et another videotape of Paris Hilton surfaced on the Internet last week, casting an inconvenient light on her Fox TV reality series, "The Simple Life," which is to premiere on Dec. 2.

The grainy videotape, poorly lit, shows Ms. Hilton and a man identified as a senior fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, N.J., developing mathematical models for a low-cost irrigation system to be used in the developing world. In one scene that has provoked wide discussion online, Ms. Hilton's cellphone rings, but she does not answer it.

In a statement last week, Ms. Hilton said, "I feel embarrassed and humiliated, especially because my parents and the people who love me have been hurt." She added that she "never, ever thought that these things would become public." Fox executives insisted that the tape would not change their plans to broadcast the seven-episode series about an Arkansas farm.

Ms. Hilton's supporters said the release of the tape was meant to damage her reputation as a vapid, self-involved rich girl, which is the premise for the Fox show. In the "Paris Math Tape," Ms. Hilton appears to be wearing a modest skirt and a Mensa pin. "It's very obvious that whoever did this is doing it to hurt her," her spokeswoman, Siri Garber, told reporters.

Celebrities in the past have been able to live down revelations about their philanthropic or intellectual lives. Babe Ruth, for instance, engaged in months of public carousing after reporters caught him visiting a sick boy's hospital room, promising to hit a home run for him.

But few celebrities have worked as hard at pure tabloid notoriety, or built reputations so unsullied by accomplishment or circumspection. Since she was the subject of a Vanity Fair profile in 2000, Ms. Hilton, whose great-grandfather Conrad Hilton started the Hilton hotel chain, has been seized upon by gossip columnists as a chance to construct a celebrity from scratch, using only the raw clay of her wealth and indiscretion. Though she has done little more than go to nightclubs, her name has appeared in more than 90 New York Post articles this year alone.

In a famous New Yorker article, E. J. Kahn noted that even compared with her attention-seeking peers, Ms. Hilton possesses a "positive reaction to the camera" and "makes no attempt to curb the imaginative press."

If the math allegations were proven, Mr. Kahn warned, "she would stop being the most unproductive public figure of the era," and "become just another celebrity, a word she dislikes having applied to herself. 'I'm not a celebrity,' she says. 'I don't deserve all this. I haven't done anything spectacular. I haven't done anything at all. I'm just a debutante.' "
Last week Ms. Hilton's friends said it was not fair for one amateur videotape to undermine years of public canoodling, cheesy outfits and conspicuous flaunting of wealth. One friend, the publicist Lizzie Grubman, took the long view, telling Fox News: "I don't think it's that damaging in the long term. I think that it is personally embarrassing, a complete invasion of her privacy. But she does have a show to promote, and I think it will help sell the show."

Indeed, the short attention span of the celebrity-hungry news media was apparent last week. On Wednesday, after "Nightline" had scrapped a segment on President Bush to cover Ms. Hilton, it then scrapped her for Michael Jackson.

The real long-term losers, some say, are the fans. In a society where 59 percent of college students say they will be millionaires, according to a 2002 poll conducted by Ernst & Young, Ms. Hilton has stood for the proposition that wealth comes with no obligations of tact, taste or civic responsibility. For people who dream of someday putting unearned wealth to poor use, Ms. Hilton has been a beacon.

Even such a hard-earned reputation could be ruined by revelations of a social conscience, experts said. When rumors of the tape first circulated last month, friends claimed that Ms. Hilton was an unwilling participant, saying she was lightheaded from building low-income houses with a group of volunteers from Habitat for Humanity. "She is so out of it, you can only see the whites of her eyes," one friend told reporters. But on the tape all math appears to be consensual.

Ms. Hilton's parents, who have been criticized for letting their daughter perform good deeds unsupervised, issued a warning that "anyone in any way involved in this video is guilty of criminal activity and will be reported to the proper authorities and vigorously prosecuted."

In a ravenous celebrity culture, Ms. Hilton's rise shows how far celebrity itself has been devalued. Reality TV shows have outdrawn genuine star vehicles by exploiting the willingness of regular people to endure gross humiliation. Ms. Hilton is the first celebrity to claim that exploitation for the elite.

"It's almost like the celebrities are not enough anymore," said Atoosa Rubenstein, editor in chief of Seventeen magazine, which put Ms. Hilton on its October 2003 cover, before the tapes became public. "Suddenly, Jennifer Aniston is boring. Now she's only interesting if something crazy or terrible happens."

In this climate, even the most securely superficial celebrity can be undone by one private act of kindness or intellectual activity. This is a scary prospect. After all, who among us doesn't have — as Ms. Hilton did — a Phi Beta Kappa key or Congressional Medal of Honor lurking in his closet?

Correction: Because of a reporting delusion, the above article misstated the nature of the videotape in question. It is of Ms. Hilton having sex with a former boyfriend, not fighting world hunger. There was no new videotape. All quotations above refer to the original pornographic tape, not to a math tape. E. J. Kahn's quotations should have been attributed to a 1939 profile of the debutante Brenda Frazier, for whom Walter Winchell coined the term "celebutante," not to a nonexistent article about Ms. Hilton.