



Owen Wilson opens up online for first time since suicide attempt



(10/27/07) - Forget the prime-time sob-fest with a marquee journalist: The new place for celebrities to talk after a traumatic event may be (where else?) on the Internet.

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Owen Wilson's first interview since his September suicide attempt is set to post on MySpace.com Friday at midnight. Will he tell all? Probably not: His interviewer is filmmaker and friend Wes Anderson, who directed Wilson in "The Darjeeling Limited" and stood up for the actor when the media pried into his personal struggles.

Fox Searchlight, the studio that released "The Darjeeling Limited," currently in theaters, told ABCNEWS.com that it approached MySpace.com with the idea to do the interview. Both Fox Searchlight and MySpace.com are owned by the same parent company, News Corp.

Considering all that, Elyane Rapping, a professor of American studies and pop culture at Buffalo University, doubts that Wilson and Anderson will talk about anything but "The Darjeeling Limited." She said it's likely Fox Searchlight is using Wilson's suicide attempt as a way to drum up press for the independent film and preserve its reputation.

"I wouldn't put anything past any of those people," she said. "And I think that they have to do this because otherwise it puts it a really dark taint on the movie, that this movie was being made while someone was suicidal. If they don't say anything, then it really does call into question the ethics of the people who made this movie."

A spokesperson for MySpace.com said that the pretaped interview will be between five and 10 minutes long. According to the spokesperson, Anderson and Wilson set the agenda themselves, and Anderson directed, edited and produced the whole piece.

Picking Out the Pesky Journalist

It used to be that controversy-saddled celebrities sidled up to big-name reporters when they were ready to tell their tales, revamp their public image and revive their careers. Gary Condit came clean to Connie Chung, Monica Lewinsky cried to Barbara Walters, Britney Spears sobbed to Matt Lauer, Paris Hilton pledged philanthropy to Larry King.

Now that Internet video has come into its own, thanks to the popularity of YouTube and the advent of highly produced shows on sites like MySpace, fallen stars have a far more appealing option: Cut the pesky journalist out of the mix and tell all, on their own terms, on the Internet. It's the ultimate form of image control.

Wilson's interview will be part of MySpace.com's Artist on Artist series, which turns the traditional celebrity interview format on its head. Instead of talking to a reporter, pop culture personalities sit down and interview one another. Past pairings include Nobel Prize winner Al Gore and hip-hop artist Mos Def; filmmaker Michael Moore and R.E.M. frontman Michael Stipe.

So if celebrities can craft their own interviews and broadcast them on a Web site that gets millions of hits each month, does that mean all star-chasing entertainment reporters, this one included, should pack up their belongings and go home? Not exactly.

"Whatever you think about the big network journalists, they do for the most part adhere to certain journalistic standards. With MySpace, we have no idea what this is going to be," said Bob Thompson, Syracuse University professor of popular culture. "From the sounds of it, [the Wilson interview] will have about as much credibility as any other MySpace posting."

In other words, Thompson thinks there will always be a need for tried-and-true reporters to pry into the personal lives of those in the public eye. And it's not likely that the people who relished Spears' cringe-inducing 2006 interview with Lauer will back away from their TVs anytime soon.

"You need only look at the recent Nielsen statistics that show that for the amazing year the Internet had last year, television viewing went down by exactly one minute," Thompson said.

And even if Wilson chose to open up on the Internet rather than on television, it's clear that Fox Searchlight and MySpace.com still realize the importance of TV and celebrity journalism. They gave "Entertainment Tonight" exclusive first rights to broadcast a clip of the interview on their Friday show, though they declined to let ABCNEWS.com view the interview in advance for this story. One look at the show's Web site, EOnline.com, shows that they're billing the Internet clip as a big scoop.

"It's ironic, but it makes absolutely perfect sense," Thompson said. "When all is said and done, if one does an innovative thing on the Internet, the most effective way to spread that is still the old fashioned way -- television."

In the end, whether on TV or on the Internet, celebrities do interviews for the same basic reasons: to enhance their image and promote their latest project (in Wilson and Anderson's case, "The Darjeeling Limited"). Thompson said to expect nothing more or less from the MySpace interview.

"If you really wanted to get to the bottom of the story of Owen Wilson, if you really cared, you'd want an investigative reporter to do the digging," he said. "This is not real journalism. It is a combination of movie PR, damage control and image reconstruction."

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