Chapter 27

Audience Replies to Character Blogs as Parasocial Relationships

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ABSTRACT

News anchors, talk show hosts, and soap opera characters often become objects of parasocial affection because of the nature of these program genres. This chapter explores the concept of parasocial interaction by focusing on audience replies to blog posts made on behalf of a TV character, Jessica Buchanan of ABC Television Network's One Life to Live show. The authors employ communication accommodation theory to illuminate the concept and to identify specific communicative behaviors that occur during parasocial interaction. The chapter presents evidence of parasocial interaction within the blog replies and audience accommodation to the blog posts. Analysis suggests that parasocial interaction is the mediated manifestation of the relationship dimension inherent in television messages and used by audience members in much the same way it is used during face-to-face interaction.

INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that in the U. S. 12 million adults "blog" or keep online journals and 57 million adults or 39% of all adult Internet users report reading blogs (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). A worldwide total of 175,000 new blogs are created every day, and the web search engine Technorati (2008) reports tracking 112.8 million blogs worldwide. Blogs are used as a vehicle for providing commentary to the public. The critical differences in blogs and diaries are the opportunities for reaching a mass audience and the opportunity for that mass audience to respond to the commentary found within the blog. Because of the interactive nature of the blogs and blogging software, readers are able to add comments, links, pictures, video, or any other media format to the blog for the edification and entertainment of other denizens of the Internet.

Popular television characters - such as, Dwight Schrute (*The Office*), Joe the Bartender (*Grey's Anatomy*), and Jessica Buchanan (*One Life to*

Live) - have blogs that allow audience members' additional insight into the character's identity and additional information about the story or plotline. These blogs are different from the blogs maintained by actors since they are written from the perspective of a fictional character. More importantly these character blogs allow audience members the perception that they can interact with the character – even though this interaction is parasocial. While audience members have always had some opportunity to interact, or more often, parasocially interact with characters through fan mail, the messages they send have not been readily available to scholars for study. Blog messages are more plentiful and easier to access, and provide communication scholars an invitation for studying parasocial interaction in depth.

In this chapter we first address what is known about parasocial relationships between the audience and TV characters. We then introduce communication accommodation theory as a framework for identifying specific communicative behaviors that are likely to occur during parasocial interaction. An analysis of a TV character blog determines whether parasocial behaviors occur in blog replies and whether there is evidence of audiences accommodating the communicative behavior of the character. Finally we offer some suggestions for future research and future trends in this line of research.

BACKGROUND
Parasocial Interaction

The term *parasocial interaction* was used by Horton and Wohl (1956) to explain feelings of closeness audience members feel toward television characters. This closeness is believed to arise when TV characters behave in ways that resemble face-to-face interaction. This feeling of intimacy can be enhanced by production characteristics, such as the selection of shots and the format of the program. Bell (1991) suggests audience members may also

feel as if they are engaged in an interaction when the characters seem to be adapting their behavior to the anticipated reaction of the audience. An example may help illustrate this notion. Imagine a scene where a talk show host is performing a monologue. On a small scale, a pseudo-interaction sequence might look something like this:

TV Host: Tells a bad joke.

Audience: Groans, boos, or merely does not laugh.

TV Host: Does a double take and makes a face.

In this example the audience members may feel as if the character told them the joke and then responded to their reaction. (Note that this is not a real interaction and the audience is aware of that.) Such interaction may seem more dynamic than a simple monologue because the character appears to be reacting to the audience.

Audience members are limited in their ability to reply or interact with their favorite TV characters. The audience member may "reply" by making commentary or talking back to the TV, laughing, or nodding their heads in agreement. Rather than sending fan mail, viewers may imitate face-to-face interaction. Again it is critical to acknowledge that the audience members understand that they are not actually interacting with the character. In a sense, the audience member is also acting like he or she is interacting with the character. More often, however, the audience member will do nothing more than think about the character's message and generate a reply. These parasocial interactions only occur in the minds of audience members but are nonetheless similar in some ways to actual interactions.

Since these faux interactions occur largely in the mind of the audience member, their responses to the character's messages can be viewed as cognitive. Greenwald (1968) recognized that people are often influenced more by their thoughts or cognitive responses to a message than by the message itself. More importantly audience members often recall their cognitive responses

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