan, and also with [Laurie] Anderson's deadpan monologue about visits to her psychoanalyst, which she delivers via a teensy video projection of herself onto a pocket-size figurine, I couldn't help wondering: What is it that makes a neighborhood, or for that matter a whole city, come together at a certain moment, culturally speaking? Why was SoHo in its early days vibrant and special in

ways that, despite the art world's current money and hype, seem so hard to come by now? (2011, para. 4)

I provide this brief charting of popular discourse not just for the sake of documenting the penetration of the word "hype" into the lexicon. I want to argue, instead, that hype's prevalence merits scholarly recognition and analysis, because it explains a common and powerful dynamic of cultural circulation, one that reveals the increasingly digitized, promotional culture in which we currently reside. Exhibiting generic, cyclical, and rhetorical features, hype highlights the centrality of promotion, as well as its discontents—the disbelief, cynicism, and backlash that are inherent features of a thoroughly commodified communication environment. Hype needs theorization not only to better explain this environment, but also as a necessary step toward developing tactics for challenging it.

I will argue here that hype tells us something about the present, but in making this claim, I am not suggesting that hype is altogether new. In other work, I have considered hype from a historic vantage, exploring how the popular music industry of the 1970s unveiled the palpable consequences hype could exact on artists, record labels, and popular music critics (Powers, 2011). It is important to keep in mind, though, that present-day concerns always drive the interests of history; any effort to trace back its lineage is very much an argument for its contemporary significance. Hype also is closely related to a number of other well-studied communication phenomena, and the term is sometimes used interchangeably with others that suggest coordinated and/or embellished promotion, such as buzz or spin. In endeavoring to situate hype within communication and media studies, I build on these connections, but also work to expose the limits of their usefulness in explaining the conditions, opportunities, and problems hype presents as a distinct and increasingly unavoidable feature of publicity.

2.

While the scholarly literature on hype itself is not extensive, what is out there is balkanized, with useful theoretical contributions scattershot across a number of disciplines. To complicate matters further, the tight relationships between hype and forms of media (news, advertising, public relations), together with its commonalities with other genres of communication (rumor, gossip, panic, word-of-mouth), present challenges to cleanly demarcating hype's parameters. The survey of the terrain dedicated specifically to hype that follows in this section serves as a way of beginning to unravel some of these connections. My goal is to align and converge this motley body of thinking into a practical definition that may underlie future theorizations, as well as other kinds of critical work.

There is a small amount of work within the discipline of communication and media studies that explores hype as a concept on its own terms. This work falls into two camps. The first consists of studies that understand hype as a process within the news media—in other words, something that happens as a result of a particular amount and style of news coverage on a topic, which may be empirically observed and quantitatively measured. The work of Peter Vasterman has been central to this conceptualization. He defines a "media-hype" as a "media-generated, wall-to-wall news wave, triggered by one specific event and enlarged by the self-reinforcing process within the news production of media" (2005, p. 515). His work has explored the existence and effect of media-hypes in the Danish press around issues such as

violence, disaster, and public health. Vasterman has inspired work on hypes around issues such as communicable disease (Hellsten & Nerlich, 2010), social problems (Elmelund-Præstekær & Wien, 2008), and politics (Ruigrok, Scholten, Krijt, & Schaper, 2009), as well as work to expand more generally on the anatomy and typology of media hypes (Wien & Elmelund-Præstekær 2009). While this take on hype has gained a foothold among Danish scholars, it has yet to do so in the United States, nor elsewhere that I have been able to find among English-language scholarship. This may suggest that hype, as I am describing it, has geographic or cultural limits—an intriguing notion, but one which I will not explore in detail at present.

One of the noteworthy features of the Danish scholarship cited above is the delicacy with which it handles the relationship between hype and value judgment—a product, perhaps, of these studies' generally quantitative dispositions. For instance, rather than understanding hype as "exaggeration" or "distortion," Vasterman determines that "a definition of media-hype can only be based on the specific dynamic of a news wave, without a priori denouncement of the phenomenon." This makes for parallels between hype and scholarly research about rumor and panic, he suggests, asserting that both rumor and panic may be identified without having to prove that they were either warranted or ultimately harmful (2005, pp. 512–513). Yet this hesitancy toward the question of the valuation obscures how integral qualitative measures of hype are—a point Vasterman himself acknowledges in noting that hype transpires when the media "are making news instead of reporting events," "reporting comparable incidents and linking them," or "reporting thematically related news such as features, analyses and opinions" (ibid., p. 516). Other scholars have worked to limit the empirical problems that such issues present (Wein & Elmelund-Præstekær, 2009, p. 185), but at bottom, they force a recognition that discerning hype involves judgments—on the part of the news professional, as well as the researcher—that are more value-laden than simply counting up stories. Hype exists in, and is born of, context. Its power emanates from its existence as an atmospheric condition—something "in the air," perceptible without having to be measured, per se.

Hype is also the product of more than the news media alone. As is clear from the examples shared earlier in this piece, the efforts of advertising, marketing, branding, and public relations are a vital aspect of hype's genome. This understanding of hype, as a genre of promotional communication, aligns most closely with the everyday use of the term, and it is the second way in which the term is conceived in media studies scholarship. Gray (2008, 2010a, 2010b), in the most thorough examples of this perspective, has borrowed the concept of "paratextuals" from literary studies to conceive of hype as correlated media materials that revolve around a text and help to shape its meaning. "[H]ype works best by completely surrounding a text with ads," Gray writes, "the goal being not only that as many people as possible will hear about a text, but that they will hear about it from industry-created hype." He continues: "[A] key role of hype is to give us reasons to watch *this* film or television program, read *this* book or magazine, or listen to *this* song. In short, hype succeeds by creating meaning" (2008, pp. 33–34). These insights add several useful points in the service of a definition. First, Gray emphasizes hype as a cultural process which results in changed meanings, as well as changed relationships between and among audience members, the media industries, and media texts. Second and related, he understands hype intertextually—that is, he understands that it *exists in* the relationships among various forms of mediated communication. Because this take on hype conceptualizes it as functioning to define a text and promote

its consumption by creating an interconnected framework for communication, it has much in common with buzz, which Caves defined as "a critical mass of favorable, or at least involved, discussion" (2002, p. 181). Thompson, researching the institutional use of hype and buzz within the book industry, carries this theme further, to argue that there is an evolutionary relationship between the two. "Hype is like fishing with the most attractive fly you can find," he writes. "Buzz happens when you start to catch fish," particularly with money (2010, p. 193).

There is use value in thinking about both of the above conceptions in tandem, forging a concept of hype that very much depends upon media, and also demonstrates both procedural and generic qualities. But hype is also social, concerning not only how the meaning of and relationships around its object change, but also how those, in turn, change its value. Such effects have been clearly acknowledged in relation to buzz, understood as something that is "treasured among those who promote the sale of creative goods" (Caves, 2002, p. 181), capable of generating a "web of collective belief" among stakeholders (Thompson, 2010, p. 193), and the kind of instrumental social information that allows consumers to differentiate among cultural goods usefully (Currid & Williams, 2010, pp. 424, 427). In this same fashion, while hype may frequently originate in, and be directed toward, media, it speaks more broadly to a social process of communication that involves both anticipation and reaction on the parts of consumers, opinion leaders, and other commenters. Perhaps the most intriguing characteristic of hype is that it connotes that these reactions skew negative—toward doubt, suspicion, annoyance, or rejection,[2] belying hype's etymological linkage to both hyperbole and falsified promotion, as per the Oxford English Dictionary (1989). So, while both hype and buzz concern social, cultural, or monetary value, hype is specific in how it represents a crisis of value, erupting when a promotionally-driven state of anticipation cannot, for whatever reason, deliver on its promises.

The fact that hype can spell crisis has made it a topic of significant interest in business and its related disciplines. One might begin with Fenn and Raskino's book, *Mastering the Hype Cycle,* written to provide strategies for contending with the "the cycle of overenthusiasm, dashed expectations, and eventual maturity" that is "an essential part of the innovation process" (2008, p. xv). The authors define

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[2] The extensive literatures on gossip and rumor suggest that the forms share commonalities with hype. They are both types of unpredictable information that circulate through social channels, sometimes including media. Scholars often focus on the interpersonal usages of these information exchanges—as ways of managing risk, maintaining social relationships, or subverting power structures—and they likewise contend with the negative connotations associated with this kind of information transfer (see, for example, DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007; Fine, Campion-Vincent, & Heath, 2005; Goodman & Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Li, 2011). Though these communicative forms are old, they also importantly raise questions about the value, veracity, and circulation of knowledge in contemporary life; Birchall notes that gossip can be thought to "facilitate and be facilitated by the rise of information networks and the knowledge economy" (2006, p. 126). An important distinction between them and what I am identifying as hype is that hype begins as sanctioned, positive promotional information, often from official sources, distributed in forthright, public ways. Through interpretation and circulation, it becomes otherwise, which means that many kinds of communication are at risk of the designation.

the "hype cycle" as consisting of a highly predictable set of benchmarks, beginning with the following three phases:

- An "Innovation Trigger" that "generates press and industry interest in some innovation";

- The "Peak of Inflated Expectations," where "a bandwagon effect kicks in, and the innovation is pushed to its limits" while "the press [captures] the excitement around the innovation and reinforce[s] the need to become a part of it or be left behind"; and

- The "Trough of Disillusionment," when "impatience for results begins to replace the original excitement about potential value" and "[t]he media . . . switches to featuring the challenges rather than the opportunities of the innovation" (2008, pp. xiii, 8).

Though interested primarily in innovations in goods and services, the authors foreground the essentialness of media to hype and gesture toward hype being a process, a genre, and a crisis of value. Moreover, because the hype cycle replicates across many business arenas, they argue that it may be widely used not just a descriptive, but also a predictive tool (ibid., p. 15), lending it a level of inevitability. As they warn, "[a]dopting innovation without understanding the hype cycle can lead to inappropriate adoption decisions and a waste of time, money, and opportunity" (ibid., p. 21).

Other work from the field of science and technology studies has related hype to the "sociology of expectation" that "has shown how technological innovations . . . come packaged with expectations of their applications, their benefits (and sometimes their risks too, though often these are not emphasized by the drivers investing and pushing for innovation)" (Pieri 2009, p. 1105). For Pieri, considering how expectations are shaped is of utmost importance, because "very real trade-offs . . . are being made today, on the basis of some of these promises" (ibid.). Hype matters, then, because it can drive expectations to outpace deliverables, practically guaranteeing a backlash. Ruef and Makard note that hype transpires because actors "strategically inflate and communicate technological promises in order to attract attention and resources" (2010, p. 318); yet, the resulting "combination of a phase of high media attention *and* of high rising expectations" is often "followed by a decline or downturn of both" (ibid., p. 319, emphasis in original) that can cause opportunities to evaporate.

Hype also plays a role in the field of finance. In his oft-cited book *Irrational Exuberance,* Shiller does not discuss hype, per se, instead noting the following:

> The presumed enlightened opinion that people tend to rely on for economic judgments is often rather like the "man of smoke" in Aldo Palazzeschi's surrealistic 1911 novel *Il Codice di Perela.* The protagonist is made only of smoke; he is virtually nothing at all, but he acquires a public persona and authority that is a construct of the collective imagination, until the public changes its mind, deciding that he is not the font of truth, whereupon he disappears completely. Events such as that represented in Palazzeschi's novel are a reality: unsubstantiated belief systems, insubstantial wisps, do create bouts

of irrational exuberance for significant periods of time, and these bouts ultimately drive
the world economy. (2005, p. xiii)

Shiller argues that these sorts of cycles can and have driven both stock prices and investor
confidence to unsustainable levels, and that they are a major reason behind the capricious fluctuations in
the global financial markets endemic to our current age (see also Story & Bowley, 2011). While Shiller's
work continues to rouse debate, a number of scholars have taken up this issue by specifically examining
how media hype may or may not affect the value of a stock at various phases during its lifespan
(Bhattacharya, Galpin, Ray, & Yu, 2009; Jang, 2010; Johnson & Tellis, 2005). At the very least, the
existence of such a debate marks a recognition that it is worth understanding the relationship between
mediated information (which may act promotionally) and value—between what is known and given
attention, and what is believed and acted upon. As Hope writes, "media representations of economic
activity [help] to constitute that activity," resulting in a situation where "the real-time feedback loops that
proliferate then contribute to the growth and collapse of speculative bubbles," though the degree to which
hype can be blamed is certainly up for discussion (2010, pp. 654–655).

The insights above help me to distill the following definition of hype as it pertains to media and
communication studies: *Hype is a state of anticipation generated through the circulation of promotion,
resulting in a crisis of value*.

This definition harnesses several crucial details. First, it points to the importance of temporally-
understood circulation—information that travels, shape-shifting as it goes, reaching diverse audiences
within a bounded period of time and exacerbating the collective expectations of those audiences to a
breaking point. Gaonkar and Povinelli have described circulation as "the enabling matrix within which
social forms, both textual and topical, emerge and are recognizable when they emerge" (2003, p. 388). As
the scholarly literature cited above attests, hype *becomes*—as ads and news stories accumulate; as
branding campaigns progress; and as various kinds of audiences read, consume, and debate. My
emphasis on the dynamism inherent to hype means not only to connect with the growing scholarly
interest in issues pertaining to circulation, but also to overcome the division that persists between
industry-, audience-, and textually-oriented approaches to the study of media; in its dependence on
circulation, hype necessarily concerns them all.

Second, I use the word promotion broadly; included in it is "officially" promotional
communication, such as press releases, advertising, or marketing, as well as "unofficial" channels (guerilla
marketing, viral campaigns) and communication that has the appearance of promoting something, even if
that is not its original intent. Like other mediated forms, promotion is subjective, and meanings can be
understood differently, depending on many different factors. As I will discuss in more detail below, a
fundamental shift in where we expect to encounter promotional communication is critical to understanding
why hype seems to be on the rise.

Third, because hype tends toward crisis, it is necessary to also think broadly about what counts
as value; it is certainly money, but not only that. For instance, reputation (Power, 2007) and attention
(Davenport & Beck, 2001) are increasingly important value-forms, able to suggest and confer status,

credibility, and other kinds of resources. Hype's ability to taint them, even as it may also be used as an instrument to enhance them, means that it carries wide-ranging implications if, as Wolff argues, "publicity is the currency of our time" (Wolff, as cited in Dean, 2002, p. 6).

3.

In 2008, the hip Brooklyn-based magazine *N+1* published an article entitled "The Hype Cycle," exploring the harmful consequences that hype could have on the arts. Understanding hype as negative interference in the formation of taste, its author bemoaned how "[h]ype and backlash overwhelm the artifacts that supposedly occasion them," going so far as to have "become the emotional life of capitalism." Though tastes and fashion have long vacillated at whim—"as long as there's been a bourgeoisie"—the rate of volatile change has increased demonstrably in recent years. "The hype cycle replaces aesthetic judgment with something closer to speculative investment in securities," it notes. And accordingly, the "hype-and-backlash today afflicts popular music most of all" (The Hype Cycle, 2008, paras. 2, 3, 6, 10).

As a scholar who has written primarily about popular music, I hesitate to claim that hype affects music to a greater degree than it does other forms of culture. At the same time, it is obvious that hype shapes the circulation of popular music enormously—a fact that has become explicit, as well as highly controversial, in the digital media environment. The growth of a vibrant musical blogosphere, the shift to MP3s, the widespread streaming and downloading of musical content, and the exponential growth of social networking have not only rewritten the terms regarding music's production, distribution, and consumption, but have also made more visible and traceable the complicated discursive patterns and professional and personal networks that steer music's existence in the marketplace. Hype is thus a regular, frequently bemoaned topic of conversation among music fans and commentators. Journalist Matt Fink commented on this matter in a piece entitled "House of Hype" that appeared in the February 2011 issue of *Under the Radar*:

> As our attention spans have diminished, our appetite for the new and novel has increased, leading to an era when albums are already old by the time they're released and every week features a new breakthrough band. That's not an entirely new dynamic, of course; the British music press has a long-held tradition of feeding the best and worst of these tendencies. But by 2005, music blogs had moved that culture online and created a new phenomenon: the blog band. And for some bands—and some listeners— the relationship proved to be rooted on a shaky foundation. (2011, para. 2)

Moving "that culture online" did more than instantiate the "blog band" as an eye-rolling designation for an act roundly and effusively praised among the usual suspects of Web-based commentary. It also widened the producers of, and the audience for, that frenetic, over-the-top admiration, in turn making it much easier for even casual music fans to be in the know about the next "It" artist. Considered alongside new tools of musical discovery (iTunes Genius, Pandora, and recommendation algorithms; Spotify and cloud services; etc.) as well as the ever-expanding potential size of music collections (which, with the onset of cloud computing, are virtually limitless; Morris, 2011), the result is an

ever-quickening pace of musical circulation. This is acutely visible among indie rock circles, where "the lifespan of indie authenticity can be brutally short," "fans are quick to drop one 'scene' in pursuit of the next," and "[t]o know of an obscure band is to claim rights as its discoverer; one who introduces bands to others gets position on them" (Hibbett, 2005, pp. 64–65, 71–72). More than simply intensifying the competition for discovery among music fans, it creates among its writers and critics a culture of what critic Chris Weingarten has called "firsties"—a battle to find and subsequently write, post, or tweet about a band before anyone else. Weingarten continues

> There's this huge race to cover tinier and tinier bands . . . because being first is like the Internet gold medal; if you're first, you win. So there's this race now to cover tinier and tinier DIY bands, which is cool and interesting but it certainly is not good for anyone who spent ten years putting together a sound on a record label and has been touring for ten years busting their ass. It's definitely going to feel like a slap in the face when some 17 year-old chillwave star makes his way on the strength of a MySpace page and a jpeg of a palm tree. (C. Weingarten, personal communication, July 14, 2010)

What Weingarten describes is hype in motion—the sprint to excavate and share, followed by the swell of enthusiasm that characterizes the practice of music writing these days. What he fails to mention, though, is that that sprint often cannot begin until the formerly loved act is forgotten and discounted. It is not an exaggeration to say that this has been pretty much a weekly occurrence since the blogosphere really took off in 2006, but I will offer just two anecdotes as evidence. One telling example of this is the story of the now-forgotten but once indie rock darlings, The Black Kids. After playing a small, relatively unknown music festival in Athens, GA, late during the summer of 2007, music bloggers enthusiastically greeted the Jacksonville, FL, five-piece, whose sound they described as an infectious blend of '80s new wave references, such as The Cure. By September, they'd been hailed in venerated publications such as the *Village Voice* and the U.K.'s *NME*, and by October, they had received what many might consider to be the holy grail of musical anointment: a sterling review from the notoriously choosy indie music site, *Pitchfork*. From there, the band seemed unstoppable, or at least inescapable: earning praise in *The New York Times*, playing a sold-out show at the annual CMJ New Music Showcase in New York City, taking on a manager and a full roster of gigs—all this with only four recorded songs, a live show that was unpolished, to put it mildly, and no record contract. While their greenness was a key element of the excitement around them, it also led some observers to find a mismatch between their actual achievement in the world and the heady accolades they'd been receiving. Such a feeling was at the heart of a scathing post at the high-profile music media industry blog *Idolator*, which decried the situation under the banner "The Black Kids Hype Must Be Stopped":

> Black Kids may have evolved into something interesting in a year or two, but right now, at an impossible early peak of popularity, they're half-formed at best . . . they're a minor league band unfortunately aggrandized into a position of prominence that their music can't support. (jharv, 2007)

This treatment may befall entire genres, too. One such case began when British music journalist David Keenan explored the phenomenon of what he termed "hypnagogic pop" in the August 2009 issue of

The Wire magazine. The genre, which "draws its power from the 1980s pop culture" and creates "realms . . . between waking and sleeping, liminal zones where mis-hearings and hallucinations feed into the formation of dreams" (2009, p. 26) became crystallized in a popular EP released that summer by Ernest Greene, a Georgia-based musician who records under the name Washed Out. Yet as quickly as the genre began to build—especially reinforced in a rave review of Washed Out's music in *Pitchfork*—naysayers had begun taking aims at its foundation. During March of the next year, Jon Pareles of *The New York Times* took a swipe at the "much blogged-about microtrend," which he estimated produced "annoyingly noncommittal music," with songs that "come across like geek daydreams: half-remembered Top 40 songs and dance hits sung by guys too shy to leave their rooms" (Pareles, 2010). Defenses began to emerge from the usual corners, but by that time, so had the eulogies, including a sarcastic April Fool's obituary in the *Kansas City Pitch* entitled "R.I.P. Chillwave, 2010–2010." "Last summer, chillwave emerged as the go-to genre for emerging artists," joked author Corban Goble (2011), "but much of the genre's foundation and critical support began to erode as early as last fall."

In these examples, media-driven anticipation—reviews and news reportage were featured in the above examples, but we might also include song leaks, publicity stunts, YouTube videos, social media campaigns, advertising, and more—creates thick but temporary matrices of excitement, praise, and expectation. Rather than forging a secure "web of belief" (Thompson, 2010, p. 193), what emerges is more akin to a fickle swarm, driven to attend to new things, demystify current trends, and discard that which seems passé. Hype is more than just irritating in this predictable erraticism. It also exposes the fundamental risk that comes along with publicity, and the social dynamics that drive, yet also limit, promotion. The *N+1* story concludes thusly:

> The strange thing is that we are not glad when other people like what we like, or vice versa. You'd think these would be happy occasions—as if the candidate you loved won the election. . . . [But the] really potent work of art implies a promise to change everything—surely the world can't bear the awareness induced by true art!—that's always renewed and always broken. What reveals the promise as broken is that everyone's now a fan of the art in question, and still the world goes on as before. (2008, para. 9)

4.

Hype is a child of the ever-expanding promotional culture, the state of affairs in which promotion emerges as the *lingua franca* of social, economic, and cultural life (Wernick, 1991). Under promotional culture, "capitalist forms of exchange [come] to dominate all other forms of exchange," and "a widening range of cultural phenomena" obtain the "primary function . . . to communicate a promotional message" (Aronczyk & Powers, 2010, p. 4). This is true not only of how governments, institutions, and businesses communicate with their constituents or consumers—that is, it does not only impact those actors which necessarily rely on public and mediated forms of communication to reach their audiences, and which have a vested interest in cultivating a desirable image. As more of an individual's relationships, transactions, beliefs, and self-concepts take place in, or are primed for, public consumption, and as the economy continues to shift toward entrepreneurialism and self-employment while technological advancements shift

toward mobile, social media, each of us is likewise pulled into these promotional tropes. In these instances, "being in public takes on a distinct cast, one in which the industries and symbolic systems of commercial promotion are not merely discursive analogues to forms of belonging, behaving, and relating in public, but also actual structuring forces for these actions" (ibid., p. 13). Publicity's dual meanings of being in public and promoting one's assets collapse upon one another—difficult, if not impossible, to imagine on their own.

The increasing speed and evolving avenues of media technology—particularly in the "rapidity of innovation, adoption, adaptation, and obsolescence" (Dean, 2002, p. 1)—intensify hype's essential character and accentuate the fundamental problems of publicity that hype pinpoints. In recent years, those fields that are commonly called viral media have emerged as a "new genre of communication, even of art" (Wasik, 2009, p. 7), with more content created and packaged expressly so that consumers may distribute it in morsels. Jenkins et al., in an attempt to move away from the epidemiological connotations of "viral," advocate using the term "spreadable media" to describe the new media paradigm, under which "consumers play an active role in 'spreading' content rather than being the passive carriers of viral media: their choices, their investments, their actions determine what gets valued in the new mediascape" (2010, p. 22). Accordingly, they argue, the decision to spread is "based not on an individual evaluation of worth, but on a perceived value within a community or group" (ibid., p. 70).

No matter what name is used, though, this development produces unintended consequences. One is that spreadable or viral media conforms to the character of the Web, making for culture that is designed to travel quickly, but also to last only momentarily. Because so many of us have been wooed by the time-dependent throngs of attention this can create—invited via Twitter feeds and friends' status updates to chortle at cat videos, wince at photobombs, and be outraged at the cluelessness of our political adversaries—we are also keenly aware that it does not always result in substantial revenue or a good kind of attention. Take Rebecca Black, for example: the California teen whose song "Friday" garnered tens of millions of YouTube views in early 2011 as spectators lodged their like (but mostly hatred) for the tune. Many television appearances, countless parodies, and a horribly panned second single later, it is unclear if Black will ever be able to translate her momentary hyper-notoriety into meaningful celebrity, even as her attempts to reenter the spotlight come saddled with hype—in this case, that she will be both better and far worse, or at the very least more interesting, than she will actually end up being.

In a commentary characterizing the age of the Web, Vaidhyanathan writes:

> We are flooded with data, much of it poorly labeled and promiscuously copied. We seek maximum speed and dexterity rather than deliberation and wisdom. Many of our systems, not least electronic journalism, are biased toward the new and the now. The habits and values of markets infect all areas of our lives at all times of day. (2011, p. 80)

When music, other kinds creative works, and even human experience itself become ever disposable blips of spasmodic entertainment, it may endow us with more agency—transforming us, as Jenkins et al. rightly note, into "grassroots intermediaries" who are "advocates for brands" (2010, p. 3).

Yet media scholars should not overlook the way in which virality also fundamentally shifts the purpose of our consumption—what it means to like, to watch, and to listen. Consumption is not synonymous with endorsement, but it is increasingly read that way,[3] and as such, our habits and preferences take on an added promotional cast. The hype that is frequently a result—swells of attention morphing into backlash, excitement-cum-exhaustion over the ceaseless flow of must-see content—is a mark not only of a withering trust in publicity; it also identifies yet another cost, as we continue to lose spheres in which we engage in private action. All of this promises to worsen hype, and with it, to further deteriorate the already difficult and unpredictable terms through which anything gains notice or attention, or is communicated in public at all.

Hype articulates the paradoxical response we all conjure in response to this environment: a strange admixture of confidence and cynicism. "We know that publicity. . . has no intrinsic worth or merit, that it is easily manipulated and has no connection with some kind of value inhering in its object," Dean writes, "nevertheless, *we act as if we did not have this knowledge*" (2002, p. 6, emphasis added). Yet the opposite is also true: We know that publicity and promotion may, indeed, be powerful, but we often behave as if they were not, confident in our ability to ignore and discredit blatant gimmicks when we encounter them. Holding these countervailing ideas together—that we are at once too savvy and not savvy enough, that we believe in promotion at the same time we are suspicious of the lengths that must be taken in order to gain visibility—produces hype in the crosshairs, a contaminated publicity that is predicated upon its own failure and precariously balanced between the power and the limits of promotion. Calling attention to how hyped something is thus necessarily triggers the backlash against it: The communication is identified for what it is, just another vain attempt to sell us something unworthy of our belief, attention, or money. Recognizing communication as hype is thus a moment of distinction that separates the namer from the named, an argument about a fraud perpetrated, as well as, importantly, one about what *other people* do, think, or believe.

5.

Susan Sontag observes in her famous 1964 essay "Notes on Camp" that camp is an interpretive sensibility which "sees everything in quotation marks" (2001, p. 280); quintessential campy culture displays "a seriousness that fails" (ibid., p. 283). In mirroring Sontag's structure here in my own notes, I also endeavor to draw parallels between camp and hype, and designate hype as its own brand of failure—a failure of publicity. In her last note, Sontag writes, "The ultimate Camp statement: it's good *because* it's awful" (ibid., p. 292). Perhaps I might take a stab at the ultimate hype statement: It's awful because it's known.

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[3] At the time of this writing, Facebook was planning to launch a new Open Graph feature, meant to integrate activities users engage in through applications and around the Web into Facebook. Spotify, Netflix, and eBay are three of the companies planning to create applications that may automatically post user activity, such as watching a movie or listening to a song. While Facebook developers contend this is an attempt to get away from the "Like" button, which connotes endorsement, the intention of Open Graph is to allow users to share more everyday activity with their friends so that they might join in, functionally serving as another style of endorsement. See Parr, 2011; Protalinski, 2011.

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