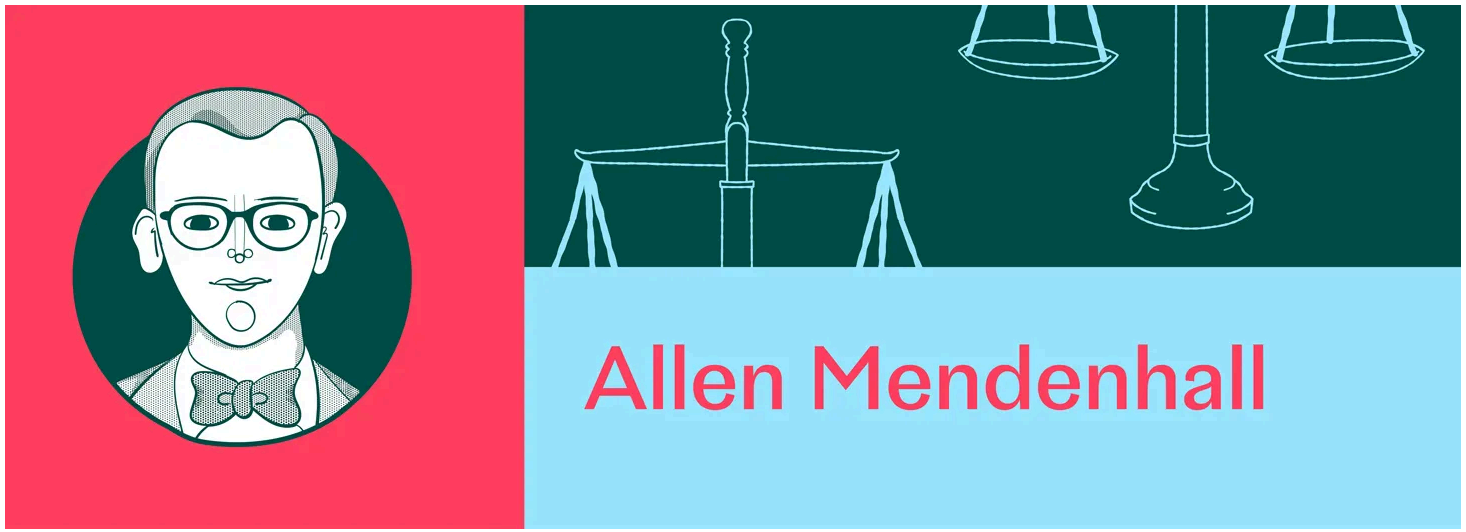
The Democratization of Stardom

The spotlight is now distributed by the market

THE FREEMAN

NOV 17, 2025



I hadn't brought a book—an unusual oversight—and the flight from Washington to Atlanta was too short to settle in properly, but long enough to feel restless. So, I pressed play on *Super/Man: The Christopher Reeve Story*, thinking I could kill the boarding minutes and maybe finish it before we began our descent.

What unfolded was compelling enough: tragedy and inspiration braided together in that familiar documentary way. But somewhere over Virginia, watching those celebrity testimonials parade across the screen—Jeff Daniels, Susan Sarandon, Glenn Close, commentary by John Kerry of all people—I felt something shift in my attention, like a camera pulling back to reveal the frame itself.

It was the sheer concentration of famous faces that did it. Gene Hackman, Marlon Brando, Robin Williams, clips from the 67th Academy Awards in March 1995, that whole glittering constellation of recognizability from an era when fame meant something specific and contained—back when I was in the seventh grade, months before the Braves won the World Series. Sitting there on the plane, I remembered our living room in Marietta, the particular quality of suburban Georgia evening light through the windows, watching television with my siblings and parents in that pre-Internet stillness.

But what struck me most forcefully wasn't nostalgia—though there was plenty of that—but rather the sudden recognition that these celebrities, left-leaning but somehow less strident about it than their present-day descendants, represented the final generation of a particular type of fame.

They were products of a system, anointed by gatekeepers, their stardom manufactured through channels so narrow and controlled that the very idea of bypassing them

seemed fantastical. They had passed through the eye of the needle. The rest of us could only watch.

What Friedrich Hayek understood about economic systems applies with equal force to systems of cultural production: centralized control inevitably means the suppression of dispersed knowledge, the subordination of countless individual preferences to the taste and judgment of a small planning committee.

The old Hollywood system was precisely such a committee, perhaps the most successful cultural planning apparatus in human history. It determined not only who would be famous but what kind of fame they would enjoy, what narratives would be told about them, which faces would be permitted to represent beauty, heroism, villainy, or any other human quality deemed marketable. The cost of this system was invisibility for everyone outside it. Brilliance languished in obscurity. Talent went undiscovered. Stories remained untold.

Then came the Internet, and with it, social media and the dissolution of those gates.

Consider the curious case of Jimmy Donaldson, known to his hundred-million-plus followers as MrBeast, a young man from Greenville, North Carolina, who achieved a level of fame that would have been literally impossible a generation ago.

He didn't audition for anyone. No casting director approved him. No network executive greenlit his vision. He simply began making videos, iterating, learning,

optimizing, and building an audience through the spontaneous order of algorithmic recommendation and genuine human interest.

His rise represents something fundamentally different from the Christopher Reeve trajectory—not better or worse necessarily, but structurally distinct. Where Reeve's fame required institutional blessing at every stage, Donaldson's required only persistence and an intuitive grasp of what millions of atomized individuals might find engaging.

This is the Hayekian miracle in action: the wisdom of crowds replacing the judgment of committees. Emma Chamberlain transformed teenage awkwardness into an empire. PewDiePie built a media company from his bedroom in Sweden. Charli D'Amelio became more recognizable to Gen Z than most Oscar winners through fifteen-second dance videos. The barriers to entry collapsed, and suddenly fame became, if not exactly democratic, at least meritocratic in the sense that merit is defined by audience choice rather than institutional approval.

The liberation is real and thrilling. Voices previously excluded from the conversation—because they were too weird, too rural, too uninitiated, too something—can now find their audiences directly. The kid in rural Kansas with genuine comedic talent doesn't need to migrate to Los Angeles and spend years auditioning for sitcom roles; he can build his following tonight. The dispersed knowledge of millions of individual preferences, rather than the centralized taste of a few dozen executives, determines what succeeds.

But liberation brings its own anxieties, doesn't it? One watches a MrBeast video—someone gets paid to sit in a glass box for days, someone else competes to win an island—and can't help but wonder if we've traded the tyranny of the gatekeepers for the tyranny of the algorithm, which is really the tyranny of our basest collective impulses.

The race for attention becomes a race to the bottom. Cultural standards, painstakingly developed over centuries, seem to evaporate in the heat of viral competition. Every creator becomes a populist, desperate to please the crowd, and the crowd—heaven help us—has terrible taste.

The lowest common denominator, multiplied by millions, produces content optimized for engagement rather than excellence. Subtlety disappears. Nuance becomes a liability. The algorithm rewards the loud, the garish, the immediately comprehensible. One thinks of Gresham's Law—bad money drives out good—and wonders if bad content might be driving out good in this new attention economy.

Yet here's what Hayek understood that the cultural pessimists often miss: free systems are self-correcting over time. The market for attention, like any market, will eventually develop its own stratifications, its own quality signals, its own mechanisms for separating wheat from chaff.

Already, we see the emergence of new taste-makers, new curators, new forms of cultural authority that arise spontaneously from the system itself rather than being imposed from above. The very democracy that threatens to debase everything also contains within it the seeds of its own refinement.

History offers comfort here. The invention of the printing press was greeted with similar anxieties: Suddenly, any fool could publish anything! The standards of medieval manuscript culture would be lost!

Yet what followed was not cultural collapse but cultural flowering: the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment itself. The explosion of cheap pulp novels in the 19th century inspired similar handwringing, yet somehow Dickens and Tolstoy managed to find their audiences (and in serialized form no less!). The early days of cinema were considered vulgar entertainment for the unwashed masses… until they weren't.

Standards are resilient because humans, beneath their appetite for distraction, genuinely hunger for quality, for meaning, for art that speaks to something deeper than the next dopamine hit. The path from here to there may be messy—it always is—but the spontaneous order of a genuinely free cultural marketplace will, over time, reward what is actually valuable rather than what merely seems valuable to a committee of executives or the first wave of algorithm-driven attention seekers.

The faces on that seatback screen, those stars of March 1995, represented something we've lost. But what we've gained—the possibility that anyone, anywhere, with something genuine to offer might find their audience—is something we never had before. The transition is uncomfortable, indeed. But isn't freedom always uncomfortable? What's freedom worth if not the unease that attends its arrival?

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