

The New York Times
SundayStyles

Sunday, January 24, 1999

Hollywood's New Status Symbol: A Web Site

By NANCY HASS

THE image of the "Frasier" star Kelsey Grammer that fans get from the celebrity press isn't pretty. For years, tawdry stories and haggard photographs have chronicled his messy divorces, his lawsuit to stop distribution of a nude videotape and his stint at the Betty Ford Clinic after a car accident.

But now there is a more forgiving depiction of Mr. Grammer's life available to the public. On KelseyLive.com, a Web site owned and operated by the actor, Mr. Grammer spins his own tale. Filtered through the Internet, he is a happy newlywed with malice toward no one, except the tabloids.

At the top of his home page is a soft-focus photo montage of Mr. Grammer in swim trunks on the beach, and his third wife, Camille, in her wedding dress. The site includes a list of his favorite charities, 21 in all, from the Help Hospitalized Children Foundation to "Get a Pet" magazine (though no links or addresses to the charities are provided). Fans can read Camille's autobiography, or purchase a personalized snapshot of Mr. Grammer hugging pillows on a couch, for \$24.95.

Mr. Grammer is among the stars who in the last few months have acquired a new Hollywood status symbol: an official Web site. Celebrities from Cindy Crawford to Leonardo DiCaprio, Barbra Streisand to Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jane Seymour to Jackie Chan are embracing the Internet, not simply as yet another way to exploit their image and make money, but as a means of spin control. "Ca-

mille and I," Mr. Grammer states in his welcome message on the site, "have relied on interviews and television appearances to convey a personal side of our lives, but never has it been to our satisfaction." The free-wheeling medium, stars say, has given them a way to reach their fans directly, skipping past press, promoters and movie studios.

"We are entering the era of the mega-star Web site," said Jaclyn Easton, who writes periodic columns about the Internet for The Los Angeles Times and who is consulting on Mr. Schwarzenegger's Web site, set to make its debut later this year. "It is time for them to tell



about cindy

fan focus

postcards

contest

bookshelf

store

join cindy.com



Get Windows Media Player

Learn more about Windows Media Player

CINDY.COM

The Official Cindy Crawford Website

Cindy's Message

Check out Cindy's greeting

January 24, 1999

What's New on cindy.com

- Official News about Cindy's Pregnancy
- More Photos in the Gallery
- Cindy at St. Jude Children's Hospital
- Insider Info in the Style Report
- Membership Discounts
- Review of Paula by Isabel Allende



NEW PHOTOS

Travel Diary

Ever wonder what it's like to travel around the world? Now you can get Cindy's opinion on the places she's visited, without leaving your computer. Just check out her Travel Diary to read her notes and see her personal photos of foreign lands. (Members Only)

Bookshelf

Wine? go you down? Cool up in front of the fireplace with a good book and a good book. If you need a suggestion for reading material, check out reviews of Cindy's favorite books on the Bookshelf. There's something for everyone—your and old, so forward non-fiction, drama and comedy.

Members Enter Here

Stay informed with site updates

(your email)

Click here to submit

日本語はこちら

help information | about cindy.com | link to cindy.com

Copyright © 1999 cindy.com. All Rights Reserved.

without paying the price.



Cindy Crawford's
site is notable for its slick packaging by a Manhattan company catering to celebrities

Hollywood's New Status Symbol:

Stars' Very Own Web Sites

The new celebrity sites are not to be confused with so-called fan sites, the cybershrines filled with photographs illegally scanned from magazines, often referred to as pornographic sites. The official sites are controlled by the celebrities themselves — or more often, by a close family member — with varying degrees of professionalism. In addition to correcting published accounts of the star's exploits, they may be used as a pre-emptive strike in a legal strategy aimed to shut down prurient fan sites. Some are intended as money makers; others are charitable ventures, though it is not always

Continued on Page 2

Continued From Page 1

specified how the money will be collected and spent.

Aside from the absence of nude photos, what distinguishes celeb sites from fan-run counterparts is their earnestness. Their tone harks back to old-fashioned fan clubs, updated with New Age-speak. Leonardo DiCaprio's site, LeonardoDiCaprio.com, run by a coterie of friends and family members, ballyhoos the actor's visits to children's hospitals and orphanages in Thailand. Marilu Henner's site, run by her husband, does out low-calorie recipes.

Some sites are more polished. Ms. Crawford started her site, Cindy.com, this fall to much fanfare. The site, much like the model herself, is straightforward and slickly packaged. It was created and is maintained by Entertainment Drive, a Manhattan-based company looking for a select group of celebrities. "Michael Bolanos, the company's chief executive, said,

"Ms. Crawford said she became interested in doing her own Web site when she learned that there were already dozens of fan sites about her on the Internet. "In some of those, I morph into a dog," she said. "I didn't really think that was so great."

Ms. Crawford, who calls herself a control nut, said she was very hands-on with the site, working to develop new content and to update the information daily with Entertainment Drive's 15-person staff. The site is filled with what fans want most: photos. Cindy.com has dozens of shots of the 32-year-old supermodel, set off by snippets of chatty text. "Hi Everyone," Ms. Crawford chirps on the home page, telling fans that she and her husband, Rande Gerber, have just returned from a trip to Bali.

"Really a delayed honeymoon," Ms. Crawford writes. "Just the right combination of R & R, with plenty of time left over to go hiking in the jungle, white-water rafting and, of course, shopping."

There's also a book column highlighting Ms. Crawford's favorite volumes; last month's pick was "Jonathan Livingston Seagull." Visitors to the site can choose between glamour shots of Ms. Crawford to send as free "electronic postcards" to friends.

But Ms. Crawford's site is designed to be more than an on-line Riosk offering souvenirs of her pretty face. Mr. Bolanos said that one compelling reason for stars to set up a Web site is to lay the groundwork for lawsuits against sites that are illegally selling doctored photos or photos to which they don't have rights.

Last month, the actress Alyssa Milano was awarded more than \$200,000 from a handful of lawsuits against sites selling nude shots of

her. Many of the photos were freeze-frame pictures from an R-rated movie she had made several years ago; others were fakes.

Legal experts expect more such cases. In the age of the Internet, there are many more right-to-privacy and intellectual property violations to cite celebrities. Jim Talbot, the author of "New Media: Intellectual Property, Entertainment and Technology Law," said one way for celebrities to defend themselves was to have their own Web sites. That way, the celebrities can claim they have lost income when fan sites post or sell bootlegged photos.

But like many celebrities, Ms. Crawford is also out to make money. Her site has a three-pronged business plan — advertising, corporate sponsors (cybermarketers call them affiliates) and a membership tier. Among the banner advertisers are Revlon, which has a contract with Ms. Crawford to represent its cosmetics products and image. Her book column is sponsored by Amazon.com. Mr. Bolanos said that more than a million have visited the three-month-old site, and she already has thousands of members who pay \$19.95 a year for a Cindy CD-ROM and an autographed photo — "a \$39.95 value," the site exclaims.

Ms. Easton, the Los Angeles writ-

er, said Mr. Schwarzenegger is planning to create a top-quality site, which can cost around \$150,000 to start up and about \$50,000 a year to run. The site will be nonprofit and will include such features as a list of Mr. Schwarzenegger's favorite CD's. Best of all, Ms. Easton said, it may offer a high-tech variation on an old carnival attraction — photographs of Mr. Schwarzenegger hugging a

Celebrities are embracing the Internet, for publicity and for spin control.

"friend" — a scanned-in photo of the fan's face. If all goes well, Ms. Easton said, Mr. Schwarzenegger may introduce a for-profit site based on his favorite sport, skiing.

For the increasing numbers of celebrities who fashion themselves as entrepreneurial corporations, Web sites are a means of direct marketing. Ms. Henner intends to sell copies of her new self-help book, "30-Day Total Health Makeover" (Regan Books, \$22), via her Web page as soon as copies are ready this spring. Jane Seymour's site will help promote a series of children's books, which she wrote with her husband, James Keach, an actor.

Jonathan Trumper, who helps run William Morris's new six-person department to advise celebrities on their Internet presence, said clients can also benefit from the demographic research a site can provide.

"Let's say an actor wants to lobby for a particular movie role and the studio is unsure she has a good enough fan base," he said. "If she has a Web site, she can actually prove that she has hundreds of thousands of fans. And she can prove to the studio that they're the right fans."

Some celebrities are drawn by the lure of the bully pulpit. Barbara Streisand was exposed to the Internet when she did a "chat" on America Online in October, shortly before the elections. Her manager, Martin Erlichman, said she was excited by the reaction she got. America Online gave her a temporary Web page soon after, on which she posted the text of her speech in support of Senator Barbara Boxer, Democrat of California, and a list of other candidates from across the country she supported. Mr. Erlichman said that 80 percent of Ms. Streisand's political choices triumphed in last November's elections. She was so excited, Mr. Erlichman said, that she decided to launch

her own site.

Setting up a Web site can be harder for stars than for their fans. First, there is the issue of "domain name." The identifying address for every site. Anyone can own a domain name merely by registering it with a quasi-governmental agency called Internic, for a small processing fee, on a first-come basis. But often when celebrities decide to set up their own site, they find that their name has already been snatched up. An Internic search shows that Brad Pitt.com is owned by Khalil Alzarooni of the United Arab Emirates. When he was setting up his site, as a safeguard, Mr. Schwarzenegger registered 31 variations of his name to account for potential misspellings.

Sometimes the name is registered by a fan, but often the culprit is a cyberheister, as they're commonly called, betting that one day the celebrity will come calling to make a deal. Mr. Alzarooni, for example, has not put up a site for Mr. Pitt. Internic regulators frown on such tactics, but celebrities often relent. Ms. Henner bought Marilu.com for an undisclosed amount. Ms. Crawford was luckier, she had only to ask nicely to get Cindy.com back from the company that had registered the name.

Then there's the issue of photo rights. Most photographs are owned by the publication that printed them or the photographer. Fans blithely scan them onto their sites, but aren't often prosecuted since they don't have much money and aren't worth suing. Celebrities, however, are another matter. "If I put up pictures from a magazine, a lawyer would be on the phone to me in a second," Ms. Crawford said. "I have to go through all the steps of clearing them. Which means that right now there are some fan sites that have more pictures of me than my own site does."

Another lesson some celebrities are learning is that even in cyberspace, fans can be very demanding. While the medium allows the celebrities to answer frequently asked questions en masse with a single posting ("They all want to know how I got started," Ms. Crawford said), most stars also get thousands of private messages a week on their site. Ms. Crawford answers only a handful.

And unlike old-fashioned letters, which generations of fans sent with little hope of hearing back, E-mail prompts to demand an immediate response. Ms. Henner said: "If I don't change the recipes on my site often enough, I get a ton of nasty mail from people who take it personally. And if I don't E-mail them back, they get even madder. It's great in a way, but it's also a little scary."